

# **LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 6 January 2004  
(*Afternoon*)

Session 2

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## LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

### 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting 2004, Session 2

#### CONVENER

\*Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab)

#### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP)

#### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab)

\*Mr Bruce McFee (West of Scotland) (SNP)

\*Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)

\*Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)

\*David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con)

\*Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP)

\*Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD)

#### COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)

Colin Fox (Lothians) (SSP)

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP)

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)

\*attended

#### THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Rowena Arshad (Widening Access to Council Membership Progress Group)

Sir Jeremy Beecham (Local Government Association)

Councillor Corrie McChord (Widening Access to Council Membership Progress Group)

Councillor Anne McGovern (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Lord Sewel (Councillors' Remuneration Progress Group)

Councillor Pat Watters (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and South Lanarkshire Council)

Paul Wheeler (Improvement and Development Agency)

Norie Williamson (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

#### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

#### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Alastair Macfie

#### ASSISTANT CLERK

Euan Donald

#### LOCATION

Signet Library



## Scottish Parliament

### Local Government and Transport Committee

*Tuesday 6 January 2004*

*(Afternoon)*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:01*]

**The Convener (Bristow Muldoon):** I welcome everyone to the first meeting of the Local Government and Transport Committee in 2004 and I wish members, clerks, official reporters and everyone else a happy new year—let us hope that it will also be a prosperous one.

### Subordinate Legislation

#### Local Government Pension Reserve Fund (Scotland) Regulations 2003 (SSI 2003/580)

14:01

**The Convener:** The first item on the agenda is subordinate legislation. No points have been raised in relation to the regulations and no motion for annulment has been lodged, so are we agreed that the committee has nothing to report?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

### Local Governance (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

14:02

**The Convener:** We move on swiftly to item 2 on the agenda, which is further stage 1 consideration of the Local Governance (Scotland) Bill. I welcome Sir Jeremy Beecham, from the Local Government Association, and Paul Wheeler, who is assistant director of the Improvement and Development Agency. The committee welcomes the opportunity to learn from the witnesses' perspectives, on English local government in particular, in order to inform our work on the bill and to take forward Scottish local government. Before we move to questions from members, I invite the witnesses to make introductory statements.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham (Local Government Association):** Thank you for the invitation. I reciprocate the seasonal greetings.

The Local Government Association represents 434 of the 435 local authorities in England and Wales and the Improvement and Development Agency is, in effect, the improvement arm of English and Welsh local government. Clearly, circumstances are very different between authorities in England and those in Wales, let alone between authorities in England and Wales and those in Scotland, but we hope that the committee will find it useful to share our experience.

**Paul Wheeler (Improvement and Development Agency):** I work for the Improvement and Development Agency, which, as Sir Jeremy has said, is part of the improvement project in local government. The agency is self-owned by local government and is driven by local government as opposed to central Government or other agencies. My particular interest lies in member development and the provision of support to elected members. My job also involves working with other agencies in encouraging diversity and a greater range of people to become councillors.

**The Convener:** Thank you, gentlemen, for those introductory statements. I will start with a question on one of the issues that is covered in the paper from the LGA and IDEA—multimember wards. You draw attention to the large number of multimember wards in England at a local authority level, although not at the county council level. Will you say something about the degree of co-operation or conflict among elected members in multimember wards, particularly in those areas where more than one party is represented? The extent of duplication or conflict among members of different parties representing the same area is an

issue that those in Scotland who want the current electoral system to be retained are concerned about.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** I have represented a three-member ward in the west end of Newcastle for—God help me—nearly 37 years now. Such wards are the usual pattern in urban local government in England. That is not exclusively the case, but the larger authorities—both metropolitan and unitary authorities, as well as many district councils—tend to have three-member wards.

For the most part, the fact that there are three members to a ward has not led to difficulties in respect of pressures on individual councillors. In fact, the contrary is true to some degree. Many of us would feel that it has been helpful to have been able to share responsibilities in representing what can be quite a sizeable electorate. The size of electorate ranges from more than 20,000 in wards in Birmingham—my colleagues in Birmingham would say that it is really difficult, even with three members, to represent such big wards—to much smaller numbers. My ward has an electorate of around 5,500, although that will shortly change.

The fact that different parties may be represented does not normally present much difficulty in relation to confusing the electorate or to councillors being played off against one other. Sometimes, constituents will approach more than one councillor; if that happens, the situation is usually resolved informally by the elected representatives and one of them will pursue the matter. That has not caused any great problems.

I can see, however, that having multimember wards could be difficult in rural areas, which is presumably why they do not exist in county councils: the geography would make it difficult for communities to identify with their representatives in very large wards.

**The Convener:** Under the existing system in England, how often is more than one political party represented in multimember wards?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** That is increasingly the case, as political change occurs in a number of councils. There are four wards in Newcastle where there is currently a mix of representatives. At one time, one ward in Newcastle had councillors from three different political parties. I do not believe that that occasioned any special difficulty on the ground.

Many councils now go in for devolved structures, such as area or ward committees, which have small budgets. Given that expenditure decisions require more than one elected member to participate, it is necessary to have wards with more than one member if there is to be a ward-based committee system. On the whole, councils make the system work reasonably effectively, notwithstanding political differences.

**Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP):** Are you saying that informality works and that there is no need for protocols or rules? Are you saying that there are no turf wars in multimember wards?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** I would be foolish to say that there are no turf wars, but I have not experienced many, if any, in my time on a council that has been quite sharply politically divided over that period. I am not conscious of colleagues elsewhere saying that councillors are fighting over constituents. The system works reasonably well.

Of course, some people try to play the system and, indeed, some people will move out of their ward—I have had people turning up at my ward surgery from adjoining wards because they feel that they are not getting enough help from their councillors. However, there is an understanding that we do not take on a case from someone else's ward. It is not usual for there to be any great problem within the ward.

**Mr Welsh:** You said that there is an understanding. What happens if that goes wrong? Are there any written rules?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** There are no protocols that I am aware of. I am not saying that there are none in other councils, but I am not aware that any protocols have been devised. The understanding has been part of the pattern for such a long time that, when someone joins a council, they join a system that is usually seen to be working effectively, and that continues.

**Mr Welsh:** Thank you.

**Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP):** You seem to be saying that the experience in wards where there is more than one member is that there has been no problem. Problems are caused only when a constituent tries to get a councillor from an adjacent ward to intervene. I take it that a chief executive would intervene in that situation if necessary.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** No. The understanding is a bit like the parliamentary convention that someone does not take on case loads or act in a parliamentary colleague's seat, whatever political party they might be from. If you will, there is an unwritten rule that the request is referred back to the councillor in the ward affected. Even if the constituent is not satisfied, it is a matter for them where they go. In certain circumstances, I might feel obliged to help someone who felt that they were not being assisted by their councillor. However, it is unusual for such a difficulty to arise and I have not encountered many cases in my long service. I am not saying that that could not happen, but it does not present any practical difficulties.

**Tommy Sheridan:** We are considering a bill that might, for the first time, introduce multimember wards of as many as four and, I hope, five, depending on the various amendments that might be lodged. Your experience from the Local Government Association leads you to believe that such multimember wards should not cause a problem, even if the members are from different political parties. Is that what you are saying?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** I do not think that different political affiliations would make a difference. If I might venture a personal opinion, I think that wards of four or five members might be more difficult to manage because of their size; such wards would be significantly larger than even those Birmingham wards that have three representatives for 20,000 people. There is also the potential for confusion among the electorate, given the number of councillors that they would be able to consult. In other words, there might be a risk that larger wards and more councillors would be a problem. In my experience, three-member wards work well. Four or five or more members on a larger canvas could present some practical difficulties.

**Tommy Sheridan:** Your three members are not elected under a proportional voting system.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** No, that is right.

**Tommy Sheridan:** Given that we are being given the task of delivering a proportional system that retains a ward-member link, you can understand why we are proposing that there should be more than three members.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** I can, but as I understand it—and this might be a bit outside my remit—the system that is being proposed is the single transferable vote system, which is arguably not particularly proportionate. The more proportionate a system gets, the less close the member link might be deemed. Perhaps I am trespassing on territory that is outside my remit.

**Tommy Sheridan:** You are allowed to do that. In fact, you are already trespassing anyway, so there is no problem.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** Do you mean because I have crossed the border? Yes, quite.

14:15

**Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab):** The proposal is to transfer from one-member to multimember wards. Is there any evidence from constituents that the multimember ward system is more effective than the single-member ward system? You said that a ward that contains 20,000 people should be served by three members, but surely one member can serve a constituency of

20,000 just as effectively. What are the benefits of a multimember ward system?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** In fairness, I do not know whether the electorate have been asked that question in those terms. However, in my experience, I have found the multimember ward system helpful. After all, in serving the ward, one has not only to carry out constituency work that involves surgeries, advice sessions, liaison with tenants and residents groups and so on, but to play a part in council policy making. If one holds a position of responsibility in a council—or, in my case, at national level—that is another layer of responsibility. As it becomes difficult to combine those levels of responsibility with the exclusive responsibility of representing an area, it helps to share the load and, for that matter, to allow other people to engage in the representative and advocacy role for an area.

For some time now, my authority has operated devolved decision-making structures with expenditure powers that, as I have said, cannot be exercised by a single member. As a result, we have a ward committee that meets in public. Such decentralised bodies are fairly common now and need more than one member.

Of course, the question is also about defining communities and communities of interest. For example, I think that the wards in Birmingham are probably too large, whereas the size of wards in places such as Newcastle is more manageable and reflects community interests more. The kind of team work involved allows more regular collective contact among the elected representatives in the area than one might get elsewhere. For example, it would be more difficult for the leader of a council to be a ward's single representative. I am not saying that that would be impossible; after all, it clearly seems to have worked in Scotland thus far. However, I was leader of my council for a very long time and found it difficult to carry out that job and to be the sole representative in my ward.

**Paul Martin:** As far as electoral responsibility is concerned, would it have been fair to the electorate—or to your colleagues—if you, as leader of the council, had been expected not to serve them?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** It would have been extremely unfair and if I had not represented my electorate effectively I would have paid a price for it at the polls. I have certainly tried to provide effective representation in my time. However, sometimes one has to prioritise certain areas of work and ensure that the work is not necessarily done by all three councillors at the same time but shared among the councillors in the patch.

**Paul Martin:** That brings us to the difficult issue of the ward-member link. You have said that such

a link in a multimember ward system could cause difficulties, perhaps because members have council responsibilities. However, a member-ward link where there is only one member per ward deals with issues of accountability.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** We clearly have to strike a balance in that respect. I repeat that the bigger the ward and the greater the number of representatives, the less close the link becomes. However, a system of three members per ward allows a good degree of contact and the sharing of responsibilities. Moreover, the contribution of colleagues creates a synergy through which one can address what needs to be done in the area. It also helps that the community is not entirely dependent on one representative.

**Paul Wheeler:** This point might not be too relevant in Scotland, but an individual councillor can sometimes have a conflict of interest on, for example, a particular planning issue, because they might have shareholdings or some other interest in a particular organisation. If that councillor served in a one-member ward, he would not be able to represent his constituents on that matter. However, in a multimember ward, he could pass the constituent in question on to another ward member. The system also gives the electorate an element of choice about whom they can go to.

**Paul Martin:** You have touched on the argument that it is helpful for the electorate to speak to someone else or even to someone from the party of their choice. How does that argument deal with a three-member ward in which someone's party of choice is not represented within the panel of elected members?

**Paul Wheeler:** Obviously, that would depend on the nature of the electoral outcome. Annual elections often give rise to representation by different parties. Sometimes people would prefer to speak to a woman councillor rather than to a male councillor or to someone who has a greater affinity with them. There will always be a balance of choice.

The other issue was about the conflict of interest. Many councillors in England are unable to make representations on planning issues because they have an executive position. With a one-member ward, the electors in that ward might be denied the chance of having their case made.

**Paul Martin:** All three members of a ward could be members of the planning committee.

**Paul Wheeler:** They could in theory. If all three members of a three-member ward were members of the planning committee, that would be a bit unfortunate. In a three-member ward, people have more choice as to which councillor they choose to go to. I am not saying that that is a good reason for having multimember wards but, unlike with a

one-member ward, if there are three members electors can choose with which member they take up their case.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** In any case, we are there to represent the entire community. I do not ask about the politics of the people who come to my surgeries. I am there to represent them as a matter of course, as we all are.

I repeat that what suits an urban area may be entirely unsuitable for a rural area. It is extremely difficult to envisage multimember wards in rural areas where there are sparse populations over large geographical areas; geography would make such wards virtually impossible.

**Mr Welsh:** How many members are there per ward in the approximately 6,000 multimember wards in the English system? You have said that the wards are of vastly different sizes, varying from 20,000 down to 5,000. How does the number of members per ward vary? You said that there were three members per ward, but is that uniformly the case? Secondly, what are the criteria for ward boundaries?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** The ward boundaries are now determined by the Electoral Commission. In the review that it conducted of the metropolitan areas—those are basically the large cities—it has generally opted for three-member wards. There has been some variation. Most metropolitan areas and London boroughs have had three-member wards for some time, but some have had a mix. Some had one-member wards and some had two-member wards. The general trend of the Electoral Commission—Paul Wheeler may confirm this—has been to go for three-member wards across the piece.

The commission begins the process by assessing how many councillors it is felt should represent the area. It then considers how to produce wards of comparable size—that is, close to an average—while taking into account community interests. However, the overriding consideration is equality of votes. The commission has proceeded on that basis and is in the process of concluding the review, which will take effect in the English local elections next June. I understand that the review will produce three-member wards across the metropolitan areas. Very often, those will be on new boundaries.

The electoral sizes of wards will vary significantly between the authorities. Both the size of the council and the average number of electors per ward will vary. The commission does not compare one authority with another but considers each authority on its own terms to determine the number of councillors. The size of the electorates follows on from that. Therefore, Coventry could not necessarily be compared with Newcastle or



Solihull, as the ward sizes will partly depend on the history of the place. There may well be different sizes of councils for comparable populations.

**Mr Welsh:** So the number of members per ward is fixed and the size of wards is varied. Are there no practical problems with that?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** I do not hear colleagues finding any great difficulty with that, except in Birmingham, where I think they feel that they have very heavy responsibilities. Birmingham has much the biggest wards.

**Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab):** Thank you for the evidence that has been provided so far. What we have heard has raised a couple of questions that I am not sure whether it is fair to ask, as they are partly hypothetical and may require a bit of speculation on your part. I am concerned that we are comparing apples with oranges, given that multimember wards in England and Wales are not comparable to those that are suggested in the bill. The fundamental difference is that the councillors in multimember wards in England and Wales are elected by first past the post. Therefore, although a ward may have three councillors, those councillors will not have competed against one another in the same election but will have been elected in separate elections in different years. Am I correct about that?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** Not necessarily, if I may complicate matters just a little. For example, this year there are all-out elections on the new ward boundaries. Some councils have always had elections on an all-out basis every four years, but, again, the pattern has been quite variable. We have not had a single uniform system in England for elections—or anything else, for that matter—and so things are not straightforward. Certainly, this year, there are all-out elections in all 36 metropolitan districts and—

**Michael McMahon:** Are the elections still carried out on a first-past-the-post basis?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** They are carried out on a first-three-past-the-post basis.

**Michael McMahon:** That is similar to what would happen in an STV multimember ward, but the difference is that, with the multimember wards under the proposal that we are discussing, those who are elected second or third would, in most cases, have to receive second or third preferences from other voters and would in effect be in competition not only with Opposition parties and independents, but with representatives of their own parties. In such circumstances, turf wars might be more prevalent than they would be in England. Do you concede that? If there were multimember wards in England and STV elections,

would that create turf wars that do not currently exist?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** It might. I understand the argument. If I were asked to comment on alternative systems for English local government, STV would not be top of the list that I would advocate. I am being as cautious as I can be.

**Michael McMahon:** Indeed. One must speculate on and hypothesise about such issues, as we are not talking about an exact science. Do you have any concerns that anything that has been proposed cannot be transferred in terms of—

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** I hope that I made that point earlier. We can share experience, but such experience will not necessarily be relevant to local conditions. I repeat that my experience is essentially urban. Multimember wards are essentially urban and a large part of Scotland is not urban—huge distances are involved. We see similar problems in county elections and with county electorates. Currently, there are significant variations in electorate sizes because of community interests and the difficulty of representing large swathes of rural counties such as Northumberland. We must be careful about assuming in general that, if something works in England, it will necessarily transfer to Scotland and we must be careful about an STV system in particular.

**Michael McMahon:** Convener, may I ask a question on a different subject, or would you prefer me to wait until the subject that we are dealing with has been exhausted?

**The Convener:** If any other members have questions about electoral systems, they should ask them first. I wonder whether Iain Smith has a question to ask on the subject that we are discussing.

**Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD):** No—I want to ask about remuneration.

**The Convener:** Bruce McFee and Sylvia Jackson have questions. Once they have asked them, we will move on to other issues relating to the bill.

**Mr Bruce McFee (West of Scotland) (SNP):** I want to clarify something. In an all-out system on a first-past-the-post basis in a three-member ward, how many crosses is the average elector allowed—one or three?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** Three.

**Mr McFee:** So essentially the system is simply a first-past-the-post system and there is no threshold.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** No.

**Mr McFee:** That is fundamentally different from what has been proposed. The only thing that is the same is that multimember wards are involved. The proposal here is to have an STV system in multimember wards in council elections, a first-past-the-post system in the constituencies for the Scottish Parliament election and a regional list system for top-up members in the same election, all of which will be held on the same day. What potential is there for confusion by using three voting systems for three elections on the same day? Would you be concerned that local government might be seen not to have achieved a mandate, because local issues had been somewhat buried in such circumstances? For example, would you advocate having local government elections in England and Wales on the same day as a parliamentary election or European elections?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** That has suited the party that I represent quite well on the past two occasions, although that might not necessarily always be the case.

I will deal with the second question first. The evidence from three general elections that have taken place on the same day as local elections suggests that people can distinguish between local and national issues and that there is a difference in how people vote in the two elections. That argues for some sophistication on the part of the electorate. However, that sophistication could be tested to destruction by having three lots of elections on the same day under three different systems. The coincident elections that we have had have basically been on the same system. I blanch rather—and you will forgive me for possibly straying beyond the brief—at the notion of having perhaps six sets of candidates and six political parties, given the Scottish situation, running in six-member wards. The ballot papers would be fairly big. If you have all-postal votes, the Post Office might be happy, but nobody else will be. I have practical concerns, but the issue is for you to determine.

**Mr McFee:** Would it be safe to say that you do not advocate that proposal?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** Yes.

14:30

**Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab):** I will follow on from one of Michael McMahon's points. I want to confirm that your system is quite different from what might happen here. In my area in Stirling, we could end up with three parties representing one third, one third and one third, although it may not quite be that. Is it correct that there are a considerable number of Labour councillors in Newcastle?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** Yes, but the number is not as considerable as it was.

**Dr Jackson:** So I gather. You said that you have an office-bearing job, so to speak, and a lot of other things to do, as well as representing your constituents. If you were the only representative of your party, it would be difficult to work in the manner in which you work at the moment, because you would not have someone to whom you could give some of your constituency work load. Michael McMahon said that the way in which your multimember ward operates is different from the way in which such wards could operate here.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** That is right. It is also a question of defining communities. In my ward, I can identify a number of communities below the ward level, but the notion of splitting Newcastle into 78 separate communities does not make a lot of sense in terms of community interest. A school will serve a ward or two at the moment. Other facilities are ward based, but splitting the area into 78 wards, and trebling the number of wards, would lead to difficulties with accountability and political management of what goes on at community level.

There is a community interest in having reasonably sized electorates in the context of urban geography, as well as in the sharing of the political load. It is not simply a question of hiving off responsibilities, but of ensuring that the community on the ground is adequately represented, which can be done in urban areas on the basis that I have been talking about. I am not saying that that cannot be done on a single-member-ward basis, but the system in England is working quite effectively. Under the alternative system that is being trumpeted here, different questions arise.

**Tommy Sheridan:** We are considering the democratic thrust of the bill, which is that there is a feeling that there is a lack of democratic accountability in the first-past-the-post system. Is the Local Government Association's position simply that it is opposed to changing the voting system and that it wants to retain first past the post?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** I do not think that we have taken a view as an association. I must be a bit careful. I have given my views. We do not have a received view. Certainly, there are people within the Local Government Association—Lib Dem members—who believe in proportional representation; I am not sure which form of PR they support, but it is some form of PR. Conservatives are against it. Some people on the Labour side see some elements of PR as feasible. To be frank, I do not know of anybody who would support the particular form of PR that we are looking at here. I am not saying that nobody supports STV, but from the discussions that we

have had, I am not aware of any great support for it as opposed to some other methods of PR.

**Tommy Sheridan:** I want to explore that. Has the Local Government Association discussed alternative voting systems—yes or no?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** Yes, we have discussed them, but we have not formed a view.

**Tommy Sheridan:** In the course of those discussions, you discussed STV and ruled it out or said that it was the least likely—

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** No. I am saying that I do not recall any demonstrable support, of the kind that is being advocated here, for STV. I do not know whether you will take evidence from Welsh organisations, but the Welsh Local Government Association came out against PR for local government in Wales. The Welsh LGA is part of our organisation, but it has its own association. Given that there has been devolution in Wales, we do not trespass on its territory.

**The Convener:** I want to ask one final question on voting; it is more to do with the process of voting than with voting systems. What is the LGA's view on the experiments that have taken place on the use of postal voting and electronic voting as new methods of conducting local government elections?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** The majority view would be to support postal voting. There are some concerns about issues such as security and fraud, although the Electoral Commission has found no evidence of any significant fraud in England. We are encouraged by the pilot on postal voting, which has generally resulted in a considerable increase in turnout. In the past year, the turnout in Newcastle, for example, went up from 31 per cent to about 47 or 48 per cent, which is quite a significant increase. Other forms of voting, such as e-voting and voting in shops, and measures such as changing the election date to a Saturday do not seem to have made much difference. Postal voting seems to have made a difference—in turnout, at least. In two regions of England—the north-east and the east midlands—this year's local elections and the European Parliament elections will be held on an all-postal basis.

**The Convener:** I want to move to other aspects of the bill, such as widening access and remuneration. Iain Smith will lead off.

**Iain Smith:** I note that you have set up remuneration panels either for individual councils or for groups of councils. Will you explain how those panels are set up and who appoints members to them?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** Councils appoint members to them. In most cases, independent members from the community are selected. I

remember that, in Newcastle's case, we placed a newspaper advertisement to invite interest from members of the community. People came forward from business and the professions, were appointed and have come back with recommendations. That has been the usual pattern. It is interesting that it has often—although not always—been the case that higher levels of remuneration have been recommended than those that councils have ultimately agreed to. The system is working quite well.

I know that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has advocated a national basic allowance and I can see how having the same system throughout the country would work well in Scotland. That is the system that applies in Wales. In England, where councils represent populations that range in size from 25,000 to 1 million and where there are two-tier, as well as single-tier, authorities, such a system would not be feasible—although some councils in England would like the comfort of a national scheme so that they would be absolved from the responsibility of taking what they think might be unpopular decisions. In my view, I do not think that such a system would work in England, but it could work here.

**Iain Smith:** Do the remuneration panels operate to national guidance or do they operate on the basis of local guidance?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** They operate according to local circumstances. In Newcastle's case, questionnaires were sent to council members to identify their work load, what they did, how many hours they worked, how many bodies they served on in and outside the council and so on, and I am sure that that was the case elsewhere. On that basis, the panels come back with recommendations on basic allowances and special responsibility allowances; since the change in the law, they also make recommendations on which members should be allowed to join the local government pension scheme. In Newcastle's case, the panel said that everyone should be allowed to join the scheme, but such a generalisation might not be made in other cases.

The panels are quite influential. I do not know whether there is any contact between them; different results seem to appear in different parts of the country, but it is right that they should reflect local circumstances.

**Iain Smith:** I do not know whether you have been able to analyse the information on allowances. There seem to be inconsistencies. For example, someone is better off in a council area that has between 250,000 and 500,000 people than they are in an area that has between 500,000 and 750,000. Are the recommendations of the remuneration panels—as opposed to the

decisions that councils take based on those recommendations—consistent across the country?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** I would not have thought so, but Paul Wheeler may have some more detailed information.

**Paul Wheeler:** The panels are independent bodies and they take account of local circumstances. Decisions may also be affected by the particular people who have been appointed to the panels.

There is not consistency. However, increasingly, a number of authorities—the larger ones, in particular—have commissioned their own studies. A number of organisations, such as the institute of local government studies at the University of Birmingham, have developed expertise in this area. They are, by default, producing some consistency. Ultimately, choices will rest with the independent remuneration panels and the local authorities, which must decide whether to accept the recommendations. As Mr Smith pointed out, situations vary. Local circumstances affect what the councils want allowances to be and what the independent panels recommend.

**Iain Smith:** It seems strange that every council can set up its own system and then do studies into what are broadly the same criteria. A lot of reinventing of wheels is going on. Is your system for determining remuneration efficient, or would it be better to have a national system that would set criteria on which individual councils could make judgments?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** It would be difficult to do that, because responsibilities vary. Cities such as Exeter, Norwich or Oxford have populations of around 150,000 but are shire districts. They have responsibility for housing and other services but not, for example, for education and social services, which often take up a lot of councillors' time. Then there are unitary authorities that are smaller than that, such as Darlington, which has a population of around 100,000. Some are smaller still. One of them—Rutland—has the ludicrously small population, for a unitary authority, of about 26,000. In unitary authorities, the council is responsible for all services. It is therefore difficult to generalise.

It might not be reasonable for every independent panel to do research, but it would be reasonable for them to consider local circumstances. Other factors come into play—for example, the way in which responsibilities are allocated in the council, and the way in which scrutiny is carried out. In England, there is a statutory split between executive and scrutiny roles. Some councils in Scotland have adopted such a system but others have not. In England, that system is universal among authorities with populations of more than 85,000.

Scrutiny can take many forms. In two neighbouring authorities of the same size and with the same responsibilities, an individual member's role can be quite different. That affects not only the general council membership but people who hold positions of responsibility on the scrutiny or executive side. People's roles can vary greatly and it is right that allowances should be tailored to fit local circumstances.

**Iain Smith:** The panels' recommendations have not always been implemented. Changes to the recommendations have normally been down the way, rather than up the way. Is there not a danger that remuneration is determined not by the value of the councillor's role, but by the views of the editor of the local newspaper?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** That is a danger. Councillors have to be more self-confident about these matters, emulating—dare I say it?—some of their parliamentary counterparts. They should defend robustly the payment of a reasonable level of allowance for public service. We may consider this later, but we ought also to consider extending the principle of some sort of compensatory allowance to cover roles that are not in directly elected office.

**Dr Jackson:** I take it that there can be a wide sweep of allowances, so perhaps we can take into account the point that you made about the shires, for example. You said that, in certain areas, councillors might not have as much responsibility as those who—like you—represent an urban area. There could be a big spread so, taking into account the average figures that are given in the table of allowances, the situation might not be as bad as Iain Smith suggested.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** That is right. Indeed, not many authorities are in the 500,000 to 750,000 population band. I think that only two unitary authorities and a smattering of counties—but not many counties—have populations of that size.

**Tommy Sheridan:** Does what the table describes as the "average allowance" include the dependant carers allowance?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** No, the dependant carers allowance is separate.

14:45

**Tommy Sheridan:** I asked the question because you explained in your paper that the dependant carers allowance varies considerably across authorities. Does that lead to greater diversity in councillors' remuneration?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** Marginally, but we are talking not as much about remuneration as about compensation for the costs that people incur.

Carers allowances are a fairly recent innovation; before 2000, some of our authorities made such payments, but there were questions about their legality and they were made legal by local government legislation. About 70 per cent of the authorities that responded to the Improvement and Development Agency's survey have now set up a system of fairly modest payments. You will notice from the evidence that payments are at around the level of the minimum wage—I am fairly certain that they do not cover all the costs of care. Payments vary between authorities; for example, Cumbria County Council caps the carers allowance, if I remember rightly.

You asked about diversity in remuneration, but the question is really whether the availability of such allowances encourages diversity in membership. There is not yet much evidence that it does, which is a point that we might return to.

**Tommy Sheridan:** I am pursuing this line of questioning not because I think that councillors should not be properly remunerated—they should be—but because I am concerned about the variation in allowances. You mentioned Cumbria, which sets a cap of £1,000 per annum, but the paper also mentions Worcestershire County Council, which caps the allowance at £2,000 per annum. Do you agree that there seem to be variations in carers and basic allowances, not just between similar authorities but between very different authorities?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** You raise an interesting point. The carers allowance represents the meeting of an expense—as opposed to remuneration—and, as such, it might be placed on a more universal footing. If such costs are incurred in the carrying out of one's council duties, it might be that a universal entitlement to compensation ought to be established. That is distinct from the question of the level of remuneration for a councillor's basic service. I am speaking personally; that is not necessarily the position of the LGA.

**Tommy Sheridan:** We will hear later from COSLA, which argues for a universal basic allowance. You suggest that such a system might work in Scotland, but do you accept that there are variations between authorities in Scotland, too?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** I accept that there will be variations, but at least there is a unitary system in Scotland, which is not the case in England, so such a measure would impact on everyone to a similar extent, in a way that it could not do in England. That almost brings us back to an earlier point, but even the representation role in England is divided between the county council and the district council in a two-tier area. Obviously, in Scotland and in unitary authorities in England, there is only one level, which carries more weight.

**Tommy Sheridan:** You are speaking personally, but can we take it from what you say that the Local Government Association feels that there is room for consideration of a universal compensation package, rather than the present system, under which there are varied packages?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** I am saying that there may be scope for considering a universal system to meet the costs of being a councillor and, in particular, a carers allowance. I am not talking about a universal system of remuneration. I regard remuneration as separate from compensation for the cost of providing care.

**David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con):** My question is on the same general point. Will you expand on the evidence on the impact that remuneration may have on people coming forward to stand as councillors? I was interested in the part of your paper that reflects on why people leave local government. Remuneration was not cited as a significant reason; the reasons were the work load and the feeling of having a lack of influence over events. Is there any substantive evidence about whether remuneration would significantly affect the number of people who come forward or is remuneration simply about treating more fairly those who have come forward?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** The question raises the general issue of attracting people into local government. Many people do not know what councillors' responsibilities are or what remuneration or other allowances might be available. Most people probably think that we walk away with more money than is the case—perhaps that is a general view about politicians—but I do not think that they could give an accurate answer about what is available. On the other hand, some people may feel that they are likely to lose out financially by becoming a councillor and, even under the proposed new system, some people will lose out financially.

Some people would lose out tangibly, simply because they would not earn as much by serving in local government or in some area of public service as they would by remaining in full-time employment. Other people would lose out in intangible ways; for example, being in local government would affect their career prospects and their possibility of working overtime, where that was available, or because it would impinge on their pensionable pay, if they were in one of the surviving final salary schemes. I know of colleagues who have retired from local government because their pension was calculated from their earnings in the final two years of their job—they had to give up because otherwise their pensions would have been seriously affected. One advantage of the new changes in pensions is that such situations should not arise.

The issue is difficult to judge. On the whole, people probably do not leave local government for financial reasons, although such reasons may be a contributory factor. It is more difficult to gauge whether people are deterred from applying because of a fear of financial loss. In any event, in the hope of attracting more people to local government, we should make it clear what the job entails, including the financial aspects. Paul Wheeler may have more evidence from studies.

**Paul Wheeler:** No, that is fine.

**Michael McMahon:** The Disability Rights Commission asked us, in considering remuneration, to take into account any disincentive that it might create for those who receive benefits because of a disability. You talked about the need for legislation to have a carers allowance. Have you foreseen, or have you had to deal with, any practical considerations that would address the Disability Rights Commission's concerns about the disincentive that remuneration may create for any sector of society?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** The benefits issue is significant and the Local Government Association has taken it up from time to time with the Department for Work and Pensions. If people work more than 16 hours a week, they lose benefit because they are deemed to be fit for work, although the type of work is not taken into account. We think that that is discriminatory and disadvantageous and should be dealt with as part of a review of the benefits system.

**Mr McFee:** You say that the system is still ad hoc, but that it is less ad hoc than it was because it was regularised in the most recent local government legislation for England and Wales. It would be interesting to see exactly what that involved in relation to what we are talking about. More important, and leaving out the question of the 16-hour threshold, was there any form of agreement with the DWP with regard to tax and national insurance on the allowances, if there were any, and other benefits that were limited by factors other than time?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** Tax and national insurance apply to the remuneration scheme.

**Mr McFee:** I was asking about the carers allowance. Sorry, I should have been specific.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** I do not think that that is taxable, but I am not sure.

**Paul Wheeler:** I do not think that it is taxable, but it is taken into account in relation to benefits. That comes back to your wider question about whether there is a disincentive to people who are reliant on benefits to move to a more active form of public service. The evidence is that that is the case, but I am not sure about the specifics of

whether the carers allowance would be counted as a taxable or beneficial gain.

**Mr McFee:** I am quite clear that there is a disincentive, but I wonder whether anything in the legislation militates against that.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** I am not sure whether it does, in relation to benefits. However, if the carers allowance were treated in the same way as travelling and subsistence allowances, tax or national insurance would not apply to it. We will check that and write to the clerks.

**Mr Welsh:** I note that most systems seem to be a mix of maxima and minima allied to hourly rates and allowances. If I have followed you correctly, your preference seems to be for a universalised system. How, in practice, could you arrive at such criteria? Given your vast experience of local government, how feasible do you think that it would be, in a unitary Scottish system, to establish such universal criteria for remuneration?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** The Welsh LGA runs a similar scheme, and I presume that you would start in the same way as I expect that it started, which would be by getting a national independent review body to examine precisely the same matters that a local independent review body has examined, such as work load, and to arrive at a judgment about the appropriate level of remuneration, drawing on proportional comparisons with the salaries that are paid to people who serve on quangos, health service bodies and so on—perhaps even MSPs. Alternatively, the issue could be examined from the bottom up by considering the question of responsibilities. I am sure that it could be done. Given that we are not talking about large numbers of authorities or individual members, it would be a practical exercise in Scotland. Because of the scale, it would not be practical to undertake such an exercise in England, however.

**Paul Wheeler:** That is precisely what the National Assembly for Wales has done. It opted for a national scale and produced a detailed report that the committee might find useful.

**Mr Welsh:** What has been the reaction to that universalised scale in Wales?

**Paul Wheeler:** I think that it might have taken some of the sting out of some local media publicity and have helped to make the point that the Welsh authorities are all similar in nature, if not in size, in that they are all unitary. There are approximately 30 of them, so the exercise was easier to conduct than it would be in England. Our point is that a comparison between Wales and Scotland is more useful in this regard than a comparison between England and Scotland would be.

All those elements will have some adverse publicity, but my impression is that, compared with other schemes, the survey has been broadly accepted as independent. People accept it as a fair comment on councillors' remuneration and activities.

**The Convener:** You might be aware that the Scottish Executive is proposing a one-off severance scheme for councillors who choose to stand down at the next elections, recognising the fact that those elections are likely to be held under a different electoral system. What would your views be of such a scheme? Do you think that there should generally be such a provision for councillors, similar to that which applies for members of Parliament or members of the Scottish Parliament, whereby there is a resettlement allowance, even if people contest and lose an election?

15:00

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** I am not sure whether the association has taken a view on that, but I would personally support such a scheme. The whole idea started in the Republic of Ireland, where it was decided that it would facilitate the infusion of new blood into Irish local government if people were compensated for loss of office. The National Assembly for Wales has come forward with such a scheme, which some, but not all, councils have adopted. Some members have opted to take it up, and some have not.

The point has been made in the terms in which you have described it: if parliamentarians benefit from such a scheme, there is no reason in principle why it should not apply to local councillors. I personally agree with that argument, but I have to say that the Minister of State for Local and Regional Government does not. There is not much sign of the scheme being introduced in England. It was not well received in Wales, by either the media or, as far as one can gather, the public. However, that does not mean that the scheme there was not right.

You said that the proposal in Scotland was for a one-off measure. With respect to the Scottish Executive, that does not appear to be entirely logical. If there is a case for having the scheme, then there is a case for having it. I would have thought that the sensible course would be for such a scheme to remain part of the system. Otherwise, it looks as if it is simply a matter of buying out the current generation.

**Mr McFee:** Got it in one. Absolutely.

Sorry—I was just agreeing with you, Sir Jeremy. I beg your pardon, convener.

**Mr Welsh:** Was there a significant loss of experience in Wales as a result of the severance payments?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** Their application is only just coming up now. The Welsh elections are taking place in June and the selections will presumably be happening now. We will have to see what happens. It ought to be said that the average age of councillors in Wales is significantly higher than it is elsewhere. Furthermore, the gender balance is even worse in Wales than it is elsewhere. It may be that the scheme will facilitate a change. I say that with some diffidence as, unfortunately, I represent precisely the average English councillor: white, male and aged 59. However, councillors are even older in Wales.

**The Convener:** That takes me on to the question of diversity. We will be hearing later in the meeting from the widening access to council membership progress group, which was established by the Scottish Executive. Scotland is in quite a similar position to the one that you outline in your research, with the average age of councillors being the mid-50s; with councillors being predominantly white and male; and with a relatively small percentage of councillors having disabilities or coming from ethnic minorities. Does the LGA have any views on what measures we could encourage the Executive to implement to broaden diversity?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** We have a number of views on that, some of which I touched on earlier. We could publicise what is involved in being a councillor and the support and allowances that are available. We could provide pre-election training and shadowing schemes, so that people can work with a councillor and get a feel for what it is like to be one. That could perhaps be supported by the Electoral Commission, which I think is likely to embark on a process of that sort. The Lord Chancellor's Department—now the Department for Constitutional Affairs—has put £4 million into a scheme to encourage people to apply to be magistrates. We would like there to be something comparable for service in local government. However, we need to go beyond that.

Political parties have a responsibility to encourage a wider representative group to come forward. I cannot speak for other political parties but, nationally, the Labour Party has been modifying its candidate selection process in order to improve quality and to reach out to a wider potential membership. The Labour Party has established something called the Labour academy, which some members here might be aware of. It produces publications encouraging people to become involved in local government. I assume that the same thing is going on in other political parties, but I cannot be certain about that.

We certainly need to do all that.

We also need to make it clear that, in England at any rate, service on the local council no longer requires people to attend 30 hours of committee meetings a week. The executive-scrutiny split has the potential advantage, which is being realised only slowly, of allowing councillors different roles, such as a community representation role, a scrutiny role and perhaps an executive or leadership role; it need not be assumed that councillors have to be involved in all three and be consumed under mountains of paper with all their time spent in formal meetings in the town or county hall as opposed to in the community where their interests lie. We also need to make it clear that it is possible to combine working for a living with public service.

We do not have enough people who are in employment, particularly private sector employment—although the numbers are growing—as opposed to those who are retired or unemployed. We need to encourage people from all walks of life and occupations to participate. We need to do all the things that I have mentioned both institutionally and as political parties.

We also have to talk up local government instead of talking it down. For years it has been too tempting for the Government of the day to criticise local government's performance. It is not unreasonable to do so when criticism is merited, but one does not hear or read enough that being involved in local government is worth while and important. It is difficult to recruit people to something that is regarded as inefficient and ineffective. We have to talk up the job realistically and create more interest in it.

We also need to encourage employers to make time off available. Paul Wheeler referred to the good employers scheme, which acknowledges the contribution that good firms make in facilitating time off for employees and which could be extended. We might want to revert to something that one of the predecessor associations—the Association of Metropolitan Authorities, which I chaired before the LGA was formed—promoted, which is the concept that allowances could be paid to the employer to recruit a full or part-time replacement for somebody in public service, as opposed to simply to the employee.

No single issue will turn the situation round. The surveys to which you referred imply that part of the problem is a feeling that people are not able to make a sufficient contribution and that is partly to do with the state of central and local government relations, in England at any rate—I cannot say whether that applies here. That needs to be addressed. People need to feel that they are making a worthwhile contribution while having a life outside.

**Dr Jackson:** I am thinking about my personal circumstances. I am sure that I benefited from the twinning exercise that the Labour Party had for the Scottish Parliament and from the fact that I had a secondment arrangement—I would have been able to return to the University of Edinburgh if I had not been successful in the elections. You talked about time off and payment. What do you think about secondment as a possibility for one term, just to allow people to see what the job entails? I am thinking particularly about trying to get more women involved. Are there any examples of arranging secondments over that longer period?

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** I do not quite follow what you mean.

**Dr Jackson:** I meant secondment for a term.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** So someone would be on leave, as it were, to serve as an elected councillor.

**Dr Jackson:** Yes. Just for one term.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** That is an attractive idea. I suppose employers, particularly small employers, would have to be compensated to some degree in the meantime if additional costs were involved. There was a time—Paul Wheeler and I were talking about this earlier—when large employers such as electricity boards and big companies tended to support people going into local public affairs. That is decreasingly the case. One would have to facilitate the process—a financial inducement might be required. As prized as Paul Wheeler's awards are, I do not think that they will necessarily convert reluctant employers into generous ones, even though a sensible employer would see that the experience that people derive from public service can often contribute to their development and make them more useful to the concern than they otherwise would be. I guess that the employer would be looking at the bottom line and perhaps a financial arrangement would have to be entered into. However, I like the idea.

**Paul Wheeler:** I do not know whether members are aware that there is an organisation called the Industry and Parliament Trust, which operates within Westminster and does precisely what has been suggested. It has got companies—mostly blue-chip ones—involved. One of the things that is offered is that the company will keep a successful candidate's job open for four years. There is no reason why that principle could not be extended to local government. Beyond that, we encourage voluntarism—there are perhaps more good employers than we realise. However, there may be options around a public service commitment, which could involve tax credits for organisations that are willing to participate.



The one activity that employers have to allow a person to do and which requires paid leave is service in the Territorial Army. That is a good principle, but if that is the principle for the Territorial Army, it is not too much of an extension to say that being a good councillor is something that should merit Government support in the same way.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** There are times when it is almost as dangerous to be a local councillor as it is to be a member of the TA.

**Mr Welsh:** Before we get carried away with that idea, I will say that I have been connected with the Industry and Parliament Trust and think that it is great to have industry connected to local or central Government on that basis. However, we would be talking about a person serving as a councillor for four years. The majority of Scottish businesses are small and medium-sized enterprises that need their members of staff. It is important to address the issue, but in practice the ability to take up that option might be quite limited. We have to consider other ways to get councillors who come from a wider range of backgrounds.

**Paul Wheeler:** I accept that point, but there are still a large number of organisations that could afford to provide that option and fill the gap. There may be other options that both large and small employers could think about.

Sir Jeremy Beecham made the point that being a councillor is good experience for a lot of business because of the skills that it gives to a person. Being a cabinet member can be the equivalent of doing a business degree in terms of the skills that can be acquired. Business does not yet understand that, but if there were a concerted campaign to explain the merits of being a councillor, we might find that the voluntary sector and the private sector would have a better understanding of the benefits.

**Mr Welsh:** That is an education exercise. Having been a councillor, I know what you mean.

**David Mundell:** I will follow up on Andrew Welsh's theme. Does there not have to be a reality check in the sense that the choice is ultimately for the electorate to make? It is not a job interview—the electorate is not making its choice based on the range of skills, as would be done if someone were being interviewed for a job. We are not moving towards the concept of technocrats—the public will always choose the people whom they want to choose, subject to the way in which the parties have selected their candidates. Ultimately, it is party selection or other criteria rather than the electoral system, shadowing or whatever that will determine how people vote. For example, in the area that I represent in Scotland, the key criterion generally is whether people have had links to the

community. It does not matter what skills the person has—if they come from outwith the community, they do not get elected.

**Sir Jeremy Beecham:** That is unfortunate, but we need to widen the pool from which people are drawn. Most political parties currently have, relatively speaking and historically speaking, small memberships nationally and therefore also at local level. In terms of age, ethnicity, gender and employment, the appearance of most parties is unrepresentative of the communities in which they are based.

If we are going to widen that representation, we must make a conscious effort to encourage and facilitate entry into public service—and not only elected public service; it is difficult to recruit school governors, magistrates and others whom we increasingly expect to play a role in public life, and the same principles need to be applied across the piece. It is a long process and there is no quick way of doing it. People have to be encouraged to participate and need to be supported, particularly to feel that, in participating, they will not have to sacrifice their family, job or lifestyle. People have often done precisely that, and I pay enormous tribute to those who have devoted years of service and, in some respects, suffered as a result. It is not acceptable that they should have to do that and it is increasingly unacceptable to people that it should be expected of them. The new system allows a more tailored approach to the time commitment, and I hope that it will lead to a broadening of interest and a wider range of people coming into local government.

15:15

**The Convener:** That brings us to the end of our questions for the first panel of witnesses. I thank Sir Jeremy Beecham and Paul Wheeler for giving evidence.

We move straight on to our second panel of witnesses. I welcome representatives of COSLA back to give further evidence: Councillor Pat Watters, president of COSLA; Councillor Anne McGovern, chair of the councillors' remuneration task group in COSLA; Norie Williamson, strategic director of COSLA; and James Thomson, policy officer.

I remind committee members that COSLA has already given detailed evidence on the electoral system that is proposed in the bill and ask them to concentrate on the other aspects of the bill: remuneration, broadening access and any related matters.

I invite Pat Watters or Anne McGovern to make an opening statement.

**Councillor Pat Watters (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities):** I thank you for inviting us to come along. I will say a few words and then invite my colleague Councillor McGovern to contribute.

At the danger of reiterating something that I said the last time that we gave evidence, I point out that local authorities and the elected members in them are the fourth tier of government. By that I do not mean that we are the fourth in line; I mean that we are another elected tier of government, of which there happen to be four in the United Kingdom and Scotland.

Since the Executive came into being, it has been willing to pass responsibility for decisions to local authorities, but the level of councillors' remuneration does not merit the responsibility that elected members in local authorities take on. The committee must realise that, as it heard in earlier evidence, when councillors are elected, they make significant sacrifices in their careers and family lives to carry out elected members' duties and to face the pressures that come with them.

The other point that I want to make is that COSLA and the Executive's joint survey, which was carried out only recently, puts paid to the stigma that the Executive placed on councillors in the consultation exercise when it said that the majority of councillors were part time. However, the amount of work that councillors undertake and their experience should be acknowledged. The Executive should retract the statement that it made right at the start of the consultation exercise. If it listens to the evidence of its own findings, it will do so.

If remuneration for elected members is to be looked at, it is important for a link to be made to other remuneration packages. Elected members are to be found in the different spheres of government and councillors represent a sphere of government. If councillors are to be given a fair package, it should be linked to other packages, as all elected members should be paid on roughly the same terms. Although councillors might not be remunerated at the same level, the same sort of criteria should be used. It is important that the progress group that has been asked to look at remuneration is free to look at how those links should be made. Its members should not get bogged down in technical detail.

We spoke earlier about reinventing the wheel. There is no necessity to do that. We have systems that have been tried and that work well. Indeed, some of the systems that work well are not so new. That said, some of the Executive's new systems seem to work well. Why should things be different for other elected members just because they are elected to local government and not to the national United Kingdom Government or the

national Government in Scotland? It is important that we do not rehash all the old arguments. We must not get bogged down in technical detail. We need to look at the principles and not the technical details.

It does not make sense to link the progress groups on pay, widening access and voting systems and say that they are inseparable. Whether we change the voting system should have no impact on whether we look at remuneration or widening access. The only link that there might be is between the right level of pay for elected members and more people being attracted into local government.

I will return to what I said at the outset of my remarks. National politicians increasingly determine national policies in partnership with local government. The Executive has recognised that it does not deliver the services that local government and its partners deliver. Despite that, it continues to hold to the current remuneration package in which someone can serve a considerable length of time as an elected member only to walk away, having damaged their own prospects in terms of their pension or their career progression, and get nothing as a result of it. We would not accept that situation for any of our employees and the Executive would not accept it for its employees, so how can it be acceptable for elected members in local government?

**Councillor Anne McGovern (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities):** I would like to add one or two points. I listened to the previous panel discussion and found it interesting. I am not one of the average councillors in Scotland—although I am white and 55, I am a female. I also do not have a higher education. It is fair to say that I came up the hard way.

When people talk about access to local government, they should start by thinking about access and retention. A whole raft of issues, including remuneration, pensions and severance, has been mentioned. One of the issues that caught my attention was the reference to carers. In the role that councillors play in local government, we try to be good employers and to provide as much support as we can to our work force. However, we do not extend that same support to ourselves.

We are talking about widening access to local government to younger, more upwardly mobile people and to people who are perhaps not as mobile, but we do not have the means to attract or retain them. My 29-year-old daughter has a salary of £19,000 and would not consider for a minute giving up her job and entering local government for £7,000 when she already has child care, access to occupational health services and other benefits.

As for retention, many councillors have served for many years. I have probably not served for as many years as my colleagues such as Pat Watters have. We can attract and retain councillors, but we must also make provision for councillors who have to retire because of ill health.

A one-off severance payment has been mentioned, but what happens if somebody would like to serve another term and their health does not allow it? They might not have the ability to access further employment should they no longer be a councillor. That restricts their choice in the council. That councillor might have a high-powered job and might be a leader, a deputy leader or a convener. If their health deteriorated, the basic allowance of £7,000 might not sustain them. For people like me, the alternative would be a widow's pension, so we would be caught in the benefits trap. Not only carers, but young women, old people, widows, widowers and a raft of people are disadvantaged one way or another.

What is needed is not only a remuneration package that includes a pension but a support package to attract people and retain the people whom we have. We might suddenly lose our longest-serving members because of a one-off severance payment, without any pension. Even if councillors had the chance to buy back pension rights, could they afford it on a basic allowance of £7,000 for 10 years? Parity of esteem and respect for the work that councillors have done are needed.

People such as us gave evidence to Kerley and McIntosh. I am pleased to be here to argue the case yet again for parity of esteem for local government members who share some of the party beliefs of members round this table. I hope that the outcome this time is slightly different and is positive. I am happy to answer any questions.

**The Convener:** I hope that the outcome will be more positive, as the remuneration package will be changed after the bill is passed and the various working groups have reported.

You have said today and in your written submission that you support a pension scheme, which might be similar to the Scottish Parliament pension scheme. You also support a general severance payment or package at the end of a councillor's term—not only when people stand down at the next local government elections, as the Executive proposes. Should such a payment be pegged at a percentage of annual income per year of service?

**Councillor Watters:** Examining that subject is the responsibility of the Executive's councillors' remuneration progress group. However, we think that the level should be linked to the severance pay—"resettlement pay" is a far better term for it—

that MSPs have. If our salary were linked to that of MSPs, a similar percentage link should apply to any resettlement payment.

We certainly believe that the payment should not be a one-off. There is no logic behind saying that MPs and MSPs who leave Parliament for whatever reason can have a resettlement allowance but that elected local government members should have a one-off payment.

**The Convener:** Some have criticised the Executive's scheme because the severance pay—that is the term that the Executive uses, but I agree that the term "resettlement allowance" would be far better—is available only if someone chooses to stand down. Potentially, a long-serving councillor who chose to stand at the next elections and was beaten would get no resettlement allowance, whereas someone who had served for perhaps only one term and chose to stand down would get the payment. I think that I can guess how you would view such an anomaly, but will you clarify your position for the record?

**Councillor Watters:** Basically, the proposal would create inequality. If the committee considers the matter, it must accept that, as someone said earlier, the Executive is trying to buy off elected members at local government level with what it terms a one-off severance payment. I do not believe that that is right. People who have given years of service should be compensated even if they lose their seat.

15:30

**Mr McFee:** I agree entirely with your comment that it would be just a one-off voluntary redundancy scheme. I also agree with paying councillors a decent level of wage not just because we need to retain and recruit councillors but because that is the decent thing to do.

Let us get to the nub of the issue. In essence, the scheme for MSPs gives six months' salary to those who are booted out the door or decide to stand down. Not unreasonably, you advocate a link between an MSP's salary and a councillor's salary. At what percentage of the basic MSP's salary should the councillor's salary be set? I know that a committee is considering the issue, but you must have some view. Should it be 25 per cent or 50 per cent? What is the role of special responsibility payments, which are, frankly, abused in local government just now?

**Councillor Watters:** At present, none of our submissions has recommended a particular level of salary for elected members because we believe that it is right that the issue should be considered independently and, if that is to happen, that consideration must be seen to be independent. However, our submission has scoped the possible

costs for different linkages. For instance, if a councillor's salary was 50 per cent of an MSP's salary, the cost would be 0.2 per cent of local government spend. If the linkage was set at 25 per cent, the cost would be 0.1 per cent. If it was set at 75 per cent, the cost would be 0.3 per cent.

**Mr Welsh:** Can you give the cost in pounds rather than in percentage terms?

**Norie Williamson (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities):** A cost of 0.2 per cent of local government spend would be about £22 million.

**Mr Welsh:** I am sorry for interrupting, but who would pay that? Would it be paid by central Government or by local government?

**Councillor Watters:** As the legislation would have been passed by MSPs, we would expect MSPs to take responsibility for it.

**Mr Welsh:** So the cost would come from the Scottish block.

**Councillor Watters:** Yes.

Basically, councillors' salaries should be linked to MSPs' salaries because local councillors should not be treated any differently from other elected representatives. If the payment for MSPs is equivalent to six months' salary at their level of pay, the payment for councillors should be equivalent to six months' pay at the level of pay for elected councillors.

**Mr McFee:** I can accept your point that, if MSPs receive six months' salary, councillors should receive six months' salary. What I am trying to get at is the level at which that payment should be made. The upper limit that you have suggested seems to be that a councillor's salary should be half of what an MSP is paid—£7,000, which is a seventh of an MSP's salary, is low. I do not want to put words in your mouth, but we are somewhere in that ballpark, with an upper figure of £22 million.

**Councillor Watters:** I did not set 50 per cent as an upper limit but gave that as an example of what the cost would be if the link was set at a specific level. The level at which the link is set is for the independent committee to consider.

**Mr McFee:** I am trying to ascertain your own view. Clearly, you must have a personal view.

**Councillor Watters:** Personally, I think that, given the amount of time that elected members put in and the sacrifices that they make, 50 per cent would not be a reasonable level for their basic remuneration. However, you are right that there would be different levels of payment on top of that for different levels of responsibility. That would need to be considered separately. I believe that we need an independent look at the issue, so that the outcome is fair and transparent.

**The Convener:** Is the figure of £22 million that you quoted the total cost of such a package or is it the additional cost over and above the cost of the current system?

**Norie Williamson:** That is the additional cost over and above the current payments.

**Mr Welsh:** Does that include research and other facilities? If we had full-time salaried councillors, would they not also require other expenditure? I am interested to know how the figure was obtained and what it contains.

**Norie Williamson:** Let me clarify that and pick up another point that was made about special responsibility allowances. We calculated the figures when we responded to "Renewing Local Democracy: The Next Steps". As Councillor Watters said, the figures are purely hypothetical and were produced to provide only an indication of the overall costs. For those purposes, we assumed that the relationship between a councillor's salary and an MSP's salary would be set at 50 per cent, that the additional responsibility allowances would account for 10 per cent in addition to that and that there would also be an additional employers superannuation cost. All those things are included in that cost. What is not included is a severance and resettlement payment, which would be extremely difficult to cost.

**Mr McFee:** I would like to pursue the matter a wee bit further. We now have an idea about what basic salaries should be. If a basic salary were 50 per cent of an MSP's salary, an extra £22 million a year would be added to the wages bill. If there was such a settlement, what would happen to special responsibility allowances? In most authorities, such allowances vastly exceed basic allowances, depending on the post in question. Indeed, in many authorities, such allowances are two to three times the basic allowance. What scope would there be for SRAs in future? In some local authorities, SRAs might be £18,000, £19,000 or £20,000 above the basic payment. Should that continue?

**Councillor Watters:** The Scottish local authorities remuneration committee that is being set up should make recommendations and give general guidance to authorities on how to deal with local flexibility and on how settlements should be implemented authority by authority. The level at which allowances would be set would be a matter for discussion in that committee.

**Mr McFee:** But COSLA currently recommends special responsibility figures.

**Councillor Watters:** I am talking about the committee that would be brought in by the bill.

**Norie Williamson:** We issued guidance in 1995, but local decisions and the application of that guidance should be considered. We would expect the independent committee to establish a framework that individual councils could apply flexibly at a local level.

**Mr McFee:** I was simply trying to elicit whether you think that SRAs would be at the same levels as at present.

**Councillor Watters:** That would be a matter for the remuneration committee rather than for us to decide, but I do not think that a council leader would be expected to be at the same payment level as a back bencher. If councillors receive a basic payment, there should be additional money for a person who has taken on the additional responsibilities of leading a council.

**Mr McFee:** I do not disagree, if that is how the additional payments are quantified.

**Councillor Watters:** There should be an independent committee to decide matters.

**The Convener:** Currently, there is wide variation in the size of wards in Scotland that councillors represent. There are as few as 2,000 electors in some wards, whereas there are in excess of 6,000 electors in others. Should there be variances in payment according to the size of the ward that a councillor represents, or does COSLA favour a flat-rate basic payment for every councillor?

**Councillor Watters:** We favour a flat rate. You are absolutely right to say that there are different sizes of wards. Wards with 6,000 electors are predominantly in the larger towns or cities. The work load of an elected member in such wards will be quite heavy, but it might not be any less in a vast rural ward in which an enormous amount of time is spent travelling between meetings and getting to meetings, including evening meetings. It cannot be said that a person will have a smaller work load because they represent a smaller ward. The number of areas that they must cover will be exactly the same.

I am a member of South Lanarkshire Council, which is the fifth-largest authority in Scotland. My ward has 3,500 electors, and is tight and compact. I can walk from one end of my ward to the other end in less than half an hour. A colleague who represents perhaps 1,500 electors in the Highland area or somebody who represents an island authority in which all responsibility is at the local level could not do that. There are different sizes of wards and it might be said that different levels of commitment are required, but the levels of work that are needed can be the same as a result of the differences between urban and rural areas, despite different population sizes. Small wards are found only in extremely rural areas rather than in urban areas. A rural councillor's level of work is no less than that of a town councillor.

**Paul Martin:** When a position on a council has historically been part time but, over the years, has developed into almost a full-time occupation, given demands and so on, would we not have to consider the ethics involved if we were to look at remuneration? Would we not have to deal with the principle of whether it should be treated as a part-time position—some councils have such positions—or as a full-time employed position? The principle that has been followed is that, in local government, elected members have been part time and have had full-time occupations. I appreciate the fact that further responsibilities have been added, but that situation has evolved over the past 10 to 15 years. Do we need to have a review of how we look at elected positions, moving away from their being part time and towards their being statutorily full time?

**Councillor Watters:** I took great exception when I read the consultation document, which says that the majority of councillors are part time. I would never argue that all councillors are full time; that is not the case. As you say, councillors work at different levels and have different responsibilities, and they make different time commitments to enable them to do that work. You are right to say that, in years gone by, people thought that the role was part time—

**Paul Martin:** Sorry. I am talking about their having another employed position.

**Councillor Watters:** Many people who have been elected—not only councillors, but those who are elected in other spheres of representation—do not just do the work of their elected position. Historically, Parliament started at 2 o'clock in the afternoon to allow the members to carry out the functions of their other, main jobs. That has worn down over time as the level of responsibility has come on, and parliamentarians now carry out a full-time job, although many of them still perform other functions as well. That is true also of members of the Scottish Parliament.

**Paul Martin:** What we are saying here, though, is that we have to consider the future position. I appreciate the fact that some colleagues in the Scottish Parliament and in the Westminster Parliament have other jobs. That is an issue for another discussion. However, are we saying that we should have full-time councillors as a statutory position, or are we saying that there should still be a mix-and-match approach? How do we quantify the returns that we should get for that? That is the point that I am trying to develop.

**Councillor Watters:** Many councils currently have job descriptions laid down for people who are carrying out the functions of a councillor, especially if they have a promotive role within the council. I do not think that that will change. I do not think that we should say that everyone who is

elected as a councillor has to give up any other occupation that they have to allow them to carry out their role as a councillor. If they can fit it in, they should be able to do that, no differently from anyone else. However, we should set a level of salary for being an elected member, and every elected member should get that salary. If they have other employment, they can fit that in as well as carrying out the tasks of being an elected member. If it is necessary that a job description is established right across local government, that is what should happen. People should be able to carry out those functions—and another job, if that is what they choose.

**The Convener:** I want to pursue that a bit further, before we move on. As you are probably aware, many members of the committee have been local authority councillors and have a high degree of respect for the job that councillors do. My experience, and the experience of some other members, is that there can be a big difference between the number of hours that are put in by someone who is a key member of the administration and the number of hours that are put in by someone who is a back-bench member of the opposition. Is there a danger that, if a flat rate of pay is established for everyone, some councillors will be highly remunerated but not make the same contribution to the work of the council? What protection could there be against that? Is it that the electorate makes the decision whether someone is making a satisfactory contribution to the council as a whole?

**Councillor Watters:** We should set a basic, fair salary level to start with. If councillors have further responsibilities, they should be recompensed for those additional responsibilities. We did not say that we wanted a different level of pay for MSPs according to their contribution or the area that they represent.

**Councillor McGovern:** Whether members are selected by a party or choose to stand individually, they stand as a representative of the community that elects them. At that point, there is no responsibility allowance. Some councillors have no desire to be anything other than a back bencher. In any work where there are 23, 48 or 76 people doing a job, they will all do it differently and commit to it differently. When anybody goes into local government, they go in at the same level. What they do after that is entirely up to them. As Pat Watters said, the responsibility allowance comes in when they choose to progress to a more senior post. The vast majority of councillors with whom I am familiar get job descriptions when they go forward for such posts and have to adhere to them.

15:45

**The Convener:** Do you have a question, Michael?

**Michael McMahon:** Andrew Welsh asked my question.

**Mr McFee:** I am sorry to come back to this, but I know of local authorities in which every single member of the administration is paid an SRA in order to keep them in line. Do you think that that is the future for SRAs, or should they be restricted to particular senior posts?

**Councillor Watters:** It is not right to abuse SRAs, which could happen if they were paid to every single member of a local authority. People should be paid according to the responsibility of their post. If we are asking people to carry out duties that are additional to those covered by the basic allowance, we should examine how we pay for that—that is no different from anywhere else.

**Mr McFee:** Should that be legislated for, or should there be a capped amount per authority, because in some authorities posts are invented so that councillors get SRAs?

**Councillor Watters:** That question is difficult to answer, because one would need to examine the make-up of the authority. The Kerley recommendation is a nice set of words, but there is nothing factual to back it up. It has been said that seven people should receive responsibility payments in large local authorities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh, but that is way below the numbers that are needed to carry out the roles in big authorities. It was said that in the smallest authority the number should be five. The difference between the number of people who are needed to carry the burden in Edinburgh and the number who are required to do so in a small council is vast. That is not to say that work does not need to be done in a small council, but more people are needed to carry it out in a large organisation.

**Mr McFee:** But do you accept that the figure should not be 50 per cent of the membership?

**Councillor Watters:** The situation is difficult. Councils are not organised in the same way, and it would not be right if they were. Highland Council, for example, is split up into rural committees, but there are also central responsibilities. Glasgow is not organised in the same way. The situation should be determined locally. Of course there should be no abuse. Nobody wants to see abuse and we should try to stamp it out wherever possible.

**Mr Welsh:** You say that councillors should have a percentage of an MSP's salary. Are you also saying that those who are in the administration in local government should be given the same percentage of ministerial salaries?

**Councillor Watters:** No.

**Mr Welsh:** The role of a councillor is, essentially, different from that of an MSP.

**Councillor Watters:** It is much heavier.

**Mr Welsh:** For example—it is sad to say, and I wish it was otherwise—local government has for a long time been called local administration. Local councillors have officials to assist them, whereas MSPs as legislators do not. There is an essential difference between the two roles, is there not?

**Councillor Watters:** The officers in local government provide a service, but policy making is done by elected members. That is similar to the policy-making role that you have as an MSP. I am sure that the civil service carries out some functions within Government—

**Mr Welsh:** But is the role of councillor similar to that of MSP? Councillors have little scope for decision making. Capital and revenue budgets are all determined by central Government, the ability to raise money locally is extremely limited—in fact, as we know from council tax problems it is practically non-existent—and there is ring fencing and new burdens. I have put many arguments to central Government on behalf of local government, which I have great sympathy for. Surely a rise in the status of local government should accompany salaries. However, that is a different matter, and I do not believe that central Government is willing to concede to local councils what I believe should be their proper status.

There is another problem at the heart of the matter. If £22 million or whatever is asked for to pay for councillors' salaries, surely that money can come only from services—it can come only from the block of money that is given to the Scottish Parliament or the money that is given to local authorities. How often have we all argued that legislation puts burdens on local government but does not give it the cash? In practice, is central Government likely to give you the cash for councillors' salaries?

**Councillor McGovern:** I return to Councillor Watters's opening remarks, when he said that we were the fourth tier of government. I do not recall Europe, Westminster or the Scottish Parliament debating whether councillors' allowances should come from Westminster or from the Scottish block grant. Currently, local government is funded in a roundabout way by central Government in London via the Scottish block grant. I do not see what the difference is and I find Mr Welsh's suggestion demeaning.

**Mr Welsh:** It was not meant to be so. In fact, the difference between a parliament and a local authority—

**Councillor McGovern:** Can I just interrupt you there? We must get back to the fundamental

premise that everyone around the table was democratically elected by the public to represent them. Certainly, we represent the public at different levels, but we were all democratically elected in a constituency role. Therefore—quid pro quo—we should be singing off the same hymn sheet.

**Councillor Watters:** As a local councillor, I do not recognise the position that Andrew Welsh reflected about no decisions being taken at local level.

**Mr Welsh:** Understand me that I would not push that argument too far—such decisions are taken.

**Councillor Watters:** Decisions may be taken on how sizeable budgets are administered and spent. For example, North Lanarkshire Council recently overspent £3.4 million in its direct service organisation budget. There was a significant level of accountability for the council and its leader for what happened because of that overspend. There was a similar situation in East Ayrshire Council for a much smaller amount. Local councils are much more accountable than other spheres of government are.

**Mr Welsh:** I am trying to be devil's advocate.

**David Mundell:** Ultimately, the Executive will not be bound to follow what is said by the remuneration committee that the bill will establish. Whatever happens relative to the establishment of the remuneration committee, we will be back into the same old discussions, because that committee will be able to make recommendations, but the Executive will not be bound to follow them.

**Councillor Watters:** The Executive will not be bound to follow the committee's recommendations. However, it would be difficult for the Executive to ignore what the committee recommended.

**David Mundell:** So you are satisfied with the proposed degree of independence of the committee and the proposed level of linkage between the committee and the Executive.

**Councillor Watters:** Speaking as a member of the councillors' remuneration progress group, I want the remuneration committee to be more transparently independent.

**David Mundell:** How would you achieve that?

**Councillor Watters:** The committee should be able to make recommendations to the Executive on what it finds and should not be bound by bits in the consultation that say, for example, that all councillors are part time.

**David Mundell:** What about the roll-out of recommendations in terms of their degree of compulsion or their statutory nature in relation to local authorities? Currently, there are COSLA

guidelines. I know most closely the workings of Dumfries and Galloway Council, which opted not to go for full payments for councillors. The council took the view that that would not go down well with the local population because Dumfries and Galloway is a low-wage area. Of course, once one gets into that position, one gets trapped. Do you see the level as applying automatically? If so, what degree of flexibility would there be within that? For example, if the level were £25,000, could some councils opt for £20,000?

**Councillor Watters:** As a good, solid trade unionist, I believe in paying people the rate for the job. If the recommendation is £25,000, it should be expected that people who do that job should get £25,000.

**David Mundell:** Is that regardless of local circumstances?

**Councillor Watters:** Such issues would be taken into account by the Scottish local authorities remuneration committee. If a rate is set for the job, we should expect people to be paid that rate, whether it is £25,000, £30,000 or £10,000.

**Tommy Sheridan:** I must tell Pat Watters, James Thomson, Anne McGovern and Norie Williamson that I do not disagree with the principle of the proposal that is on the table, but that I disagree with the determination, because the comparison that they have used to decide the level of remuneration is unfair. Given that only 4 per cent of the Scottish population earn more than £49,000 per annum, if we based councillors' remuneration on MSPs' salaries, we would be basing it on the salaries of a small minority of the Scottish population.

The figure of £25,000 that you have arrived at is the average wage of a skilled worker in Scotland. Your remuneration task group could have struck a blow for more equality in public sector wages by arguing for an average skilled worker's wage for MSPs and for a pro rata settlement for local councillors. What is the average wage of local authority employees in Scotland? As the witnesses from COSLA know, a large number of those employees are low-paid workers. Is there not room for you to come up with a more imaginative formula that begins to bring into focus the fact that politicians at our level—not at your level—are overpaid?

**Councillor Watters:** The councillors' remuneration progress group has not asked us to consider the level of pay for MSPs or any other elected representatives; it has asked us to look at the remuneration package for councillors. There is a simple rule—not in the discussions in that group, but in COSLA's thinking—that councillors' pay should be linked to the pay of other elected representatives in Scotland. We do not argue that

we should be paid £49,000. Whether you believe it or not, we do a similar job to those other elected representatives: we are elected to deliver services to every community in Scotland. Not many elected representatives can say that; only those in local government. The role of other spheres of government is to determine policy and to decide on the funding that is required to allow services to be delivered, whereas we deliver the services at the local level. That is why our pay should be linked to that of other elected representatives and why the proportion should be fair. However, we are not arguing that we should be paid the same as MSPs are.

**Tommy Sheridan:** I would not argue for a moment that councillors are not accountable or representative. As I served on a local authority for 11 years, I am well aware of councillors' onerous task. If we consider that the leader of a local authority may in effect be sacked for an overspend of a few million pounds but that nobody in the Parliament has yet been sacked for an overspend of nearly £400 million, we will realise that there is a difference in accountability.

You propose a universal basic salary for all councillors in Scotland. You do not argue that councillors in more populated local authority areas such as Aberdeen should have a higher salary than those in areas such as South Lanarkshire should have. Why do you want a universal or national basic salary for councillors?

**Councillor Watters:** When a person is elected to local government, they are expected to assume a certain level of responsibility. Every authority has the same input into delivering services and we should gauge the level of responsibility from that input. Whether someone is serving a rural community in Angus or an urban community in Glasgow, the level of responsibility and commitment relating to how they go about their job should be the same. We should set that level. If people work beyond that basic level, we must take that into account as well.

**Tommy Sheridan:** I have two final points. If I understand you correctly, you are arguing for the retention of special responsibility allowances on top of the basic salary. Are you prepared to contemplate centralised guidance on capping of special responsibility allowances, or are you arguing for continuation of a free-for-all among the 32 local authorities? It is clear that there have been accusations—correct or not—that special responsibility allowances are abused politically to retain obedience within particular administrations. Are you happy that it will still be the responsibility of individual local authorities to apply SRAs to as large or as small an extent as they like?



16:00

**Councillor Watters:** As has been mentioned, we would look to the proposed remuneration committee to set up frameworks for implementation locally. An authority must have some leeway—but not *carte blanche*—to reflect local circumstances and the way in which it delivers its services. All authorities are not the same; they are not organised in the same way and they do not deliver in the same way. Therefore, we think that although there should be a national framework and guidance for authorities, there should be some flexibility on how that is implemented locally.

**Tommy Sheridan:** In paragraph 31 of your submission, you mention “suitable support service arrangements” for local councillors. You say that

“Consideration needs to be given to ensuring that individual councils”

put in place such arrangements. Are you arguing that the current situation is not satisfactory, or are you suggesting that the support arrangements will have to change under a new electoral system on which there might be a different political complexion? My experience in Glasgow is that there is a pool of secretarial support service staff who serve all councillors, regardless of their political complexion. Are you suggesting that that is not the case in the other local authorities and that the situation will have to be addressed? If so, what will be the resource implications of that?

**Councillor Watters:** That situation must be addressed, because every authority does things differently. If we are going to give all local councillors a job description that says that they will carry out their functions properly, we must give them the means to do that. Proper support services that allow councillors to have work carried out—for example, research—are needed, as we would expect elsewhere. We could consider the use of information technology and other methods to provide some of those solutions. I think that IT would be a solution—giving councillors access to proper IT facilities would allow them to carry out the functions of their job.

Although Glasgow City Council has a pool of staff such as Tommy Sheridan mentioned, other authorities do things differently. South Lanarkshire Council does not have individual secretaries; a pool of office staff carries out the various functions. Some of us have specific staff who always do our work, but we do not have individual secretaries; no single member of staff is responsible for a particular councillor. Many authorities have a different set-up. For example, in Glasgow there are, as well as the pool of staff, individual secretaries for people such as the chairs of committees. In other authorities, that is not the case. It is important to ensure that the arrangements are right.

**Mr McFee:** I want to return to the idea of a national basic rate and the level at which it would be set. You have spoken about local authorities doing things differently and having different structures. Do you accept that there is also a gross disparity between the number of electors in wards in different local authorities and that it is not just an urban-rural split? The city authorities have far larger wards than other urban authorities. If that is the case, do you accept that there may be a need, in some areas at least, to reduce the number of councillors in order to allow a reasonable level of payment to be made to those who are left?

**Councillor Watters:** I do not accept that there is a need to reduce the number of councillors, just as I did not accept that there was a need to reduce the number of members of the Scottish Parliament. We have fewer councillors in Scotland per head of population than any other country in Europe; we certainly have fewer councillors per head than England has. We heard about three-councillor wards in England that represent as few as 6,000 people, but in Glasgow there are one-councillor wards with 6,000 people. There is no basis for a reduction in the number of elected councillors.

**Mr McFee:** However, some of those councillors in England receive £2,500 per year, according to the paper.

**Councillor Watters:** I have not looked at the figures, but if that is the case, perhaps the matter should be addressed in another place.

**Mr Welsh:** Norie Williamson mentioned an estimate of £22 million. For information, and so that we can compare the figures, what is the total cost of the current system of remuneration?

**Norie Williamson:** It is about £15.5 million to £16 million.

**Mr Welsh:** Thank you—that is helpful.

**Mr McFee:** That figure includes SRAs, so what is the basic figure?

**Councillor McGovern:** It is £7,000.

**Mr McFee:** I did not mean the basic amount that a councillor receives.

**Norie Williamson:** It is about £7 million.

**The Convener:** I think that that brings us to the end of questions for this panel, so I thank the witnesses for their evidence.

We move on to the third part of our evidence session. Councillor Pat Watters remains with us—he is now here in his capacity as leader of South Lanarkshire Council. The committee is keen that, as well as hear from COSLA, which represents all local authorities, we should hear directly from

different types of local authorities in Scotland. We have already heard from two local authorities and we are keen to hear from an authority that has a large urban and rural mix: South Lanarkshire Council fits that bill.

In that context, will you set out the views of South Lanarkshire Council? Obviously, you are welcome to indicate any areas where the council's position is largely similar to that of COSLA, rather than repeat the position. The committee would be interested to hear about any distinctive issues about the bill that the council wants to raise, which might not be reflected in COSLA's submission.

**Councillor Pat Watters (South Lanarkshire Council):** Thank you. I am sorry that the committee has to hear from me again, but as South Lanarkshire Council is an extremely frugal authority, we decided that as I would be here today, I might as well stay on to give the committee the council's view.

I should point out that Councillor Edward McAvoy, who is the leader of the council, might be quite upset to find that I have been promoted today. I am the chair of corporate resources and a member of the council's executive.

**The Convener:** I apologise to you and to Councillor McAvoy.

**Councillor Watters:** I was very flattered, but he might be upset.

South Lanarkshire Council's position has been not to have a full council discussion on the bill. We thought that it would be disruptive to have a big debate on how to take the matter forward. I make no apology for the fact that we have a large Labour majority, which would have won the day in a straight vote. Other political parties have a different view, but we broadly support COSLA's position.

We have raised concerns about the mechanisms that would be put in place if there was a change to STV, and about how the new system could be difficult to administer and might cause confusion for the electorate. We are concerned about the expense of changing the electoral system and of the on-going education of the electorate that would be required, given that there would potentially be a great deal of confusion about the change. We have to consider whether it would be practical for a person to vote using three different electoral systems on the same day and we must consider the time that would be required to count such a vote.

The view of the council and officers was that such counts could not be done overnight, as they are at the moment, but would have to be done over a longer period. Experience elsewhere indicates that it would take at least three days to

complete the whole thing. The council's evidence is along those lines. I am happy to answer any questions, but the evidence was broadly along the lines of COSLA's evidence, with additional points on the complications of a change of system.

**The Convener:** I hear clearly the view of the council on the proposed change to the electoral system. How does the proposed STV system meet the criteria that the McIntosh commission was set up to introduce, compared to the current first-past-the-post system?

**Councillor Watters:** The proposed change does not meet those criteria in several respects. It does not strengthen the member-ward link; rather, it waters it down. It does not make room for the election of independent councillors, but would weaken that possibility. The proposed change does not take into account other areas that were considered by the McIntosh commission. For example, McIntosh says that any change must be popular and, outside the realms of elected councillors and MSPs, I find it difficult to see where there is a popular movement for change in the electoral system. In fact, when the proposals went out for consultation, the changes to the voting system did not meet any of the three criteria that were set down by McIntosh.

**The Convener:** On whether the proposed changes would be popular, some opinion polls have suggested that the majority of people who were surveyed favour a change to the electoral system. I appreciate that opinion poll questions are not always consistent and that samples can be relatively small, but would South Lanarkshire Council favour a public test of the popularity of any change in the electoral system, such as a referendum, before the change was introduced?

**Councillor Watters:** We have not discussed whether the council would support a referendum. If there was a move to consider a referendum, our response would depend upon the question that was asked in any survey. If we ask people whether there should be a fairer electoral system, they will say that there should be: no system is perfect, not even the first-past-the-post system. It would depend on what was asked, but we have not discussed in detail whether we would support a referendum on the matter.

**Mr Welsh:** The bill proposes to repeal the rules by which the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland determines ward boundaries and to replace those with secondary legislation. What are your views on that?

**Councillor Watters:** It is easier to get secondary legislation through, so there would be less scrutiny. That would be dangerous.

**Mr Welsh:** That was succinct.

**Tommy Sheridan:** Excuse my ignorance of the political complexion of your local authority, but how does the number of seats that are allocated to the ruling party tie up with the percentage of votes that were cast?

**Councillor Watters:** The number of seats is probably slightly more than the percentage of votes cast. Of the 68 councillors, the ruling party has 52.

**Tommy Sheridan:** Fifty-two per cent?

**Councillor Watters:** No, 52 councillors.

**Tommy Sheridan:** Can you give me the percentage of the vote that the ruling party received compared to the percentage of the seats that it has?

**Councillor Watters:** No, I do not have that information in front of me at the moment. I can certainly get it and send it in to the committee.

**Tommy Sheridan:** I would appreciate that because, when you were going through the McIntosh criteria, you missed out proportionality, which is the first criterion that is mentioned. Do you accept that within your local authority, and in the majority of Scottish local authorities, the proportion of votes that were cast for each political party does not represent the proportion of seats that are allocated to the parties?

**Councillor Watters:** No, but we do not operate a proportional system and STV would not give us the proportional system that McIntosh recommended. The system that we operate at present does not give us proportionality—it is not devised to do that—but the system that you suggest would give us proportionality would not do so either.

**Tommy Sheridan:** That is not the question that I asked. I asked you whether you accept that the current system does not deliver proportionality in relation to the seats that administrations receive compared to the percentage of votes that are cast.

**Councillor Watters:** The system is not devised to do that. It is not a proportional system.

**Tommy Sheridan:** You are arguing that the proposed STV system would not improve proportionality.

**Councillor Watters:** It would not. It would make the situation worse.

**Tommy Sheridan:** Do you mean that it would make proportionality worse?

**Councillor Watters:** Yes.

**Tommy Sheridan:** Do you accept that that view is counter to every independent commission and expert who has come to give the committee evidence?

**Councillor Watters:** If STV is so popular and is such a perfectly proportional system, why is it used so little in the world today? There are only about 10 examples in the democratic world of its use, and some countries that have used it have gone back to their previous systems. I do not think that STV can be demonstrated to be a proportional system that gives us an exact science—it does not.

**Tommy Sheridan:** Obviously, you would not like me to put words into your mouth; I would not like you to put words in mine. No one is suggesting that STV is a perfect electoral system. You and I might be able to agree that all electoral systems are imperfect, but I think that the first-past-the-post system is the most imperfect. I argue that the evidence that we have heard to date from academics and independent commissions is that STV provides a more proportional result—not a perfectly proportional result, but a more proportional result. You disagree with that.

16:15

**Councillor Watters:** Yes, I do. I do not see it as a step forward to move to a system under which one can be elected on 20 per cent of the vote, as opposed to 43 per cent under the first-past-the-post system in the previous election.

**Paul Martin:** Several councils have raised concerns with the Executive about the number of pilot projects that the councils have taken part in. The idea of such pilots is to test the possible impacts of legislation. In terms of delivering PR in local government, assessing its impact and assessing whether it would be proportional and successful, is there an argument that we should pilot STV in a selection of local authorities that support STV? Such local authorities are in the minority at the moment, but would that be a positive pilot exercise?

**Councillor Watters:** When there is to be a major change to anything, pilots are the way to ensure that one gets things right in the first place. I recall other major changes to systems that had to be thrown into the waste-paper bin after a few years—for example, the poll tax. The cost of that to the people of this country was horrendous and I hope that we will not repeat that by changing the voting system and then finding out that it does not work.

**Paul Martin:** I am moving into your COSLA role, but in your council, is the popularity of the implementation of the STV system similar to that of the poll tax?

**Councillor Watters:** Yes.

**David Mundell:** One of the reasons for our interest in hearing from South Lanarkshire Council

is its urban-rural split. In the south of South Lanarkshire, there are some large rural wards, such as the Duneaton and Carmichael ward, which is almost the size of some small countries. How do you envisage such wards being amalgamated into three-member and four-member wards and being represented more effectively than they are at present?

**Councillor Watters:** It is difficult to see that. In South Lanarkshire Council area, we have heavily populated urban areas and sparsely populated rural areas. It is physically impossible to link some of those large rural wards and expect representation to be as it is at present. It would be nearly impossible for councillors to get right across such wards. I do not believe that smaller wards should be made into one big ward and that elected representatives should then split the bigger ward up for themselves, so that they represent smaller parts of it. I take the view that if someone is elected in an area, they must represent the whole of it. There is a real problem doing that in large rural areas because of the size and diversity of the population that we are trying to represent.

**David Mundell:** If we created a four-member ward linked with Lesmahagow, there would be little incentive for anyone to go down to Leadhills, given how few people live there.

**Councillor Watters:** It would also be nearly impossible for someone from Leadhills to be elected, which would disadvantage rather than enhance that rural community.

**Michael McMahon:** As an MSP who represents part of South Lanarkshire Council's area, I know the great pride that the council takes in the counts that take place there, especially in Hamilton South—people there are all usually packed up before the count in my constituency starts. You mentioned the concerns that you have over the length of time that it would take to conduct STV election counts. Has South Lanarkshire Council estimated the cost involved and where the burden would fall in relation to the resource implications of a change in the electoral system?

**Councillor Watters:** Such work has not been done specifically on South Lanarkshire. That is part of the process that we are going through in COSLA to try to estimate the costs that would be incurred as a result of a change in the voting system, with a longer counting period. You are absolutely right that in South Lanarkshire we can declare one of our seats within two hours, although it takes longer to declare the rest. Resources mean that we cannot just follow on to do the count for the council seats; that is done the next day. Under the proposed system, it would not take one day to do, as it does at present.

At present the count starts at lunch time and goes on until about 4 or 5 o'clock. That would be

impossible under an STV system. We would be talking about going beyond the Friday into the Saturday and possibly into the Sunday, as happens in the Irish experience. We are trying to evaluate the on-going costs of conducting the count over the weekend and whether that would be feasible or whether we would have to change the day when people vote.

**Michael McMahon:** This follows on from Paul Martin's question about piloting the system. Do you believe that there should be a testing mechanism to ensure the system's viability, given the resource implications?

**Councillor Watters:** Yes. We are talking about costs right across the board. The previous panel talked about the possible changes. It is difficult to estimate costs when we do not know what system is going to operate, what the impracticalities will be and what problems we are going to hit. It is not just about the costs of doing the count; there is a cost involved in educating people about how they would handle the system. Given that major mistakes are still being made in Ireland after the system has been operating for 30 years, it would be impractical to expect the system to be introduced here without a hitch.

**Dr Jackson:** Obviously, here in the Scottish Parliament with the list system, we have a coalition and a partnership agreement. What are the issues around having STV and what type of local government might it bring about?

**Councillor Watters:** Some estimates suggest that we would, under STV, have coalitions in all but one council—albeit that the approach that was taken to that was unscientific. There are other scenarios in which three or four councils would not have coalitions. We could debate whether that would bring better government, but it is certain that what came out of a coalition would not be what the electors voted for.

**Dr Jackson:** I do not want to put words in your mouth, but given what you have just said, do you envisage that smaller parties would hold the balance of power and that local government could therefore be unrepresentative of what the electorate want?

**Councillor Watters:** Yes—much as it happens at present.

**Mr McFee:** It is almost like intruding on private grief to come into the discussion at this stage, but I was interested in the new diversion of the pilot project and in whether there are any candidates for it. Both Pat Watters and I know that it does not matter a tuppenny damn what he says in opposition to the system, genuine though that opposition may be. Electoral reform is part of the coalition deal and, if Jack McConnell is to keep his job as First Minister, Pat Watters and some of his

colleagues will be expendable. That is an unfortunate fact.

I would like to concentrate on one of the areas that Mr Watters could perhaps influence; that is, the question of having three elections with three different systems on the same day. There is the potential in that for confusion among the electorate and, I suspect, for the burying of many of the local issues that local government elections should be about. Given that local government electoral reform is going to happen, would you put the case for decoupling the local authority elections from the Scottish Parliament elections?

**Councillor Watters:** Yes.

**The Convener:** Would you favour that decoupling if there were to be no change, or just if there were to be the proposed change?

**Councillor Watters:** If I were to echo the views of my colleagues in South Lanarkshire, I would have to say that there would still be a strong argument for decoupling the elections, given the burying of local issues that can happen with joint elections. That is not something on which there has been a decision, but there is a growing argument for it.

**Mr McFee:** Does the bill make that argument stronger?

**Councillor Watters:** The bill's proposals would make it practically impossible to run the three elections together.

**Iain Smith:** I am interested in some of your comments about minorities and majorities. Do you think that we can describe as democratic an election in which, say, 73 per cent of the electorate vote against the party that goes on to form a majority administration?

**Councillor Watters:** For every example that you can give me of such an outcome in a first-past-the-post election, I can give you an example that shows the opposite.

**Iain Smith:** I do not think that you can, actually, but you could try. The example that I gave is an extreme one, but it has happened. In what way does such an outcome reflect the views of the electorate? You say that the problem with STV and coalition governments is that they do not reflect the views of the electorate, but how are the views of the electorate reflected where 73 per cent vote against an administration, yet that administration is re-elected with a majority of councillors?

**Councillor Watters:** That is the system that we operate at present. We operate a first-past-the-post system and if that is what the first-past-the-post system throws up, that is democracy. You are wrong to say that democracy is improved by

having a proportional system in which a small party can change the electoral manifesto of the largest party in order to find a foothold, and where what the electorate voted for at the election on the Thursday is changed the following Friday in some smoke-filled room.

**Iain Smith:** Surely the point is that the electorate did not vote for the larger party's manifesto, otherwise that party would have had a majority. Under a proportional system, the party that formed the administration would have had more than 50 per cent of the vote.

**Councillor Watters:** On average, 43 per cent of the electorate voted for candidates who successfully became members under the first-past-the-post system in the local government election in May.

**Iain Smith:** I am not disputing that. What I am talking about is the administration that is formed and the overall position in a council. In most cases in which a majority is elected, it is not elected with a majority of the votes. Is that really a democratic system?

**Councillor Watters:** It is the democratic system that we operate at present. It is the democratic system under which you probably stood when you were a regional councillor. I am sure that, at that time, you were not arguing that it was undemocratic.

**Iain Smith:** Actually, I was. I have never supported that system as being democratic, although I did get more than 50 per cent of the vote the first time I was elected.

**Councillor Watters:** So did I.

**Iain Smith:** There were only two candidates.

As I understand it, the McIntosh commission and the Kerley committee considered a balance of different issues, including the member-ward link, proportionality and how to get a balance between the two. Kerley came up with the recommendation that the best way to achieve that balance, taking account of independents, was to introduce the single transferable vote as the system that would best fit. Given the evidence that Kerley took and the significant evidence that we have received over many years of considering the matter, do you now accept that there is clear evidence that STV is the best way of achieving a balance between proportionality and the member-ward link? I am not saying that you have to support STV.

**Councillor Watters:** No. You start from the premise that Kerley took evidence, but there is no evidential or factual basis to the Kerley report. It is a nice, well-written document by an esteemed academic, but that is all that it is. There is no evidence to back it up. Therefore, what validity does it hold? McIntosh talked about

proportionality, about strengthening the member-ward link and about effecting a popular change. None of those aspirations has been met. The proportional system and the system of STV do not improve local democracy. In fact, they weaken local democracy because, the bigger the wards are made, the fewer votes are needed to get elected.

16:30

**Iain Smith:** That is not true.

**Councillor Watters:** It is.

**Iain Smith:** It is not. That is a clear misunderstanding of STV. Someone needs to get the same number of votes in order to get elected, regardless of the size of the wards.

**Councillor Watters:** In percentage—

**Iain Smith:** More councillors are elected in a bigger ward, but—

**Councillor Watters:** I meant in percentage terms.

**Iain Smith:** In percentage terms, yes—but people need to get the same number of votes.

**The Convener:** Before I call Tommy Sheridan, I can report that we have an answer to the question that he asked earlier. The percentage of the vote that South Lanarkshire administration got in the elections was 48 per cent, with roughly 76 per cent of the seats.

**Tommy Sheridan:** Thank you for that. I recall asking for those details for all the local authorities that are giving evidence. If I did not, I apologise.

**The Convener:** A document that gives all those statistics is available. I am sure that we can get copies of the relevant sections and circulate them.

**Tommy Sheridan:** That would be marvellous.

**Mr McFee:** Would it be useful to read out the Renfrewshire figures now, by way of an example?

**The Convener:** I do not think that we need to do that. We are taking evidence from Pat Watters, who is speaking on behalf of South Lanarkshire Council. I am sure that you can use the statistics that are available at any point that you wish.

**Tommy Sheridan:** My reason for asking you my original question, Pat, was that I was aware that your party had received less than 50 per cent of the votes cast but had secured much more than 50 per cent of the seats available. The size of the difference has been illustrated: 48 per cent of the vote secured 76 per cent of the seats.

Before you go, I could not for the life of me allow you to get away with something that you said without challenging it. You compared the proposed

change to the voting system for local authorities with the poll tax. I was quite involved in opposing the poll tax in my day; I remember it being a savage distribution of wealth from the poor to the rich, which provoked massive demonstrations, public meetings and a public outcry. Are you seriously suggesting that that is what will happen if we change the voting system for local authorities?

**Councillor Watters:** I was using the analogy of a big-bang change, which had not been piloted. The change from rates to poll tax was carried out throughout Scotland in one go. Five or six years later, that proved to have been a disaster. The change to and change back from that system was costly for the people of Scotland, not just in relation to finances and service delivery, but because we are still reaping the ravages that were caused by people trying to change things. That is what I was trying to demonstrate; I was not saying that the impact of any change to the voting system would be the same for the people of Scotland. However, a big-bang change can be a disaster if it is not got right.

**Tommy Sheridan:** That was a bit clearer. However, you were asked about the popularity of the proposals and you said that they would be as unpopular as the poll tax. I do not have any evidence of the bill being as unpopular as the poll tax. What is your evidence for that?

**Councillor Watters:** As a councillor, you will be able to tell me the number of people who came to your surgery and were demanding a change to the electoral system as a priority for you when you came—

**Tommy Sheridan:** That is not what I was asking you. You said that the proposals are as unpopular as the poll tax. I am asking you for evidence that they are as unpopular as the poll tax.

**Councillor Watters:** I believe that there is no move for change in the electoral system. Therefore, the proposals for change are not popular. If they are not popular, that means that they are unpopular.

**Tommy Sheridan:** So there will be the same demonstrations, public meetings and, potentially, riots against the changes. Is that what you are suggesting?

**Councillor Watters:** I am not suggesting that for a minute, Tommy; you will not be there to lead them.

**Tommy Sheridan:** Is it not the case that, in your political capacity, you are protecting the Labour Party's political fiefdom in South Lanarkshire, as you have every right to do, rather than promoting democracy within local government? Do you accept that it is not democratic to secure 48 per cent of the vote in South Lanarkshire but get 76 per cent of the seats?

**Councillor Watters:** It is perfectly valid if that is the system that we operate in local government at a particular time. There is nothing wrong with that. Your party has six MSPs with what percentage of the vote throughout Scotland?

**Tommy Sheridan:** Throughout Scotland, 7.5 per cent.

**Councillor Watters:** Out of 129 MSPs, you have six. Is that fair?

**Tommy Sheridan:** It is proportional.

**Councillor Watters:** No. It is not proportional—

**Tommy Sheridan:** It is proportional.

**Councillor Watters:** It is only proportional out of the 50-odd—

**Tommy Sheridan:** It is proportional, but a better example would be our getting 16 per cent of the vote and one councillor or the Scottish National Party's securing 25 per cent of the vote and only two councillors in Glasgow at the previous election. That is what is wrong. The system is totally unproportional. We operate—

**Councillor Watters:** Tommy, would you—

**Tommy Sheridan:** I would like to make my next point.

**The Convener:** Tommy, we are trying to avoid having a debate between the witness and the members.

**Tommy Sheridan:** In the Scottish Parliament, we operate an additional member system, but I wish that we operated a single transferable vote system, because it is more proportional.

**Councillor Watters:** Do you accept that, when your party's candidates stood for election to local government, they understood the system under which they were standing?

**Tommy Sheridan:** Absolutely. It is an unfair electoral system and that was part of the political programme on which they stood.

**The Convener:** We will draw this section of the debate to a close, however entertaining it might be.

**Tommy Sheridan:** No problem. Pat Watters and I could continue all night.

**The Convener:** Perhaps you can do that outwith the committee meeting.

Unless members have other questions, I will ask one final one about the electoral system. It relates to the line of questioning that Iain Smith took. If there is to be a change to the electoral system and a move towards STV, would South Lanarkshire Council prefer the ward-member link to be as small as possible—that is, three or four members

per ward—or would it prefer to have five, six or seven members per ward, as some other parties have proposed?

**Councillor Watters:** The smaller the link, the better. We do not see a need for three or four members per ward; one or two members per ward would be even better.

**Mr Welsh:** I know that you are opposed to proportionality, but, if we move to a proportional system, is there any sense in moving to the least proportional one?

**Councillor Watters:** We should consider what would be the most advantageous. I do not oppose STV or any other proportional system because I believe that it would affect me politically; I oppose it because I believe fundamentally that it would damage democracy in Scotland.

**The Convener:** I will ask about one final matter, although it might have been covered already in your evidence. Does South Lanarkshire Council hold any views that are different from or complement COSLA's views on remuneration and creating greater diversity in local government representation?

**Councillor Watters:** South Lanarkshire Council's views probably complement COSLA's. It is essential to get diversity in local government. As was said, a growing number of councillors are getting older and we need to think about how to regenerate the flow of people coming into local government. At present, the way in which councillors are remunerated and portrayed in the media means that we will not get bright people coming into local government—they will walk away from it in droves and not get involved because they do not see any prospect of moving forward. That damages them instead of bringing them on and making them more productive individuals.

**The Convener:** That brings us to the end of our questions for Pat Watters in his capacity as a representative of South Lanarkshire Council, although not as its leader—I erroneously promoted him earlier. Thank you for your further evidence.

**Councillor Watters:** I apologise that you have had to listen to me so many times.

**The Convener:** I welcome to the meeting Lord Sewel in his capacity as convener of the councillors' remuneration progress group. I invite him to give us an introductory update on the group's work, after which we will have questions from committee members.

**Lord Sewel (Councillors' Remuneration Progress Group):** Thank you. First, I express my gratitude for this opportunity to give evidence to the committee.

Members will have received the very brief document that highlights the group's work and composition. As you will see, the group is drawn in such a way as to bring expertise from various areas of local government—and beyond—to bear upon an issue that has been running for something like 30 years without being solved.

Perhaps I should make an apology at the beginning of this session, because I fear that I might disappoint committee members. Of necessity, I will not be able to go into great detail on or provide particular solutions to the matter. The group does not seek to recommend that councillors should receive a particular level of remuneration or be given a severance payment of so many pounds. Those issues will be considered by the Scottish local authorities remuneration committee and ministers once the bill is passed. Instead, the group is very much involved in a ground-clearing exercise. We are considering a range of options and possible models, identifying the characteristics of the various models that are in the system and narrowing them down to a smaller number that the local authorities remuneration committee can consider once it is properly constituted.

The bill's remuneration provisions are fairly simple and straightforward. However, the group is not really involved in examining the nuts and bolts of the bill. In fact, we very much doubt that we will make any observations about possible amendments to the bill as it proceeds.

Our starting point is the Executive's view that the current arrangements and structure of basic allowances—with many councillors receiving special responsibility allowances—are basically unacceptable and should be replaced. So far, we have considered the different characteristics of the severance schemes that are currently available and their applicability to councillors. We have also examined the different types of pension arrangements and pension models and how they might apply to councillors. In doing so, we have drawn significantly on existing arrangements in other places. Given what the previous witness said, I am sure that members will not be surprised to discover that the arrangements in place for the Scottish Parliament have figured large in our discussions. We are looking in particular at different models of remuneration. Over the next few months, we will proceed to develop our analysis of those models in order to make observations and recommendations to the remuneration committee.

As members will be aware, the bill makes provision for the establishment of the Scottish local authorities remuneration committee. The progress group has been asked to consider the committee's role and remit. However, we have not yet undertaken that work.

The group does not have a formal role in relation to the bill, but we are able to advise the Executive throughout the bill's passage. Unlike the STV working group, we do not envisage making an interim report to ministers, because there is virtually nothing that we could say that would need to be incorporated into the bill. All our work relates to issues that will arise after the bill is passed. We plan to report to ministers in the autumn.

I hope that that gives members an outline of what we have done and of the approach that we have taken. I am more than happy to answer questions.

16:45

**The Convener:** Thank you for those introductory remarks. I appreciate that the role of the councillors' remuneration progress group will not be to produce precise recommendations for salaries and packages for the future. I note the role that the group will play in the future in that regard. As Councillor Pat Watters is a member of the group, a number of the issues that were raised by him will undoubtedly have been raised in the progress group.

**Lord Sewel:** I am a little reluctant to give my views on some matters, because the job is to get the progress group to reach conclusions to which everyone can sign up. That process may be inhibited if I am too forceful in advocating my position.

**The Convener:** We will try to draw out some of the issues that have been raised. One issue that I want to raise is the severance package, which the Executive has proposed should be a one-off payment. To what extent has the progress group analysed that? Has strong evidence been presented to you so far that would justify giving councillors resettlement packages similar to those of MPs and MSPs, as opposed to the Executive's proposal?

**Lord Sewel:** Given the evidence that the committee received from a previous witness, members will not be surprised to learn that an argument has been advanced that there should be a linkage between the resettlement packages of councillors and those that obtain for MSPs and members of Parliament. Beyond that, there are some more underlying issues. Given the one-off nature of the severance scheme, should there be a flat-rate amount for all councillors who choose to stand down or should the amount be proportionate to length of service? Should the scheme be drawn up so as to discourage younger, more recently elected councillors from leaving local government? Those are some of the underlying factors that should properly be considered.



So far, it is fair to say that the group is moving towards saying that severance payments should be proportionate to a councillor's length of service and that the scheme should be structured in a way that is designed deliberately to recognise long service. There is a common view on that.

**Mr Welsh:** Should the scheme involve a one-off payment?

**Lord Sewel:** We have closed our mind to considering that issue. Although the bill does not specify that there should be a one-off payment, it is clear that the parameters within which ministers are operating include the one-off nature of payments. Our job is to devise a severance scheme that can be put in place. It will be a matter for ministers—and, indeed, for the Parliament during the passage of the bill—to argue whether the payment should be a one-off or should continue. It is not the job of the progress group to do that.

**Mr Welsh:** Setting any salary or wage is a very difficult matter, especially as the labourers are worthy of their hire. In principle, would linking councillors' salaries directly with MSPs' salaries, by making one a percentage of the other, be comparing like with like?

**Lord Sewel:** I will try to be careful. When one starts to think about doing that, one realises that it does not get us very far. The member says that it is claimed that there should be linkage, but what is really important is whether the linkage is at 90 per cent, 5 per cent or somewhere in between. The suggestion that we are comparing like with like assumes that the fact of election creates almost a different type of person, setting them apart from everyone else, and that whoever is elected should have remuneration, severance and pension packages that are linked and integrated.

I do not think that that case can easily be made, because one of the tests is whether the obverse is true and clearly the obverse is not true in the sense that all individuals who are not elected do not fall into a common category.

**Mr Welsh:** You said that the costs would come after the bill is passed; in other words the legislation will be passed and the bills will follow. Surely the progress group could and should produce indicative estimates of costs for the different models that it proposes. That would be useful in judging the group's deliberations and conclusions.

**Lord Sewel:** I do not think that it is the remuneration progress group's job to say, as Councillor Watters was indicating—if I heard him correctly—that 50 per cent of an MSP's salary is appropriate for a local councillor. That is clearly not our job. That task will fall to the remuneration committee once it is established.

Our task is to say that there are different ways to come to a view on how a judgment should be made about what remuneration is appropriate for a local authority councillor. For example, should remuneration relate to an existing scale, such as that of an MSP or MP, or should the system be like the Welsh one? As I understand it, in Wales, a study was done to reach a view on the number of hours required to carry out the role effectively—not necessarily the number of hours that are put in but the number of hours that are required to carry out the role effectively. Then there was consideration of a public service discount—recognition that people give an element of service free as a public, pro bono contribution—and the rate was linked to the average non-manual Welsh male salary. That was the route chosen in Wales.

There are different ways of approaching the issue of how a judgment is made on what the model should be. It is our job to lay out the different models for the remuneration committee, which will choose a particular model and put the values in.

**Mr Welsh:** It still bothers me that you are producing models on which decisions will be taken without laying out any parameters or giving any estimates of what the costs will be, so that nobody will know what the final bill will be until after the legislation is law and the deed is done. If models are produced, it would surely be possible within broad ranges to produce parameters or rough estimates that would indicate where a chosen course would go.

**Lord Sewel:** I am fairly clearly and resolutely of the view that the last thing that we should do is to put values into any model that we devise. I do not think that that is our job.

**Mr Welsh:** It is difficult in looking at it—

**Lord Sewel:** It would be a very easy task for people to say that 25 per cent of an MSP's salary would mean a particular figure. Plenty of people can do that, but I do not think that it is our job to do it.

**Mr Welsh:** I am looking for rough indicators—even rougher than the example that you give—to give a general indication of the cost. Otherwise, the deed will be done and we will be stuck with it. I find it difficult to make a judgment when the cost will come after we have agreed to the legislation instead of our having had an indication of the cost beforehand. That bothers me—a pig in a poke comes to mind.

**Lord Sewel:** I do not think that that is fair.

**Mr Welsh:** Convince me, please.

**Lord Sewel:** The bill establishes a remuneration committee. I think—and I think that my colleagues agree—that our job is to say, "These are the

different ways in which councillors' salaries can be addressed. These are the different models that seem to make sense and which can be applied to local authorities." The remuneration committee will then make a recommendation to ministers. As I understand it, that recommendation will be the subject of secondary legislation, so parliamentarians will have the opportunity to pass comment on the cost as well as the model.

**Mr Welsh:** I understand that you will not set the levels of remuneration. However, the situation is like your describing the kind of car that we are likely to buy without giving the actual cost of it so that we can produce an estimate. That still bothers me.

**Mr McFee:** Let me get this clear: the group is not looking outwith the one-off voluntary redundancy scheme that the Executive proposes. That is not an issue that is being considered.

**Lord Sewel:** That is taken as a given.

**Mr McFee:** So you are not allowed to look outwith those parameters to a severance scheme that would perhaps apply at all times.

**Lord Sewel:** No. That is a matter for your interaction with ministers.

**Mr McFee:** I want to get this clear from your point of view. Your group is not going to look at that issue.

**Lord Sewel:** No.

**Mr McFee:** You have not been given any cash limits. In fact, you have been instructed not to talk about money at all.

**Lord Sewel:** I would not say that we have been instructed—

**Mr McFee:** So, your not talking about the cash is voluntary.

**Lord Sewel:** No. The important thing to remember is that our group, which has been set up by the minister, is totally non-statutory. It has been set up by the minister to make recommendations on different models. The remuneration committee is going to be set up by statute.

**Mr McFee:** Let me help you. I am trying to gauge whether the parameters of the exercise were imposed or self-imposed.

**Lord Sewel:** They were largely self-imposed. We have a formal remit within which the parameters are imposed by what is in the bill and what ministers indicate in their policy positions.

**Mr McFee:** So, it is a wee bit of a mixture. In your considerations—correct me if I am wrong—the present scheme is out.

**Lord Sewel:** Yes.

**Mr McFee:** The link to MSPs' salaries will possibly be looked at.

**Lord Sewel:** As a possible model.

**Mr McFee:** The Welsh model will possibly be looked at. What else?

**Lord Sewel:** Basically, any other model that anybody can come up with that stands a degree of scrutiny.

**Mr McFee:** Has anybody come up with one so far?

**Lord Sewel:** No.

**Mr McFee:** So the review should not take long; but you reckon that it will take until September.

**Lord Sewel:** No. To be fair, there are other considerations. For example, we have to consider the argument for special responsibility payments. Clearly, there is a general wish for a smaller number of special responsibility payments. There are also arguments about the extent to which such payments will be determined by the remuneration committee and whether the payments should be based on the size of the authority. Even within different generic models, there is quite a lot of detailed work to be done on the subtext.

**Mr McFee:** So, the special responsibility element of the present system is not out entirely?

**Lord Sewel:** It would be fair to say that most of the thinking of which I am aware is that the special responsibility system as it operates at the moment is not regarded as acceptable and that, if a salary for councillors is introduced, a significant reduction will be expected in the number of councillors who receive special payments.

**Mr McFee:** I have one quick, final question. Without talking about money, do you envisage that the eventual bill will be higher or lower under the schemes that you are currently considering?

**Lord Sewel:** You are asking me to chance my arm on that one. If we consider the whole package, I do not think that the bill will be lower. I very much doubt that it would be significantly higher.

**Mr McFee:** Would it be double?

**Lord Sewel:** I would not like to say. As I say, my job is to try to bring people together on the issue.

**Mr McFee:** Thank you very much. I am never going to play poker with this guy.

**Tommy Sheridan:** On that point, the progress group has decided not to consider whether the package should be a one-off or not. Was that decision self-imposed or was it imposed on the group from outside?

17:00

**Lord Sewel:** It was self-imposed, based on that being what the minister has indicated. However, it does not matter, because the decision is clearly a matter for the Parliament, and if the Parliament decided that it wanted to introduce a scheme that was not a one-off, it could go with what members are recommending.

**Tommy Sheridan:** With respect, it does matter, because if the councillors' remuneration progress group does not say anything about whether the package should be a one-off, that will be used by those who believe that it should be a one-off to say that the progress group did not recommend something different. I do not understand why the group has imposed that on itself and I invite it not to do so and to consider whether the scheme should be on-going.

**Lord Sewel:** Our concern has been to come up with a severance scheme and to decide whether there should be a lump sum that is related to length of service or whether the amount should be graded to take account of long service in particular. If we are silent on whether the package should be a one-off, we are not saying whether we support that or oppose it. We are providing different models of severance scheme. Whether the scheme is a one-off scheme is an open matter and whether a view is taken that is other than that expressed by ministers at the moment will depend on the progress of the bill. However, the scheme will be the same.

**Mr Welsh:** Are you saying that your group will present a menu of alternatives from which the minister will choose?

**Lord Sewel:** No. It is the proposed remuneration committee's job to decide on the final scheme. We will give the committee several models that we have examined and that seem to be reasonable. I think that we will give that committee a steer on which models are particularly attractive. It would be wrong for us to prejudice the remuneration committee's decision.

**Mr Welsh:** I was just trying to clarify whether there is going to be a menu.

**The Convener:** The Executive is not only proposing a one-off scheme; it is proposing that the scheme be only for those who choose to stand down as opposed to those who stand for re-election. Will your group consider that issue or remain silent on it?

**Lord Sewel:** We will remain silent on that issue because it is in the bill and we are working within what is currently in the bill.

**Mr McFee:** Surely the objective of all discussion is to improve what is in the bill. I take issue with you when you say that it does not matter whether the scheme is a one-off. It does matter and it depends on the objective that we are trying to reach.

The objective of a voluntary redundancy scheme would be different from that of a scheme that acknowledges long service or resettlement, particularly when that depends upon whether someone stands in an election.

**The Convener:** To be fair to Lord Sewel, he has clearly expressed the view that the progress group will produce a scheme that meets the criteria that have been set down by the Executive in the bill.

**Mr McFee:** I am urging him to reconsider.

**The Convener:** If Parliament chooses to amend the bill, the position might change in future, but that is the position at the moment. As a non-statutory committee that was set up by the Executive, the progress group is working to the Executive's guidance.

**Mr McFee:** I am asking Lord Sewel to reconsider, given that the decision was self-imposed. If we are going to have to consider alternatives later, it will be useful if work has been done on other potential schemes.

**Lord Sewel:** If that was the wish, the more appropriate way of securing that outcome would be for the Parliament to establish a progress group.

**Dr Jackson:** Most of my questions have been asked. I can understand why women do not come into politics.

Where is consultation going to come in your discussions? Will it come after you have spoken to the minister?

**Lord Sewel:** There is an argument about that topic. On remuneration generally, consultation has been taking place for decades and the difficulty has been in making decisions. Obviously, there is an open-access opportunity for groups and individuals to write in to the progress group. Although that is in itself insufficient, there is a proposal for the three progress groups to work together to facilitate consultation on a geographical basis. There is the possibility that there will be some form of going out and talking to interested groups, which clearly at the moment tend to be the people who are most agitated and who have direct interests.

**Dr Jackson:** When will you meet ministers?

**Lord Sewel:** We do not intend to meet ministers prior to our report to ministers.

**Iain Smith:** I have been saddened by the attempts of some members to prejudge the decisions of the proposed remuneration committee and others. Do you envisage, as COSLA suggested in its evidence, that the terms of the remuneration package will involve a single flat-rate allowance or salary for every councillor in Scotland? If not, do you envisage a model that allows for variations between different types of council?

**Lord Sewel:** I would have thought that we would be duty bound to point out two basic approaches. One is the flat-rate-for-everybody approach under which the fact that you are a councillor—no matter where you are or what you are—will mean that you get the same amount. The other approach, which comes through from virtually all of the previous work, is that the package should somehow be related to the size of the authority, either in population or budgetary terms.

**Iain Smith:** On a related point, do you envisage a statutory scheme in which once the remuneration progress group has made its recommendations and they are approved, every council would be obliged to pay for a framework under which they could set allowances up to a maximum, within certain criteria?

**Lord Sewel:** Again, at the end of the day, the matter of how the proposed remuneration committee approaches its tasks will be a matter for that committee itself. I have a personal view on the issue, but I do not think that it will be helpful to advance it.

**Iain Smith:** I accept that point. Does the bill allow the proposed remuneration committee sufficient flexibility in its determination of the models?

**Lord Sewel:** Yes, I think that it does.

**David Mundell:** I am much happier with your progress group's *modus operandi* than I am with that of the STV working group. The evidence that we have received suggests that the STV working group is straying into policy issues that are not appropriate. On a technical point, are you examining more than just the financial aspects? I am thinking of terms and conditions and job descriptions, which are among the issues to which COSLA referred. Will salaries be linked on some sort of agreed basis and is that an area for the proposed remuneration committee or for parliamentary and/or political discussion?

**Lord Sewel:** The approach that will be adopted to pensions is a major component of the terms and conditions of the overall package. I would have thought that other support for councillors to do the

job would be a matter for individual local authorities. Sir Jeremy Beecham made an interesting point about carers allowances. We would wish to examine that issue in particular detail.

**David Mundell:** And what about a job description?

**Lord Sewel:** I will chance my arm here a little bit, if I may. I was struck by Sir Jeremy Beecham's view that one of the challenges for local government is to bring in people who may not be able to commit themselves full time to local government. I think that he said that local government should not necessarily be about sitting round a committee table for 30 hours a week. I say, "Hear, hear," to that. We have to acknowledge that there cannot be just one job description for councillors, because councillors will have different roles. In my old days, I used to teach this sort of thing. The literature was fairly clear: there was the policy-development person, the scrutineer, the opposition tester and the pain in the neck, who was usually described as the "tribune of the people". Those roles are different and are fulfilled by different people. Any approach to this issue should acknowledge that councillors are not the same and that they will do different things at different times in their council careers. I am not therefore attracted by a mechanistic job-description approach. However, I have chanced my arm further than I had wished to.

**The Convener:** That brings us to the end of our questions. I thank Lord Sewel for his contribution this afternoon.

I welcome our final panel of witnesses to the committee and I apologise for the fact that we are running a little bit late. Rowena Arshad is the director of the centre for education for racial equality in Scotland; she is here today in her capacity as the chair of the progress group on widening access to council membership. Councillor Corrie McChord represents COSLA on that progress group. I invite the witnesses to make an introductory statement on the work of the group to date.

**Rowena Arshad (Widening Access to Council Membership Progress Group):** I will be brief because members have been sitting for a while and listening to many different views. Members will have the group's membership list and remit in front of them, so I will skip over those.

Last summer, Andy Kerr asked me to chair the group, which has had two meetings since October, so the work is still pretty embryonic. Our work is not directly connected to the Local Governance (Scotland) Bill, but there are clear links. In setting up our group alongside the other two progress groups, the Executive sought to ensure that issues

dovetailed—in particular, our issues and those of the remuneration group.

One part of our remit that does tie into the bill is the drawing up of guidance. For example, on politically restricted posts, there is a threshold that may be repealed by the bill. Some consistency is required across councils in respect of the way in which they decide which posts are politically restricted and which are not.

17:15

As I have said, my group has met twice. Given that its name refers to widening access, I believe firmly that it is important that we seek views from a range of groups including the usual suspects and organisations such as political parties, trade unions and equality groups who are most interested in the issue. It is also important that we go into the public arena and find out the views of people such as ex-councillors and current councillors, and of groups that we want to take part in local government.

I believe that, before Christmas, the committee took evidence from the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Disability Rights Commission. We, too, want to hear the views of a wide range of groups that deal with gender, disability and young people's issues. Indeed, we will be going round the country doing exactly that because, after all, different parts of Scotland will have different views and we need to take all of them on board.

According to our timetable, we will report back in August or September—certainly this autumn, and taking forward the group's recommendations will thereafter be a matter for the minister. As I said, our group has no direct relation to the bill, so we can act as a sounding board for the bill team, which over the next few months can seek our views on any proposed amendments.

That is as much as I want to say at this point. Corrie McChord and I are happy to answer questions.

**The Convener:** You said that much of your work might not relate directly to the bill. However, in the light of the work that you have done initially, is it likely that any of your recommendations will take the form of amendments that might have the effect of broadening access?

**Rowena Arshad:** While I listened to the last part of Lord Sewel's evidence, I was reminded that I ask people constantly whether they have ever considered going into local government or becoming councillors. Indeed, I asked the taxi driver who brought me to the Parliament that very question. He replied that he was not stupid and that he could do the job; however, he did not know

how to go about becoming a councillor. When I asked him what he thought about being a part-time councillor, he said that that would probably make more sense for someone like him because he could keep his business going at the same time. Such views might well have an impact on the work of the other two groups that we want to feed into.

**The Convener:** Although the bill as it stands does not contain any provisions to encourage, for example, more women to become part of local government, that could potentially come within its remit. One particular success of the Scottish Parliament is the way in which some of the political parties chose to prioritise the selection of women, which has resulted in the Parliament's having one of the highest proportions of women of all current Parliaments. Has your group considered making recommendations to political parties about broadening the participation of women or of other groups that might be under-represented in councils, or has it considered whether there could be a legislative approach in that respect?

**Rowena Arshad:** Under the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002, it is already open to political parties to take such action. Until now, the issue has not cropped up, but we could examine it. That said, we must encourage the political parties to follow current legislation with respect to, for example, gender discrimination.

The fact that race is another very significant area of equality is reflected in the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. In fact, people in councils should consider that legislation with regard to certain public duties that are related to communicating with members of the public and attracting them into local government. The mechanisms potentially exist; it is the job of the progress group to discover and outline some of them. In that way, we can progress the work of the McIntosh commission and the Kerley group, because some of the legislation existed when those groups were operating. Moreover, when Bob Benson gave evidence to the committee in December, he mentioned the proposed disability discrimination bill, which will deal with matters such as job descriptions for local councillors and so on. As a result, we could consider a whole tranche of measures.

I do not know whether Corrie McChord has anything to add to that.

**Councillor Corrie McChord (Widening Access to Council Membership Progress Group):** Not at this stage. I am quite happy with what Rowena Arshad has said.

**Iain Smith:** I was interested in your comments about widening the scope of your work and talking

to people about being or not being council members. One group that you mentioned in that respect was ex-councillors. It would be pretty interesting to speak not necessarily to people who had lost an election but to those who had chosen not to stand again to find out the reasons behind that decision. Are you aware of any research from Scotland or further afield on the reasons why people choose not to stand again for election?

**Councillor McChord:** Evidence probably exists, but one such person is a member of the progress group. At one time, she was probably the youngest councillor in Scotland. After one term, she chose to leave because of the pressures on her and because she felt that she was not making any dents in the culture of local government at that time. I am sure that that input will be useful.

**Rowena Arshad:** The group has not yet examined research on the subject. COSLA is interested in the matter, but the group has asked the Executive and our secretariat to locate former councillors who served a term and left and to find out why they left. They will give us valuable information.

**Iain Smith:** The opposite scenario involves young councillors who cannot get out because of the impact that being a councillor has had on their job opportunities and prospects.

Other barriers to becoming a councillor include child care issues and dependant care in general. Another question is whether councils meet at times that encourage or discourage participation. Will you examine such matters?

**Rowena Arshad:** Yes. We have asked our secretariat to take a leaf from the public appointments unit's book. That unit has worked hard in the past four years or so to widen access to public appointments. Many facilities such as shadowing and mentoring can be made available.

In my other capacity as the equal opportunities commissioner for Scotland, I have had meeting after meeting in the past four or five months with businesswomen who own small businesses, partly because I wanted to move a bit further from talking just to the Confederation of British Industry and the Federation of Small Businesses and to talk to groups of women. Some people in those groups are interested in standing for local government but had never considered it an option, partly because of the full-time/part-time issue, but partly because they never considered themselves material for local government. I do not understand why on earth not, because they would be ideal candidates.

We must consider how we entice and encourage such people. I am not sure whether we have exhausted all the mechanisms that we should have.

**Councillor McChord:** A healthy voluntary democracy is out there. The obvious elements are community councils and corporate citizenship—if that term can be used—through the Scottish Civic Forum. Various other bodies exist locally and interregionally. In my area, community councils cluster to deal with interests that concern Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park. A body of corporate interests interacts democratically with local government week on week. We fully intend to tap into that vein as well as the single or limited-interest groups. That is a great vein to be tapped.

**Dr Jackson:** We took evidence about disability in December. Do you have any comments on that issue?

Having worked with Rowena Arshad, I know that she is aware that the University of Edinburgh gives people such as me the opportunity to return. What is your view on secondments and how we might encourage them? Business has been mentioned, but secondments can involve other walks of life.

**Rowena Arshad:** Two points struck me from Bob Benson's presentation on disability. He said that the number of people who are selected remains low, particularly for winnable seats, which is an important point. That can be taken alongside the national survey of attitudes to discrimination that John Curtice undertook over the summer. The widening access progress group's work must sit alongside societal perspectives. If people are given a choice, they will vote preferentially. A vote might be based on who a person thinks will serve them best and might be biased on gender, class, race or other grounds. What was interesting about attitudes to disability was the fact that the percentage of people who said that they would not mind having an MSP who was disabled was a lot higher than the percentage of people who would not mind having an MSP from an ethnic minority or a gay or lesbian MSP. In other words, the issue is complex.

The other thing that Bob Benson spoke about—which is an important issue for the remuneration group and for our group to take on board—was the idea that anything that we set in place in the future should not be detrimental to or jeopardise the benefits position of disabled people, so that we do not create an impossible situation in which, although the will might be there, the pragmatics just is not.

My personal view on secondments—the matter has not been discussed by our group and Corrie McChord might want to add his view to this—is that it is worth while to think about them. I have no objection to them. People being able to put themselves in another camp for a few years or months is a good thing. If that were allowed or were more possible, you might find that people would put themselves forward. However, if people

have to give up their posts without knowing what their future will be like, they will be less forthcoming. Everybody should be inculcated with a sense of wanting to serve their community and of civic responsibility. Any mechanism that makes that happen is a good thing. Thank you for raising that issue: we will go back and talk about it.

**Mr Welsh:** Most people do not know what a councillor does and have no contact with councils. I guess that there is a great educational benefit in allowing such contact. A parallel was drawn earlier with the Industry and Parliament Trust giving people a taster. Getting over that initial barrier might be a useful avenue to follow. Do you intend to widen access to your group? For the record, it might be useful if you could give us an indication of how many meetings are proposed and where they will be held. How can people get in touch with you?

**Rowena Arshad:** Our committee would like to go north, south, east and west. I am not sure that we can manage such a geographic spread, but we will certainly meet in the north, west and east. We have a website and we also have networks between ourselves. For example, we will want to approach the Scottish Youth Parliament, and there will be other youth groups that we need to tap into—youth groups that serve, for example, the gay and lesbian community, such as Stonewall. We will also want to meet Glasgow Anti Racist Alliance, which serves black and ethnic minority young people aged 18 and above. We will go outwith the normal—perhaps that is a poor choice of word—groups and the usual suspects that people normally see.

Alerting people to when we are going to be in the vicinity is important and we should not rely on the usual networks. We will use many of the contacts that we have. We are in tune with a range of minority groups and groups that are outwith the usual networks. We also have community council representation on our committee and I know that the community councils will be especially useful in helping us to tap into local resources.

**Mr Welsh:** And in helping any individual who wants to write to you to know how and where—

**Rowena Arshad:** Absolutely. There is a website. Not everybody will have access to websites, but people can write to us or meet us. We can take evidence face to face from some people. We will try our best to be as accessible as possible—that is a guarantee that we will try to give you. We will not have a huge number of meetings. There will probably be half a dozen or so, before the end of August, but quite a lot of those will be full-day meetings and we will pack as much as possible into them.

**David Mundell:** None of your work is predicated on changes to the electoral system, is it? All that can be done under the current system of voting.

**Rowena Arshad:** Yes.

**David Mundell:** Many initiatives can be carried out now, and the general one concerning the job of a councillor will not change, whether or not the electoral system changes.

**Rowena Arshad:** No. You are absolutely right.

**Councillor McChord:** The cultures of councils will certainly change—there is no doubt about that. That is what widening access and 21<sup>st</sup> century local government are all about. The type of people who are coming into local government and the type of people who are leaving, as well as the numbers, will obviously change the nature of local government, come 2007 or whenever.

**David Mundell:** Because of the changes to the voting system?

**Councillor McChord:** Yes, that is an input. It is a perfectly reasonable situation to arrive at through the voting system.

**Rowena Arshad:** Yes. There could be a change in the profile of up to a third. It is important that between 2004 and 2007 we begin to make a cultural change in society, in terms of people putting themselves forward, and a cultural change within political parties, with regard to selection. There are many changes that we can start to make with the expectation that electoral change will allow new people to come forward. The two eventually will come together. However, I do not disagree when you say that quite a lot of changes should be taking place right now in any case.

17:30

**David Mundell:** I accept that a new electoral system will bring in some new people—although not as many as we might have had if we had a truly proportional system—but it will not deal with issues such as the number of people who serve only one term because they get in and then do not like it. It will not deal with the number of people who feel frustrated, as was alluded to in evidence from down south, or with remuneration or whatever. Those issues are not linked to the electoral system.

**Rowena Arshad:** That is right. The remuneration work—for example, on allowances and carers allowances—will bring about change, because it will make for much more equitable participation by elected members who are already in the system.

**The Convener:** David Mundell is also suggesting that, although it is likely that there will be changes in the personnel within local

government, on the basis of evidence that we have received we believe that the electoral system might not have an effect on the profile of candidates, because there is not much difference between the different political parties at local government level in terms of, for example, the gender split, ethnic split and number of candidates with a disability. Perhaps that takes us back to getting society and political parties to change, as opposed to getting the electoral system to deliver the change.

**Councillor McChord:** That is the point that I was making. We have to change all our cultures, and I fully support that, but change in the culture of local government will not be brought about by electoral systems or new technology. If a range of cultural issues are addressed, that will help to bring about change in local government. However, the big issues are governance and new ways of doing things, which are important. In future, there will be pressure on political parties to co-operate, because there will probably be more hung councils in Scotland. It will be interesting to see how that works at the local level and at the national level.

**The Convener:** Another issue that could be related to widening access is not electoral systems but methods of voting. The number of young people who participate in elections is declining and is much smaller than the number of older people who participate. If someone does not vote in an election, it is not likely that they will think of standing as a candidate. Is your group looking at that issue, and considering why young people in particular are voting far less and whether changes to the way in which people vote could be one way of addressing those issues?

**Rowena Arshad:** I have no doubt that young people will tell us some of the reasons why they are voting with their feet and not taking part, and those will be documented. Our priority is to encourage young people to put themselves forward. If that means shadowing and being mentored by local councillors, we will need to set that up.

The McIntosh and Kerley reports were excellent on all the widening access issues. They said it all, and outlined how to widen access. You might say that the three years from 2000 to 2003 were not a long time, but I have been slightly disappointed by the progress that has been made on widening access. If nothing else, our group wants to ensure that our work is given the same weighting as the work of the other two progress groups, and that it is taken seriously, so that ours is not just another set of recommendations that finds its way into some cupboard three years from now. The issue is how we take forward the work of the previous two groups and embed it further.

Corrie McChord is right. Cultural shifts are happening all the time, and the culture has shifted even in three years. There have been legislative changes and, although I am not saying that legislation has to be the way forward every time, it does help.

**Councillor McChord:** You can help with the participation of young people. At the moment, silly parts of local government legislation say that young people cannot be co-opted on to local authority education committees. That is daft. A 17-year-old sixth-form student cannot participate. That provision is not about widening access, and it should be removed from the acts.

**The Convener:** That brings us to the end of questions. Thank you both for your evidence. I wish your committee well with its work in the coming months.

I thank all members for their attendance and look forward to seeing you at the next meeting.

*Meeting closed at 17:35.*



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