

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 1 February 2000
(*Afternoon*)

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

5th Meeting 2000 (Committee Room 2)

CONVENER :

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS :

*Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP)

*Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP)

*Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD)

*Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab)

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

*Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab)

*Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

*attended

CLERK TEAM LEADER :

Eugene Windsor

ASSISTANT CLERK

Craig Harper

Scottish Parliament

Local Government Committee

Tuesday 1 February 2000

(Afternoon)

[THE DEPUTY CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:05*]

The Deputy Convener (Johann Lamont): I welcome everyone to this meeting of the Local Government Committee. As you will have realised, the convener, Trish Godman, is unable to be with us today. She is still unwell and I am sure that we all send her our best wishes for a speedy return. I have a particular personal desire for her to return soon so that I do not have to convene any more meetings, but I hope that she will take sufficient time to recover so that she can come back to deal with matters as soon as possible.

We have a number of items to deal with. From my informal discussions with members of the committee, I know that we are all anxious to deal with as much of the McIntosh report as possible today. That will allow us not to meet next week, when most members are committing at least one day, if not two, to local government visits. Next week, our scheduled meeting on Tuesday afternoon will clash with a couple of other committees. If we do not manage to get through the business today, we will have to meet next Tuesday, but I hope that we will be able to combine useful discussion with conclusions today.

I suggest that we deal with the other two items of business first, allowing ourselves the space to work our way through McIntosh knowing exactly how much time we have left. There are also a number of housekeeping items with which we must deal at the end of the meeting.

Covenant with Parliament

The Deputy Convener: I suggest that we deal first with the report on the covenant between local government and the Scottish Parliament. Members have copies of the report of a meeting with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, attended by the clerk and myself. The purpose of the meeting was to pull together a first-stage discussion around the question of the relationship between local government and the Scottish Parliament and between local government and the Executive.

It was clear from the meeting last week that COSLA is anxious to have as productive a

relationship as possible with the Scottish Executive, with the Parliament and with the Local Government Committee, and would like to have an initial discussion with the Parliament. We have to address ourselves to a number of questions, the first of which is how the joint group between the Scottish Parliament and local government would work. Separately, we will have to consider how the relationship between the Executive and local government will work and what role there would be for the Local Government Committee in both relationships. I think that our role will be quite different in each case. In the relationship between the Executive and local government, we may have a more scrutinising role; in the relationship between the Parliament and local government, we may have a more proactive role.

It was suggested that COSLA would produce a draft of the covenant. I thought it was important that, from the earliest stages, we should have some sort of shared ownership of that document so that, when it came to this committee, we already would have been through some of the early discussions. It would not be as if COSLA were approaching us asking us to consider the covenant; it would have been produced in partnership. I suggest that we ask one of our number to be a reporter to the committee on those matters. Along with others, as appropriate, that member could meet COSLA to pull together a first draft that could be presented to the committee.

I suggest that the convener would be the most appropriate person to undertake that task, partly because it would underline the seriousness with which COSLA has been dealing with this question. I am conscious that COSLA pulled together in its working party a number of busy people who were willing to make the commitment to it. It would be good if we sent back the same message that we take this matter seriously. I am happy to answer any questions or to allow any points to be made about the meeting, but I hope that we can agree that we will ask Trish Godman to report to us on a draft covenant, which we can consider at a later stage.

Are there any questions or comments?

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): I agree with the point that you made that we must have joint working. It would be a pity if the whole of the first draft was a COSLA draft. We should have some input before the report gets to the draft stage. With regard to the point that you touched on earlier, there are three players—the Executive, this committee and COSLA—so we could have a three-legged forum, committee or whatever, or we can have our own forum and the Executive can have its own forum. I favour this committee having its own relationship with local government, free from the Executive, which can work out its own

relationship. I am happy with your suggestions, convener.

The Deputy Convener: That was the key issue that was explored at the initial meeting: would we be looking to pull the three groups together, or would there be two separate bipartite relationships? Given that the Executive and local government have a responsibility to work together, it was my feeling that we might have a scrutinising role to play, or be able to intervene when there are problems.

Our relationship with local government is different from the Scottish Parliament's. It is proposed that the joint conference should comprise 15 representatives from local government and 15 from the Scottish Parliament, but the Parliament representatives would not necessarily be drawn from this committee. Those are the wee practical issues that we need to work on. However, there is no doubt that underpinning those issues is the fact that there is a clear relationship between the Parliament, and perhaps this committee, and local government, but that there is a separate job to be done in constructing a relationship between the Executive and local government.

Do we agree that Trish Godman will be a reporter on those matters, and that we will be looking for a draft report as soon as is reasonable?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Petition (Accountability of Assessor)

The Deputy Convener: The next item of business is petition PE56, of which members have been given copies. I will tell members what I suggest we do, and they can decide if they want to do it or do something different. I suggest that we ask the Executive to comment on the issues that are raised in the petition and, depending on its response, we may want to take further evidence, possibly from the Scottish Assessors Association.

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): That is a good suggestion. Just the other week, we were discussing warrant sales. Assessors should not get away with such treatment. In the situation that is mentioned in the petition, a member of the public was looking for an apology, but everyone down the line ignored his view that the law had been broken. If he had received an apology, we would never have known about this matter.

The underlying concern is that a person acting on behalf of the public may have to abide by a set of rules, but if they think that the essential issue is to get on with business, they may just forget about the rules. I hope that if assessors act in the same way in future, those who are affected can go the local government ombudsman, where the case could be heard and something could be done about it. The way in which the petitioner was treated is appalling.

The Deputy Convener: It may be that we will want to revisit that matter once the Executive has taken a view. Your comments will be noted. I do not know whether there is a way in which we can inform the petitioner about how the matter is being progressed.

Eugene Windsor (Clerk Team Leader): We are obliged to advise the petitioner of the action that is being taken. We will write to him through the Public Petitions Committee to tell him what action is being taken and to say that we will get back to him in due course.

McIntosh Report

14:15

The Deputy Convener: The substance of today's meeting is our response to the McIntosh report. Members have copies of a briefing paper from the clerks, which discusses how we will address the matter. I propose to use annexe A to structure our discussion.

This meeting should not be an opportunity for members to rehearse all the arguments that we have been through. We are trying to pull together a report that will reflect the committee's view both on issues on which there is consensus and on those on which there is disagreement—there is obviously one area on which we might wish to spend some time. We should resist the temptation to go back through the arguments, but should consider what we want the report to say and what the clear position of this committee is in areas of agreement.

It is suggested that, if we manage to deal with all the business today, a draft report will come before the committee on 15 February for amendment, after which the final report can be published. If it is clear that we are struggling, we will accept that we must meet next week. We should not restrict the time for discussion unnecessarily if we encounter difficulties.

If it is agreed that that is how we will structure our discussion, I suggest that we consider annexe A, which highlights the points that we may wish to consider, although I will not restrict members if they wish to raise other issues.

The first issue is reviewing local government finance, the options for which are presented on page 6. Does anyone wish to suggest further options for consideration?

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): Is it correct to say that the tripartite arrangement that was suggested by Arthur Midwinter has not been included?

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): I suspect that that option has not been included because, if the Executive does not want to instigate an independent review, it will not want to participate in a tripartite review.

The Deputy Convener: Would it be reasonable to say that, if the Executive were interested in a tripartite review, that would be our preferred position, because it would pull in the authority of the Executive?

Bristow Muldoon: Yes.

The Deputy Convener: I am working on the

assumption that there will not be such a review, and that we will have to examine the other options.

Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP): I do not know whether that is the case. It is clear from the submissions that we have received that some 30 local authorities want an independent review and only one or two have been hesitant in giving a view. As it is the overwhelming view of the local authorities and the organisations with which we spoke, such as the Society of Local Authority Lawyers and Administrators in Scotland, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and General Managers and Unison, that there should be an independent review, that is the way forward.

Dr Jackson: I agree totally with Kenny Gibson, but I was considering what options should be available.

Bristow Muldoon: I am comfortable with the idea that there should be an independent review, à la McIntosh, but the Executive would have to finance that. Certainly we can say that it remains our view that there should be an independent review of local government finance, but that idea was submitted to the Executive by McIntosh. I think that it would be reasonable to believe that its position is likely to be the same. We need to find another way of taking forward the issue. Perhaps Kenny Gibson has some ideas about how we could resource an independent review without drawing on the resources of the Executive.

Mr Gibson: What about the committee's own resources?

The Deputy Convener: The report should say that we want an independent review, but if that is not possible, we would consider the best way in which a review of local government finance could be undertaken. I do not think that we have the resources to fund such a review, although we have a research budget. Would it be reasonable to say that if the Executive will not authorise the independent review in the normal way—that is our preferred position—we would have to examine how best we could conduct such a review with the limited resources that we have, giving the review the maximum amount of authority in terms of independence?

Mr Gibson: We cannot ask the Executive to sanction an independent review because people will not be sure whether it is really independent. I thought that the committee would be able to undertake such work on its own, given that we are about to enter a new financial year and will have some resources.

We have appointed an adviser to examine rates revaluation and I am sure that it would not be beyond the realms of possibility to appoint a similar adviser—perhaps a retired director of finance—to chair a committee with representatives

from the organisations that I have already mentioned. There is no point in saying that we want an independent review and referring the matter to the Executive when the Executive has already said that it does not want one. We are likely to get a fairly negative response.

The Deputy Convener: There are circumstances in which the Executive or any government body organises an independent review and passes on the responsibility for it. That is what happened in the case of McIntosh. At this stage it is still possible for the Executive to change its mind, which would be the ideal solution. Realistically, that will not happen, so we must consider whether we are in a position to construct an independent review or whether we should appoint advisers and so on.

Donald Gorrie: We have very little money. The Executive has a lot of money, but does not want to use it. COSLA has some money and would like to use it. It would be reasonable for COSLA to contribute to the review. The question of independence is very important and it must be clear that it is not a COSLA review. The Executive might accept that if there were to be an inquiry, it would be reasonable for it to chip in along with COSLA. That would be separate from the Executive's refusal to hold a full-blown inquiry.

I was chatting to one of the various pundits who spoke to us and I asked him whether it would cost much to get experts like him to come along to a review. He said that he thought there was still enough public spirit and good will among people interested in the subject for them to attend in return for their train fare. We could get a lot of outside, independent advice without huge cost. That is worth considering.

We should try to get at least a two-horse carriage: the Executive and COSLA. I do not understand the mechanics of such matters yet, but I think that we should tell the Parliament that everyone is keen on having an inquiry and ask how we should set it up and pay for it.

Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I support the Executive—which may make it change its mind on the matter. I do not support an independent review at the moment. There is too much turmoil in local government. I am happy for the Local Government Committee to instigate its own investigation in the future, but at present I agree with the Executive that this is the wrong time.

Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP): I think that we should go for an independent inquiry, and if we cannot have that, we should take the approach suggested by Donald Gorrie.

Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): I agree that we should have an

independent report but we should also have a fallback position if the Executive does not accept that suggestion. The Local Government Committee should make its concerns about local government finance known directly to the Executive. Every authority that we have visited has highlighted the difficulties that are being experienced. Knowing that that information is there, it is our responsibility to advise the Executive of our concern about the problems that are being faced by local authorities at present. Action must be taken to address them.

The Deputy Convener: Our report would reflect that anxiety and would emphasise the importance of an independent review in the best interests of local government. That is what is being said at a local level.

If the Executive position remains as it is at present, we may need to ask the clerks to consider what realistic options we have. Would we do what Keith Harding suggests? Would we be able to appoint a body that would have sufficient authority? If our review carries no weight, how could that make a difference? If the clerks were to weigh up the options, we would know where we stand in terms of money.

Bristow Muldoon: It seems to me that the ideal option would be to appoint a body of people who could go away and study the issue in detail, as was the case with the McIntosh and Kerley reports. However, if that option is not available to us, I do not see why the committee cannot take forward the issue in the same way as a Westminster select committee could, producing a comprehensive study of the issue ourselves.

Members around this table have a wide range of experience in local government and local government finance. As Michael McMahon said, we are aware of the concerns of local authorities, so we should be quite capable of conducting a review. The only constraint on our activities would be time, but that brings us to the question of the level of our commitment. If we believe that the matter is important enough, we should be prepared to put the required time into it. That should be one of the options for the clerk to consider before our next meeting. I see no reason why we could not perform that role.

The Deputy Convener: Our main position is clear and we are considering other options, including commissioning out work or doing it ourselves, depending on the timetable implications. The clerk's report would also reflect the fact that there is support among committee members for commissioning an independent report, but that it is less than unanimous.

The next section of the report is on electoral arrangements and reform. This is the non-

contentious bit. The points that the committee may want to consider are listed on page 8. I think that there is probably no disagreement on the question of modernising electoral arrangements to make them more accessible, considering postal votes and the accessibility of the places where people are expected to vote. There may be more room for dispute in other areas. Are there any comments?

Donald Gorrie: As you know, I am an enthusiast for changing to a single transferable vote system. However, I think that at this stage there is no possibility of this committee agreeing on the subject while the specialist committee under Richard Kerley is considering the matter. It is reasonable that the committee should hold its hand until we have seen Kerley's proposals. I am quite happy to lodge a motion that we should have STV and win or lose it by five votes to four, or what have you, but I do not think that that would be helpful at the moment. If there is a dog there already, let us not bark as well.

Mr McMahon: I was going to say exactly the same thing, convener. I suggest that we defer a decision until Kerley has reported and we can see exactly what options he comes up with. We should wait before we take a decision and let the Executive know at an appropriate time. We should not get ourselves into a fankle just now when we could resolve the problem later with better information.

Colin Campbell: We will have a delayed fankle.

14:30

Mr Gibson: I will lay my cards on the table and say that I, like Donald Gorrie, am very much in favour of STV in local government. However, I fully agree with the points made by Michael McMahon and Donald Gorrie about waiting for the Kerley commission's report. Half a dozen local authorities have said that they are in favour of reform, half a dozen are strongly against it, but 20 or so are waiting for the report before they make their views known.

Furthermore, many councillors and local authorities are not clear about how the differing electoral systems will work in practice. I am concerned that people will decide for or against a system without knowing how that system will work in practice. The committee should stay its hand on this matter until Kerley has reported and we have a clearer view of what local authorities think.

The Deputy Convener: It would be helpful to wait and to make sure that our report reflected the areas that we have discussed. There is an issue about how certain systems work in practice. In a sense, there is less hostility to the simple question of proportional representation; people become reluctant when they have to commit themselves to

other systems. Our report should also reflect serious issues such as having different electoral systems in different parts of the country and at different layers of government. We have all been wrestling with such issues and I do not think that the committee has reached a consensus yet. Do members agree that that might be easier when Kerley has reported?

Mr Harding: I am not convinced that we should move to PR. However, I want to read the report before we come to a decision.

Mr Gibson: Before he condemns it.

Mr Harding: Before I condemn it, yes. I wish Kenny would not put words into my mouth.

The Deputy Convener: Some committee members have instinctively not been persuaded by the evidence, but it would be interesting to read Kerley's reflections.

Dr Sylvia Jackson: Are we going to leave the debate on the timing of elections until later?

The Deputy Convener: No, I was going to deal with that issue separately. Have we finished with the issue of electoral systems? Shall we say "All power to Kerley" and then come back to him?

Mr Gibson: I thought you said "All power to Kenny" there.

Mr Harding: Local elections should be fought every four years on a different date to Scottish Parliament elections.

Mr Gibson: I agree with that. Furthermore, I feel that, after this and the next three-year local government term, we should move to four-year terms. Local elections should be fought on local government issues and it is erroneous to link the date of the elections to turnout. We have discussed the many ways that we can improve turnout.

It is not too much to ask voters to vote eight times in 12 years instead of six, and it is often the case that the more opportunities people get to vote, the better it is. It is up to us as politicians to motivate people by, for example, suggesting new ideas, instead of hiding behind another election. Local government elections should be on a different date. If turnout is an issue, we should examine it separately.

Mr McMahon: I do not agree. There are as many advantages as drawbacks in having elections on the same day. Although I hope that we do not have to put this issue into the long grass, that alternative is beckoning. I was not convinced by any of the arguments for having separate elections. I still think that the pros outweigh the cons.

The Deputy Convener: Everybody has

indicated that they want to speak, on one side of the argument or the other—

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I have not.

The Deputy Convener: Apart from Jamie. I hope that, before speaking, members will consider how much their contribution will help us to progress.

Donald Gorrie: I started off by agreeing with Kenny Gibson's position on this—I think that that is also my party's position, although we are fairly divided on the subject. However, I am now intellectually taking another position.

There is an argument that is not often advanced. Last May we saw that voters were quite capable of voting differently in the first-past-the-post and list elections for the Scottish Parliament and the local authority elections. If one aggregated the votes for our party in the local elections in Edinburgh South, we won, whereas, in the parliamentary election, we came third. The people obviously liked their local Lib Dem councillors. I am sure that other parties have similar stories to tell. People can distinguish.

We do not have much experience of mid-term, all-in all-out elections, but the English do. There is a long history in England of an unpopular Government—which for many years was Tory but has previously been Labour—finding that its councillors got massacred, quite unjustifiably, because the public used the election to express their view. If the overriding view was that the Government was hellish, the public would boot out all the Labour or Tory councillors, who may have been very worthy people.

That argument is different from the one that is usually advanced, but it is a strong one. Therefore, risking the wrath of my party, I support having all the elections on the same day.

Bristow Muldoon: I agree. Before I continue, Johann, may I ask whether Kerley is considering this issue?

The Deputy Convener: Is long grass available for that one?

Donald Gorrie: I think that he is.

Bristow Muldoon: I feel that it is sensible to hold the elections on the same day. As Donald Gorrie says, the experience last year was that people were capable of deciding how to cast their votes in different elections. To give an example like Donald's, an analysis of the boxes showed that there were areas that voted Labour in the Scottish parliamentary elections and SNP in the council elections. I am sure that people are capable of coping with different issues.

Turnout is important. High turnouts give extra

legitimacy to local government. The turnout last May was the highest since the 1974-75 reorganisation. It was a good 10 per cent higher than normal.

I agree with Donald that holding local authority elections on the same day as the Scottish Parliament elections would be more likely to result in people considering local authority issues and not—as has happened in the past—using the local authority elections as a referendum on the Government. If people want a referendum on the Government, they can use the Scottish Parliament elections for that.

The vast majority of local authorities that I have spoken to have expressed the view that the term should be four years and that the election should be on the same day as the Scottish Parliament election. Their views should weigh heavily—it is the people in local government who will be affected by whatever change we make.

Mr Paterson: If we want a big turnout, we should hold all elections on the same day. But what does turnout mean? The evidence is clear that, although more people than usual turned out for the local elections last year, they did not turn out specifically for those elections; they just took the opportunity of voting for the local council as they were in the polling booth anyway. I do not know of any evidence that tells us what people thought about the delivery of their local services.

I imagine that retribution is taken at every election. When there is a big, high-profile general election, European election or Scottish parliamentary election, I suspect—although I have no evidence to prove this—that retribution is taken either on the governing party or on the party that made the big, high-profile cock-up in the campaign, which could even be the SNP.

On turnout, electronic voting is one of the positive measures that have been practised all over the world—in Australia in particular. Electronic voting would allow a polling station to be set up in a petrol station, post office or school. Dare I say it, the lines used in the lottery could also be used.

Increasing turnout is not the same as legitimising people who are elected to local government. For that reason, I think that the two elections should be separated. We take the risk of marginalising local government. The people who believe in local government will get out of their beds and go and vote, choosing their preferred party and people without confusing their choice with those for other elections.

Dr Sylvia Jackson: Support for a four-year term has already been discussed. Donald Gorrie made a good point about the unpopularity of the two-year periods between elections; there is a lot of

truth in what he said.

I feel that involvement in local government politics has been enhanced by the good co-ordination and interaction between local government and the Scottish Parliament. There are no issues at a local council level that we are not concerned with at a slightly different level. Having the two elections at the same time is a good opportunity to put the whole agenda in front of the public. I do not like the idea of splitting up the elections into the local and Scottish scales—I think that the way in which we approach issues is too co-ordinated for that.

There has been some feedback from the various councils—including members of Stirling Council—in support of holding the two elections at the same time.

The Deputy Convener: The committee is obviously divided on this, and fairly equally. I think, however, that we all agree that the term should be four years.

Members: Yes.

The Deputy Convener: We will include that in the clerks' report. There are strong arguments on both sides, but I think that we are probably slightly more in favour of having the elections together. I would be interested to find out COSLA's view on the matter. As has been said, local councils are generally in favour of having the elections at the same time. We may simply need to reflect that in our report.

There is no middle ground between having the elections together and having them separately. Unless we have a vote—which would only say that slightly more committee members took one view—we can be no more illuminating than simply to reflect in the report the division of opinion.

Mr Gibson: I think that we should simply reflect things as they are. When I was a councillor in Glasgow, all five parties were opposed to having local elections on the same day, for some of the reasons that have already been cited. One of my concerns is that no publicity will be given to local government elections. That was my main concern about the elections last May. I believe that a significant proportion of the electorate did not know that there was a local government election until they went into the polling station.

The only way in which we can treat local government as equal to the Scottish Parliament is to put the elections on an equal footing. As for mid-term elections, if a Government is doing its job correctly, its councillors should not be massacred, so to speak. A Government should not gear all its policies to getting the maximum vote four years hence; it should try to keep faith with the electorate throughout its term of office.

I think that, in the interests of democracy, the elections should be held separately, and that some of the proposals already raised for increasing turnout, such as having a rolling electoral register, which I think is crucial, would be a lot more successful than anything else.

The Deputy Convener: I think that it would be worth noting in the report that, regardless of the position from which people are coming and regardless of the position that they are reaching, the argument is based on what is good for local government and not on what would advantage the parties or the Scottish Parliament. The arguments on every side have been about giving local government its proper place. We do not want extraneous matters to influence the decision. People will make a decision based on whether it will increase voter turnout.

I should also report to the committee—members will see this on page 6 of annexe A—that, although it is not a part of Kerley's responsibility to examine the matter, the Executive is waiting to consider the report of the renewing local democracy working group before making a decision on the timing of elections. It would be interesting to hear what that group has to say.

All that we can do in the report is reflect the fact that there are strongly held views on both sides of the argument, which are almost entirely connected with a desire to give local government and local elections their proper place, so that local issues are scrutinised during elections instead of other issues.

Let us move on to the review of the operation of the local government boundary commission for Scotland. Do members have any comments on that?

14:45

Mr Gibson: It is important that the boundary commission is much more flexible. We were all aware of the difficulties that were caused by recent boundary changes, when it was decided that a ward could have only plus or minus 5 per cent of the average number of electors for that authority. For example, in Glasgow, where there was a designation of 5,500 electors, a ward could not contain more than 5,750 or fewer than 5,250. That is very inflexible.

At the same time, we must take into account the attempt to ensure that every vote counts in a local authority. It would be inappropriate for a ward to contain 3,000 electors, for example, if other wards averaged 6,000. To ensure that we have natural communities within ward boundaries—and I hope that we can work towards that—the percentage figure should be flexible. I hope that we might consider a 20 per cent figure, up or down. As I

have said before, we do not want gerrymandering. In Northern Ireland's second city, the majority community was deprived of control of the local authority because of gerrymandering by the minority community. That is the last thing that we want.

Flexibility would allow us to take into account the social composition of a ward. Elected members in areas of great deprivation have a much greater burden of work than those in more salubrious areas. If we move to a system such as STV, whereby we have combined wards, that might not be an issue. However, if we adopt a first-past-the-post system, there must be more flexibility.

The Deputy Convener: Is there general agreement with the points that Kenny Gibson has made about flexibility and the importance of natural and manageable communities?

Mr Stone: Yes. I could not agree more with what Kenny Gibson has said. In the Highlands, whole counties have been chopped up and mucked about, with bits added on or taken off. Such action is bitterly unpopular there. The boundary commission seems to have paid absolutely no heed to the communities or the structures of counties. That is exactly where I am coming from, and I make no bones about that. I aim to put right the problems up at the top of Scotland, through this committee or in any way that I can. Last night, I was up in Tongue, on the north coast, and people there were on about this subject. They do not like what has happened, which they think is the fault of a bunch of faceless bureaucrats down here who wield a red crayon across the map of the Highlands.

I was interested in something that Kenny Gibson said—it is best for a ward to have a mixture rather than ghettoisation. Every councillor should—for the sake of their own learning curve—represent a deprived area, as it would be good for them to realise how the other half live. That is not a bad principle, although I am not advocating gerrymandering for the sake of it.

The Deputy Convener: Given the density of deprivation in some parts of Scotland, and the way in which whole communities are socially excluded, it would be difficult to manage that. However, it could be a policy aspiration, and issues of poverty could be addressed.

Dr Jackson: Colin Campbell can correct me if I am wrong, but I think that Perth and Kinross made a good case about how much their communities had lost due to the boundary change.

Colin Campbell: I wanted to reinforce the community aspect. I got into politics through what might be called parish-pump politics in the village of Kilbarchan. In the council ward that I represented, a village was divided quite artificially

by a line that followed the river that flowed through the middle of the village. The situation was worsened by the inclusion of chunks of two totally separate villages.

That sort of thing casts us all into disrepute. People understand what their community is—they might not be able to articulate what it is and they might not like what it is, but they know that it belongs to them. Bureaucrats dividing up communities in an arbitrary and foolish way does us no good and destroys communities. I might be old-fashioned, but I think that community is second only to family. Following those things comes the nation, then the world. That sounds a bit grand, but I am sure that the committee knows what I mean. If we get the family and the community right, we will get the rest right, too. Communities are under siege from all directions. If we break up natural communities, everything will become more difficult for us all.

Donald Gorrie: I agree with the thrust of what has been said so far.

One of the arguments for the ridiculous over-concentration on numbers by the boundary commission is that it is in some way undemocratic if one ward has 6,000 and another has 5,000. It is assumed that the people in the ward with 6,000 people will say, "Gosh, I am worth only one six-thousandth of a councillor but the bloke I drink with down the pub is worth one five-thousandth of a councillor." Of all the non-ideas that I have heard, that comes pretty high. It is a typically bureaucratic argument. As long as there is not manifest gerrymandering, people do not give a hoot that their ward is slightly bigger than somebody else's. They care more about keeping their community together.

The Deputy Convener: I think that points have been clearly made. There has been a call for flexibility and for communities not to be broken up—unless there are pressing reasons otherwise—and for them to be represented by one person.

Mr Stone: Could the clerk tell us about how the review of the boundary commission will take place, step by step. I am a little bit hazy, although I know that I should not be.

The Deputy Convener: I think that the Executive would put in place a review that we would comment on. That is separate from a review of the boundaries. We are considering the organisation of the body that conducts the review, not the review itself. The Executive would be involved in amending the powers of the commission.

Mr Gibson: We have to know when the next council elections will be, under what system they will be fought and how many members will be

elected. What we are talking about just now is the last piece of a complex jigsaw.

The Deputy Convener: We will now deal with the power of general competence. In our visits to local councils, a strong consensus in favour of that power has emerged. Will we reflect that in our considerations or do we want to do something different?

Mr Gibson: To help the committee, I read the summary. I noted that 30 local authorities were in favour of the power of general competence. Only two had not indicated what they thought and one of those is an SNP-controlled authority, which I can assure the committee is in favour.

The Deputy Convener: Now it is.

Mr Gibson: It always was, actually. I do not know why it did not send a response. I was a bit narked with the members when I realised that they had not done so.

All the local authorities that we have visited have been forthright when putting forward examples of why a power of general competence would help them. As with the finance issue, we have received an overwhelming response in one direction. Our final report should emphasise that.

The Deputy Convener: We were also told about the cost to the council in terms of time and money of establishing whether it was entitled to do something. We were told that the power of general competence would take that stage out of the equation.

Donald Gorrie: I support those comments, convener. However, some of the councils that we spoke to stressed the issue of community leadership, on which they were keen, although that is not reflected in the paper. As well as imposing on councils the duty and power of community leadership, the law should impose on other public bodies the need to co-operate. There should be pressure on health boards, enterprise companies, housing associations and so on to be part of the team. In some areas, councils found that some of those bodies hung back a little. That point should be mentioned in the paper, because it was a strong point made by councils.

Bristow Muldoon: I endorse that point. Most councils see community leadership as being not only helpful to them, in terms of the tasks that they have to perform, but strongly symbolic of the esteem in which the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive hold local government. Implementation of that positive measure will help to build trust between local government and central Government.

My only other comment is that Kenny's reference to an SNP-controlled council should have been to the SNP-controlled council.

Mr Gibson: No, because we control two councils. I thought that your knowledge of local government—

The Deputy Convener: We have been behaving well—we do not want the meeting to degenerate again to the level of the diary columns. Can we move on, before Kenny works up a head of steam?

Do we agree that a power of general competence—*[Interruption.]* No, we seem not to agree.

Mr Harding: It is not that we do not agree—I do not think that local authorities, although they want a power of general competence, have made the case for it. I am happy to reflect councils' views, but two or three councils said in their reports that they had not found anything that they could not do because they did not have that power.

The Deputy Convener: Would it be fair to say that local government made the case for a power of general competence and the committee's overwhelming view was that that case had been made convincingly?

Members: Yes.

Dr Jackson: The community planning role seemed to come through quite strongly. However, councils did not feel that they had as much ownership over that role as they could have had, although I admit that they did not go into detail.

Given time, councils could work out more strategic approaches in certain areas. That would enable us to see how a power of general competence would fit into those approaches.

If I wished to consider further the idea of local democracy, would I be able to do that at this stage or later, when we discuss items such as developing civic education?

The Deputy Convener: That issue does not rest comfortably with the other items that we have been discussing, so you may want to raise it later.

Do members agree with the wording that I suggested—that there is a general view that the case was made convincingly, but that one member had reservations?

Members indicated agreement.

The Deputy Convener: We move on to the matter that we were going to discuss next week—executive arrangements and directly elected leaders. We will all collapse when we see what is ahead of us. The paper identifies the issues that we may wish to consider.

Mr McMahon: Do you want to deal with those issues in order, or do you want people to make general comments, because, going straight to the

issue of directly elected leaders, the councils told us—

Mr Gibson: Trust you to pick an easy one, Michael.

Mr McMahon: We could just bury this issue. We could put up a headstone saying “Here lies the idea of directly elected leaders”, as there is absolutely no support for it.

The Deputy Convener: That point has been made in a number of meetings. Committee members seem to be in universal agreement that there is no support for directly elected leaders. Would it be fair to say, without adding anything, that that reflects the committee’s view? We can simply say that we do not agree with the recommendation.

Mr Gibson: Absolutely. We do not even want to discuss it—we are against it. It is a nonsense, full stop.

Mr Harding: If there is local demand for the idea of directly elected leaders, we should not close the door on it. The opportunity should be there if councils want to pursue that route. Once directly elected leaders are established down south and prove to be successful—or otherwise—demand could grow in cities in Scotland. Certainly, one of the ministers is in favour of them.

The Deputy Convener: That is in its favour. The report can reflect that. We will perhaps reflect on how successful directly elected leaders turn out to be in places where they have been tried.

Mr Harding: Councils should be able to make use of the provision if they want to go down that route.

The Deputy Convener: The overwhelming feeling is that people are opposed to directly elected leaders. The strongest argument against that is that, if there is a strong demand for directly elected leaders, councils should be allowed to consider them.

Colin Campbell: That is a plea for flexibility.

15:00

Mr Gibson: I do not agree; the issue is dead. Unless we make that clear, we will have to consider whether people should be encouraged to take a view on this matter. There are a lot of important issues facing local government in Scotland. The opposition to having directly elected leaders has been rock solid by all political parties—for example, the Conservatives in East Renfrewshire and in Aberdeen were solidly against the idea. I do not think that there is any interest in it in any political party, in any area or in any community in Scotland. As the debacle over the London mayor continues, the fragment of

support for directly elected leaders will continue to diminish.

The Deputy Convener: The report will indicate our strong feeling, in reflecting the views of local authorities, that the model should not be pursued. However, one member of the committee felt that, at the very least, the position should be held open.

We will return to the issue of internal models of political management structure, on which the committee is much more divided—both sides of the argument have been made.

Mr McMahon: This is an issue about which we could have some flexibility. In some areas, there was evidence that a cabinet system, for example, could work. In some of the bigger councils there was a belief that it would not be practical, as the council was too big. It should be horses for courses. Where such a structure is appropriate and a council believes that it would help it to work more efficiently, the council should be allowed to choose. It is very much down to what is required in each area.

The Deputy Convener: That should be underpinned by standards of openness and accessibility in local government, which the ethics bill and so on will outline.

Mr Stone: I agree with Michael McMahon. Again, let me bring a rural perspective to this. In cases such as Highland Council, Argyll and Bute Council or Aberdeenshire Council, the arrangements for decentralisation are crucial to the council’s credibility and to service delivery in outlying areas. We must give those councils the flexibility to set up the necessary management arrangements. However, the committee could review those matters when we have seen what councils have done.

We should also benchmark best practice. I am told that some local authorities in the south-west of England have handled decentralisation well. We should consider that and best practice in Scotland. There is work to be done on that. For that reason, I think that what Michael McMahon said is eminently sensible.

Dr Sylvia Jackson: Jamie Stone has more or less said what I was going to say.

Obviously size is important. One of the points that came across in our council visits was the need to find out about best practice. Meetings between councils are difficult to arrange at the moment, as we heard from Perth and Kinross Council. The big issue, which Jamie touched on, is how to disseminate best practice. Johann Lamont’s point about standards is linked to that.

Mr Gibson: This is an interesting matter. Going out to local authorities opened our eyes somewhat. In areas where there is consensus

across the political divide, executives have a role. That is especially true for small local authorities in which everyone feels they have a part to play. My concern is that in a large council it cannot work under the current system.

If we were to consider the executive system in Glasgow, for example, where the official opposition has two members and the administration has 74 members, it would be impossible for Councillor John Mason and my mum—Councillor Iris Gibson—to scrutinise the workings of such an executive. It would also leave too many members outwith the real decision-making process.

I take on board a lot of what Michael McMahon said; it should be horses for courses. There should not be a push on this issue. Local authorities should be able to decide their management structures for themselves. I would like to quote Arthur Midwinter, from his "Developments and Issues in Scottish Local Government". He states:

"McIntosh advocates the creation of stronger executives in local government, and the government supports that view. However, an executive model would centralise power in authorities, and may be incompatible with the prospect of more consensual politics under proportional representation. The case for change has not been made."

I believe that in some local authorities an executive could work only with proportional representation. If we had PR in a city such as Glasgow, with 40 councillors from one political party and 20 from the official opposition, a scrutiny and executive model would be more viable. However, we would still come up against the problem of every back bencher having a proper role.

An executive model may be inappropriate for large authorities. There may need to be more study of how executives would work, particularly in larger authorities. If there is not to be a change in the electoral system for three or even seven years, we need to investigate how they would work under first past the post. I think such a model would be unworkable in areas such as Glasgow. We believe in subsidiarity and in local authorities having a role in decision making, but the opposition has to play ball. If the opposition did not agree to participate in an executive, that would not work. Liberal Democrats in Edinburgh have expressed concern that they are being forced into an executive that they do not believe will work.

The Deputy Convener: There is agreement, however, that there is not one obviously correct model. The executive model would be appropriate as long as there were guarantees of accessibility and accountability and of a reasonable role for the opposition, and as long as the council continued to scrutinise departments. Are we agreed on our position?

Members indicated agreement.

The Deputy Convener: The next issue is the

"Role of the Leadership Advisory Panel in local authorities' self review process".

Mr Gibson: It is very difficult for us to take a definitive view on this because we have not received any reports. When are we going to receive reports from the panel and from Champions for Change?

The Deputy Convener: We may wish to draw a veil over Champions for Change. The work of the leadership advisory group continues and local authorities must report by the end of this year. We will be able to judge whether the leadership advisory panel is a good or effective mechanism only after we hear what people say about it.

We move on to

"Widening Council Membership and support for councillors—Issues to consider"

at the bottom of page 12. Do members want to make any specific points?

Mr Stone: Like Sylvia Jackson, I am particularly interested in getting young people to participate. If we can, we should be pretty positive about this. The proposal was to involve community councils. We can examine the detail of that, but we have had successful youth parliaments in a couple of areas of Scotland and we now have the Scottish youth parliament. The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that this makes sense. It is not just about involving local authorities, but about involving health boards, the police, schools and so on.

There may be an argument for a network of youth parliaments, perhaps matching local authority areas. Each secondary school in an area could nominate so many fourth, fifth or sixth-year pupils. In Highland, that went some way towards reversing the trend towards the young becoming completely disillusioned with the political process. I am sure that all of us who have been councillors have been to modern studies classes and been horrified by the lack of knowledge about council democracy—even about democracy itself. I do not know what members feel about my suggestion, but I make no apologies for putting down this marker.

Mr McMahon: The debarment of individuals from standing for election is not included here for consideration. We ought to take a view on that matter, as we have discussed it and taken evidence on it.

Mr Gibson: That is something I, too, wanted to mention, as it is one of the most important ways of improving access. There are more than 200,000 local government employees who cannot stand for

the local authority. Changing that would create a greater pool of people who could stand for election, particularly women, as a higher proportion of women than men work for local authorities. We believe that, with the exception of senior heads of department, everyone should be able to stand for their local authority, although there would have to be safeguards and they would have to declare their interests.

The Deputy Convener: I shall come back to that point in a moment to take a sounding.

Colin Campbell: I wanted to develop the same point; something fundamental must be done about that. Obvious safeguards can be built in. For example, if a teacher is elected, he or she should not sit on the education committee. That is the case in the armed forces. Although it is not commonly known, someone may be a member of a political party but they must stand down if they become active by becoming a candidate. The bar to political activity in local authorities certainly discourages people from taking an active part. We should do everything we can to lift as many of those bars as possible, to widen the scope.

Bristow Muldoon: I apologise for leaving the room for a moment, convener. I would like to clarify whether we are discussing all these points or just one in particular.

The Deputy Convener: We are discussing all of them, but we should deal with the specific ones first before we come to the more aspirational and general points about the participation of excluded groups. At the moment, we are addressing specific points about people who are not permitted to stand.

Bristow Muldoon: That is one of the points that I want to address. We should make it clear that we believe there to be a substantial democratic deficit because certain people are excluded from participating in local authority elections by virtue of their employment. My view is that we may want to retain some restrictions, such as preventing people at director level from competing in an election. Providing that sort of guidance is in place, we could increase the number of eligible people quite considerably. This issue arose in Highland Council, because a large proportion of potential candidates are employees of the local authority and are therefore debarred from participating in local democracy.

This committee should put its point across quite clearly, as there is general consensus among local authorities for lifting bars on participation. Some guidelines may be needed, such as preventing people from participating in a decision that would directly affect their own employment in terms of rates of pay or conditions of service. However, with such guidelines in place, we should broaden

participation as much as we can.

The Deputy Convener: I get the feeling that members favour the presumption of a right to stand, with safeguards being written in.

Members indicated agreement.

Mr Harding: They should give up their jobs if elected; retaining them would constitute a conflict of interests. If one cannot be a full participant in the council one would not be doing one's job properly.

Mr Gibson: You could not stand, because you are an MSP—

Mr Harding: I beg your pardon.

The Deputy Convener: Kenny, let us not allow the discussion to break down into individual dialogues. Let us discuss this matter as a committee.

It is reasonable to say that there is a strong feeling among members that there should be a presumption of a right to stand and to take up an elected position as long as safeguards are in place. One member does not agree with that.

Mr Paterson: The ratchet will have to be squeezed right up to the very top. One does not have to be in the council chamber to discuss schools and education, for example; there are many other things to be involved in. That is true of any sphere of employment. If the situation is generally bad in Scotland, it is a crisis in rural areas, as was highlighted in Highland Council. In rural areas, many people are employed by local authorities and many talented people are kept out of office as a result. The wider community rather than the individual loses, because the contribution that such people can make to the community is so much greater. I am in favour of excluding almost no one.

The Deputy Convener: It is obvious that there will be measures to prevent people abusing their position. To some extent, we take people on trust. For example, we accept that people from the business community, who may not be directly affected by the activities of local authorities but who may have an interest in them, have a role to play in local government.

15:15

Mr Harding: There are hung councils. If one or two members were also employees, they would have to declare an interest and not vote on the budget. How would someone declare their council tax? Such issues have to be addressed. Council employees can stand for neighbouring authorities—it is only their own authorities that they cannot stand for.

The Deputy Convener: The arguments are fairly clear. The position is that most members believe that it is possible to find safeguards to deal with those questions, but one member is worried that safeguards cannot be found.

Dr Sylvia Jackson: I wish to make a point about the link between the aim of encouraging people to engage in public life and the remuneration of councillors. When we discussed that matter, we concluded that there was a close link between those issues and that there could be secondment packages and so on. We should link such issues as they are not entirely separate.

The Deputy Convener: Unless members have specific points, I will outline our position. We are anxious to involve the broader community. There is a role for community groups other than community councils, although active community councils have a significant role. We are keen that political parties should examine how representative they are, because they are still the main way in which people get into elected office—we underline the responsibility of political parties. Any steps that can be taken to encourage people to realise that active involvement in one's community and local government benefits the community should be taken. Are there any specific points that members wish to put into that general aspirational stuff?

Bristow Muldoon: The Kerley working party is examining remuneration, training, job descriptions and so on, so we should not bind it to a specific position. I am sure that we will consider Kerley's conclusions in detail. The committee should put down a marker that we expect the outcome of Kerley and whatever legislation follows to set realistic standards for the remuneration and conditions of councillors. There should be common standards. At the moment, there is a wide variety of levels of remuneration in local authorities. It might be that certain positions should still be remunerated more highly than others, by statute or regulation, but there should be a common scheme across Scotland.

We should ensure that councillors can participate in local government pension schemes if they wish to do so—some may not if they have pension provision elsewhere. We should also ensure that there is a comprehensive training package for new councillors, because many are thrown in the deep end in terms of what they are expected to do when they are elected. I do not know whether training is specifically covered by Kerley, but I hope that the matter will be addressed in any general local government legislation that follows McIntosh and Kerley.

The Deputy Convener: On the last issue for the committee to consider, I think that our position is that being a councillor can be a full-time job, that if

people wish to be full-time councillors they should be able to be, but that there are concerns about excluding people who are not prepared to be full-time councillors who might nevertheless be able to make a constructive contribution.

Colin Campbell: The work load of some councillors does not merit a full-time job. My role as a councillor did not amount to a full-time job.

Mr Paterson: We have heard about that.

Colin Campbell: I know you have heard about that. Do you want me to say it again?

Mr Gibson: I would like to add that the work that Colin is doing as an MSP does not merit a full-time salary.

Colin Campbell: Just you be quiet.

The Deputy Convener: Are there any more comments on this item?

Mr Gibson: People become councillors for a variety of reasons—out of a sense of public duty or loyalty to a party, for example. We must ensure that the Executive gets the message that councillors' remuneration is inadequate. The position of Keith Harding's party is that it should be self-financing—that would mean that a councillor's salary could be increased from £5,000 to £10,000 a year only by halving the number of councillors, burdening even more those who are left. That is not the route that we should take.

We must recognise that, since reorganisation, the number of councillors has fallen by about 400 and the job has become more complex. Councillors have statutory responsibility for far more things and being a councillor is becoming more of a full-time job. We will get people to do it as a full-time job and get a higher calibre of person to stand for election only if we remunerate them adequately.

Councillors are, effectively, the board of directors of a local authority. I do not know any company with a £1 billion-plus turnover that would have its directors on £20,000-odd a year. That seems to be the situation in Glasgow. It is ludicrous for the leader of an authority of Glasgow's size and status to be paid only slightly above average wages. We must consider remuneration very seriously if we want a wider cross-section of people to stand for election.

The Deputy Convener: There is general agreement that we should consider that issue.

Mr Gibson: Definitely.

Bristow Muldoon: I realise that I was remiss in what I said previously. Given that we are talking about remuneration of councillors, I should have declared my declarable interest. I want to put on record that my wife is a councillor.

The Deputy Convener: Although my husband is a councillor, I did not express a view on the issue. I do not know whether that exempts me from making a declaration.

Mr Harding: I understand that we declared our interests when we started dealing with the McIntosh report.

Several Members: We did.

The Deputy Convener: We have missed out one item on page 11:

"Mechanisms for developing relationships between Local Government and the Parliament, the Executive and the Local Government Committee".

We have already discussed this issue briefly. Much of that discussion can be incorporated into the document. That was not the reason I missed it out—I simply made a mistake. Do members want to add anything to our earlier discussion on this matter? We want to emphasise in our report the seriousness with which we want to pursue it. Getting this relationship right will be central to the success of the Scottish Parliament.

Mr Gibson: I have always taken the view that we should promote local government as an equal partner of the Scottish Parliament, rather than a subsidiary appendage to it. We must respect the wishes of local members who have been democratically elected and allow them to spend the money that they are allocated as they see fit.

We talk about partnerships, equality, covenants and all the rest of it, but at the end of the day the Executive is still telling councils how to spend their budgets. Regardless of how local government is financed and of what budget it has available, we must accept that councils are democratically elected and should be able to decide spending priorities for themselves. We must see local government as a responsible beast. There is no longer any need for the ring-fencing and diminution of responsibility that local government continually faces.

Bristow Muldoon: I agree with much of what Kenny Gibson has said. It echoes what local government is calling for. However, these issues could be explored adequately as part of the review of local government finance.

The Deputy Convener: If there is a constructive relationship between the Parliament and local government and the Executive and local government, and if society is agreed on the areas where money should be targeted, we will be able to discuss with local government why it ought to spend money on, for example, dealing with domestic abuse, instead of simply telling it to do that.

One can understand why money has sometimes

been top-sliced and ring-fenced when the Executive is anxious that something will not get done otherwise. If there was an effective relationship between the two, however, it might be possible to build a common commitment to progress on certain key areas.

Colin Campbell: It is important to develop such a level of trust. Without citing any particular authority, I know that conveners have found themselves with a ring-fenced sum of money and a specific objective because that is what central Government wants them to do. They may feel, however, that that is not the best use their departments could make of the money and that they could make more positive use of it to attain many of the same ends. They are told, "You can have X thousand pounds provided you do the following." That sort of approach takes away a lot of trust. As Johann Lamont said, we should talk proposals through, accept what are reasonable ends, but suggest other ways of arriving at them.

Mr Gibson: It is not as if the money is always available to be spent: it can be spent only if money is available to bid for additional money. It is not a case of just identifying a need and getting money.

We should examine challenge funding. Perhaps I am straying from the central point; I am simply saying that we have to trust local authorities more than we do now if they are to take the partnership agreement seriously. Many local government people feel that we in the Parliament are here wielding the big stick. That is not conducive to a good working relationship.

The Deputy Convener: It is a reflection of what councils have told us: they feel that things have been asked of local authorities when the necessary funding has not been made available and that there is a lot of direction in the moneys that are in place. We should probably explore that point, through the covenant and through an examination of a financial review.

Mr Gibson: Furthermore, there has been little consultation. It is not just a question of the money being ring-fenced.

The Deputy Convener: We can acknowledge that as an issue in our report.

Donald Gorrie: The financial aspect is obviously important, but it is not the only one. It should not just be discussed through whatever mechanism we end up with for examining financial questions. There must be an open, no-holds-barred, level-playing-field forum for discussion between the Parliament and local government on all the relevant issues so that we can put down our cards, they can put down their cards, and we can argue about them.

The Deputy Convener: I think we have a clear

idea about what we want.

The final issue that we have to consider is headed:

"Developing Civic Education – Issues to Consider . . .

- How the Parliament and local authorities can work together to promote active citizenship".

Dr Sylvia Jackson: I hope that the committee will support McIntosh on the promotion of local democracy. The report said a lot about community councils. When we last discussed that, we considered introducing area forums and other groups that the report did not mention.

From my experience, there appear to be distinct areas in which other groups—community councils in particular—would like more involvement in local democracy. They may need legislation to do so, especially on planning issues. I raise that point just to get some feedback from other members, but it is generally a matter of consultation. Many community councils feel that they do not have the level of consultation that would be useful. That would give them greater ownership of what is happening.

Jamie Stone has already talked about how to encourage active citizenship. Young people are the focus. We have already discussed the role of schools, not just in terms of what happens within them and of their links with outside, but in relation to their involvement in community education. We should also consider the youth congresses and so on. There is also a question about how local activities fit in with the national civic assembly.

I was pleased to note that community groups are getting involved in active citizenship. Some groups visited the Parliament before Christmas to see what is happening. They are clearly being funded in certain ways.

I think that community involvement is critical in many respects, and I would like us to raise it on the agenda and make a strong recommendation on it.

15:30

Donald Gorrie: I support all of that. In addition, we should say that it is important that people have more opportunity to play an active part in running things. It is fine if a lot of sixth formers listen to Jamie Stone giving a great lecture about Parliament or local government but—with all respect to Jamie—it is better if they are able to vote on the running of the local youth club and programmes in their area. The same thing applies to elderly people.

In some areas, community centres and youth clubs are run from the top down with people in suits like me telling people what to do. In other

places, things are better run and people are more involved. We should stress that that is important, along with Sylvia Jackson's points about the educational side.

Mr Gibson: I agree with a lot of what has been said, but I know from attending the Glasgow community councils forum that some people who have spent decades in the community and have been with a community council since its inception feel that the community councils are being systematically undermined by initiatives such as civic juries and vox pops where randomly selected people are paid £60 to give an opinion. We should be encouraging people to participate in local community organisations rather than encouraging activity that undermines the legitimacy of those organisations.

Mr Stone: We have to address the question of democracy in community councils. Some are good and conduct their elections properly but others do not and become self-perpetuating oligarchies that are out of touch with the communities they purport to represent. We should not shy from grasping that nettle.

The Deputy Convener: There is an issue about the credibility and authority of organisations in the local community. It is understandable that alternative ways to gather information might be used if there is no obviously active organisation doing so, but that should not be a substitute for the well-established structures. We believe that active democracy is key. Co-operative models of decision making at a local level let people know that their views matter. It is hard to put those models in place and the system is not strongly established in many parts of the country. We have to be honest about that.

Colin Campbell: Community councils and other such organisations must have adequate funding if they are to work. It is insufficient for people to have their opinions heard at meetings but not listened to in a way that matters. There have been heavy cuts in the budgets of community councils in recent years. Any financial powers that they might have had have disappeared and that has caused cynicism to set in and people to fall away. It is not enough to talk about democracy; people have to be able to do something about it. That might mean that funding should be improved.

The Deputy Convener: When we visited East Lothian Council, we saw that it had increased its funding to community councils. That had brought about some successful activity.

Mr Stone: Highland Council has also increased its funding to community councils—it has a good reputation for its community councils. However, that does not deal with the problem of the same bunch of people always running things. That is

why people are disillusioned with community councils.

The Deputy Convener: With that we will conclude this part of the meeting. I want to record the thanks of the committee to the clerks and to Morag Brown of SPICe. We were helpfully led through what could have been a tortuous discussion. It was useful to have the summary and the responses to the questions laid out for us as they were. I thank the committee for being relatively disciplined.

Colin Campbell: And we should record our thanks to the deputy convener, seeing as how we are all being nice to each other.

Donald Gorrie: A letter from a Mr Ramsay, who used to be an auditor, was distributed to the committee. Are we supposed to do anything about that?

The Deputy Convener: I am not sure what the letter is. If you want to do something about it, it could become an item on a later agenda.

Donald Gorrie: It talks about millions of pounds' worth of fraud. Would it be worth raising this with the Audit Committee?

The Deputy Convener: I do not want to talk about the letter just now. If you want to deal with it formally, you can talk to the clerks.

Mr Gibson: I will second that. Even if the allegations are false, the matter is of a serious nature.

The Deputy Convener: We will put it on the agenda for a later meeting.

Meeting closed at 15:36.

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