

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 15 February 2000
(*Afternoon*)

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

6th Meeting 2000, Session 1

CONVENER :

*Trish Godman (West Renfrew shire) (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

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

Local Government Committee

Tuesday 15 February 2000

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:03*]

The Convener (Trish Godman): I will start the committee meeting, comrades. We have received apologies from Jamie Stone, Donald Gorrie and Michael McMahon.

Before we begin, do members agree to take the item on the committee's draft report on the McIntosh report in private at the end of the meeting?

Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP): Although I have no objection, convener, I wonder what your motivation is.

The Convener: I think that we will have a better discussion without the official report or the public present.

Mr Gibson: I do not have a problem with that.

Ethical Standards in Public Life etc (Scotland) Bill

The Convener: I will move to the first agenda item, which is a consideration of paper LG/00/6/1 on the ethical standards in public life bill. The paper sets out proposals for the management of stage 1 scrutiny of the bill, and the paper's annexe contains proposals on dividing up evidence among the three committees. The conveners of this committee, the Education, Culture and Sport Committee and the Equal Opportunities Committee met to divide up the evidence, and it was decided that, as the lead committee, we should receive all the written evidence. It is correct that we should hear as much evidence as we can on the issue.

Mr Gibson: At the meeting in Glasgow—although you were absent, convener—we decided that we were not going to consider section 2A separately from the rest of the bill, given that it is the tail wagging the dog and that 95 per cent of the publicity seems to have focused on the issue already. The rest of the bill seems almost an add-on when the reverse should be the case.

The Convener: Although I accept your comments, our evidence so far shows that there is no difficulty with section 28. People who have contacted us already have said that it should be

repealed. Although I accept the comment that the media has pushed the issue to the top of the agenda, if we cross-examine as many people as possible, we will have evidence to back up our decisions. Our discussion on the issue must be as wide as possible.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): At the meeting in Glasgow, we agreed that our witnesses would be talking about the whole bill, although they might have specific comments about section 2A. The Commission for Racial Equality suggested that an equality perspective had not been sought at the initial stages of the legislation. Although such organisations will have a legitimate view on the whole bill, it is up to them if they want to concentrate on section 2A. We do not want to resist taking evidence, but witnesses will have to scrutinise the whole bill, as it will have huge implications.

The Convener: The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers did not participate at the pre-legislative stage, because it did not have enough time to prepare. At the time, I wrote it rather a sharp letter, and will now be giving evidence. Glasgow City Council has said that it would like to give evidence about its standards committee. The Scottish Council for Single Homeless will also be commenting on the bill. Johann Lamont is right: now that we are moving into stage 1 scrutiny of the bill, the issue is much wider than section 28.

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): I have two points. Although you said a moment ago that all the evidence pointed to a repeal of section 2A, the committee added a proviso about proposed teaching guidelines. At the Glasgow meeting, we discussed slight additions and changes to the draft report. Has a final report been produced? If so, I do not think that I have a copy. That would be quite useful.

The Convener: I am sorry. I am not clear about what you are saying.

Dr Jackson: We slightly amended the draft report on this bill at the Glasgow meeting. I do not think that we have received the updated version.

Eugene Windsor (Clerk Team Leader): The final version of the report has been published and is currently on the web. Copies are also available from the document supply centre.

Dr Jackson: My second point concerns opening out the list of witnesses. At the Glasgow meeting, we had a lot of discussion about the letter from Frederick Marks. He talked about the relationship between the Scottish Executive and the commissioner of the standards commission. Is that the correct terminology?

Mr Gibson: Chief investigating officer of the standards commission.

Dr Jackson: Quite a few issues were raised concerning the standards commission. Members will remember that that letter came in later.

Johann Lamont: It is covered in the final report. An issue was raised, but we did not agree with Mr Marks that the whole bill was flawed.

I do not think that the convener was suggesting that all the groups from which we took evidence said that there was no problem with section 2A. She said that, generally, there was no problem with the thrust of the ethical standards bill, and I think that that is true. When we take further evidence, there will be greater contradiction on section 2A.

Dr Jackson: I am just trying to highlight aspects that do not relate to section 2A but on which we may wish to take evidence. We were certainly discussing the question of who appoints the chief investigating officer and the members of the standards commission. Another matter was the letter that we received from the Forum of Private Business on area tourist boards and the question of whether the code should include honesty among the criteria. I am suggesting people from whom we may want to hear evidence again.

The Convener: Members will see in the annexe how we have divided the organisations among the three committees. We can add to the list of organisations if members wish to hear from anybody else. We certainly have time to do that.

Johann Lamont: We can certainly ask organisations to expand on their views in writing.

The Convener: Witnesses can give us written or oral evidence.

Mr Gibson: It is important that SOLACE, Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Council for Single Homeless do not give evidence only on section 2A.

The Convener: No, they will not. I probably phrased it badly. Glasgow City Council asked if it could come before the committee to give us an overview of how its standards committee functions, and I am happy that it should do so.

In our pre-legislative report, we suggest that MSPs should be covered by the bill. Barry Winetrobe, the senior research officer, sent me an e-mail saying that he was unclear about why we said that. I am unclear about what he means, as the English is a bit odd. I think that he is saying that we are saying, suddenly, that MSPs should be covered by the bill. He says that we might want to take evidence from David Steel, Paul Grice, Frank McAveety, Wendy Alexander, Tom McCabe or Iain Smith—from some or all of those people—to

establish why they do not want MSPs to be covered by the bill.

I leave the decision on that to members. Is it enough for us to say that MSPs should be included on principle, as a moral issue or whatever, or should we hear what those people have to say?

Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I think that Frank McAveety addressed that question when he gave evidence to this committee.

Mr Gibson: He addressed that question because a number of us asked about it specifically.

The issue is that people in local government feel that this is a “do as I say not as I do” bill. Including MSPs would help to gain the confidence of local government, and would say that this is not just about local government, but about MSPs, quangos and everyone else in public life. Keith Harding is right that Frank McAveety answered a brief question on this point, so asking him back to the committee might not add any value. It might be interesting to hear from David Steel or Paul Grice.

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): It was not my understanding that we would come to an agreement on a position. I thought that we would raise questions about whether MSPs should be included. I was not aware that the committee was supposed to reach a firm conclusion. I am happy for us to continue to pursue the inquiry. I suggest that we invite the convener of the Standards Committee to give a view on the control of the standards of MSPs.

The Convener: Yes, I think that that is what Barry Winetrobe was suggesting. We said that it seemed like a good idea, but in a report that would sound rather vague. Barry is suggesting that we tighten it up a bit. There are ways in which we can do that. Do members think that we should invite someone to the committee to speak on the matter and then make a definitive decision?

Mr Gibson: Yes.

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Yes.

14:15

The Convener: In that case, whom do members want to invite?

Mr Gibson: Mike Rumbles and David Steel.

The Convener: Are there any objections to that?

Johann Lamont: I do not have any particular objection. However, the convener of the Standards Committee has the job of monitoring standards as

long as the Parliament considers that that is an appropriate job for the Parliament. It is not for the Standards Committee or its convener to refuse to consider other options. If we were to change the position, the decision would be a political one. I am interested in the political argument about why the power should lie with the Standards Committee rather than with an external body.

Mr Gibson: The convener of the Standards Committee must be able to express a view on the matter, although I accept much of what Johann Lamont has said.

The Convener: We could write to him.

Johann Lamont: We could ask what the Standards Committee thought about the matter. However, that is not the same as establishing the political arguments for and against a standards committee.

Bristow Muldoon: I was not suggesting that Mike Rumbles would have any sort of veto on the decisions of the Local Government Committee. However, given that he has had early experience of drawing up a code of conduct and considering the ethical standards of MSPs, I thought that he should have input.

Johann Lamont: He would be able to suggest what safeguards there should be if there was no external body.

The Convener: Will we stick with Mike Rumbles and David Steel? Members are agreed. Do members also agree with the proposals that have been made and the comments on the stage 1 scrutiny of the ethical standards bill?

Members indicated agreement.

Petition (Bridge of Allan Public Interests Association)

The Convener: The next item is a petition, PE26, that we considered on 14 December, when it was agreed that we would write to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the matter. The reply from COSLA is attached to members' papers. We must decide what action to take on the petition. We can either note the position but take no further action, or we can hold an inquiry. When petitions are sent to councils, they are dealt with in different ways. There is probably good reason for that. In my experience, the appropriate committee would deal with a petition.

The petitioner is asking the Scottish Parliament to produce guidelines or legislation for the way in which councils deal with petitions, so that they are dealt with in the same way across Scotland. There are some examples in the memorandum from the clerk to the Public Petitions Committee about how the City of Edinburgh Council, Dumfries and Galloway Council and Highland Council deal with petitions.

If I remember correctly, the matter of the Museum Hall is of long standing. Do you know anything about it, Sylvia?

Dr Jackson: I live in Bridge of Allan, although it is in Ochil constituency, not Stirling. The restoration of the Museum Hall has been an issue for a long time. I back the suggestion made in the memorandum from the clerk to the Public Petitions Committee that we try to find out from Stirling Council how it approaches petitions. That would be informative, and there is clearly variation among local authorities. Keith Harding might know more about this issue than I do, having been involved more intimately with Stirling Council.

Mr Harding: I think that we should write to Stirling Council—and I declare an interest—to ask how it deals with petitions. As I said at the last meeting, they are certainly not ignored. It would be interesting to find out how the council deals with them. I am not a member of any of the ruling parties in Stirling, and I do not know how they deal with petitions.

Mr Paterson: It is clear from the documents that this is a matter that goes wider than Stirling. Just as the Scottish Parliament has a procedure, it would be worth while, for a number of reasons, if each council could adopt a procedure—it would be rather good if they were all similar—so that we, or someone such as the ombudsman, could judge whether due care and attention was being paid to an individual's or group's petition. It would also be good for the council.

A lot of time wasting and repetition is involved, as we have seen. In other words, if the first petition does not make a hit, it is often seen as a good idea to run a campaign on petitions, which could perhaps last 10 years. I do not think that that would be a good idea for an individual council.

I would like to move towards firm guidelines. There is a question whether it should be we or COSLA who should provide those guidelines, but I am minded to suggest that COSLA should put them in place and ensure that they are fairly understandable for everyone throughout the country, stating where, when and how a petition is dealt with.

The Convener: COSLA is saying, in the last paragraph of the letter, that it

"would be concerned if there was any suggestion that local government should be required to deal with petitions in a uniform manner."

It points out that

"councils are increasingly seeking to involve their citizens in their policy development and decision-making processes"

and

"petitions form . . . part of that participative process."

I think COSLA is saying that, if that is done properly, there may eventually not be a need for petitions, if enough people are involved in decision making. I do not think that that will be in our lifetime, however.

I suggest that we write to Stirling Council in the first instance to get its views. We will bring the matter back to the committee as an item that is low on the agenda, and we will decide on what to do thereafter.

Dr Jackson: There is one more thing that we could do. There is variation between the councils listed on the memorandum from the clerk to the Public Petitions Committee. We could write to each of them, asking them if they think that this is the appropriate way to deal with petitions, or if they have other ideas. We could pursue this matter a little further than what Gil Paterson envisages.

Mr Paterson: Quite frankly, I am not convinced by the COSLA argument. I should perhaps have stated this already: I am not of the opinion that petitions are all going to disappear as democracy starts to bite into councils.

The Convener: I think that that was my interpretation rather than that of COSLA.

Mr Paterson: I read the COSLA paper, but I am still not convinced. I think that issues are bound to arise even within the Parliament, no matter what we do and no matter what democratic structures we build. There will always be a time when people

will feel that the decision about their petition is wrong for them, as individuals or as members of a community. They need some way of expressing that. I do not think that it should just be a case of our saying, "We know better."

The papers point out the diversity in the way in which petitions are handled—or in some cases, dare I say, not handled—so it would be a good idea to get it right. We have a lot to do, but this is down to the nitty-gritty of people who feel that democracy has failed them. We should address that. If one ever goes to the British Museum, one will see the beautiful petitions written by the people of St Kilda. Petitions are great things and people tend to respond to them.

The Convener: The suggestion is that we write to Stirling Council, City of Edinburgh Council, Dumfries and Galloway Council and Highland Council to ask them to say more.

I do not know if there are statistics on this, but it would be interesting to know how often petitions are used by groups, which feel, as Gil Paterson said, that they are not being listened to. We should try to get that information.

Are members happy to leave that with us to write to the councils? We will bring the matter back to the committee, taking on board the comments that members have made.

Visits to Councils

The Convener: We will start with the visit to Scottish Borders Council. Kenny Gibson is the reporter.

Mr Gibson: The visit was fascinating. One of the interesting points that is emerging is that, whether one goes north, south, east or west, to urban areas or to rural ones—irrespective of political control—the consensus among local authorities on some of the key issues is incredible.

I do not know whether Keith Harding and Johann Lamont will agree, but at the meeting I felt that we were almost getting an individual view rather than a view from a political party or the independent group as such. Even so, the degree of consensus was remarkable. I should add a minor caveat—neither the sole Labour member nor any of the four SNP members were present, so we heard only from the Liberals, the independents and the Conservative member.

On general competence, the situation was the same as it is everywhere else. The councillors all want a power of general competence. They feel that it will assist the council greatly in fulfilling its obligations and would get rid of the frustration that they experience in dealing with matters locally. They specifically mentioned issues such as direct labour organisations, direct service organisations and constraints on councils as a result of the Local Authorities (Goods and Services) Act 1970.

As for local government finance, people who live in the Scottish Borders Council area are perhaps in a better position than others, as the council tax is the lowest in mainland Scotland. The council is aggrieved that it does not appear to be getting any social inclusion partnership funding, although it made the case that rural deprivation is often worse than urban deprivation because of the lack of adequate transport and community support.

The councillors talked specifically about hypothecation; they felt that the local authority should be able to spend available money as it sees fit. They emphasised that they were happy with the present system of the pooling and redistribution of business rates; the council is a net beneficiary, so that is only to be expected. The councillors wanted a review of local government finance.

There were divergent views on whether to set up an executive or to retain the committee structure. I took the view that most people were probably in favour of retaining the committee system. There was an informal chairmen's group that almost acted as a cabinet. The Conservative member stated that he and other opposition members were included wherever possible. There was concern

that only four out of 34 elected members were female.

The council did not have a corporate view on proportional representation. I differ slightly from the report, which indicates that there was perhaps some dissent about which system should be used. My understanding was that all the councillors to whom we talked were unanimously in favour of the single transferable vote system.

All the councillors talked about the need for increased tolerance of ward boundaries. They re-emphasised the council-ward link and talked with some bitterness about the fact that the boundary commission had split communities. That issue should be addressed in the future.

On the issue of changing management decision-making structures, the councillors were still adjusting to the reduction in the number of elected members from 58 to 34. The view, which seems to be shared by Aberdeenshire Council, Perth and Kinross Council and Dumfries and Galloway Council, is that some rural authorities had too many elected representatives to start with. The councillors whom we met said that, although they had a bigger work load, it was a lot easier to run an authority with 34 members. They thought that that was more efficient and effective, although they emphasised the fact that further reductions were unnecessary. Like everybody else, they were point-blank opposed to the introduction of directly elected council leaders.

14:30

The council was fairly effusive about community planning, on which we had an interesting discussion. We talked about the fact that it is wishful thinking to try to involve the community in strategic decision making as much as we would like to, simply because some community organisations do not have the time, energy or inclination to face up to strategic decisions. They are more concerned with what is happening in their own streets and in the small communities in relation to housing, schools and other bread-and-butter issues. Perhaps that is a flaw with the idea of community planning.

The councillors had established links with other local authorities, and—as they did throughout their presentation—they emphasised the difficulties with transport. They talked about the de-trunking of the A68 over the border with England, which makes it difficult for them to conduct business with their counterparts south of the border.

On the issue of civic education, they bemoaned the fact that, over the years, there has been a loss of civic identity in the Borders. That is understandable, given the fact that a lot of the wee towns had their own councils until reorganisation

in the 1970s. Many people—as I found out in North Lanarkshire a few days later—still hanker after those days.

The Borders councillors regularly consult community councils over council budgets, but say that there has been resentment over consultation. The community councils sometimes feel that that consultation is not genuine and that decisions are made before they are put out to consultation.

The people whom we met did not talk much about the draft joint covenant. There is virtually nothing in my notes about it. They said that they were in favour of a joint covenant, but had not discussed it in any detail. No one wanted to volunteer any particular views on it, other than to say that links between the Parliament and local government had to be much stronger and more coherent and that the status of local government must be recognised.

A view emerged that the Local Government Committee should scrutinise local government finance, and that we should be the guardians of local government against the scourge that is the Executive. It was felt that we should be the voice of local authorities in Parliament, rather than the Parliament's voice in local government.

The councillors talked about remuneration. They said that we must change the attitudes of members and officers, and that more action was needed to galvanise people in their area in relation to the issues that are faced in the Borders.

The Convener: Do Johann Lamont and Keith Harding want to add anything to that before I open up the discussion?

Johann Lamont: I have one point to make that is not about the substance of the individual questions, but about the visit that we paid in the afternoon to the Easter Langlee recycling centre. Many interesting points were made there about the way in which the landfill tax operates in the real world. The centre represents an interesting initiative. Extra copies of the document were provided; members may find it worth while to look at.

I would like—and someone else may have a better grasp of this than I have—to pull together the centre's main concerns about the landfill tax and to put them to the Transport and the Environment Committee, for example. Issues were raised of which I had not been aware, such as the consequences of the way in which the centre operates in reality. Because it was an interest visit, we could perhaps refer our findings to someone else to give a written response.

Mr Gibson: As members know, when we visit local authorities, we usually visit one or two amenities. This time, we went to a large landfill

site, because the situation in the Borders is difficult. The bottom has fallen out of the recycling market and the same amount of paper and glass cannot be marketed for recycling, even though there has been much recycling in the Borders since as far back as 1962. At one point, the amount of material collected was the largest in Scotland. Now, because it cannot be sold, it has to be dumped.

The difficulty is that there is perhaps 12 or 18 months' use left in landfill sites. Under new legislation, £5.5 million—which the council, frankly, does not have—has to be spent to provide a new landfill site that will meet the requirements of European legislation. The council wanted to emphasise to us how desperate it is for additional resources to cope.

All of us round the table know that that is an issue in other areas, but Borders has a population of 100,000, with 30,000 or 40,000 council tax payers. Unless the matter is addressed, the council will be in severe financial straits.

Mr Harding: The visit was altogether very interesting. Johann Lamont is right; there are obvious problems down there and issues that we should consider referring to the Transport and the Environment Committee. The economy is in decline due to losses in textiles and in electronics. It was also a bit disconcerting to hear that the area attracts European funding, but cannot take all of it up, because it does not have the funding to match it.

Transportation is bad. Kenny Gibson and Johann Lamont were late because of the roads and it took me two hours to get there. The A7 is unbelievable. There is a strong case for extending the railway, which would help a great deal in reviving the economy.

Nevertheless, the council is very innovative. I was particularly impressed by the slim committee structure. The visit was well worth while.

The Convener: Are there any other questions?

Colin Campbell (West of Scotland) (SNP): I have not so much a question as a comment. Someone in Shetland, which in many ways is remote from the Borders, said to me that the problem with environmental legislation was that, if a house was knocked down in Unst, for example, it had to be taken by lorry on two ferries to Lerwick to be put in a hole in the ground. The application of urban environmental legislation is not always appropriate in rural areas, which seems to reinforce the point that is being made about the Borders.

Johann Lamont: I was not aware of this point, but found it interesting: for want of a better solution, the council is having to dump waste in a

landfill site and, as a consequence, is having to pay, which takes resources away from more imaginative forms of recycling. The point that was made was that the landfill tax does not provide resources substantial enough to enable alternative methods to be used. The council is caught in a trap.

Mr Gibson: We may want to address the issue of landfill tax with the Executive. The council said that it gets only 20 per cent of the money from landfill tax to deal with local issues. The rest of the money goes into the central pot. The Borders, therefore, is losing £480,000 of the £600,000 that is paid in landfill tax. On the one hand, the council is giving £480,000 in income away while, on the other, it is being forced to spend £5.5 million that it does not have on a new landfill site, otherwise it will have nowhere to put its rubbish.

Johann Lamont: Another point that the council made was that, because of the geography of the Borders, many of the important links are across the border with England. The nearest airport, for example, is in Newcastle. Concern was expressed about the lack of consultation on roads. There had been a development south of the border, which impacted on the Borders. It is important that the Scottish Executive and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions in England and Wales communicate with each other.

Mr Gibson: The people we spoke to were also concerned that the council's capital allocation was so low that it did not have any money to spend on, for example, country roads, which are fairly dilapidated. The Borders railway is a mega-issue down there, and I think that it has to be addressed sooner rather than later.

Dr Jackson: The issue of rural roads infrastructure has come up before, but I would like to re-emphasise its importance.

I would be happy to take the environmental issues forward via the European Committee and the paper on sustainability that it is working on. It would be good either to visit the recycling plant and discuss the issues further, or to get some more written evidence.

The Convener: Eugene Windsor has given us a paper on waste management in the Borders from the property services department of the Scottish Borders Council. I suggest that I write to the council to pass on members' comments. I will also suggest that it asks the Transport and the Environment Committee to consider the waste issue and perhaps to invite it to give evidence. That would keep the matter within the committee structure, as opposed to our going immediately to the Executive. We need to have more concrete information before doing that. I cannot determine what another committee will consider, but I could

at least start things off with a letter.

Members indicated agreement.

Dr Jackson: Could you also suggest that the council contacts the European Committee?

The Convener: Yes.

Mr Gibson: I would like to add that Scottish Borders Council is fairly well run. It seemed to be working well and there seemed to be a lot of enthusiasm for change—although it does not want change for change's sake. It is certainly willing to consider new structures. The administration is a Liberal-independent coalition, but it is willing to take on board the views of the three opposition parties.

The Convener: The next report is on Dumfries and Galloway Council and the reporter is Colin Campbell.

Colin Campbell: We had a very interesting visit. Gil and I were there, as was Craig Harper, the assistant clerk. Unfortunately Bristow could not manage it; he missed a good day out.

One of the big issues that will recur throughout this report is that of the university on the Crichton site. The campus, which is outside Dumfries, used to be a mental hospital. When it ceased to be a mental hospital, it was bought by a trust that was funded by the local authority. I will explain why that is relevant in a moment.

On the Crichton campus, a combination of Glasgow University, Paisley University and the Bell College of Technology is working on a number of courses. It has the form, I suppose, of an American liberal arts college. Other parts of the site are used for economic regeneration and business. It is important that members should know that, because it is the big issue in the area.

The council got itself into a little bit of a knot over the matter of not having a power of general competence. When it wanted to start things off, it had notional capital receipts of £25 million. It then gave £8 million to the trust that was established to set up the Crichton operation. The auditors then told the council that it could not do that and that it had to get the money back. The trust is now supposed to give the money back to the local authority. However, the trust's rules and regulations say that it cannot give it back—and five QCs are working on the problem.

In some areas, people do not understand how big a disadvantage not having a power of general competence is. Dumfries and Galloway Council is very clear what problems there are. It set out to do something visionary, it showed initiative and drive to improve the community, and it is fair to say that it got itself into a legal knot as a result. Council representatives told us that they would try to

quantify what the episode had cost the council in time and money, both of which might have been better spent on something else.

14:45

The council is strongly in favour of a power of general competence, primarily because of its experience in this area. It also favours an independent review of local government finance. When pressed, it had some sympathy for the notion that, if the Executive would not carry out such a review and money could not be found elsewhere, it might be prepared to think about coming up with a little money itself. However, it wanted the review to be extended into other issues, such as tax and social security, which, as we know, are not in our remit. The council was fairly unhappy with ring fencing, as it imposes a kind of rigidity on its expenditure.

The council has a joint administration and everyone signed up to agreed principles when it was established. As far as I could see, the political groups seem to be getting along amicably. They are all working together to attain the best possible ends for the area, but they are not yet at the point of formalising the position more than that.

Funnily enough, the council is for the status quo in terms of the voting system, largely because it has a large number of independents in the area. Strangely, the council opposes holding council elections on the same day as national elections. That must be a record, as I do not think that we found anyone else with that view.

Mr Gibson: What meetings have you been coming to?

Colin Campbell: That view has not been expressed at the meetings that I have attended. In any event, this council was strongly against that idea. It wanted a good deal of flexibility and natural boundaries for wards, which is a view that we have come across in other places.

On question 5, on the impact of changing management, all the parties involved in the council are in a partnership and have not moved into a more distinct management structure than that which is in place. They are still adjusting to the changes that have been made. There has been a colossal reduction in the number of members—from 70 to 47—which has caused a number of problems. Having said that, we must recognise that council members experience major difficulties getting about their constituency. Some are 75 miles away from Dumfries, which is a considerable travelling distance for councillors.

Unsurprisingly, the council does not want directly elected leaders.

On community planning, the council finds itself

in a fortunate situation—its police board and health board fit exactly into the Dumfries and Galloway local authority area, so cross-boundary police boards and so on are not necessary. Councillors feel privileged by that and hope that there will be no changes to council area boundaries, which might interfere with the present arrangement.

Possibly the most interesting and exciting innovation, after the Crichton campus, is the fact that Dumfries and Galloway Health Board and Dumfries and Galloway Council have brought together some of their agencies at the Crichton site, which is noted under the response to question 7. The health board and the social work department have come together on one site, sharing buildings and infrastructure, making joint management appointments, attending joint management meetings, offering joint training and sharing planning systems. The end game, which involved a bit of juggling money and budgets, is to try to deliver a far smoother and seamless service. It seems quite progressive and is a good model that we should examine if part of our function is to pass on good practice.

When we arrived in Dumfries, after hanging up our hats, our first visit was across the street to the Oasis Centre, which is an old school that has just been refurbished. The council has a youth strategy executive committee which, unusually, comprises six councillors and six young people, each of whom has a vote. There are 12 votes up for grabs when they discuss matters that affect youth in the area. That seems an important initiative.

The facility we looked at has a recording studio, lounges and internet facilities. The young people we met are very articulate, switched on and keen. They feel that they are being listened to by the councillors on the youth strategy committee—I found that quite refreshing. In one of my more cynical moments, I wondered what other kids, who are not on that committee, think about it, but that is just the way things are.

Interestingly, the point was made that they are all apolitical. None of them has a burning ambition to become a councillor—they have clearly seen enough not to want to. Having said that, the council was quick to point out that in the run-up to the election, the youngsters had gone out of their way to encourage people to register and to go out and vote. It is an interesting model. Often, particularly if one has a teaching background, one thinks that one has to impose participation on people, but here people are being persuaded by their own peer group to do the right things and to get involved.

Question 9 concerns the concordat. The council is in favour of that. Question 10 is about our relationship to local government. It was pleased to

have made the contact and to see us there—it is pretty universal that wherever we go, nobody feels too threatened by us. Yet. I hope they never will.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight the youth strategy executive and the co-operation between the health board and Dumfries and Galloway's social work department as examples of good practice. The council seized a huge opportunity by setting up the Crichton site. All its evidence will prove the need for a power of general competence.

The Convener: Gil, do you have anything to add to that?

Mr Paterson: Just a couple of points.

Dumfries and Galloway is the lowest earning area in the United Kingdom. This is the third rural area I have visited, and a common thread has run through all of them, but what came over more strongly in this area than in any other is the horrendous cost of transport to the council and the community.

I spoke to a young lady, or girl—she is about 17 and at my age I can say girl—who lives 70 miles away, which means that accessing the Oasis Centre involves an overnight stay. Although there is a concession on the fare, people have to stay overnight to get it. I think she said it is a fiver; as she is not working, that seems a horrendous amount of money. She told me about the effect of the cost of travel on the family budgets of people who live in the community and work in the town of Dumfries. That is a common thread running through life in rural areas that somebody has to address at some point. The cost of running a car and the condition of local services is getting beyond the pale.

Colin has already mentioned that—from what we were told—the social work and health departments are almost one unit. The council said that it can foresee a time when it will be one unit, which would produce cost savings and more resources at the sharp end. We met both departments. They both said more or less the same thing. I thought that that was extremely refreshing, especially as one of them will either be demoted or get the bump.

Colin has covered most of the other points.

Colin Campbell: When we were at the Crichton campus, we were told about the ambitions of the Paisley side of the university operation. While we were having lunch, we were told about the Glasgow side of the operation. Everybody in those educational circles—which can often be quite competitive—is pulling together. They feel that, already, students who might have slipped out of higher education are being kept in it by the existence of a facility in the south-west. The visit

was a very cheering experience in many ways.

Mr Gibson: I am pleased that Colin has such a positive view of the Crichton centre, because when he was SNP national secretary I wrote to him suggesting it for a national conference but he declined—it was too small for a rapidly expanding party.

Under question 2, the report says:

“A view was expressed that urban areas got a fairer deal in terms of resources.”

Can you expand on that?

Colin Campbell: I may have a note on that. As I remember, someone said they feel that they are not on a level playing field and that councils that have been careful with their money are being penalised to help councils that have been less careful. They also feel that their funding is based on how things have been, and on traditional criteria, rather than on what the criteria ought to be.

Mr Gibson: Did they offer any evidence to show that more money is going to less prudent authorities?

Mr Paterson: I think what was said is that they manage within their budget but still suffer along with councils that are not prudent and have gone over budget.

Mr Gibson: I notice that, under question 3, the report says that the council is

“run by a joint administration of 4 political groups”,

one of which is the independents, and then, under question 4, says:

“A view was expressed that it was unrealistic to expect independents to group together”.

Perhaps only when it suits them?

Dr Sylvia Jackson: Economic development is a big priority for the area. You mentioned the Crichton campus, which is the educational side of economic development. Are other partnership arrangements under way?

Colin Campbell: It is not purely educational. There are internet facilities on the site that are not purely educational, although I cannot remember what they are—

Mr Paterson: They are renting property and involving local businesses. One had gone down—

Colin Campbell: That was a knitwear business.

Mr Paterson: The knitwear business had gone into receivership, but there were new businesses—one was setting up on the day of our visit. The extra capacity of the campus is being utilised.

Mr Gibson: Is there not a social inclusion partnership in the Sanquhar-Kirkconnel area?

Colin Campbell: There may be but it was not discussed.

Mr Gibson: It is an area that is described as one of the worst travel-to-work areas in Scotland.

Mr Paterson: As Colin said, people feel that the Crichton campus has attracted people to stay in the area who had been going to go to universities elsewhere—purely because it is there and is catering for local people. That includes people who registered for other universities but decided to go to the Crichton campus although they do not live in Dumfries. I think they have something unique in that.

The Convener: Thank you for the report, Colin.

Before we move to the next agenda item I should bring members up to date. We have made 14 out of the 15 planned visits; the next is South Ayrshire Council, by Michael McMahon, Gil Paterson and Sylvia Jackson. We need to have reports from North Lanarkshire, South Lanarkshire, Shetland Islands, Western Isles, Clackmannanshire and South Ayrshire Councils. It is proposed that we will take those reports on 7 and 14 March. Eventually, we should visit all councils and we may visit some again for specific reasons.

We will now go into private session, for housekeeping issues.

14:59

Meeting continued in private until 16:15.

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