LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 19 June 2001
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE
19th Meeting 2001, Session 1

CONVENER

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP)
*Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
*Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Iain Smith (North-East Fife) (LD)

*attended

WITNESSES

Sue Granville (George Street Research Ltd)
Andra Laird (George Street Research Ltd)
Paolo Vestri (Scottish Local Government Information Unit)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Irene Fleming

ASSISTANT CLERK

Craig Harper

LOCATION

The Signet Library

Scottish Parliament

Local Government Committee

Tuesday 19 June 2001

(*Afternoon*)

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

Item in Private

The Deputy Convener (Dr Sylvia Jackson): I welcome everyone to the beautiful setting of the Signet library.

Item 1 is to ask the committee whether it agrees to take item 3 in private. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Renewing Local Democracy Working Group

The Deputy Convener: Item 2 is our inquiry into aspects of the report of the renewing local democracy working group. Members will remember that we set out terms of reference in November. This is the first part of our information gathering and we have with us two groups that have been conducting research into the area. The first is the Scottish Local Government Information Unit. Paolo Vestri, the director, and Stephen Fitzpatrick, the research and information officer, are here.

Paolo Vestri (Scottish Local Government Information Unit): I thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to discuss our research findings. Members have the report—I hope that you will have had a chance to read it—so I will not go through it in detail. I have circulated graphs to highlight some of the main findings of the report and will talk through those in a couple of minutes.

I want to focus on two key questions relating to the research that may interest the committee. The first is whether the sample that we used was representative and the second is whether the results of the research were accurate. I wish then to go over some of the main conclusions that are highlighted in the graphs that I have circulated and some implications that I would draw out of the research, which relate to the recommendations of the renewing local democracy working group.

First, was the sample that we used representative? The research was carried out through a daily diary that we issued to a number of councillors. They were asked to fill in the diary over a two-week period in November 1999, giving details at half-hour intervals each day and highlighting the activity that they undertook during that period and the location where they carried out that activity. The diary was issued to all 58 council leaders and conveners in Scotland and to a random sample of 50 per cent of all other councillors. As far as possible, we tried to ensure that the sample that we issued the survey to was representative of gender and political allegiance in all councils.

A total of 641 diaries were issued. The responses that we got back were anonymous. People did not write their names on the survey, although we asked for some information on their socioeconomic background so that we could check the returns against what we know of councillors from previous surveys. A total of 191 councillors responded to the survey, which is a 30 per cent response rate, and represents just over 15 per cent of all councillors, which is a high

response level for this kind of survey. It can be compared with two other major surveys of councillors that were carried out in recent years. The Widdecombe inquiry in the mid-1980s, which former councillors here may remember, carried out a survey of all councillors in the UK, and it got a 6 per cent response rate; a more recent survey of Welsh councillors, which was carried out in 1995, received responses from 7 per cent of Welsh councillors, so our response rate of 15 per cent of all councillors was high.

There is a close correlation between the responses to the survey and the overall sample to whom the survey form was sent, especially when account is taken of gender and the position of councillors on councils. The survey was sent to 58 senior councillors, leaders and provosts, which represented 9 per cent of the survey forms that we sent out, and just over 9 per cent of the survey forms that were returned came from leaders and conveners, which is a close correlation. There was an exact match with regard to gender: 78 per cent of councillors in Scotland are male, and 78 per cent of the responses were from male councillors; 22 per cent of councillors are female, and 22 per cent of responses were from female councillors, so those two key factors were closely correlated.

We can compare the responses that we got with a survey of all councillors that we carried out in June 1999, which got a high response rate. The June 1999 survey, which was carried out just after the 1999 council elections, showed that the average age of councillors was 53. The average age of councillors who responded to the current survey was just under 55. There was not an exact match, but from what we can see, there was a fairly close correlation between our sample of councillors and what we know of councillors generally in Scotland.

The second question that we wanted to address was the accuracy of the results. It is impossible to say for certain whether the results of any kind of survey are accurate, but if the results of our survey are compared with previous councillor work load surveys, it can be seen that our results are not that far out of step with other surveys.

In 1983 there was a major survey—the only major survey of Scottish councillors' work loads that has not been carried out by the SLGIU. It was carried out on behalf of the Planning Exchange, and showed that the average work load of councillors at that time was 31 hours a week. The SLGIU carried out a major councillors' work load survey in 1996, which showed that the average work load of councillors was 46 hours a week, so the average of 36 hours a week that was obtained from the latest survey shows that the figures for the recent survey are probably not inflated, which is the main concern when carrying out this sort of survey. There is a close correlation between the November 1999 survey and the survey that we carried out in 1996.

A similar survey of councillors' work load was carried out by Glasgow City Council last August, using a three-week diary-based survey modelled on the form that we issued in this survey. Many of the questions were exactly the same and others were fairly similar. The results of the survey of councillors in Glasgow were similar to the results of the survey that we carried out. For instance, we found that the average work load was 35.7 hours a week; in the Glasgow survey, it was 35.4 hours. Our survey showed that the chairs and deputes throughout Scotland worked an average of 37.5 hours a week; the figure for senior councillors in Glasgow was 38.6. Throughout the results, there was a fairly close match, suggesting that the SLGIU survey results were fairly representative and accurate.

I shall talk the committee through some of the graphs that I have circulated to illustrate the key findings of the survey. The detailed figures are all in the research document that was circulated before the meeting. It is easier to pull out the key findings of the survey using graphs.

On the sheet that is headed "Weekly Averages", there is a table that shows the weekly average by position. It shows that there are major variations in the work load of councillors, depending on their position on the council. The figure on the left is the average for all councillors, which is 35.7 hours a week. For leaders, the figure is 50.5 hours a week, on average. Minority group back-bench members average 31.4 hours, whereas majority group back-bench members average only 23 hours a week. There is a fairly obvious correlation between the position that someone holds on the council and their work load. There is a much smaller work load for councillors who do not hold positions of seniority or responsibility. Those figures are only averages. A small number of councillors are way off the graph, as their work load is substantially higher than the average. Some councillors also have a much smaller work load than the figures in the graph suggest.

The second graph shows the weekly average according to the employment status of councillors. It shows that there is a smaller but still significant variation in work load depending on councillors' employment status. Councillors who identified themselves as full-time councillors with no other employment average 44 hours a week, whereas councillors who are in full-time employment outside the council average 31 hours a week for their council business. That illustrates clearly the fact that full-time councillors spend substantially more time on council business than councillors who are in other full-time employment.

Over the page, two graphs show the variation in work load, depending on the size and type of council. We have divided councils into the categories of rural, urban and intermediate, the latter category comprising a small number of councils that are both rural and urban. You will see that the variation between the categories is a lot less significant. Councillors on councils that have a population of more than 250,000 in their area have an average work load of 37 hours a week. Councillors on councils with the smallest populations in their areas have an average work load of 34 hours a week. Additionally, councillors on rural councils average 37 hours a week, whereas councillors on urban councils average 36 hours a week. Some of that difference comprises travelling time, as councillors in rural areas average seven hours a week in travelling and councillors in urban areas average only four hours a week in travel time.

The next sheet has coloured graphs on it, the top one showing work load by type of activity. Constituency work covers ward surgeries, councillors' meetings with organisations in their wards and their dealing with individual constituents' problems. External activity covers councillors' representation of the council on external bodies such as the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the police and fire boards and other joint bodies, or their representation of the council on quangos and other such bodies. Internal activity relates to the internal work of the council: going to committee meetings, preparing for committee meetings and meeting officials on council-wide business rather than constituency-related business. Members will see clearly that councillors who are in leadership positions spend a significantly higher proportion of their time on internal council activity than back-bench councillors, who spend far more time on constituency business.

14:15

The next table on that page shows time of activity by employment status. We have tried to show the variation in the time within which councillors carry out their council duties, according to whether they are full-time councillors, whether they are in full-time employment or whether they have another employment status. The second line from the top shows that full-time councillors undertake approximately 70 per cent of their work in either the morning or the afternoon, and 30 per cent either in the evening or at weekends. The bottom line relates to full-time employed councillors. Just over 50 per cent of the time that they spend on council activities is during the day—slightly more of it in the afternoon than in the morning—and just under 50 per cent is either in the evening or at weekends. The table shows that councillors who work full-time have to spend more time on council duties in the evening or at weekends.

The final table, which is on the next page, shows location of activity by type of council. Here we tried to identify the significant variation in where councillors perform their council duties, depending on whether they serve in a rural or in an urban authority. The table shows clearly that councillors in rural local authorities split their time evenly between working from home and working from the main council building. The top line in the table shows that rural councillors spend about 32 per cent of their time carrying out council duties in the main council building and just over 31 per cent at home. Urban councillors perform most of their council duties in the main council building or other council buildings. Only about 16 per cent of their council duties are performed at home. On this matter there is a clear distinction between councillors in rural authorities and councillors in urban authorities.

I turn now to the implications of the report and how it relates to the recommendations of the renewing local democracy working group. I agree broadly with that group's recommendations on the action required to reduce councillors' work loads and/or to help councillors to perform their duties more effectively within a realistic time frame. I support the recommendation that councillors should have job descriptions. We must clarify what is expected of councillors.

I also support the recommendations on member-support services. It is important that councils examine how they can use IT and internet facilities to reduce councillors' work load, to help them to perform their duties more effectively and perhaps to help them to work from home. That is particularly important to rural councillors, who have more difficulty getting to the main council building. We need to consider options such as videoconferencing either from home or from local council offices. Just before and just after reorganisation the SLGIU carried out a couple of surveys of member-support services. We are planning to undertake in the autumn another major survey of member-support services provided by councils. We would be happy to share the results of that survey with the committee, COSLA and others.

Another of the working group's key recommendations was that councils should examine the work loads that committee meetings impose on councillors. That is very important. The issue is not about only the timing and number of meetings, but the way in which meetings are carried out and their function. Many councils began to carry out that work in their reviews during the past year, which fed into last week's

leadership advisory panel report.

We need to consider the timing of meetings. Most—if not all—councils have their committee meetings during a normal nine-to-five working day. Perhaps they should consider whether late afternoon or early evening meetings would be better suited to the councillors who are also otherwise employed and who have problems getting time off to attend meetings during the day. However, too many council meetings in the evenings would eat into the time that councillors must devote to working in their constituencies or wards. For example, most councillors have ward meetings and meet school boards and other local groups in the evening.

Penultimately, as the working group recommended, it is crucial that there are discussions with employers organisations about the time off that employees take for council duties. If one of the aims of the exercise is to encourage more working people to become councillors without their having to give up their jobs to do so, we must consider the issue of paid or unpaid time off for council duties and the implications that that would have for councillors' remuneration from local authorities.

Finally, I will highlight some of the points about councillors' remuneration that were raised by the working group. There is a question mark over the recommendation that the basic allowance for councillors should be £12,000. Given most councillors' heavy work load and the fact that, on average, they put in a 35-hour week, we do not know whether that figure is an adequate reward—if one is looking for reward. Is that enough to entice people to give up their jobs to become councillors?

There is a question mark over the working group's recommended differential for leadership of the large Glasgow and Edinburgh councils. The recommendation is that these leaders should be remunerated at the same level as MSPs, whereas council leaders in the smallest authorities should receive much smaller remuneration of just more than £24,000. However, given that the Scottish local government information unit survey shows that the work load of council leaders does not vary substantially, is such a high differential justified?

There is a further question mark over the inflexibility of the number of councillors that the working group has recommended for special responsibility allowances. The survey illustrates that the number of councillors who put in so many hours' work suggests that more of them should receive the special allowances, as Kerley recommends.

There is perhaps a need for more research, although people who carry out research always say that. There is an argument for conducting more council-based surveys of the kind that we conducted. A Scotland-wide survey can give only a broad overall figure and picture, whereas council-based surveys allow each council to discover the impact of its work load and method of operation on its councillors. Glasgow City Council's survey has been very useful in helping the council to find out how it can support councillors, reduce their work load and make them more effective through measures such as changing the committee structure. Such surveys help to identify specific issues and problems for specific councils.

Furthermore, there must be a follow-up survey that considers the impact of the new structures that councils are putting in place. What impact does an executive-based authority have on the work load of councillors who are members of executives, and on back-bench councillors in such authorities?

Similarly, some councils have gone for decentralisation, and we must consider the resultant impact on councillors' work loads and on the type of work that they do. More work needs to be done to find out councillors' views of their work load and its impact. Does a heavy work load discourage councillors? Does it contribute to the fairly large turnover of councillors? Does it discourage people from wanting to become councillors?

I am sorry if I have gone on for a little too long, but I thought that it would be useful to highlight some of our key findings and their implications. I will be happy to answer any questions.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you—that was a comprehensive account that filled in many of the details in relation to your written submission. I am sure that everybody found the graphs that you circulated useful, because they allowed us to understand immediately some of the information in the submission.

Were you able to break down your figures to give information on newly elected councillors and returning councillors? Were there differences?

Paolo Vestri: We did not ask whether councillors were old or new councillors, but we asked when they had been elected. From our 1999 survey, and from evidence that we gathered from the 1999 election results, we know that just over 33 per cent of councillors who were elected in 1999 were elected to the council for the first time. The remaining 66 per cent were re-elected. That indicates a large turnover, which is an issue in itself.

In our survey, the response rate was slightly lower from newly elected councillors. We could break down the figures to give information on new

and old councillors, but we did not do that, because experience suggests that the length of time that a person has been on a council is not the key factor that determines their work load. The key factor is the position that a person holds in the council. New councillors who became committee chairs immediately they were elected had a work load that was substantially higher than that of a new councillor who remained a back-bench councillor for the first year or so. There is not much evidence to suggest that the length of time that a person has been a councillor impacts on their work load; as I said, the key factor is the position that the councillor holds.

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Your survey showed that those who classified themselves as full-time councillors spent longer on council business than those who did not classify themselves as full-time councillors. Were you able to identify the types of activity on which full-time councillors spent more time than did other councillors?

Paolo Vestri: The quick answer is yes; but the hard part is giving the figures. If you will give me a second, they will be in my notes somewhere, because we did carry out an analysis of the type of work that people did, in relation to whether they were full-time councillors.

In the middle section of table 2 on page 4 of our submission, employment status runs down the left-hand side and the type of work done runs along the top. The first column gives attendance at council meetings. Councillors in full-time employment attended council meetings for 3.7 hours a week, whereas full-time councillors did so for 4.2 hours. The table shows the differences for various types of activity. Full-time councillors spend more time on internal council activity than councillors who have full-time jobs do. However, that may be because of the position that they hold on the council. Not many council leaders or council conveners have other full-time jobs. A small number have, but most council leaders and conveners tend to be full-time councillors, and their post might be the factor that impacts on how they work, rather than whether they are full-time employed or full-time councillors.

The matches and correlations that can be made are fairly convoluted—but the key factor is the position that a person holds. Full-time councillors are more likely to be council leaders or conveners. Councillors who are employed full time outside the council are less likely to hold such senior positions.

Mr Paterson: Below table 1, your document says that

"survey respondents who classified themselves as full-time councillors spent 44 hours per week on council business."

Is there a specific reason for why people become full-time councillors, apart from their working at a senior level?

14:30

Paolo Vestri: I will answer Gil Paterson's fair question directly: we did not ask that question in this survey or in previous surveys. Perhaps research on why people become full-time councillors should be considered; they do it for a mixture of reasons. Some who are classified as full-time councillors might be unemployed or retired, but they classify themselves as full-time councillors because they spend all their time working on the council.

We asked councillors to classify themselves as retired, unemployed or not working for any other reason. The table in the document shows that quite a difference exists between the hours that full-time councillors put in and the hours that councillors who classify themselves as retired put in. Councillors who said that they were retired averaged 36 hours a week. Councillors who said that they were full-time councillors averaged 44 hours a week.

People might become full-time councillors because they are unemployed and do not try to find another job because they are able to work full time on the council, because they are retired or because they give up their jobs—we can identify a small number of councillors who did that.

Mr Paterson: I am trying to find out whether people are being pushed into unemployment because they want to do a good job for the community.

Paolo Vestri: I do not know. We did not ask about that. We have only hearsay to go on. The evidence that I have heard from some of the committee's members, from my being a councillor and from knowing councillors up and down the country makes me sure that that is happening. People say, "I won't progress in my job because I am a councillor, so I might as well give up my job and concentrate on being a councillor." That is happening more.

We have conducted four major surveys of councillors. The first took place in 1995. We conducted a major survey of all councils in 1999 and have undertaken two surveys of work load. Comparisons between our surveys and previous surveys show that the number of councillors who classify themselves as full-time increased substantially in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. In our most recent survey, about 24 per cent of councillors classified themselves as full-time councillors, whereas the figures were much lower in previous surveys.

Mr Paterson: All the graphs seem to show that full-time councillors work longer hours and have a wider variety of duties. Is there evidence that councillors who work full time outside the council would like to do similar work to full-time councillors, but cannot because of time constraints?

Paolo Vestri: We cannot obtain that information from the survey because we did not ask councillors for their views on their work loads. The questions were basic: we asked how many hours councillors worked; we asked what that time was spent on; and we asked where it was spent. That is what we were asked to report on.

The councillors' work load survey that we conducted in 1996 asked for councillors' views on their work loads, on whether they were spending too much or too little time on council business and on whether they were spending too much time on constituency work or on meeting officials, for example. We received more detailed results from that survey. It provided evidence that councillors who were not full-time were unhappy and would have liked to spend more time on council duties. They might have been restricted by other factors, such as their work loads—because they were working outside the council and could not get time off to do council work—or because they were in opposition groups.

We can correlate figures on that as well. Councillors who are in opposition groups tend to say more often than do councillors in majority groups that they do not spend enough time with officials. That is partly a result of the fact that they are in opposition and do not have the same access to officials as committee conveners do. Councillors might be unhappy with what they are doing on their council for a range of reasons and their employment situation is undoubtedly a key factor. I am not sure whether the committee has been given the results of the 1996 survey, which goes into that question in far more detail. It was slightly different from the survey that we carried out this time, but it includes some interesting information.

The Deputy Convener: I do not want to pursue Gil Paterson's point much further, but you said that you wanted to continue to investigate the issue in future.

Paolo Vestri: Yes.

Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP): This is an excellent piece of research. I am astonished that councillors spend so little time in surgeries and in dealing with constituents. I recall spending about 75 per cent of my time as a councillor dealing with constituency problems. Did you investigate variation based on size and type of ward? Does the amount of time that is spent on constituency work vary between councillors who represent wards that are 100 per cent owner occupied and councillors who represent wards where most people live in housing association or local authority accommodation? One assumes that it does vary, but has there been any research into that question?

Paolo Vestri: We did not ask that question in this survey, partly because the complex work that would be involved in collecting and analysing such information would have substantially increased our bill to the Scottish Executive. This time we did not ask any detailed questions about the type of ward that councillors represented, but we asked questions of that sort in the 1996 survey—for example, about the type of issues that came up in councillors' wards. We found that the issue that was raised most frequently was housing.

I know from experience as a councillor that housing is the key issue. I represented a ward in central Edinburgh that had no council housing. An average of one person a fortnight came to my surgeries, although I held surgeries religiously every Friday night and every second Saturday. A councillor who represented a ward in Wester Hailes had an average of about 20 people a week coming to his surgeries and a substantially higher work load in phone calls and letters. Most of his work was related to council housing. I am sure that the situation is the same throughout Scotland.

The type of ward that councillors represent has a major impact on their constituency work load, but we did not gather information on that in this survey. Perhaps the matter can be investigated at council level. If councils were to carry out their own surveys of work load—not just of hours worked, but of what councillors spend their time on—that would provide very useful information. It would enable them to identify the kind of support that individual councillors need to help them to do their work more effectively. A councillor who has a heavy constituency work load might need more support than one who has a relatively light constituency work load.

Mr Gibson: In my experience, that extra support is not available—certainly not to councillors in opposition. I do not know whether it is available to councillors who are part of the administration. Do you not think that under the first-past-the-post system the size of wards is an issue? In one ward a councillor might have to dedicate himself or herself predominantly to ward work, while in the neighbouring ward the councillor might have the opportunity to get involved in strategic matters—committee issues and so on—simply because of demography. Should those factors be taken into account more?

Paolo Vestri: In most authorities most wards are the same size in terms of population. The big

difference is in the type of ward. That needs to be considered in more detail. If the Kerley recommendations on the electoral system are implemented, their impact on individual councillors will need to be considered. Perhaps we can learn from the experiences of MSPs, and how their work loads and the type of work that they do vary depending on whether they are constituency or list members.

Mr Gibson: One would think that a single transferable vote system with larger wards would even out some of those disparities.

How many of those who responded were in full-time employment at the same time as they were councillors?

Paolo Vestri: Of the councillors who responded to the survey, 23.4 per cent were in full-time employment and 25.3 per cent classified themselves as being full-time councillors.

Mr Gibson: Given that the proportion of adults who are in work is at least double that, do you believe that being a councillor limits people's chances of finding employment? Should that issue be addressed?

Paolo Vestri: It should be addressed. From experience, I know that being a councillor has an effect on the kind of employment that one can get and on one's career prospects.

I became a councillor when I was a student and, because I could spend more time being a councillor, I became a de facto full-time councillor. It was difficult to get out of that role and to find employment because few employers were willing to employ somebody who had to devote a large part of his working day to council duties. That factor limits the people who become councillors.

Mr Gibson: When I was in Glasgow City Council, I was amazed to find that Bill Aitken and I were the only councillors who worked in the private sector—the place was overrun with teachers. Do you have any information on the number of councillors who work in the private sector? I think that the pool from which we can draw councillors is restricted.

Paolo Vestri: After this survey and the survey that we conducted of all councillors after the 1999 election, we have good information on the employment details of councillors. Of the councillors who are in full-time employment, we found that 18 per cent work in local government, 6 per cent in central Government, 6 per cent in the national health service, 14 per cent in other public sector occupations, 10 per cent in the voluntary sector and 45 per cent in the private sector. All those figures are approximate. Roughly, just less than half those councillors work in the private sector and just more than half work in the public or voluntary sectors. That disparity is partly because of the type of people who become councillors—people who work in central Government, local government, the NHS or the voluntary sector will probably tend to be more interested in politics and their community than will people who work in the private sector. Another factor is the need to get time off. Local authorities are relatively good at giving their employees time off for council duties, but the private sector tends not to be.

Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In your reply to Sylvia Jackson, you said that one third of councillors were new. Was that figure only in the latest survey?

Paolo Vestri: That is the figure for all councillors who were elected in 1999.

Mr Harding: Throughout the whole of Scotland?

Paolo Vestri: Yes.

Mr Harding: Has any research been done on the number of standing councillors who lost their seats?

Paolo Vestri: No, although we could have done that. The 33 per cent represents people who won seats from sitting councillors and people who stood in seats in which the incumbent councillor did not stand for election.

Mr Harding: At the most recent election, however, there was a huge sea change in political control. I think that that means that the figure of one third is not sustainable.

Paolo Vestri: It is similar to the figure that we found in relation to the 1995 election. There have been similar figures in England as well.

Mr Harding: On both occasions, my party lost a lot of seats.

Mr Gibson: I am glad that you said that, Keith.

Mr Harding: Could you expand on your earlier response about the Kerley recommendation on the level of pay for council leaders being based on the MSP salary? Why do you think that that is not right?

Paolo Vestri: I am not sure about the top figure. I do not want to get into a debate about the level of remuneration that Kerley has recommended for people on special responsibility allowances, because I have not examined the overall figure. However, I am concerned about the differential that Kerley recommended between the salaries of councillors in leadership positions in Glasgow and Edinburgh—for whom he recommended that remuneration should be based on an MSP's salary—and, going down the scale in the size of authority, the councillors in the smallest band, for whom he suggested the figure should be just over £24,500.

14:45

If we consider the work load, I am not sure that there is such a difference between being leader of a small authority and being leader of Glasgow City Council. Clearly the council's budgets would differ considerably, so there is a different level of responsibility. However, the kind of work that the leader of a small authority does is the same as the work that is done by the leader of a large authority. The hours that they must put in are also comparable.

If we introduce such disparity between councillors in leadership positions in large and small authorities, why should not we differentiate the levels of payment to ministers according to the size of their department's budget? At the moment, the Minister for Health and Community Care receives the same remuneration as any minister who is responsible for a department that has a much smaller budget.

Mr Harding: Let us stick to local government. If we pursued your argument, all chief executives should be paid the same.

Paolo Vestri: No, I am not saying that they should be paid the same. I am simply querying whether the differential that Kerley recommended is correct. Kerley has recommended that councillors in leadership positions in Glasgow or Edinburgh should be paid more than £41,000 and that councillors in smaller authorities should be paid just over £24,000. That is a differential of almost 80 per cent. There is a difference in chief executives' pay, but it is not at that level. The chief executive of Glasgow City Council is paid more than the chief executive of Clackmannanshire Council, but the differential is nowhere near as great as that which is recommended by Kerley. There should be a differential, but not one as great as that which was recommended by the working party.

Mr Harding: What is the differential in chief executives' pay? Is it about 30 per cent?

Paolo Vestri: I am not sure. I imagine that it is about that.

Mr Harding: When I was a councillor, I was in the fortunate position of being able to go home between meetings. In your research, were waiting times counted as working time, or were they discounted altogether?

Paolo Vestri: Waiting time between meetings was discounted in our survey because we asked councillors to fill in a fairly detailed diary page, outlining what they did during every half hour from 7 am to 11 at night. When they said that they were at a committee meeting from 9 am to 10 am, we calculated that. If there was nothing in the 10:30 slot, that half hour was discounted. We assumed that they were either working or not doing anything in relation to the council. We took into account only times that they included in the survey.

However, as Mr Harding suggests, travelling time—travelling between meetings and between home and the council—is key.

Mr Harding: If the Executive's proposal for major housing stock transfers throughout Scotland takes place, will that radically reduce the hours spent by councillors working on council business?

Paolo Vestri: It will have an impact on councillors who have a heavy work load in relation to the council housing in their wards. Two years down the line, it will be interesting to do a survey of councillors in Glasgow—should the council go ahead with stock transfer—to discover the impact of that transfer on their constituency work loads. It would have some impact, but not perhaps as much as one might expect.

People who are dissatisfied with their housing or who are looking for a house might still go to their local councillor for help. It is difficult to say what the impact of stock transfer will be; one would only be able to calculate that two or three years down the line, when and if stock transfer takes place.

Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): I want to go back to the way in which differentials are calculated. In your study, you compare rural and urban areas—even within councils—and you compare councillors who represent suburbs with those who represent housing estates and so on. Kenny Gibson seemed to be working on the assumption that a move towards multimember wards would eradicate some of the differentials in work load. Have you done any studies, or are you aware of any, on the spread of work load in councils that have multimember wards?

Paolo Vestri: No, we have not, but that is an interesting point. Given that most English authorities have multimember wards—even though the members are still elected by the first-past-the-post system—it would be interesting to find out whether any surveys of work load have been done down there. We know of some general surveys of work load in English authorities, but they have tended not to be as detailed as the ones that we have done. We can go away and examine that issue, and if a survey has not been done, it could be a further area of research. A comparison could be done with multimember English wards.

Mr Paterson: I want to go back to the suggested salary—

The Deputy Convener: We do not want to spend too long on that, because it is not in the remit of the inquiry.

Mr Paterson: You spoke to councillors about

them receiving a salary instead of responsibility payments, and your information was that the suggested figure was too low. Did they give you a figure, apart from saying that it would have to be a lot more?

Paolo Vestri: I am sorry if we misled you. We did not ask councillors for their views on the recommended £12,000 salary. It was my view that perhaps £12,000 would not be enough. The aim is to recompense people for the amount of work that they put in as councillors. If the average work load is 35 hours a week—half of which is done in the morning and afternoon, and the rest in the evening—I question whether £12,000 would be adequate remuneration, and whether it would get round the current problem whereby more and more councillors are receiving special responsibility allowances because they are full time and need a decent level of income to sustain themselves.

Mr Paterson: That clarifies things. Thank you.

Mr Gibson: To clarify Michael McMahon's point, it is logical that there is more diversity in Scotland than in Glasgow, more in Glasgow than in Pollok, and more in Pollok than in Mosspark. Clearly, if wards are larger, the likelihood of having concentrated pockets of wealth or deprivation is reduced.

I notice with some fascination that councillors who are part-time employed work longer overall, specifically on surgeries and on dealing with constituents, than those who are retired, who appear to spend less time, on constituents in particular, than councillors who are full-time employed. Is there a reason for that?

Paolo Vestri: I do not know. It might be a glitch in the responses, because a relatively small number of councillors are part-time employed. Only 20 councillors were in that category, so it only takes one or two with a high work load in one particular category to skew the figures. The sample was relatively small, so it is difficult to go into great detail. Other factors may be involved. For example, the part-time employed councillors who responded may be in wards that have a heavy work load. I do not know, because we did not go into that kind of detail. We can re-examine that, and see where the 20 part-time employed councillors came from.

Mr Gibson: Perhaps they are younger and more dynamic.

Paolo Vestri: They could be.

Mr Gibson: With regard to councillors who work full time and part time, do you have a breakdown of the number who are in the professions or in manual employment? I wonder whether there is a predominance of one or the other, and whether the current system discriminates against one or the other.

Paolo Vestri: We have those figures, but I cannot provide them off the top of my head. Our 1999 survey of councillors has the figures.

Mr Gibson: You mentioned SRAs and your concern about the inflexibility that Kerley recommends. Is not that inflexibility a reaction to the over-preponderance of SRAs? When I left Glasgow City Council, 63 of the ruling group of 71 had SRAs, and I understand that, in West Lothian, 27 out of 27 had SRAs.

Is not Kerley trying to make the situation a wee bit more clear-cut, up front and honest. Attempts are made to boost councillors' renumeration through their being the sub-convener of some committee that should not exist, because councillors have a shocking level of basic allowance.

Paolo Vestri: I think that that is right. I know why the recommendation to which you refer was made. I am questioning two things. One is the matter of having a basic allowance of £12,000, and Kerley's suggestion that that would, in effect, reduce the incentive to give councillors SRAs for posts that might not necessarily include the special responsibility that would justify payment of such an allowance. I am not sure whether a basic allowance of £12,000 is high enough; I think that the amount may need to be higher to offset that tendency.

My second point is that Kerley has gone too far down the road, in that he has been too specific. If you look at the leadership advisory panel report, which came out last week, you will note that one of the findings at the end concerns remuneration. The panel suggested that the recommendation of having fixed limits goes too far, and that there should be more flexibility to allow authorities to have different structures.

Some authorities might be able to justify having 12 councillors on SRAs because of their specific type of decision-making structure, whereas other authorities might need only four or five councillors on SRAs, because of the tight structure of their executive. There needs to be a bit more flexibility, but it is true to say that the figures should be lower than they are in some councils.

Mr Gibson: A number of issues relating to Kerley are fairly controversial—proportional representation is an obvious example. How soon would you wish proposals that have broad political support to be implemented? I have in mind proposals such as support and training for councillors.

Paolo Vestri: It is important for such recommendations to be acted on straight away—I

do not see why there should be any delay. We have been conducting support service surveys to find out the reasons for certain recommendations not having been acted on yet. We are stepping in and saying that we are able to carry out some aspects of the recommendations. From the survey, we can issue a report that identifies good practice and which may lead to training or seminars being provided for councillors to highlight examples of good practice and to encourage more good practice across all councils.

Many of the other recommendations should be acted on as quickly as possible. All the recommendations that relate to support and training for councillors, and even those that relate to discussions with business representatives, which are intended to encourage more businesses to give employees time off for council and other duties, should be acted on as quickly as possible. Those recommendations are not politically contentious; they do not need any legislation; and they do not need any regulations to be drawn up by the Scottish Executive. They should be acted on as quickly as possible.

Mr Gibson: I fully agree.

The Deputy Convener: If there are no other questions from members, I invite Stephen Fitzpatrick to add anything that he wishes.

Stephen Fitzpatrick (Scottish Local Government Information Unit): I do not think that there is anything that I could add.

The Deputy Convener: We look forward to receiving the information from 1996 that you said you would send us; we also look forward to seeing the results of all the future research that you mentioned. Thank you very much.

I welcome representatives of George Street Research Ltd. One of the company directors, and the lead speaker, is Sue Granville; with her is Andra Laird, who is also a company director. They will speak to the paper that we have in front of us, "Motivations to Public Service". I invite them first to go over some of their main points; we will then ask questions.

15:00

Sue Granville (George Street Research Ltd): Thank you for inviting us to the committee this afternoon.

We looked at a specific element of the Kerley remit: motivations and triggers that might encourage people to serve in any public service capacity, and specifically as councillors. Our key objective was to get an understanding of what people saw as the advantages, disadvantages and barriers to participation in any form of public service. Again, we looked specifically at the role of the councillor and at what people understood that role to be. We considered people's propensity to take on a public role, and what factors might inhibit them from doing so or attract them into doing so. We also thought that it would be useful to talk to a few ex-councillors who have retired not purely on the grounds of age, to find out what motivated them to stand for election as councillors in the first place and to stand down from that role later.

Our work was exploratory by nature. We held a small number of discussion sessions, either face to face or in groups of eight to 10 individuals. We talked to existing councillors, past councillors and members of the general public, as well as to people who were serving in a public capacity, which covered a broad range of people, from members of health boards and school boards to those who helped with local brownie or scout groups. We talked to people across a range of geographical locations in Scotland—city, rural and intermediate. I will begin by covering our key findings sector by sector, then I shall try to pull them all together.

Apart from possibly helping out at school jumble sales or getting involved in parent-teacher association meetings, the members of the general public did not really have a role serving in any form of public capacity. In general, there was little knowledge or awareness of what councillors do, and people's perceptions tended to be vague rather than precise. A small number of people felt that they had a clear picture of the role of the councillor; for many of those people, that picture tended to be based on anecdotal evidence or personal experience. For example, somebody with a housing problem might feel that dealing with housing problems was the primary remit of a councillor, without appreciating the broader range of issues that a local councillor could deal with.

When people had clear perceptions of the councillor's role, those perceptions tended to be negative rather than positive, and it was seen as an unrewarding role to take on—some people described it as a thankless task. The role was seen as quite time-consuming, and that made many people perceive it as something that would appeal to other types of people rather than to them.

Regardless of what people currently do, they seem unable to see themselves taking on the role of councillor. If they are not working but have other family commitments at home, they think that it would be difficult to take on the role of councillor because they do not have the experience of working. Conversely, somebody who is working full time might say that they cannot commit enough time to the role. Everyone tends to think, "That would be right for somebody else, but not for me."

Some people see a strong link between political allegiance and standing as a councillor, so people who have little or no interest in local or national politics automatically exclude themselves. Even those who have an interest in politics still tend to think that there could be conflicts between the role of a councillor looking after his or her constituents and party political interests.

Those who understand how the system works generally fear standing for election. It is far easier to be voted in by friends on a committee down the road than it is to go out and canvass the local population, to convince people to vote for you and to carry that through if you get in. The electoral process can be daunting for many of those people. Some people might be aware that they could stand as an independent, but they worry about the support and advice that they might get to enable them to do that and to see the process through properly. That sums up the views of the general public. It must be borne in mind that the views and perceptions of this group tend to be based on anecdotal evidence rather than positive knowledge.

The next group was individuals who serve in some form of public capacity. Whoever we spoke to, their reasons for taking on any such role came down, primarily, to personal interest in a matter that was of specific interest or relevance to them. When we talked to those people about their propensity to take that interest one step further, they did not see that there was much similarity between what they did and what councillors did. They saw their role as very specific, whereas a councillor could be dealing with a broad range of issues that changed regularly. There was no sense that there would be natural progression from sitting on a school board to considering standing for election to the local council.

In the main, those councillors whom we spoke to felt that they had a strong desire to do good for the community, to be involved in the community and to help make life better for other people in the community. A minority felt that the power and status that is associated with being a local councillor is important. Again, for a minority, being a councillor was seen as a career path. Nobody whom we spoke to claimed that they were using the position as a stepping stone to further a political career, but they assumed that other people that they knew of were using the role of councillor as a stepping stone for a political career.

For a small number, there was a family tradition of being a councillor. Such a person might feel that their grandfather and father before them have been councillors and that they want to carry on that tradition, which has often been part of their lives since they were young children. They see the need to carry on what has been done before. They have been involved in work such as canvassing in elections in the past.

For all the councillors whom we spoke to, money was not a motivating factor. They felt that the remuneration that is available does not counteract the hours, effort and commitment that is put into being a local councillor. That fits in with what we have heard. The significance of party politics tended to vary quite a lot. Some councillors, when push came to shove, would put party politics first and foremost. Others wanted to put the interests of their constituents first. To an extent, that might have reflected the platform on which they stood in the first place. We spoke to one or two people who had been approached by one or two local political parties that were looking for somebody to stand at the next election, and who were prepared to say that they would not accept a party whip on issues on which they totally disagreed with the party. An agreement had been reached between the individual and the local party for which they were standing.

All the councillors saw training and support for the role of councillor as essential. The level of support and training seemed to vary, depending on whom we spoke to. Those who were standing on a party political platform tended to get a reasonable level of support through the party that was behind them. Many who were standing on a more independent basis felt that support came from family and friends or other people whom they knew who had previously been councillors. There was no system in place that would give them access to photocopiers and e-mail. Some people had put in second phone lines at home to try to keep some separation between home life and council life, but that was not an automatic part of the system. They felt that consistency in what is—and could be—available would be well received.

All the councillors whom we spoke to acknowledged that they had to be able to have flexible work patterns; many of them were self-employed or farmers. They did the sort of job where they could say, “This afternoon, I will be a councillor and I can do my other work at another point this week or over the weekend.”

For many people, being a councillor brings additional responsibilities alongside that role, as they may end up sitting on school boards or other committees. Some of them might not have taken into account beforehand the fact that, once they have become a councillor, the job can grow. They all acknowledged that, regardless of how many committees they might have been involved in, being a councillor is a time-consuming job that requires a great deal of commitment from the individual. They all acknowledged that there is a need to attract a wider range of individuals; I will return to that point later.

The views of the ex-councillors tended to sit with the views of the councillors to whom we spoke. They talked about difficulties with juggling home life, work life and council duties. Some of them thought that the impact on their home life was a high price to pay. Indeed, one or two councillors said that they regretted missing out on parts of their home life. We spoke to only six ex-councillors, so we cannot say that we have talked to a broad range. However, some of them felt that the job has changed quite a lot since the introduction of the new unitary authorities and that there is more limited capacity to influence decision making among committees and so on these days.

Some councillors felt that there is a need for new blood in councils. A couple of people said that they would do only two or three terms as a local councillor; for some, that was all that they had ever set themselves. For people who do not have strong political feeling, the political aspect can be a deterrent. Those who felt that there was a lot of conflict, in terms of constituency and party interests, may well say, "I've had enough of this. I want to step back from it."

A few points emerged from our research, some of which fit with the recommendations from the working group report. First, a substantial majority will never be interested in standing as a councillor and there is probably little that can be done to persuade them. They may be apathetic; they may be uninterested; there may simply be a lack of personal interest. We think, however, that there is a natural recruitment ground among people who serve in other public capacities, although some of them might not realise their potential and may need to be spurred on by others.

Everyone whom we spoke to said that personal approaches would prompt consideration, especially if that approach was made by someone in whom they had a great deal of faith and who they felt would be open and honest with them in explaining the role of a councillor and what the job can entail. We heard from some people, where there is more of a family tradition, that that sort of education at an early age can be useful. Some form of education campaign, not only for children in schools but through newsletters from councillors, television and radio coverage, citizens panels and other participatory initiatives might create much more awareness of the role of the local councillor. A number of people commented on the negative media coverage and public relations that tend to follow local councillors around and the need to change those perceptions and help to create a more positive image of what can be done by a councillor.

There is a need to offer flexibility in the hours of council-related work. Many of the people whom we spoke to commented on the fact that meetings tend to be held during the day; for some, that is not convenient. It might be possible to vary the times at which meetings are held, to give people at least some flexibility. Those who were in full-time jobs felt that the role of councillor would not sit neatly side by side with the job that they were already performing. Some people felt that they could not take on any further commitments while they were in full-time work. There is a need to deal with employers at some level. Support mechanisms could be put in place to help councillors to come through the election process, to learn the role of the councillor and to perform the role well afterwards.

That pretty well covers the key points from our research. Do committee members have questions that they would like to ask?

15:15

The Deputy Convener: I will fire off by asking Sue Granville if the focus groups discerned any differences in terms of gender.

Sue Granville: In general the men were happier to stand up and be counted. Some of the people we spoke to would probably disagree with my saying this, but in general the women were happier with a support role. The women were happier helping to canvass than being the person who stood for election. That said, we talked to more men than women.

The Deputy Convener: Did councillors make any specific points about men's and women's attitudes?

Sue Granville: Most of the councillors felt that there were not enough female councillors. Some said that women lacked confidence or that they had less confidence than do many men. One of the ex-councillors said that he had persuaded a female colleague to stand. She needed reassurance from him—or from someone else—that she was not on her own and that people would give her support, help and advice throughout the process. That meant that, even if she was the person who was standing on the platform, there would be someone by her side to egg her on. Some women, in particular those who were not the breadwinner in the household, felt that the hours needed to perform the role of a councillor did not fit well with family commitments.

Mr Harding: How many people were involved in the focus groups and how were those people selected?

Sue Granville: There were eight to 10 people in each focus group. We talked to about six focus groups of people who served in a public capacity and nine focus groups of people from amongst the general public. We went to specific geographic

locations, primarily to avoid areas where other research was being done, as we did not want to create more work for councillors.

Focus groups in Edinburgh and Aberdeen covered the cities, groups in the Borders and Aberdeenshire covered the rural areas and groups in Falkirk and Ayrshire covered the intermediate areas. On top of that, we talked to 15 existing councillors and six ex-councillors.

Mr Harding: How were members of the focus groups selected?

Sue Granville: We developed a recruitment questionnaire that asked people about the capacity of their involvement in all sorts of organisations. In that way we could ascertain whether they fitted into the general public-at-large category or the public-service category. They were then invited to attend a group discussion on a given date at a given time.

Mr Harding: Were any community councillors involved in the public capacity groups?

Sue Granville: Yes, but I do not have the precise numbers.

Mr Harding: Surely they did not express a fear of going to the electorate.

Sue Granville: Some of them felt that the role could be quite different.

Mr Harding: Did they?

Sue Granville: Yes.

Mr Harding: Did the public capacity group mention changes that would increase the attraction of becoming a councillor?

Sue Granville: I do not think so. People who come into contact with councillors tend not to understand the full range of responsibilities that a councillor takes on board. All that those people need is a simple explanation of what the role entails and an explanation that being a councillor is quite easy.

Mr Harding: I am not sure if it is possible at this stage, but it would be useful to have details of the former councillors who were interviewed: their age, family circumstances, how long they had been councillors and how long ago they were councillors.

Sue Granville: Most of them were councillors up until recently. They were aged from about 35 to 55. Family circumstances change. We spoke to one or two people who had been councillors while they had children at home and had given up once the children left home. In theory, one might expect them to have more free time once the children left home, but they were younger rather than older people.

Mr Harding: How long had those councillors served?

Sue Granville: It varied. We talked to one or two who saw only one term through and decided that it simply was not for them. Rather than struggle on for a second term, they said that they did not believe that they were doing as good a job as somebody else could.

The other four had served for two or three terms. I think that they all felt that one term was needed to get to grips with being a local councillor and another term was needed to become really effective. A third term and anything after that was used to build upon a general knowledge and understanding of issues that might affect them as councillors. One or two suggested that, ideally, one should never do more than three terms. They felt that councillors can become a bit stale after a period and perhaps new blood should come on board.

Mr McMahon: The information that you have supplied is based on qualitative assessments, but "Motivations to Public Service" says that

"negative perceptions were rarely based on factual information but rather relied on anecdote".

Later, the document says that the press has responsibility for the negative perceptions. Does your information indicate whether the anecdotes were based on the personal experience of a councillor, or came from the press?

Sue Granville: Much experience came from a friend of a friend or the press. If people with direct personal experience of a councillor felt that an issue was not resolved in the way that they wanted it to be, they might have had a negative perception. However, those who had an issue that had been resolved well would happily say that they were very pleased with the good job that their councillor did.

Very few of the members of the general public to whom we spoke had had direct contact with their local councillor. Direct experience was very limited. Their perceptions tended to be based on something terrible in the paper on the previous Saturday, or a friend telling them about a friend who had had problems and the councillor had been no help. That could be because the councillor could not help and pointed towards somebody who could, but we do not know that. Experience therefore tended not to be personal, but based on distant anecdote.

Mr McMahon: I do not know if you can answer this, but were reports in the press inspired by journalists? Did the press report that councillor X from the Y party said that councillor A from the B party was such-and-such, or had done something wrong, or gone on a junket? Or did the press

report that, "Our reporter has uncovered that the councillor has done this"? What is the basis of the reports?

Sue Granville: In many instances, published hearsay has been the basis of people's experience. If a response has explained the hearsay, people have not read or heard it, so the negative perception has continued. People said that their experience was primarily from television and newspaper coverage. In the main, that might be what journalists have written. That said, if a councillor talks about local junkets or people going off to Spain for a few days and having a holiday while there, people might have read that, too. There is a mixture.

Mr McMahon: So it is possible that some of the negativity that people perceive in the press is generated by councillors themselves.

Sue Granville: Some of it could be—or from misreporting.

Mr Gibson: I would like to agree with much of what Michael McMahon has said, but my experience is that people phone the media and make an off-the-record comment about a colleague. The press will then phone up a member of another political party to get a comment on the record. The journalist will say, "What do you think about that councillor?" That is a big issue and, human nature being what it is, I do not know how such things can be stopped.

Do you believe that the public has unrealistic expectations of councillors?

Sue Granville: In some instances, they do. Many people do not have any idea of what councillors should or can do and think that they should deal with everything. Nevertheless, there are probably instances in which the councillor is not the best person to deal with something. All that the councillor need do is say, "I am not the person to do that for you, but I know a man who can." However, the general public do not necessarily understand that and will, at times, have very high expectations.

Mr Gibson: I am a former councillor and I would have been part of your ex-councillor group if I had not stood for the Scottish Parliament. My intention was to stand down from local government because of the issues that it raised, such as difficulties in juggling home and work, blah, blah, blah. I wonder how we can set about changing public perceptions.

Sue Granville: There are several ways in which that can be done, although it cannot be done overnight. We spoke to one or two councillors who produce local community newsletters; others, however, do nothing akin to that. There should be positive PR on the part of the councillors, saying, "Look at what I have achieved for you over the past 12 months or two years. I have now resolved this issue and people are happy about that." Councillors can help themselves by explaining what they have done and pointing out the good things.

Perhaps radio broadcasts would help—something along the lines of a day in the life of a councillor—to explain to people how difficult it can be to juggle all the different balls and keep everyone happy. Councillors must also try to get positive PR in the local newspapers. My local paper often focuses on the problems in the area rather than the good things, although there must be issues that are resolved well, which a newspaper could be persuaded to cover in a positive light.

It is important to hold open meetings and to try to persuade the public to come along to them. A lot of people whom we spoke to did not realise that there might be meetings that they could attend. Some people will never be persuaded to attend such meetings, but if the issue for discussion is of particular interest to people, they might be able to attend. The fact is that people are not aware that they are allowed to attend certain meetings.

Mr Gibson: The media obviously play a significant role in motivating and demotivating both people who stand for council elections and those who vote. Judging from the press about the Parliament over the past year, people would think that all that we ever discussed was fox hunting and homosexuality. There has never been a debate on fox hunting. Nevertheless, that is what the public think. How can that situation be changed? People of all parties work night and day in local authorities and in the Parliament, yet 99.9 per cent of what they do never gets reported. The media are only interested when something daft happens and when that is reported the public get a skewed view of government.

A year ago, after the Kerley report was published, the *Evening Times* ran an opinion poll in Glasgow. It asked, "Do you think that councillors should get a 100 per cent increase in their basic allowance?" Nobody knew what councillors were paid—it was only £6,000 for councillors in Glasgow—and 98 per cent of people said no. One of my colleagues and I joked that the other 2 per cent must have been the councillors and their families phoning in to try to redress the balance. What is your view on the way in which public service is presented in the media? Can we do anything to change it?

Sue Granville: It is down to battering away in every way possible to help to create a positive picture of what is done, what is achieved and what can be done. I am not sure what civic education is given to children in schools, but we could explain

what goes on to them at an early age. They would then have an awareness that they could disseminate to other people.

The TV and the press always play a large role in affecting people's perceptions. They should try to present things in a positive light, instead of perpetuating a negative feeling.

The opportunity should be taken wherever possible to hold local community meetings. A lot of local councillors will have responsibilities on other committees or within the local area and selling themselves positively to other types of people might help to spread the word to an extent.

There will always be a group of people in the general public who will believe what the papers say, who do not have much of an interest in events and who exhibit a lot of apathy about local government and voting in general. I doubt that there is much that can be done with that group. However, if councillors can spread the word by whatever paths are available, that should help a lot.

15:30

Mr Paterson: In your submission, you say that the general public do not know what councillors get up to. Do you think that the general public know what councils get up to?

Sue Granville: It was felt that they do not know what councils do either.

Mr Paterson: Would holding the Scottish Parliament elections on the same day as the local government elections help to raise public awareness of what councils do?

Sue Granville: Not particularly.

Andra Laird (George Street Research Ltd): It sounds bizarre, but people divorce the idea of the council from that of the councillor. Sometimes, stories of what a councillor has done are reported as if there is an antagonism between the two and as if the councillor has forced the council to do something. That does not help the situation as people tend to be supportive of what the council does in providing services. If the councillor is presented by the media as arguing with the council, that will not help to improve people's perceptions of the councillors.

Mr McMahon: Kenny Gibson gave a good example of the fact that if you ask a pejorative question you will get a pejorative answer. The way in which a question is phrased will encourage certain answers rather than others. Gil Paterson also gave a prime example of that when he asked about the timing of elections. I am not going to phrase the question differently—in fact, I am not even going to pose the question—but if he had phrased it differently, would you have given a different answer?

Andra Laird: Could you rephrase that?

Mr McMahon: If I ask you a direct question that is phrased in a pejorative way, it will lead you towards a certain type of answer. If I had asked you a question about the timing of elections that was phrased differently from the way in which Gil Paterson phrased it, it is possible that you would have given a different answer. Do you agree?

Andra Laird: Running Scottish Parliament elections at the same time as local government elections will not necessarily clarify for the electorate who does what and why they are being asked to vote for different names. The benefit to be had from combining the elections is that turnout may be increased because the election day will be seen to be more important.

Mr McMahon: Without my having even to ask the question, you have given a different answer from the one that Sue Granville gave Gil Paterson. That confirms my point.

Mr Harding: The answer had the same meaning.

Mr McMahon: But it was a different answer.

The Deputy Convener: I assume that we are still dealing with the general point, rather than with the timing of elections, which we will deal with in a second.

Mr McMahon: Yes. I am pointing out the fact that we cannot assume that the answer to a question is the definitive answer, as it depends on the way in which the question was asked.

Mr Harding: In that case, we can ignore all evidence that we receive.

Mr McMahon: No, that is not what I am saying.

Sue Granville: If I had expanded my answer, I would have said something similar to what Andra Laird just said.

Mr McMahon: I thought that that might have been the case.

Mr Paterson: Keith Harding made an important point.

Does the point that Mr McMahon made mean that, if we had asked our witnesses differently phrased questions, we would have been given different answers? I ask our witnesses not to answer that question, as the point is stupid.

The Deputy Convener: Before we get any further into this sticky issue, I thank Sue Granville and Andra Laird for coming along and going through the research with us. You have raised interesting points about how we can raise

awareness of what councillors do to try to encourage more people to come into the job.

Mr Paterson: Before we move on, it is important that I clarify something. When I said that the point was stupid, I meant the point made by Michael McMahon, not our witnesses, whose presentation I enjoyed.

15:35

Meeting continued in private until 16:18.

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