

# **LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 14 May 2002  
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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# CONTENTS

**Tuesday 14 May 2002**

	<b>Col.</b>
<b>SUBORDINATE LEGISLATION.....</b>	<b>2928</b>
Valuation and Rating (Exempted Classes) (Scotland) Order 2002 (draft) .....	2928
<b>“RENEWING LOCAL DEMOCRACY: THE NEXT STEPS” .....</b>	<b>2931</b>

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## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE**

### **14<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2002, 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)

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

\*Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab)

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

\*attended

#### **THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:**

Peter Peacock (Deputy Minister for Finance and Public Services)

#### **WITNESSES**

Councillor David Alston (Highland Council)

Alan Geddes (Highland Council)

#### **CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Eugene Windsor

#### **SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK**

Irene Fleming

#### **ASSISTANT CLERK**

Neil Stewart

#### **LOCATION**

Committee Room 3



## Scottish Parliament

### Local Government Committee

*Tuesday 14 May 2002*

*(Afternoon)*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:00*]

**The Convener (Trish Godman):** Comrades, it is 2 o'clock. I start by welcoming back Kenny Gibson, who was on the committee at the beginning. It is good to see you back. I also take the opportunity to record officially my thanks to Tricia Marwick for the work that she has done in her time on the Local Government Committee. Welcome back, Kenny.

**Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP):** I am deeply touched, convener.

**The Convener:** I am sure that you are.

## Subordinate Legislation

### Valuation and Rating (Exempted Classes) (Scotland) Order 2002 (draft)

**The Convener:** We must now consider an affirmative Scottish statutory instrument—the draft Valuation and Rating (Exempted Classes) (Scotland) Order 2002. Joining us are Peter Peacock, the Deputy Minister for Finance and Public Services, and Nikki Brown, an official in the local government division of the Scottish Executive.

The SSI was sent to members on 23 April and no comments have been received. Along with their papers for today's meeting, members should have received the report of the Subordinate Legislation Committee, which noted that the Executive did not include details of the consultation exercise that was carried out. At that committee's request, the Executive provided further information, which the Subordinate Legislation Committee welcomed. Our attention has been drawn to the instrument on the ground that further information was required on the details of the consultation.

Our procedure will be the same as that for other affirmative instruments. I shall allow a short period for the minister to give evidence on the instrument. If members wish, they can then ask questions of the minister. Once that time is up, I shall ask the minister either to add to his opening remarks or to move the motion. The subject will then be open for debate. At that point, it is a debate only, not a question-and-answer session. Members have gone through the procedure often enough, so it should be clear by now—I can explain it without even looking at my notes, which is an achievement if nothing else.

Does Peter Peacock want to make any opening remarks?

**The Deputy Minister for Finance and Public Services (Peter Peacock):** I have little to say by way of introduction. The committee will be astonished to learn that pipelines in Scotland that are seaward of the low watermark are rated unless they are specifically exempt by order, whereas in England and Wales all such pipelines are exempt from rates. The draft order provides for

"the exemption from rating of pipe-lines used for transporting petroleum to any licensed area or offshore installation, there to be used solely for the purposes of the underwater exploitation of petroleum resources."

You will also be pleased to know that article 2 of the order defines petroleum as

"any mineral oil or relative hydrocarbon and natural gas".

The significance of that definition will become

apparent in due course. I am happy to answer any questions.

**The Convener:** Having spent some time on the Subordinate Legislation Committee, I am not surprised at what you have said about pipelines. I remember spending time considering an instrument that had to draw a distinction between goats and sheep. I thought, "Did I come into politics so that I could tell the difference between a goat and a sheep?" I shall not say what I thought about the other parties at that point.

Do members want to ask for any clarification?

**Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab):** I assume that part of the reason for the order is that the previous order applied only to pipelines going to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Given some of the ideas that are around about renewable energy and CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration, will the order apply to that sort of thing as well? Carbon dioxide is not a hydrocarbon. Does the definition also relate to carbon dioxide?

**Peter Peacock:** I am delighted to receive that question. No, the definition does not apply to those other matters; it applies simply to petroleum as defined in the order. The principal purpose of the order is to bring about harmonisation of the rating positions north and south of the border. It is established policy to try to minimise the differences that exist.

**The Convener:** Do members have any other questions?

**Mr Gibson:** I say only that I am concerned that there does not seem to be any harmonisation of the poundage, but that is another issue.

**The Convener:** That is not a question. We have exhausted our questions. I ask the minister whether he has anything to add to what he said at the beginning of the meeting.

**Peter Peacock:** I want to set out one or two matters in relation to the consultation process. As I have said, pipelines in Scotland are rated seaward of the watermark unless they are specifically exempted by order. That is not the case in England and Wales. A pipeline is being commissioned to transport otherwise surplus gas via Sullum Voe terminal to the Magnus oilfield east of Shetland, where the gas will be used to help to recover oil. Under the current legislation, that pipeline, which is valued at about £1 million, would incur an annual rates liability in the region of £478,000 a year. A comparable pipeline in England and Wales would be exempt from rates. The purpose of the order—as I said to Elaine Thomson—is to ensure that the valuation practices north and south of the border are as harmonised as possible.

In the course of publishing the order, we

consulted the Scottish Assessors Association, the Institute of Revenue Rating and Valuation, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board, Shetland Islands Council, Gerald Eve—an agent for BP Exploration Company Ltd—the Valuation Office Agency for England and Wales, and the Lands Agency for Northern Ireland. The consultees who responded were content with the terms of the order.

I move,

That the Local Government Committee, in consideration of the Valuation and Rating (Exempted Classes) (Scotland) Order 2002, recommends that the order be approved.

**The Convener:** I open up the discussion, not for questions, but for debate. Does any member want to speak for or against the order?

**Mr Gibson:** I just want to say that I understand that the difference between goats and sheep is that goats' tails stick up, whereas sheep's tails hang down.

**The Convener:** That has nothing to do with the order. Thank you for that contribution. Mr Gibson is obviously back with a vengeance.

As members have no further comments, I put the question on motion S1M-3030, in the name of Mr Andy Kerr, on the draft Valuation and Rating (Exempted Classes) (Scotland) Order 2002.

*Motion agreed to.*

That the Local Government Committee, in consideration of the Valuation and Rating (Exempted Classes) (Scotland) Order 2002, recommends that the order be approved.

**The Convener:** I thank the minister.

## “Renewing Local Democracy: The Next Steps”

**The Convener:** The next item of business is the white paper on renewing local democracy. We will take evidence from Highland Council. We welcome Councillor David Alston, the chairman of the renewing democracy and community planning select committee, and Alan Geddes, the director of finance. You will have time to present your case, then I shall open up the debate to the committee for questions.

**Councillor David Alston (Highland Council):** The committee has received our written evidence. I do not want to go through it point by point, but I will highlight three key points.

First, it is important that levels of remuneration are reasonable. Highland Council covers a geographically dispersed and sparsely populated area and, as a result, most councillors work full time for the council. That is simply a result of the area's geography. Some councillors must make a three-and-a-half-hour one-way journey to reach meetings at the council's headquarters. We recognise that one of our weak points is that too few of the seats are contested. We need to attract more people into standing for election to the council and that can be done only if reasonable remuneration is offered. In general, we see the councillor's job as being full time. It follows that we are thinking of a salary rather than an allowance. If there is a salary, it is important that there is pension provision. In addition, we think that severance payments are reasonable.

The second key point is that we would like levels of remuneration to be set independently of the council. That should be done at arm's length and we favour a national body to set levels rather than a local independent body that is set up for that purpose. It is important to keep the process at arm's length from the council.

The third key point is that it is important that the special responsibility allowances system that is devised is independently set and flexible. Highland Council is an independent council and operates a heavily devolved system. Many decisions are taken at a local level in eight area committees. Our system for deciding where responsibilities fall might not easily be mapped on to a system in which responsibilities are allocated by a cabinet or by a central committee system, as might be operated by a local authority in a smaller area. It is important for the council to be able to make judgments or sometimes for judgments to be made about where the appropriate responsibility payments should be. We are happy for responsibility payments to be set independently—

we are not asking for the allocation of responsibility allowances to be in our hands—but it is important that, if payments are independently set, it is open to us to make proposals and say, “This is the system of responsibility allowances that we feel would fit our situation.” That system could be independently scrutinised, but we should not be bound by a quota system that has been devised for a different kind of council.

Those are the three key points that lie behind our proposals: the need for reasonable remuneration; the need for remuneration to be independently set; and the need for a flexible system of responsibility allowances.

I am happy to answer questions.

**The Convener:** The white paper on renewing local democracy covers a slightly wider area than that, so some of my questions might also cover a wider area. I will ask the first question—I am trying not to catch members' eyes.

One thing to come out of the McIntosh report was the leadership advisory panel. I am sure that Alastair MacNish or a member of that panel went to the Highlands and spoke to Highland Council. Will you briefly outline the recent changes to the council's political management arrangements? How have those affected the work load of councillors in different positions? That issue is important and links into remuneration and special responsibility allowances.

**Councillor Alston:** The major change that we have made is in streamlining our committee system and combining committees. That has lessened the load on individual councillors. Now, every councillor serves on two core committees, whereas before they served on five—that has reduced councillors' work loads. We still recognise that it is important for councillors to be able to attend committees of which they are not members so that they can ask questions and contribute to debates. That is part of their scrutiny role.

That is particularly the case because we are a non-aligned council. There is no sense in any of our committees that the decisions are made before the debate in the chamber. The role of the back-bench member remains important in all the committees. We have made a crucial change, which has made a difference, but the important point remains that if a member feels that it is important to attend a committee, the system and the time that they have available must not present a barrier to their doing so.

14:15

**Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife (Con):** First, I declare an interest, as I am a sitting councillor.

The fact that ministers are encouraging councils to facilitate the attendance of fewer full-time councillors explains the geographical problems that you have with distances. Apart from the reduction in the number of committees—which does not seem to have been successful, if councillors still attend all committees—what measures has the council taken or does it plan to take to reduce members' travelling time?

**Councillor Alston:** I did not want to give the impression that the reduction in the number of committees has not been successful. The system must retain flexibility so that people can attend meetings if they wish.

We have increased our use of e-mail—we have put a lot of effort into moving towards all councillors being online, which makes it easier for them to do much of their business with officials at times that suit them, rather than being tied to meetings or the telephone. From my point of view, that has been a big success.

We will see the results of another major change—videoconferencing—in the near future. We have pushed for changes that would allow formal meetings to take place by videoconference. We already use videoconferencing for meetings that are not formal meetings of the council or of one of its committees. The use of e-mail and videoconferencing are examples of ways in which we have moved forward. We will continue to move forward.

**Mr Harding:** How often does the full council meet?

**Councillor Alston:** We meet every eight weeks.

**Mr Harding:** How many meetings are there in the committee meeting cycle?

**Councillor Alston:** One each.

**Mr Harding:** So there is a committee meeting every eight weeks.

**Councillor Alston:** Yes.

**Mr Gibson:** You expressed concern about a quota system for those with additional responsibilities. How should remuneration for those with additional responsibilities be decided?

**Councillor Alston:** We would like to be able to submit our proposals for the allocation of responsibility allowances to an independent body. We would like our proposals to be judged on their merits. For example, we have eight area committees and we feel that the chairing of those committees should carry a responsibility allowance, although the allowance should be set at a lower level than that provided for chairing a core committee. That situation would be replicated in some other councils, but by no means in all of them. We seek flexibility that would allow the

responsibilities in that kind of devolved system to be reflected in the payments.

**Mr Gibson:** You mentioned the fact that some councillors have to travel three and a half hours to full council meetings. However, some councillors—probably the largest single contingent—represent Inverness. Do you feel that councillors who represent outlying areas, who have the greatest distances to travel and are most likely to have to work on a full-time basis, should receive additional allowance? Should there be flexibility in the basic allowance, as well as in the special responsibility allowances that you mentioned?

**Councillor Alston:** We have not formed a view, although that would be a way forward. I think that our position would be that a system in which all councillors are on an equal footing is much easier to operate. The danger is that having people who are officially full-time councillors and people who are not would lead to tensions in the council. I acknowledge some of the merits of your proposal, but the practicalities might be difficult.

**Mr Gibson:** You are looking for flexibility with the SRAs, but not to such an extent with the basic allowance.

**Councillor Alston:** We feel that, as a matter of equity, the basic allowance ought to be set at a level that allows people, wherever they live in our council area, to consider standing for election as a councillor. It is inevitable that some people will face financial hardship, but that ought not to be so extreme that not enough people stand.

**Mr Gibson:** The basic allowance is based on population. Highland Council is not at the lowest end of the scale, but should basic allowances be flexible throughout Scotland or is less flexibility better? Should all councillors have the same basic allowance, or should the allowance continue to have an element of flexibility? Should an element of flexibility be based on population, geography or a combination of the two?

**Councillor Alston:** If we assume that all wards are similar, it is geography that largely makes the difference to time.

**Mr Gibson:** Wards are not all similar. Councillors for inner-city wards might have 5,500 poverty-stricken constituents, whereas councillors for rural areas might have 2,000 or 3,000 people, who might be less dependent on the support of their local councillor to deal with everyday issues.

**Councillor Alston:** I agree, but that relates to the people in the ward, rather than just to the number. The size of a ward matters, but what makes the fundamental difference to the time commitment for us is the geography. As for flexibility throughout Scotland, all that we can say



is that, from our point of view, we want our councillors' role to be performed as something approaching a full-time job.

**Iain Smith (North-East Fife) (LD):** We have talked mainly about remuneration and the financial barriers to being a councillor. Have you considered other barriers to people standing in the Highland area, such as child care and related issues? How does the council deal with that? Have you considered dependants allowances, which would be a useful aid to encouraging more people to stand?

**Councillor Alston:** That would be a useful aid. We are conscious of the issue for other reasons, because some of our councillors have no option but to bring children to the council chamber. We welcome that, but child care and dependants allowances would make the situation much easier for them. We feel strongly about that and would welcome the introduction of an allowance.

**Iain Smith:** Have you considered why few people stand for Highland Council? You said that the number of uncontested seats was a concern. Have you considered the non-financial barriers that discourage people from standing?

**Councillor Alston:** Yes. We talk about that particularly with our community councils, because the route to standing for the council is often through local involvement in community councils or tenants associations. Outside the immediate area of the inner Moray firth, the key issue is that only people with some types of job or with independent income can consider standing. The fundamental concerns are time and money.

There are other issues. Once the fact that wards in some areas are uncontested becomes established, there is a vicious circle, because there is no tradition of people standing. We need to break that tradition and create a situation in which more people can consider the career choice of being a councillor and ask whether that is the way in which they want to go with their lives.

**Iain Smith:** I will pursue that point a little further. Highland Council has a problem with the number of people whom it employs, as those people are debarred from standing for the council. Living in one council area and working in another is not an option for most people in the Highlands. What are your views on the white paper's proposals for relaxing the rules on council employees standing for a council?

**Councillor Alston:** We support the proposed changes. A provision whereby people had to resign not when they were nominated but only when they were elected would make a big difference. Before local government reorganisation, people who worked for one council in the Highlands could stand for another, but that has now changed.

There is also the question of what counts as a politically sensitive post. Beyond that, there is a need for a common approach from the major public sector employers to taking time off work or leave of absence, even if that is only during the election campaign. People's inability to take time off can be a considerable barrier. We hope that, as part of community planning and joint operations by public sector bodies, we will see health boards and the enterprise network adopting similar attitudes to their employees and to how much encouragement or time off they are prepared to allow for public service.

**Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab):** What is your view on extending the secondment system so that, if we could get the support of employers around election time, an employee's job would still be there after four years of service if they wanted to return to it?

That was really a supplementary to Iain Smith's question. My other question is about committees. How many central committees are there? I remember that you said that you also have area committees. How do they operate? How far from the centre are the area committees that councillors in more rural areas outwith Inverness have to travel to? You mentioned videoconferencing. What time scale do you have for introducing that and which committees do you think it would work for? Would videoconferencing overcome some of your problems so that councillors need not be full time?

**Councillor Alston:** The council does not have a view on secondment, although we have begun to discuss it and members are certainly conscious that important issues are involved. I cannot give you any definitive answer on behalf of the council, but I know that many members would like those matters to be pursued.

There are a number of core committees as well as the area committees. I shall ask Alan Geddes to explain the core committees and then I shall talk about the area committees.

**Alan Geddes (Highland Council):** There are five core committees at the centre of Highland Council: a resources committee; a housing and social work committee; an education, culture and sport committee; a planning, development, Europe and tourism committee; and a roads and transportation committee.

**Councillor Alston:** We also have eight area committees. The areas vary in size. The largest geographically are Ross and Cromarty and Sutherland. People in those areas would be making journeys of between an hour and a half and two hours one way to come to the area committee meetings. The committees operate on a system whereby basic strategy is set at the core and implemented through the area committees. If

members are to play their scrutiny role, they must have the option of attending at the core where that is important. We would also expect them to serve on two of the five core committees.

As soon as the legislation is in place, we would move forward as quickly as possible to introduce videoconferencing for meetings. Videoconferencing works best in certain committee situations and we would try to introduce it into some of the smaller working groups. One example would be our budget working group, which is a key smaller group of members.

Having taken part in videoconferencing, I believe that its use is not just a question of switching on the equipment—some important skills require to be learned. Until everyone is up to speed with some of those skills, videoconferencing will not work. We are enthusiastic about the proposed legislative changes and we would move as fast as we could, but we are aware that, in addition to technical issues, people issues affect videoconferencing.

14:30

**Elaine Thomson:** I want to pursue further the question of people being in employment while they are serving as elected councillors. In the case of Highland Council, what is the percentage or the number of councillors of working age who are in full-time employment? In the past 10 or 20 years, has there been a change in the willingness of employers to give people time off to pursue council duties? I am thinking in particular about the private sector. The Kerley report stated that the current basic allowance is too low. Kerley proposed a salary of £12,000. What is your view on that?

**Councillor Alston:** The number of councillors who are in full-time employment would be restricted to the immediate Inverness area. Even in that area, the number would not be large. Highland Council has 80 councillors. I cannot give you the figure that you have requested. However, when the present council was elected, we examined how many councillors were in full-time employment. From memory, the figure was between 10 and 15 per cent, most of whom were from the Inverness area.

It is easier for a large private employer to make the necessary arrangements for people to have time off. Dounreay, which is located in Caithness, employs one of our councillors; as it is a large establishment, it can make arrangements. In the Highlands, there are many small and medium enterprises, which tend to perceive that making such arrangements is difficult. My feeling is that, over the years, it has become more difficult to give people time off.

We have not formed a fixed view on the level of remuneration. As Kerley is a bit out of date, I presume that there would be an increase on the £12,000 figure. My personal opinion is that, if an average salary is upwards of £20,000, the figure of £12,000 is too low in the discussion about councillors acting on a full-time basis.

I cannot give the Highland Council view on the level of remuneration—we want it to be set independently. Everyone who has examined the issue has said that the remuneration should be adequate. We do not want to feel as though the question is being pushed back to us in order for us to justify locally the right level of remuneration.

**The Convener:** We know the feeling.

**Mr Gibson:** I have a couple of points. You said that an independent committee should be appointed to work on remuneration. Who do you envisage would serve on such a committee?

**Councillor Alston:** The committee would need people with the personnel skills to examine a councillor's job description and decide what remuneration was reasonable for an equivalent employed post. They would then have to take into account the amount of time involved. As long as the committee is at arm's length from councils, we are happy to put the task into the hands of other people and accept their independent judgment.

**Mr Gibson:** So you have no fixed view beyond what you have said on the sort of people who should be on that committee.

**Councillor Alston:** No.

**Mr Gibson:** If the number of full-time councillors increases, how many councillors should Highland Council have? I appreciate that some of your councillors are already, in effect, full time, but I am talking about them becoming full-time councillors officially. The council has 80 councillors. It is the largest council in Scotland. It had 72 councillors when it was a regional council. Should there be a reduction in the number of councillors to perhaps 60 or 70 in exchange for, for example, additional remuneration? Have you taken a view on that?

**Councillor Alston:** We have not taken a view on it. The council's reaction to the current proposals was that we welcomed the stability that the decision not to change the number of councillors would give. However, some council members also expressed the view that the issue was important and needed to be debated in future. In that sense, the issue is still open.

**Dr Jackson:** If there was a phased programme, whereby you would retain the same number of councillors for the time being but reduce the number in future, how long should such a process take? Does the number of councillors need to be examined urgently?

**Councillor Alston:** No. Stability is more important at the moment. It is probably easier if some of the changes coincide with council terms. The right sort of time scale would be for the changes to happen at the end of the next four-year period.

**Mr Harding:** I am trying to ascertain the average work load of a councillor in your council. You have 80 councillors and five committees. How many councillors do you have on each committee?

**Councillor Alston:** We have 40.

**Mr Harding:** Is that not a bit unwieldy, given that councillors also have the right to attend meetings if they are not members of the committee?

**Councillor Alston:** We had an extensive debate on that during our review. Smaller committees were proposed. It is a numbers game. We vary the committees. The appointment of councillors to the committees is based on area representation and we have areas of different sizes. Some difficult sums need to be done to ensure that the core committees are representative. Because we are a non-aligned council and the committees therefore do not reflect any party-political balance, they have to reflect the geographical balance and the balance between the area committees. Forty committee members is the number that members of the council felt would work. We have committed ourselves to a review of our revised committee structure. That will be under way in the next couple of months. We have not set in stone the number of members on the committees and we will certainly revisit it.

**Mr Harding:** How often do the area committees meet?

**Councillor Alston:** They meet once in each of the eight-week cycles. They usually also meet separately to consider planning matters.

**Mr Harding:** You say that you are a non-aligned, non-party-political council. Are there any group meetings?

**Councillor Alston:** There is the opportunity for group meetings immediately before the full council. No whips are ever applied. As an individual councillor, I am never aware of councillors voting along party lines.

**Mr Gibson:** Neither are we.

**Mr Harding:** The majority of councils have weekly group meetings. Does Highland Council have those?

**Councillor Alston:** No.

**The Convener:** Kerley commented on the possibility of a local government pension scheme. Should that opportunity be available to all councillors or only to those who are given additional responsibility?

**Councillor Alston:** As I have implied, we feel that such a scheme should be available to all councillors.

**Alan Geddes:** The council's clear view is that that facility should be available to every councillor. It is considered part and parcel of the overall package to attract members of the community to stand for election.

**The Convener:** As the convener of the committee, I have been approached by councils about the possibility of some kind of severance pay for councillors, who are usually male, well over 50 and have been around the council for a considerable number of years. Do you agree with that principle? Given the make-up of your council, would it cause problems if, for example, the Minister for Finance and Public Services discovered a pocket of money to institute severance pay before the 2003 election and half a dozen or two dozen of your members disappeared?

**Councillor Alston:** In principle, we are in favour of such a scheme, which I do not believe would give us a problem.

**The Convener:** That is interesting, given some of your earlier answers about the difficulty of getting people to stand for the council. Do you believe that people would be more attracted to it if they thought that they would get severance pay at the end of their term?

**Councillor Alston:** No, the level of pay and pension would make the difference. When a long-standing councillor who has done a good job stands down, that can create an opportunity for people to come forward. A local culture may have developed in which people do not want to stand against the councillor, but when that councillor stands down, that can be the trigger to a new way of doing things and people will feel that they can stand and contest the seat.

**The Convener:** Earlier, we talked about people who have worked for the council becoming councillors. What is your position when a councillor stands down and wants to return more or less immediately to working for the council? There is some anxiety about the fact that, two or three weeks previously, that person might have been sitting in a committee making decisions that would affect their job. What is your position on that, given the size of the Highlands and the number of people whom the council employs?

**Councillor Alston:** The feeling is that anyone who has stopped being a councillor should be treated like everyone else. If they applied for and got a post, we would have to live with any possible uneasiness for the sake of equality.

**The Convener:** I have one last question and I

can see that Kenny Gibson wants to ask something else. The remit of the white paper on renewing local democracy is wider than the discussion that we have had today. One of the questions in the white paper is about the possibility of proportional representation in local government. Does Highland Council have a position on that?

**Councillor Alston:** Yes, we have a two-pronged position. The council's main view is that we strongly support retaining the first-past-the-post system. However, if there were to be change, there would be considerable problems with multimember wards in sparsely populated rural areas. We would want any PR system and how it relates to multimember wards to take account of that. In particular, we would want to retain single-member wards in the most sparsely populated areas. We have committed ourselves to gathering evidence and to considering some of the detail of how that system might operate. That is our outline and fallback position if we do not get what we want, which is the retention of first past the post.

**The Convener:** The McIntosh report said clearly that PR in local government might mean different scenarios in different parts of the country. You are saying that you agree with that.

**Councillor Alston:** That is right. It is interesting to consider the example of Welsh local authorities, which have different ward sizes.

**Mr Gibson:** My concern is that we are listening to the voice of vested interest. In 1992—when I was elected to Glasgow District Council—there were nine candidates for 11 wards in Caithness, which is now part of the Highland Council area. There had to be two by-elections because there were not enough people to fill the seats.

When we visited the Western Isles, we heard that, of the 31 seats, 12 were not contested. Is it not the case that, if the first-past-the-post system is applied to rural wards, many members of the electorate have no choice? I understand that—I think these are the figures—in the 14 wards that were contested in the Western Isles, 12 of the sitting councillors lost their seats. That shows what happens when there is a challenge to the people who have—in theory—been representing an area. They might not always be the best people to represent that area.

When we asked the officials how many councillors they thought there should be in the Western Isles, they said 10. There are 31 at the moment, which shows that many of them do not appear to be representing an area. I am not trying to say that that is the issue in the Highlands but obviously we have to take into account the fact that turkeys do not want to vote for an early Christmas. Perhaps some of your councillors

believe that they would not be chosen if the electorate had more choice.

**Councillor Alston:** I am not sure whether that was a question.

**The Convener:** No. It was a statement. I am sure that it will be interesting to see what comes out of the work that your council does on the issue.

**Mr Gibson:** It was not what I was originally going to ask.

**The Convener:** Because I spoke about PR, Mr Gibson thought that he would get his statement in.

**Mr Gibson:** Indeed. We are talking about remuneration and I did not intend to talk about PR at all.

The Kerley report recommended that the leaders of Glasgow City Council and the City of Edinburgh Council should obtain the same remuneration as an MSP. Do you believe that that should also apply to leaders of local authorities such as Highland Council, for example? Alternatively, do you believe that their remuneration should be in proportion with the population or that some other method should be used to decide it?

**Councillor Alston:** We feel that the work load of senior councillors in Highland Council is similar to that of an MSP.

**The Convener:** I will give you a bit of advice. Make sure that you work out a system in which you do not have to vote on the remuneration.

As there are no more questions, I thank our witnesses for coming along. It would be interesting for the committee to see the work that you are doing on PR when it is complete.

**Councillor Alston:** Thank you.

**The Convener:** That is the end of the meeting, which is a record, especially as Kenny Gibson was here.

*Meeting closed at 14:46.*

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