

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 17 September 2002
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

22nd Meeting 2002, Session 1

CONVENER

*Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Mr Duncan Hamilton (Highlands and Islands) (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)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD)

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

John Young (West of Scotland) (Con)

*attended

WITNESSES

Jon Harris (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Stewart Maxwell (Angus Council)

Councillor Glennis Middleton (Angus Council)

Susan Robb (Angus Council)

Councillor Pat Watters (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Ruth Cooper

ASSISTANT CLERK

Neil Stewart

LOCATION

The Hub

Scottish Parliament

Local Government Committee

Tuesday 17 September 2002

(Afternoon)

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

Items in Private

The Deputy Convener (Dr Sylvia Jackson): I welcome members to the meeting. I ask the committee to agree to take items 3, 4 and 5 in private. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Deputy Convener: We have agreed to consider items 3 and 4 in private because they concern draft reports. Item 5 is consideration of a paper concerning the proposed approach to the Proportional Representation (Local Government Elections) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1, which contains details of potential witnesses.

“Renewing Local Democracy: The Next Steps”

The Deputy Convener: Item 2 is the beginning of evidence taking on phase 2 of the committee's renewing local democracy inquiry. I am pleased to welcome Councillor Pat Watters, who is the president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and Jon Harris, who is its director of policy and legislation. You have been here before, so I am sure that you know the drill. You may speak for a few minutes, then we will ask questions.

Councillor Pat Watters (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I thank the committee for the opportunity to discuss the paper that we have submitted. It is always a great pleasure to speak to any of the Parliament's committees, particularly the Local Government Committee, because we have such a close affinity in what we try to do.

I will hand over to Jon Harris. He wrote the paper and will go through it in detail. I will come back in at the end to discuss matters that might be a bit more political.

Jon Harris (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I will try to be brief. One of the key themes that runs through COSLA's submission is our belief that the focus of action, following the white paper, must be on securing and promoting a strong and effective system of local government. Any action that is taken must achieve a better balance between national and local priorities. It must also achieve less financial dependence and increased financial flexibility through a reduction in ring fencing. Action must challenge the view that local government is just another service provider that works to prescribed standards under central direction.

I will go through the key sections of the white paper, “Renewing Local Democracy: The Next Steps”. COSLA believes that we should do all that we can to remove barriers and to make councils more representative of their communities. We do not believe that there is a single solution; rather, there are a number of different solutions. Those solutions must be packaged to address local concerns and circumstances. The solutions include: ensuring that local elections capture the votes of representative sections of the population; encouraging a representative cross-section of people to stand for political office; and enhancing democratic participation outwith the formal democratic process.

In our submission, we highlight a number of initiatives that could improve voter participation. Those include promoting a positive image of local

government, conducting targeted campaigns and giving voters more choice on when, where and how to cast their votes.

We need to address the factors that currently deter people from standing as councillors. In particular, we have to increase local government's capacity to bring about real change. We need to reduce the difficulties of combining a political career with full-time employment and bringing up a family and we need to reduce the time demands on councillors. We need also to improve the support arrangements for councillors, so that they can fully carry out their role.

On links with communities, we want to emphasise that councils already do much to promote their links with communities—that should continue. In particular, we feel that councils have gone a long way towards improving communications with their communities, through the use of survey panels, group work and other focus groups that involve people in decision making, and towards extending public participation through the use of things such as area forums.

In our submission, we acknowledge ministers' commitment to changing the current system of councillors' allowances and to establishing some form of pension provision. Those issues have been debated for a considerable time, but we believe that the debate must be brought to a conclusion. The arguments for change are irrefutable and such change must be a priority.

COSLA's submission is based on the principle of achieving parity of esteem across democratically elected tiers of government. In the past, it has been suggested that being a councillor is a voluntary role. We do not believe that; we believe that a local elected member's position is no different from that of an MP or an MSP. That must be recognised by the introduction of suitable remuneration and pension arrangements. We believe that it is essential that the package of remuneration and pension arrangements is fully funded and we have costed that. Our work suggests that, although the cost would be more than the current position, it would still represent a very small percentage of overall local government spend. That small cost must be seen as inexpensive when we consider the benefits of putting in place arrangements that acknowledge the democratic value and responsibilities of local elected members.

I will highlight three points in our submission. The setting of salaries must be a task for an independent national remuneration committee. As well as setting the standard basic salary, the committee could also set the broad national framework for additional responsibility payments and salary payments. There should be a direct link between the basic salary of a councillor and that of an MSP.

We believe that elected members should have access to a pension scheme if they so wish and that pension arrangements should be transferable to and from other schemes, with councillors' contributions to the scheme being supported by an appropriate employer contribution. We see merit also in instituting a severance payment scheme for councillors along similar lines to that which is available to MSPs.

I turn to electoral reform. It is our strong view that the debate on electoral reform is a diversion from action to strengthen local government. We believe that the issue of low turnout would be better addressed by removing barriers and improving links with communities. We have identified three crucial factors relating to the various alternatives that are suggested in the white paper. The first is the importance of maintaining the member-ward link. The second is the fact that the election of a community representative is more important than focusing on achieving proportional representation according to the votes that are cast at council level. Thirdly, we believe that the electoral system must be able to accommodate the election of independent councillors. The additional member system, the single transferable vote system and the alternative vote plus system cannot deliver the member-ward link, because they are all multimember ward systems. We also believe that multimember ward systems in rural areas result in wards that are too large, which is to the disadvantage of those areas.

It is the view of the majority of COSLA's councils that the case for change has not been made and, therefore, that there should be no change. We believe that the first-past-the-post system delivers strong political leadership and a clear member-ward link, as well as giving independent councillors a fair opportunity to be elected. Nonetheless, a committed minority of our councils support change, through a range of preferred electoral systems including the alternative vote system, AV plus and STV.

Let us turn to improvement. COSLA accepts ministers' proposals in the white paper for the development of a new service to support continuous improvement. We believe that the starting point for the creation of such a service should be local government's having ownership of the improvement agenda. That said, we also believe that the development of the service should bring in the whole public sector. Such a service should focus on skills development, the provision of support in challenging councils to search for continuous improvement, facilitation of the sharing of knowledge and best practice, and the provision or facilitation of mutual self-help. We suggest that such a service would best take the form of a partnership. However, the primary role of that

partnership should be to co-ordinate, facilitate and accredit—not to deliver.

Major investment is needed in local government, both in existing infrastructure and in the implementation of the modernisation agenda. We do not believe that the current system of capital consents will facilitate that; in fact, we believe that it constrains it. We therefore welcome the plans to abolish existing controls and replace them with a system of professionally endorsed prudential safeguards. However, that system must be supported by a firm commitment from central Government to provide sustainable revenue funding.

Finally, we are concerned by the fact that the Scottish Executive does not want to extend the application of the new prudential framework to housing investment. We also believe that the requirement to apply 75 per cent of the receipts from the sale of housing stock to redeem outstanding debt should be ended.

The Deputy Convener: Pat, would you like to say a few words?

Councillor Watters: Communication among elected representatives, the councils that they represent and the constituents whom they serve is very important. We must think about how we can communicate better than we do. A lot of restraints are placed on councillors and sometimes, when we try to communicate some of the stuff that we are doing, people see that as being overtly political. However, it is about supplying information to allow the communities to get more involved in the electoral system and the work of the elected councils.

I make no apology about the situation on councillor remuneration. We think that the case has been well made for an improvement in how councillors are remunerated. A councillor's basic pay, if we can put it that way, is £6,500. When you consider the amount of work that councillors do to carry out their role within and outwith their communities—sometimes at national and international level—£6,500 is not a great reward.

We do not believe that the case for electoral reform has been made. There is room to change how people vote and participate in the system, but there is no case for looking for a proportional system. Jon Harris made the three points on that very well. We believe that such a change would disenfranchise people rather than encourage them to participate. That is the majority view of the elected councils.

14:15

The Deputy Convener: I thank you both very much.

Before we go on to questions, I should say that the first phase of our inquiry considered electoral reform and proportional representation. That is not the substance of what we are here to ask questions about today, so we will leave that aspect to one side. We can deal with all the other issues that you mentioned.

I will ask a few questions. To what extent, particularly at the next local government elections, will the new political structures make it easier for people from under-represented groups to become councillors?

Councillor Watters: Only time will tell whether that will filter through. I do not think that new political structures will have a direct impact; rather, the communication that local authorities will have with communities will have the impact. We must recognise that the views of local and national Government are sometimes dictated by the media. There must be a change in that: it must be established that being a local elected representative is not something that someone does because they have been bad in a previous life, but because they choose to take on that role in order to improve the lot of their community.

Communication that establishes the important role that local government plays in communities will go a long way towards encouraging more people to get involved. It would—prior to the problems that Scottish Borders Council had with its education budget—have been interesting to ask the people of the Borders how important local government services were to them, and to have asked them again when the council tried to make cost reductions in the service to bring it within budget. In a community of about 1,800 people, 1,200 people demonstrated against what they saw as cuts in their services. That helps us to realise how important to communities are local government and the services that it provides. The important point is that we must get the message across to communities that they should participate more in how services are delivered.

Jon Harris: One of the other areas in which councils can make a difference is in how they support people who intend to become councillors. For certain under-represented groups, consideration must be given to child-care provision and provision for people who have responsibilities for care of the elderly. We must consider the way that we do business and in particular we must consider the use of information technology to improve accessibility for people, especially in rural areas.

As Pat Watters said, the image that local government presents through the media is also an issue. We should present local government as being inclusive organisations, in which all parts of society can feel confident that they will be

represented. That is not a task only for local government, but for central Government and the Scottish Parliament. We should all promote that.

The Deputy Convener: You mentioned child-care provision, IT and the image of councillors. Are there any other ways in which COSLA and councils have responded to the Kerley recommendations about how certain sections of the population such as women, young people and people who have disabilities can be encouraged to become councillors?

Councillor Watters: Training is provided—the problem is provision of information so that people are aware of the support that is available. We are not saying that the support that we have at present is ideal. One issue, which is particularly relevant in rural communities, is the distance that elected members must travel to attend meetings. Relaxing the rules so that videoconferencing could be used would improve the situation. Members could work more from their communities and would not have to go to a central point. Such measures would assist the delivery of local government to communities in Scotland.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I have a number of questions to ask, but I will ask questions on one topic, which other members may pick up on. You talked about making local government more accessible to enable people to become involved by, for example, becoming councillors. I have questions on training for councillors. Does COSLA provide training for people who are interested in becoming councillors? Does COSLA provide training for councillors who become conveners? Does COSLA have a training programme, or do individual councils provide training?

Councillor Watters: COSLA instituted a training programme, which aimed to recognise the work that elected members do to—

The Deputy Convener: Pat, could you speak up a little bit? The problem might be the position of your microphone. We will ask the broadcasting people if they can help us.

Councillor Watters: Speaking too quietly is not a problem that I normally have.

The Deputy Convener: You and me alike.

Councillor Watters: COSLA initiated a training programme, which is delivered through local colleges. The programme raises the level of esteem by encouraging elected representatives to see the worth in what they do. The training is provided at a number of levels—levels 1, 2 and 3, for example—and can be carried forward into other programmes.

It is difficult for COSLA to get involved in detailed work with newly elected members,

because the situation is very much authority-led. However, the situation in councils has improved dramatically as the years have gone by. When I became an elected member, we were given 20 minutes with each director, who gave us a load of literature. For months we were scared to throw that literature out in case we needed it. We called that our induction period. Most councils now provide proper induction for elected members. Although COSLA could, perhaps, co-ordinate it better, training is provided at national and local level.

Ms White: Should a future bill lay down that all councils should provide training? I was a councillor, and I did not get any training from the council on which I was a member. I know that that is the experience of many councillors. Perhaps a bill should state that all councils should embark on training schemes, which would involve not only councillors meeting directors, but being trained in the responsibilities of convenership, for example.

Councillor Watters: The difficulty is that such a bill might state that people who are not trained cannot be councillors, which could act against democracy. We need to encourage people to become involved in training and to provide training at local authority level. In my authority, we are providing such encouragement in several ways. For example, members cannot use information technology equipment unless they have had training. That training has enabled me to use expensive IT equipment properly. If a future bill states that elected members must be trained, should the training be provided before members are elected? Should people be able to stand for election if they have not had training? Should the same rules apply to MPs?

Jon Harris: I have two points to add. COSLA has highlighted and invested in skills development for elected members and officers. The issue is ensuring that there is sufficient capacity to provide that support. Just after the previous local government election, COSLA provided regional training mornings during which we briefed newly elected members on a range of issues, such as local government finance and some of the major modernisation issues that were under discussion nationally. Perhaps we could do that after the next election.

Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Conservatives and the Labour party—I do not know about the Scottish National Party or the Liberal Democrats—train their own prospective candidates. We cannot expect the local authorities to train people who may never reach the elevated status of councillor.

What steps is COSLA taking to work with political groups to encourage people from the under-represented groups that Sylvia Jackson

mentioned—women, young people, people who have disabilities, people from ethnic minorities and others—to stand?

Jon Harris: COSLA has a modern governance executive group. That is supported by a cross-party political group. We have discussed in some detail how we might approach the matter. Those discussions led to the suggestions in our submission. Now that we have made that submission, I expect the modern governance executive group to consider how to develop some of the ideas.

One of the big issues is how far we support new councillors and time-served councillors in carrying out their job. That is probably the most important element of our proposals. We intend to promote some form of support for child care or care for the elderly in order to attract people who have other responsibilities, such as family responsibilities. That is another key element of our proposals. The other issue is that there should be a salary that reflects the job. If we get that, it should help to tackle the problem of people not being able to afford to stand or to stay on as councillors because of other commitments. That applies particularly to people aged between 20 and 45 who are trying to build their families and keep careers.

Mr Harding: Do you support the figure that Kerley recommended for a salary for councillors?

Councillor Watters: There is not much in Kerley that I support. That report was the view of a group of people with no evidential base. That is why we say in our submission that a remuneration committee should be set up to consider independently the worth of elected members' input.

Mr Harding: Is there any nationwide work that you could undertake to raise awareness of public service and improve the image of local government?

Councillor Watters: There are many ways in which we could do that jointly for the image not only of local elected representatives, but of elected representatives in general. We should communicate regularly with the public about what we do, how we do it and how we arrive at decisions. That might mean expenditure on what some people might consider frivolous items, but if the public do not understand what we do and how we do it, how can we expect them to become involved? Communication is vital not only to get the public to understand what we do, but to encourage them to do it, too.

Iain Smith (North-East Fife) (LD): I remember that a former leader of my old council in Fife once said that consultation was not about asking the public what they want, but about telling them what

the council was going to do. I presume that COSLA does not share that view. Is COSLA confident that councils use information that they get from various exercises in community engagement and community involvement to make changes to the services that they provide?

Councillor Watters: Councils have made good use of the involvement of citizens panels and focus groups, not only to gauge public feeling towards local councils but to get an understanding of where they should go. That is one change in local democracy that has certainly been welcomed.

We can widen that to take on board how we deal with youth councils. It is pointless to set up such mechanisms if people's views are ignored. I am not saying that 100 per cent of the groups' views can be taken on board, but if their views are totally ignored, they will feel that there is no value in their participation, which will drop off completely. People will think that you will do whatever you like anyway.

The changes have made a difference and such participation should be encouraged; indeed, we should develop that approach.

Jon Harris: Our development of the skills and techniques that are necessary to engage with people has come a long way. However, I highlight the question of whether communities have the capacity to engage. I would like to develop the way in which we promote community learning and community development. Our community learning strategies should focus more on building the capacity of individuals and communities to engage. Equally, although we have developed techniques and tools for engaging communities, we must ask whether the organisational capacity of the council and other public bodies can manage that process. We are shifting the culture from one that focused on professional values and needs to one that focuses on the needs of citizens and customers. The organisational development role needs to be put into place in order to engage with communities more effectively.

14:30

Iain Smith: Engagement with communities is obviously crucial to the community planning agenda. Does COSLA have an overview of the way in which councils are developing community engagement in community planning? Is COSLA spreading best practice? In the community planning process, what key issues have arisen so far that have helped to improve the democratic process and the involvement of communities?

Jon Harris: We are monitoring what is happening on the ground through our links with the community planning task force. We are also

monitoring that as part of our role in the development of the community regeneration action plan, in which the issue of how to increase the capacity of the community is key. We would be happy to share with the committee our good practice guidelines on various techniques to engage with communities.

As Iain Smith said, engagement with communities is a crucial part of the community planning agenda, but it is equally a crucial part of the best-value agenda.

The Deputy Convener: Could you say a little more about best practice in councils, in connection with which you mentioned youth councils? Would it be easier for you to give a summary in writing?

Jon Harris: After our evidence, Angus Council will give the committee a presentation. A number of councils are being proactive in their development of that agenda, by working with youth councils, youth parliaments and so on. As far as the future of democracy is concerned, it will be most important that we engage with young people.

COSLA is hosting a youth dialogue initiative under the modernising government fund. The initiative is a model of good practice on how to build communication with young people, and we would be more than happy to present information on it to the committee.

Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab): In your submission, you talk about why certain groups might be under-represented and you refer to the difficulties of combining a political career with full-time employment. You also mention the problem of the increase in the average age of councillors and the attempt to involve young people, who find it particularly difficult to combine full-time employment—or any employment—with a political career in local government.

In paragraphs 11 and 12 of your submission, you make a couple of proposals. You talk about changing the Employment Rights Act 1996 and the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 to give people more protection. Do you think that changing the local government framework will do all that much to enable people to stand as councillors when they are in full-time employment? Employment trends show that employers are less and less sympathetic to the idea of allowing people time off.

In paragraph 12, you propose that employees be entitled to a

“minimum amount of paid leave.”

I understand that you have been involved in discussions with the Scottish Executive and employers organisations on this matter. Can you give us some feedback? How do employers view

the prospect—particularly those in the small and medium size sector?

You also talk about reimbursing employers, but for a small employer, the issue would not just be financial. They would be facing the withdrawal of a person who may be skilled and crucial to the business.

Councillor Watters: At present, the allowance that elected members get would not cover many people for taking time off from paid employment. Paragraph 12 tries to deal with that issue. What you say about small and medium businesses is absolutely right. In a company of only three or four people, if someone becomes an elected member and needs a considerable amount of time off to carry out their duties, a big gap can be left in the business. If we are serious in saying that people have to get time off, we will have to consider ways of assisting small businesses. People who work in small businesses could not become councillors unless they were allowed time off or were replaced for a period if they became full-time councillors. In some areas of local government, that could be appropriate, although I would not argue that every elected member should be a full-time councillor. That would depend on their level of responsibility.

The situation is difficult. There are many barriers for people who are career-minded—especially for people in the age group that we have been talking about, between 25 and 40. Those people may be trying to build up a career, may be married and have a young family, and may have a mortgage if they have bought property. There is no doubt that taking time off to become an elected representative can damage a person's career. I have seen examples of that. As well as damaging a person's present career, it can damage their future, because of pension considerations. A lot has to be done to address such problems.

Jon Harris: Those points are well made. In our discussions with bodies representing small businesses, they have stressed the importance of people in small businesses being involved in local democracy and serving as councillors. Facilitating that is the problem. As Pat Watters has suggested, if a company has only five employees, how can it lose someone for a significant amount of time? Compensation may be one way of dealing with that. It may not be that the person's salary is paid; rather the company may be helped to pay someone else to fill the gap temporarily. That is one possible solution, although not the only one. Such developments are still a long way off.

Some provisions exist in the Employment Rights Act 1996, where there is a right to take time off. Under the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, if a council has an employee who is a councillor in another area, that person can get paid leave, up to a maximum amount. In some

ways, we want a similar provision to be available for everyone, and not just for some.

Elaine Thomson: I presume that employers organisations, with which you have been holding preliminary discussions, recognise that people who are employed now face significant barriers to becoming involved in elected office. Are they sympathetic to the range of views that has been expressed, perhaps including your proposal to allow people to participate more easily as elected representatives?

Jon Harris: The small business community would certainly endorse such proposals. There is still a need to raise understanding among larger businesses of the importance of local government and of their own need to become involved in local discussions. That need has not been so readily understood among larger businesses, compared with the small business community.

The Deputy Convener: I have a few questions to ask about the important subject that Elaine Thomson has broached. First, are you thinking of doing more work on it and examining the various options? If so, that would be very useful for us. Secondly, might there be some mileage in options involving full-time employees on unpaid leave? I am referring to an extent to what happens with some MSPs. Councillors would have the option to return to their employment, perhaps after the first session of being in office. That could involve an arrangement like a sabbatical or secondment. I presume from what you are saying that you are thinking along those lines, but will we get firm proposals from you? Those would be very useful.

Councillor Watters: Such arrangements would be fine, but it should be remembered that, at present, someone's livelihood would be affected dramatically if they took four years' leave of employment. It is not just about the release from the job, but about what the person was paid once they were released from it, how their pension was covered during that time and the effects of returning to work. The idea is worthy, and we would welcome any kind of change that would assist people to become elected members.

It is not just a question of being released from a job for the purposes of taking time off; the impact of being released must be considered. People must consider their future career and their pay. If people who were working in quite high positions were told that they could be released to get £6,500 as a councillor, there wouldnae be a rush, let me assure you. At present, a big gap might be left in someone's pension entitlement if the proper cover was not provided. We would be happy to continue to work on this through COSLA's executive group, but I remind members that we work with limited resources.

The Deputy Convener: I recognise that remuneration and pensions are big issues. However, if other things were more as you wanted them to be, we could still think about possible scenarios.

Ms White: My questions follow on from Elaine Thomson's question in a way, but they relate more to the public and to your discussions with the Executive on promoting awareness of local government and councils. Have those discussions come to fruition? Are you planning any advertising process for the 2003 elections to make the public aware of the importance of local government and of the differences between local government, the Scottish Parliament and national Government? Would there be merit in trying to improve civic participation by educating young people about the importance of local government and the importance of participating not just in local government but in the voting process?

Councillor Watters: There are several strands to that. It is vital to educate young people about local government. I have always got involved in the secondary schools in my area by giving talks on what local government does and its value. I try to get the point across to young people who do not regard politics as important that there is nothing that they can do without somebody somewhere having taken a decision about whether they can do it, when they can do it and how much it will cost. It is important that young people have their say in that. How we take that area forward is vital.

What was your other point?

14:45

Ms White: It was about your discussions with the Executive on promoting the differences between local and central Government.

Councillor Watters: It is sometimes difficult to get information out to the wider community. Just over three years ago, we launched a successful campaign on maximising the vote. We tried to ensure that physically handicapped people got into polling stations. Since then, we have run a campaign to try to get as many people as possible to put themselves on to the voting register, because the poll tax problems caused people to disappear from the register. That campaign continues.

There is a fine line, however, between such advertising campaigns and political advertising campaigns. We need further discussion on how we advertise. For example, if Glasgow City Council blatantly advertised for people to come out and vote, that would be seen as overtly political. That might not be the case for another council. In some areas, people would regard such advertising as a political statement and perhaps we need a

guideline on advertising. However, we—singly and jointly—should be encouraging people to participate in local government.

Ms White: Your reference to ring fencing reminded me of the question of whether there is a way in which local government can demonstrate what it does and what central Government does. For example, local government could say that it raises X amount of moneys and show what it pays for with that; it could also state the amount of money that it gets from central Government. Have you discussed with the Executive the possibility of making people more aware of what they get from local government?

Jon Harris: One issue that emerged from the process of developing our submission was the importance of COSLA—not in isolation, but in collaboration with public relations officers within individual councils—taking a role in presenting the positive side of what local government achieves. We will pick up that issue as we develop our communications strategy. However, the issue is not just for us, but for the Scottish Parliament, MEPs and MPs. Perhaps we should do more collectively.

We must develop a positive image and present good evidence of what local government does to improve the lives of our communities. The issue is the ability to get that picked up in the media. Our experience is that local media tend to be accessible and useful in that respect. Perhaps we could work with the Parliament and the Executive in assessing how we can promote that nationally, because that does not always happen.

The Deputy Convener: I want to follow on from that and ask about your plans for the improvement partnership. Are you thinking that that would link much more with a media campaign?

Jon Harris: I had not made that link. That particular improvement partnership was about supporting continuous improvement within local government and developing that across the public sector as we get involved in joint work with other bodies. The focus of that work is to demonstrate and deliver best value, good practice and so forth. In that respect, the link could be made and that material could be used in a wider campaign.

Generally, what is being done on best value has not been given the profile that it should have been given. We have been developing best value for three or four years. We have learned a lot and we are beginning to see the returns on that. Perhaps we should give those returns a higher profile.

Iain Smith: I want to ask about the new political structures that have come out of the work of the leadership advisory panel and the work that COSLA has been doing in developing them. Has COSLA reviewed how successful the scrutiny

panels have been? How well is the concept of scrutiny panels understood across local government?

Councillor Watters: We have looked at the implementation of the leadership advisory panel. The leadership advisory panel has done a lot of work on scrutiny panels to suggest that one size does not fit all. Therefore, at the end of that exercise we would not see mirrors of each other, but a range of different solutions to meet varying local needs. Some authorities have set up scrutiny panels; some authorities have not gone down that road. Others have set up their executive with a scrutiny panel to overview the rest of the council's operations. There are wide and varied answers to the question of how it has been done. The scrutiny panels were not intended to be rolled out with everyone accessing the same models to implement. Jon Harris might know of work that is being done to draw that together.

Jon Harris: We trawled councils to find out what decisions they made and what their new structures were. However, I am not aware of any evaluation that has been undertaken throughout Scotland. The political structures will be subject to the same duty of best value as the provision of direct services and we anticipate that they will be subject to on-going best-value reviews. We felt that that was more appropriate than opting for another MacNish advisory group. The political structures, like anything else, should demonstrate best value.

The issue of scrutiny panels has been raised. Quite a lot of work has been done on the new skills and the capacity of elected members to provide effective scrutiny. As part of the continuous improvement duty, on the elected member development side, we are looking at courses that are being set up by the Improvement and Development Agency in England, to see whether those are transferable. The importance of scrutiny was not given the same recognition as the importance of other aspects of a councillor's role, although it should receive the same recognition. We should be able to find ways of supporting that.

Iain Smith: In your submission, you refer to local government in Scotland not having the equivalent of the Scottish Police College at Tulliallan. How could such a local government management training centre be established and who would be responsible for funding it?

Jon Harris: We were contrasting the resources that are going into training and development in local government. There is no strong track record of investment in skills development in local government. We were not suggesting that we wanted an equivalent college for the local government community to that which exists for the police authorities and police forces. We considered the issue 15 years ago, when we

decided to support the University of Strathclyde's local government management centre. That centre has proved successful and is now standing on its own legs as an effective organisation.

I do not think that we would go for the equivalent of the police college. We take the view that there is enough provision available in a range of different formats. However, the provision is not particularly well co-ordinated and there are some gaps. We would rather not try to set up a new delivery agent.

Iain Smith: Thank you for clarifying that.

The Deputy Convener: I have a couple of questions that might tie up a few points that we have not quite covered.

To what extent is IT being used to improve administrative support to councillors? For example, has the opportunity been taken to use the European computer driving licence?

Councillor Watters: There are two aspects to that question. Councils have tried to develop IT to assist elected members in carrying out their function. However, that has been hindered by costs and the perception of those costs. Some of my colleagues have also shied away from the amount of training that is involved.

I admit to being dragged kicking and screaming to some of the courses that I was forced to take if I wanted to access the equipment that the council was making available; I am sure that I am not alone in that. There will be many elected members up and down the country like that; some have said that they do not want to get involved. However, there is no way round it.

More and more literature comes to me by e-mail, so it would be a sad loss if I could not access it, or did not know to whom to forward it or how to get information. That means that I have to work on it sitting in the house in the evening when everyone else is watching some nice television programmes.

We need to use IT and we need to do it better. We also might have to put up with some stick for the money that we will spend on it.

Jon Harris: Two years ago, 90 per cent of COSLA's communication was done by mail and 10 per cent was done by e-mail—now it is the other way round. I rarely send anything by post.

The Scottish Local Government Information Unit and COSLA published a report on member support, which recommends that all councillors should have an e-mail address. It is essential for communication and access to information and is a key element of how we develop member support, not just in rural areas where access is an issue, but throughout Scotland.

The Deputy Convener: Will you comment on councillors' uptake of the European computer driving licence? Keith Harding might like to come in on this. Some of the Stirling Council councillors seem to be less paper-based than I am. In some ways, councillors seem to be moving ahead of MSPs. Do you have any evidence on, for example, scanning documents so that they can be easily retrieved, rather than keeping paper copies?

Jon Harris: The evidence from the survey of all councillors is that support is still quite variable. The internet and e-mail are the most commonly used technologies. Document scanning and keeping electronic libraries seem to be some way off. Such practice is beginning to be picked up where there is a well-resourced team that supports elected members of the council through democratic services, but it does not generally happen.

The committee will have to tell me more about the European computer driving licence because I was not aware of it. I can try and find out about councillors' uptake.

The Deputy Convener: My final point is about civic education. Iain Smith made a point about community planning and how it opens up the opportunity for more engagement with the community generally. What are your views on civic education and all the new proposals about citizenship being part of the curriculum?

Councillor Watters: Those developments are welcome. The issue is not just about communicating the role of local government to young people who are in education; it is about raising awareness of the input of other public bodies to communities through community planning. We must understand each other's problems better and work together better to deliver a package to young people so that they understand how the system functions. We are aware of the issues, and we hope to drive them forward with our community planning partners.

15:00

Jon Harris: In our submission to the national debate on education, we stated that schools and students are part of the community and that they are crucial to the way in which we advance the education service. We are in favour of developing citizenship education as a mainstream subject, but we also want to develop links between schools and communities and students and communities.

The Deputy Convener: If there are no other questions, I thank you both. Your evidence has been useful, and we look forward to receiving more information from you.

I now welcome the representatives from Angus Council. I am not sure whether we have moved

your table forward to be more homely or for technical reasons, but the situation is a lot better.

Stewart Maxwell is the principal community education officer of Angus Council. Susan Robb is the former chair of Angus youth congress and a dialogue youth committee member. Councillor Glennis Middleton is the chair of the dialogue youth management group. I invite you to speak for a few minutes, after which we will ask questions.

Stewart Maxwell (Angus Council): I will not read through our whole paper, because I understand that the committee's specific interest is in widening access and, in particular, in involving young people. It might help if I clarify our roles in the exercise. I have line-management responsibility for the community education service, which supports the implementation of youth initiatives and services the groups around them. Councillor Middleton will give an elected member's perspective, but also the perspective of a keen supporter of young people in Angus. That perspective will be developed in the course of the discussion. Susan Robb will provide the perspective of an active participant and a customer. I am sure that you will want to ask her about her experience.

I hope that our written submission demonstrates helpfully what we have done to encourage young people to get more involved and become active citizens. The terminology is constantly bandied about, but the question is what active citizenship looks like in practice. Therefore, in our submission we picked up on two specific initiatives in which we have been active.

The first is the Angus youth congress—the submission gives the background to that development. A steering group was formed in May 1998 that targeted young people between the ages of 14 and 22 and ensured that they came from the widest range of backgrounds from throughout Angus. It is easy to establish an initiative in the key areas, but we tried to involve young people from throughout the authority, much of which is exceptionally rural.

The idea was to establish a youth congress and local youth councils. The initial seminar was a success and the youth congress and youth councils were established in January 1999. The aims and objectives are set out in the written submission, but I will run through them quickly. The aims were to promote the voice of young people throughout Angus, to encourage maximum participation and to create opportunities for young people to participate. A previous witness referred to the need to build capacity within communities. From a community education perspective, we are about promoting community learning and development in terms of personal development and capacity building. The congress was an

example of putting that into practice. The objectives were to encourage young people in Angus to take an interest in their community and to get involved, which would have a bearing on the future of all young people in Angus.

Council support has been critical and we listed in the submission the areas in which support has been given, which range from free use of premises to access to support from the community education service. We have about 10 community education workers who at some point in their working week will be involved in supporting local youth councils and the youth congress. We have also been able to supply a dedicated support worker, initially for the congress and more recently for the dialogue youth initiative.

Travel and subsistence support has been made available, which is crucial. If young people have some distance to travel we cannot expect them to give up their own money and time. Therefore, we have organised transport because of the rural nature of the county. If young people travelled using public transport, they would need to set out a week early.

There have been regular meetings between the congress and Angus Council. The council also invested in videoconferencing equipment to allow youth councils to communicate. That was effective in a one-to-one setting but was less so in conference. However, we are looking at the matter again.

It is fair to say that the congress and the councils are held in high esteem and have over the years been actively involved in a range of initiatives. The congress was involved recently in a youth exchange with a Bavarian youth council. That was completed last month. As an authority, we are pro-international, which is important for young people in terms of raising their global awareness.

The council invested £40,000 in the early stages of the youth initiatives. That has now been mainstreamed within the dialogue youth initiative. Clearly, young people will come in and move on; there is no fixed membership. If young people did not move on, there would be a problem. Several of our young people have gone on to become members of the Scottish youth parliament. Susan Robb is probably a good example. She is starting university next week, so that is progress.

We cannot be complacent, however. We must continually assess how things are operating and whether we are engaging with young people or losing them. We need to know their thoughts—they are key stakeholders. We have been able to secure funding to run a major residential youth conference next month. It will take place not in Angus, but in Dunoon because we thought it

would be good to take the young people out of Angus. We are also linking with one of the youth councils in Dunoon. That is another exchange of views and we have ties with Argyll and Bute Council through the Angus dialogue youth initiative. We hope that that will set out the way forward with young people deciding on the format themselves.

The Angus dialogue youth initiative was referred to by one of the previous witnesses. Angus was one of the three pilot authorities, along with Glasgow City Council and Argyll and Bute Council, that were involved in the COSLA bid under round 1 of the modernising government fund—MGF 1. Securing that funding was critical in enabling us to progress with the initiative. Angus Council also made a financial contribution. The initiative has worked and there has been an open exchange of information and practice between the three authorities. We have now made a further bid as part of the COSLA MGF 2 bid for all authorities. Again, we are seeing an expansion of the sharing of practice.

The Angus dialogue youth initiative is trying to encourage young people to use new technology to access relevant information. We are also trying to get young people more involved in the life of their communities. We try to address social inclusion by delivering relevant services.

Another positive aspect of the initiative is that it is becoming more corporate. We might previously have had responses only from one council department, but the way in which we in Angus have approached the matter means that all council departments have a role to play. That also ties in with the promotion of community planning.

We were able to open dedicated premises—No 1 for Youth—in January this year. It has a high street location and a shop front on the ground floor that has public access terminals. However, the real positive aspect of it is that young people can come in and go up the stairs and meet a wide range of agencies or support services, and other people will be none the wiser—they can come in for 101 reasons. That is the kind of service that we are trying to develop.

The project management group is made up of key council departments such as trading standards, police and health and includes young people from the congress and local youth councils. Angus youth congress has been a key partner from the start. It is interesting to consider the origins of the group. A couple of years ago we held a residential weekend in Edinburgh with the youth congress, which was good in terms of developing a way forward. All key council departments were required to attend that. It was very productive.

Online access is a central part of the dialogue youth initiative. Young people can access the website from schools, community centres and public libraries through the pupils' network.

A new development is that we are just about to connect with some of the voluntary sector youth work providers. There is a range of voluntary community-run youth provision in Angus. We are installing the communications equipment to give broadband internet access at a fraction of the price. We are trying to expand access as best we can.

What do we give access to? There is access to the Young Scot portal, which is well presented. There is also access to the Angus web page that has been developed by local young people.

Another part of the dialogue youth initiative is Angus Young Scot. Members might be familiar with Young Scot as it has been around for a number of years. With the available funding, we have been able to supply a pack to every 12 to 18-year-old who wants it. The briefing says that the card that is supplied in that pack is a smart card; it is not that smart, but it is getting there. I have given a sample of the card to the committee. It provides some basic services for young people but we are looking for ways to expand that. The card can be used for library membership, leisure centre facilities—at which it gives a discount—and for school meals. It can be used in place of cashless catering.

At the moment, there is a take-up of between 80 per cent and 90 per cent. We have been able to market the card as a must-have. It is interesting that you now hear head teachers saying that their schools must have the cards. That shows considerable progress in the past 10 years.

15:15

In relation to the second round of the modernising government fund initiative—MGF 2—we are considering expanding our health promotion work and developing online services for young people.

Success has been dependent on strong financial support from the council and from the Scottish Executive via the COSLA bid. Without that money, the model would not have gone ahead. However, it has been so successful that others are interested in copying it.

Elected representatives and council officers have been strongly committed to ensuring that young people can play their part and are not included in a tokenistic way. It is all very well for a council to set up a youth council, but the danger is that it might have an adult agenda. Young people would just walk away from that so it is important that youth councils are geared to their needs.

The Deputy Convener: Could you conclude your remarks soon?

Stewart Maxwell: Of course. It is critically important that young people are involved. The material must be promoted at a level that ensures that young people respond to it.

Our initiatives have been successful partly because we have taken an opportunistic approach to the funding opportunities to ensure that we could deliver.

Councillor Glennis Middleton (Angus Council): One of the reasons why we have achieved a measure of success with young people is that, before the steering group was set up, we set up a member officer youth strategy group, which lasted for the best part of two years. It lasted so long because we thought that we should take a step at a time and get the form of the youth council right rather than rush to set one up.

Angus Council is indebted to the community education workers who went out and persuaded young people to come and speak to us and eventually to form the steering group. The fact that we took our time and proved to the young people that we would not dictate our ideas to them and would allow them to take ownership of the process was essential. Only when we demonstrated that we valued their contribution, valued them as members of society—often, young people are not valued in that way—and were prepared to put our money where our mouth was, did they accept what we had to say and become willing to take ownership of the initiative, which they have done successfully.

Susan Robb (Angus Council): I would like to reiterate what has been said. I was involved with the steering group. It might seem a bit scary for a 15-year-old to go along to a council meeting, but we were always told that the young people's agenda was important and that has always been the case.

I have been chair of my local youth council and of the youth congress. I was involved in the development of the Young Scot smart card and am now employed by Angus Council as a youth worker at No 1 for Youth. There has been a complete process all the way through. Every young person should be offered such opportunities from before the age of 14.

The Deputy Convener: What were your experiences of the steering group? How easy was it to attract people to it? How representative were the youngsters who were on the steering group in terms of the socioeconomic mix and so on?

Councillor Middleton: Initially, it was difficult to identify and involve young people. Again, I stress the importance of the involvement of the

community education workers in that process. They persuaded a number of young people to come forward. I would like to say that all our young people are angelic, but undoubtedly they are not. They come from a wide variety of backgrounds and some of them are less angelic than others, but they have been persuaded that the youth congress is worth while.

Angus is a rural area and has no major centre. We have eight burghs. People were drawn from major towns such as Forfar, which has a population of 14,000, and from rural areas that contain no towns at all. They came from ordinary backgrounds and privileged backgrounds. Credit is due to our community education staff, who spent a long time speaking to young people—the importance of that cannot be overemphasised. Some people fell by the wayside and others came on board. The congress has always been dynamic. Once it was established, the first steering group made progress.

Susan Robb: We were identified to be on the youth congress steering group, and we went on study visits and so on. When we went along to the first meeting, we were 10 people in a room who had never met each other. That was daunting, but when the year was over and we had had our seminar, only one person decided that the congress was not for them, which shows that there was something in the congress to interest a variety of people, and that they appreciated its importance.

Ms White: Good afternoon, and congratulations on the Angus youth congress, which is near to my heart, as I am trying to establish something similar in Glasgow. It is important that young people are involved in and are proud of their communities. I praise you on your submission, in which you ask whether we are engaging with young people.

I know that the congress has not been up and running for long—I think that it was established in April 2001—but can you gauge the number of young people who are taking part in the congress's activities? What is the rate of uptake of the Young Scot card? How many young people use leisure facilities? If you cannot gauge participation now, do you intend to do so in future, so that you can determine whether the congress is engaging with young people?

Stewart Maxwell: We do gauge that information. The system that we use to issue Young Scot cards is the same system that our leisure service uses. We took longer to issue Young Scot cards because we tried to implement compatible systems. We can track the uptake of leisure services, school meals and library services by Young Scot cardholders. We are particularly interested in how young people make better use of libraries.

We have discussed with health colleagues a prescription-to-work initiative. For example, young people may undertake a six-week course of exercise, but we do not know whether they continue with that exercise. Through Young Scot, we will be able to track whether they are still active or whether they have packed it in.

Ms White: I am glad that you are doing that. I have a question on Angus Council for Councillor Middleton, whom I have known for a number of years. I know that you are always involved in promoting youth initiatives. You mentioned the dialogue youth initiative, one of the key aims of which was

"To promote social inclusion by involving young people as full partners in the design, management and delivery of services".

Could you expand on that statement? From a council point of view, did you involve young people in the planning process or other processes?

Councillor Middleton: The Angus youth congress is a statutory consultee of Angus Council with regard to services that are being delivered to young people. The formal reporting mechanism is through the social policy sub-committee of our policy and resources committee. The youth congress has the right to call a meeting of that sub-committee and place matters on the agenda.

I am a wee bit long in the tooth to have my finger on the pulse of what is important to a 15-year-old, but the youth congress can do that. The councillors and the young people meet as equal members of the community. I hope that Susan Robb and her colleagues have never felt that they were being patronised. It is essential that we respect those young people. If we did not, I do not think that the young people would respect what we are trying to do or the community in which they live. The relationship is a two-way street.

Our young people have not just engaged with the local authority. They held a successful conference at the Scottish Police College at Tulliallan after persuading our local chief superintendent to host the conference on the congress's behalf. That conference alone fundamentally changed police attitudes to young people in Angus.

The young people, rightly, do not let us off with anything. It is a two-way street and if we cannot provide the goods, we must explain why. It is a profound partnership that has worked for us so far. However, we must continue trying year after year because young people such as Susan go away to university or move out of the area to work. Therefore, we start again with a fresh lot of young people.

Iain Smith: I will start by following on from the answer that you just gave. Can you give other

examples of how the youth congress has helped to change council policies or services?

Councillor Middleton: The congress has had more than a few words to say on transport, which is a major issue in such a rural area as Angus. The congress has had a fundamental effect on how transport is organised. The young people do not want to go home for their tea at 6 o'clock and then just sit in the house, but that is often all there is to do in a rural area if they do not have transport.

The congress has also had a fundamental effect on information technology in Angus, not only through schools and e-mail addresses but with the videoconferencing to which Stewart Maxwell referred. All our young people have access to that and we are establishing IT centres for young people.

We are in the middle of persuading our health colleagues to become more involved. They have not been as enthusiastic as they might have been. We have spent a considerable time persuading them to become involved. They are now doing so, with the backing of Tayside NHS Board and the chair of Tayside Primary Care NHS Trust who, with the director of public health, is coming along to a meeting with the dialogue youth management group. We will suggest at that meeting what we would like to happen in Angus.

Susan Robb: The member referred to policy. Most action is taken by the youth councils, which exist for each of the burgh areas. They look at specific local issues such as the lighting in a park or the opening times of a swimming pool. However, transport is dealt with by the councils and the congress, as was the relationship between young people and the police.

Iain Smith: How do young people become members of the youth councils and the youth congress? That is not dealt with in your submission. How do the youth councils and the youth congress report back to people who are not members of those bodies?

15:30

Susan Robb: Youth councils are open to any young person who lives, works or is educated in the area. We have promoted the councils through street work and the local media and in youth centres, schools and colleges.

Each youth council sends three representatives to the youth congress, which is made up entirely of youth councillors. We are trying to diversify the membership to include representatives from the uniformed organisations and, so far, have one member from the girl guides. We want to do that so that the congress is more representative of young people.

On the issue of reporting back to non-members, we initially set up the health information youth access—HIYA—scheme, which took the form of a magazine that was distributed through schools and colleges and highlighted the issues that the congress was dealing with. Young people were invited to write in and contribute in that way. Now, however, the emphasis is shifting to the online magazine. The youth congress website is being overhauled at the moment and youngscot.org, which Angus Council controls an aspect of, is about to be launched. People will be able to submit articles to the website and the youth congress will be able to communicate with young people through it.

Mr Harding: I am interested to hear what subjects the young people will debate in Dunoon. What sort of issues do you expect to arise?

Susan Robb: The conference in Dunoon is meant to allow us an opportunity to examine where the youth congress and the youth councils should go now. Many of the original members of the bodies have gone on to different things. We want to think about how the introduction of IT can make the system better and how we can get new people involved.

Stewart Maxwell: The conference is about young people determining the way forward for their organisations. Our agenda is that an agreement should be reached on how local youth involvement can make progress. The current set-up has worked for a number of years but we cannot be complacent. As the situation and the environment changes, we need to change and we need to be receptive to young people in doing so. We do not expect 80 or 90 young people to come away from the weekend and get involved, but we will know what their views are and will use them to agree a way forward.

When we started the dialogue youth initiative, we thought about getting 80 or 90 young people together to discuss it. However, we took on board Glasgow's experience of using the Y Network Glasgow as a sounding board and decided to use a smaller number of young people but have them carry out some survey work in their areas. Our residential event started with a feedback session. It is difficult to determine how representative such feedback is. In some respects, perhaps the young people represent only their own views. However, we have tried to encourage them to talk to others and they have not been slow in going out and canvassing others.

Mr Harding: How many delegates will there be in Dunoon?

Stewart Maxwell: We think that between 80 and 90 will go.

Mr Harding: How many delegates will there be from Dunoon?

Stewart Maxwell: Perhaps 10 or 20. The key focus for us will be the Angus discussion and a spin-off benefit will be the opportunity to have contact with other young people.

Elaine Thomson: Do you think that it is easier to organise the setting up of a youth steering group and the associated activities in a largely rural setting? Do you have evidence that hard-to-reach or disaffected young people are involved or are attracted to becoming involved?

Councillor Middleton: It is not easier or more difficult to establish such a steering group in a rural area. The key is community education staff having contact with young people in the first instance. If we had difficulties, they related to the geography of the area, because one person might travel for 10 minutes to a meeting and another might have an hour's journey to reach the same meeting. The logistics of bringing young people from all over the area to one place at the same time may be difficult.

None of us can attract disaffected, disenchanted or disfranchised young people overnight. I hope that that will come. Some success has been achieved. I do not want to label any of our young people who have become involved. Some are from less well off backgrounds, but I would not care to put numbers on them. Is that reasonable?

Stewart Maxwell: That is my view. In the time that I have been in Angus, the high-fliers have not been involved. Many of the young people have problems. We realise that only when we get to know them in a residential setting, when other issues arise.

I talked to someone from the voluntary sector today about the residential meeting that we are planning and was told that some young people who are involved in Angus young carers are keen to come along. That is great. We want to open out involvement—it is not a closed shop.

That ties in with the dialogue youth Young Scot initiative. I have been at pains to stress that Angus Young Scot is not a schools card, but is open to all young people. We have a project in Arbroath called PALS—positive action lifestyles—that involves young unemployed people, many of whom have been through the criminal justice system. They access the cards and benefit from them.

We always look for other ways to make connections, for example through social work and with young people who are in care. We strive continually. Our focus in our work with young people is clear. We are not necessarily distributing table tennis bats. We do focused work on personal development and capacity building, which we can evidence through prescribed indicators. We work on that and need to demonstrate that.

Elaine Thomson: The witnesses said that the health authorities had been less forward in becoming involved. Given that health improvement is a strong aspect to the work, are longitudinal studies or other studies planned to monitor young people's health and health improvements and to show the impact of some of the initiatives that have been rolled out in Angus? The impact could be on matters such as alcohol and drug use.

Councillor Middleton: I am not aware that the health authorities have implemented any such studies. I hope that they will but, obviously, several health initiatives are being undertaken throughout the county. I hope that, at the visit that we are having next week, we can debate and formalise those matters. It is important for health improvement that such matters are documented, not only for the local authority's benefit and our young people's benefit, but for the shaping of future health services in Angus and health improvement services, which we deliver in partnership.

Stewart Maxwell: We are still in the early days in Angus. We are ahead of other authorities because we were part of the pilot initiative. We want to make youth participation work—for example, in the Young Scot initiative—because if it does not work, young people will not get involved and the participation schemes will be a waste of time. For example, if the council says that it will get the school-meal service running properly and it does not run properly when young people next use it, we will have failed.

We are considering having an online health service. In addition, someone with a health background might be present in our base to respond to inquiries. Those are practical considerations. There is much enthusiasm from the practitioners in the health field and we are trying to square that and move ahead.

The Deputy Convener: I will finish off with three quick questions. First, have you considered any other issues? We would be interested to know about those. You referred to transport and IT. Secondly, I am interested in your monitoring system. Glennis Middleton explained how healthy living would be considered and Stewart Maxwell referred to prescribed indicators. How do you judge whether you are achieving your aims? Thirdly, are you communicating to other councils how they could take on board your good practice?

Susan Robb: I will answer your first question. The other issue that we have considered is facilities. We have emphasised to young people in rural areas that there are local facilities that they should use. A few local groups are trying to set up a skate park. That work is supported by the youth congress and local youth councils, which have representatives on one another's committees.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has been important for the youth congress. We have promoted that through working with the social work department and attending conferences. Health has been an issue in our health, police, and drug and alcohol sub-groups. They have organised awareness-raising events that have emphasised issues that affect young people.

Stewart Maxwell: We do several things in the area of monitoring. We record the number of website hits locally and nationally. Young people access the national website, which is the Young Scot portal, and from there they can access the Angus site. The idea is that the machine will identify where the young person is coming from and default to that information. We also record visits to the No 1 for Youth facility and the usage of terminals in libraries and leisure centres to access the website.

Our development plan intended to carry out a survey of users six months into the project, but we have not done that yet. However, we are reconsidering our measures in that area.

The Deputy Convener: Elaine Thomson referred to longitudinal studies. I assume that you will use a longitudinal study to assess whether the young people have become more involved in local government or in their communities generally. It would be helpful if you informed us of your results.

My third question was about communicating good practice to other councils.

Councillor Middleton: That information is reported back through COSLA. We have had several study visits from COSLA members and members from other local authority areas. In addition, Andy Kerr and Frank McAveety have visited us. Frank was terribly impressed by his videoconferencing performance.

We have also had international visits through the youth exchange scheme. Unfortunately, I was off ill when Bavarian young people attended the social policy sub-committee, but I know that there was a good exchange of information and wide-ranging discussion on young citizenship and youth councils.

The Deputy Convener: Excellent. There are no more questions, so I thank you for coming. Any further information that you can give us will be most useful.

15:46

Meeting continued in private until 17:04.

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