

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 1 October 2002
(Morning)

Session 1

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE 24th Meeting 2002, Session 1

CONVENER

*Trish Godman (West Renfrew shire) (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)

Angus MacKay (Edinburgh South) (Lab)

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

John Young (West of Scotland) (Con)

*attended

WITNESSES

Judi Billing (Improvement and Development Agency)

Ron Morrison (Renfrew shire Council)

Tom Scholes (Renfrew shire Council)

Ian Simpson (Renfrew shire Council)

Steve Thomas (Welsh Local Government Association)

Councillor Laura Willoughby (Local Government Association)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Ruth Cooper

ASSISTANT CLERK

Neil Stewart

LOCATION

Renfrew shire Council Chambers, Paisley

Scottish Parliament

Local Government Committee

Tuesday 1 October 2002

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:17*]

The Convener (Trish Godman): Good morning, comrades, and welcome to Renfrewshire. Some of us have been here before—I am sure that Sandra White has been in this room many times. I thank Renfrewshire Council for the facilities that it has provided for this day of civic participation and for the committee meeting this morning. I am sorry that there has been a delay, but traffic held up some members.

Item in Private

The Convener: I ask members of the committee whether they are prepared to discuss item 3 on the agenda, which is consideration of a draft report, in private.

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you. I advise members that the civic participation lunch starts at half-past 12 and that I shall ensure that we are finished before then.

“Renewing Local Democracy: The Next Steps”

The Convener: We move to the renewing local democracy phase 2 inquiry. We have already had some witnesses before us and have received some written submissions on renewing local democracy. Today we welcome Tom Scholes, the chief executive of Renfrewshire Council, Ron Morrison, the council's head of corporate policy, and Ian Simpson, the council's principal officer for the regeneration strategy and communications. I declare an interest, as I know all three.

I invite Tom Scholes to say a few words to the committee, after which I shall open up the debate for members' questions.

Tom Scholes (Renfrewshire Council): I shall speak briefly about our submission to the committee. We have concentrated on the issue that you told us you were particularly interested in, which is the work that we have been doing to involve our communities in council work. As members can see from our submission, since becoming a unitary authority in 1996 we—like many other councils—have greatly extended our involvement with and consultation of our community. We are still developing that work.

We use consultation and community involvement in a large range of service delivery issues. In addition to the various standing consultation arrangements that would be expected, we undertake a large number of ad hoc, or dip-in, consultations in which we consider specific service delivery as part of best-value service reviews. We have a large programme of best-value service reviews and we prepare and submit specific services for the charter mark, which is the major measure of service excellence in Renfrewshire. Both those activities involve customer and public involvement and discussion.

We seek targeted customer and user involvement in those exercises which—as well as the usual means of consultation, such as focus groups—includes siting opinion meters in our facilities when we want to find out what our users think of a service. We have been more successful than other Scottish local authorities in pursuing and achieving charter mark success. There are 26 charter marks for service excellence in Renfrewshire and 17 per cent of our 9,300 customer-facing work force are now charter marked for excellence.

Our approach to charter marking and customer involvement is starting to pay off. Each year, Audit Scotland, which is well known and loved by everyone, provides an overview of the 70 or so statutory performance indicators, which shows the

number of service delivery indicators per council that have improved by more than 5 per cent. That number is expressed as a ratio to those that have worsened by more than 5 per cent. Two years ago, we were the most improved council of the 32 in Scotland; last year, we were the second most improved. Our concentration on continuous improvement and in involving the public is starting to pay off big time in our performance and in the way in which the public perceive our performance.

Our concentration on providing information on our services, particularly via our website, led to the Society of Information Technology Management judging it to be one of the top 20 websites in its survey of the 467 local authority websites in Britain. Only one other Scottish local authority was in the top 20. The website is a major drive forward in progressing contact with the public. We continue to work on the website and intend to make it much more interactive in order to improve the service that we provide to our clients.

We were one of the first authorities in Scotland to establish a citizens panel, which is made up of a representative sample of 1,500 people, who were selected by a private company on our behalf. We consult the panel four times a year via a questionnaire and we draw representative focus groups from the panel on specific issues. We try to ensure that groups that are otherwise excluded from public affairs, including young people, are targeted in the sample.

We listen to what is said in such consultations. Over the years, consultation has had a significant impact. For example, in the past, when Government set as service priorities education, social work and police and fire services, our local budget consultations, the citizens panel questionnaires and organisations such as the elderly forums in Renfrewshire told us that our priorities should be pavements, potholes, litter and the state of our town centres. The council listened to those consultations and, although we had to make budget cuts to close the funding gap, we recycled more money into roads, pavements and street lighting. The relevant budget has increased by £1.5 million a year every year since we came across the strong feeling about roads and potholes. The statistics show that we spend proportionately more money on roads and pavements than other local authorities. Members might not think so from the state of our roads and pavements, but it is a fact that we spend more on them.

In response to public feedback, we invested money in setting up a quick-response litter hit squad, which deals on the same day with complaints about litter. We listened to what we were told. We have invested more money in cleaning up our town centres during the weekend

shopping days when the centres are busiest with shoppers and, sadly, with litterbugs.

The only other example that I would like to highlight, which is also in our written submission, is our young persons housing forum, which is recognised as being innovative and groundbreaking in terms of our proactive relations with that growing group of our tenants to whom it is difficult to relate. For setting up that forum, we received last week the Chartered Institute of Housing award for innovation and good practice in participation. We recognised that we were not getting across to that large number of clients in our housing service, so we have gone out of our way to make the service more attractive to those young people so that they can interface with us and we can take forward their concerns. I hope that the forum goes from strength to strength as it develops.

I will leave the introduction at that. We will respond to any questions that members might have on that or any other issue.

The Convener: In developing your policy and services, one of your key initiatives is your work with the tenants and residents associations. Have you consulted the tenants and residents associations on policy and services? If so, has that consultation process resulted in any change in service delivery?

Ron Morrison (Renfrewshire Council): We have 46 tenants associations, which meet four times a year on a council-wide forum. At the most recent forum, the head of housing finance set out the budget priorities and the issues with which we are involved and got feedback from the tenants who attended the forum. That will help to shape our formulation of policy.

The Convener: You said that there are four meetings a year. What is the level of turnout at those meetings?

Ron Morrison: The forums are held four times a year and two representatives from each tenants association can attend. There are 46 associations, so there is a maximum representation of 80 odd. In practice, those who attend number in the high 20s.

The Convener: Are you content that that is a wide-ranging 20 and not the same faces at all the meetings? For example, if I went to a school board's meetings, the same people would attend them. Are you getting a wide range of representation using that method?

Ron Morrison: I think that we are. We have 46 genuine associations that are representative of our council tenants and a sub-group of those associations attends forums. I think that that is as good as we can get it.

The Convener: You gave the example of service-delivery changes, but has there been any change in priorities? Have tenants come to you with a set of priorities that are different from yours? Do they look at matters such as budget allocation?

Tom Scholes: Tenants get involved in identification of budget allocations. As members might know, we have local budgets for each ward and that money can be spent on housing matters. Discussion on performing minor improvements in each area takes place with tenants and residents associations, so our tenants and residents feel that they have influence.

We also discuss broad housing issues in terms of where the housing revenue account is going and the lack of investment in housing. The state of play in Renfrewshire is that we are not moving towards housing stock transfer. We have difficulties with investment and our discussions are on prioritisation and how we can best invest the housing revenue account capital in each area.

We ended up prioritising a major scheme for releasing double-glazed windows in Renfrewshire. We wanted to speed up that scheme to ensure that every house in Renfrewshire—after the completion of our regeneration programme—was double glazed within a respectable period of something like five years. Consultation has major results.

The Convener: So there was dialogue between you and the associations about priorities.

Tom Scholes: Yes.

10:30

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): I would like to ask about the young persons housing forum, which seems to be gathering momentum—although it will not be launched formally until October. The idea sounds interesting. You have tried to assemble a group of people who would not normally be involved with the tenants association and to give them skills that will enable them to participate in council policy making. Can you explain how the forum will operate? How will it link with other groups such as Barnardo's Paisley Threads, Youthbuild and Strathclyde police? What is the gender balance of the forum? How have you tried to include young people in the structure?

Ian Simpson (Renfrewshire Council): The member is right to say that the council has made a conscious effort to involve young people. We have done so not least because of changes in the demographic profile of our tenants. We have a number of young single tenants who are the future residents of council housing stock.

We have tried to learn lessons from previous exercises that we have run involving young

people. Events are organised on an informal basis. We do not put people in committee rooms, nor do we call groups committees. We try to keep the language informal and to ensure that staff hold meetings and social functions in settings in which young people are comfortable, such as youth clubs. We have tried to take services and consultation exercises out of the usual committee structure and to create situations with which young people are comfortable.

That approach has worked relatively well and is showing early signs of success. Sylvia Jackson mentioned the involvement of young people in some of the council's policy initiatives. The forum has had a direct impact on the new tenancy agreement, on the tenant participation strategy that the council is considering and on housing support services for vulnerable young people. The forum has led to the production of a young homemaker's pack, which provides a range of information and contacts to support young people in tenancies.

To date, those who are involved have been predominantly male. The proportion of males to females is roughly 70:30. We are conscious that we must encourage young women tenants to join the forum. The housing department has been considering what other resource allocations can be brought to bear to assist that process. That touches on the point that the member made about the involvement of other agencies. For example, we might be able to use resources from other agencies to support participation in the events that we organise by young women who have child care needs.

The involvement of other agencies in the forum has a dual function. First, we want to leverage in additional support to increase the forum's chances of success. Secondly, we want to use the forum not just for housing matters, but to introduce young people to the range of services that are available through a variety of other agencies.

The member is right to say that it is still early days, but we have made a start. The forum will be launched officially on 28 October. We are trying to take a holistic approach and not to concentrate solely on housing services. We want to identify young people's other needs and the agencies that could support them.

Dr Jackson: How are the views of the young persons housing forum taken into account? I understand that you try to ensure that the forum meets in an informal setting. How are views taken through the committee structure in the council and how does the forum meet the other partners, such as the police? How does the system operate?

Ian Simpson: I will answer the second question first. The agencies are invited to the informal

meetings that have been established with the young people. Perhaps two or three agencies come along. Alternatively, the young people will identify a particular need—employment and training for example—and we will try to get representatives from the Paisley social inclusion partnership or Scottish Enterprise Renfrewshire to come and provide additional advice, guidance and support. The process is very much based on the agenda that is set by the young people.

In terms of the committee structure or policy boards of the council, most of the documents to which I referred earlier are subject to consultation. That is followed through on the basis that once any department consults young people in the forum, the young people's recommendations on specific policy initiatives will be highlighted. Those recommendations go through the committee cycle in the form of a report on the issues the young people bring up.

Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning and thank you for your interesting and informative submission.

I move on to questions about elected members. You have given the committee extensive evidence on the council's involvement with the community and the efforts that you have made to consult and communicate with that community. It is clear that elected members have a key role to play in that. How does the council support its members?

Tom Scholes: All 40 members have their own desk and chair, and access to a personal computer. They did not use to have that. Twenty-seven of the 40 members have taken up access to PCs, the internet and our intranet. There is a fair amount of basic support for our elected members.

When the last elections took place, we undertook specific training of the 12 new members and we opened up that training to the other returning members. Training for members tends not to be on-going; rather, it is done every time we identify a major activity that we believe we need to train our members on. We have a full training session on the schools public-private partnership coming up for all council members. We have offered training on free care for the elderly and its impact on the council. We have offered training on a number of subjects other than the obvious training on information technology.

Mr Harding: Has any specific training been offered in the light of the new political structures?

Tom Scholes: Yes. As a result of the leadership advisory panel, we reviewed our political structures. We have reduced significantly the number of committees and we now call them policy boards in order to get across the message that they are not just for rubber-stamping decisions. We have tried to delegate a lot more of

that to officers and we report it to members in an information bulletin that comes out every council cycle.

We have reduced the amount of business, reduced the number of committees, retitled committees as policy boards to try to concentrate on policy and policy development, and we have what we call a cross-party leadership board, which sits above the policy boards. Each policy board can make its own decisions and they become council decisions, provided that the leadership board does not call the decision in within five days. We have therefore speeded up council decision making.

When the boards were set up, we provided operational training to members of the council.

Mr Harding: You said that 27 of your 40 members are now using IT. Is that correct?

Tom Scholes: That is correct.

Mr Harding: What are you doing to encourage the other 13 councillors to take it up?

Tom Scholes: We are trying our best. You can lead a member to water, but you cannot make him or her drink.

Mr Harding: I know. It is good that 27 councillors are using IT. Do you think that it has made a difference to the way in which councillors are able to operate in terms of cutting down bureaucracy?

Tom Scholes: I think that it has. Their use of IT has reduced paperwork considerably. I get e-mails from councillors now; they land extremely frequently on my desk, unlike the letters that I used to receive.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I am pleased to be back with Renfrewshire Council. I see many familiar faces, but I am thankful that the police are not among them—in my time at the council their faces became very familiar. I presume that that is progress.

Tom Scholes: Things have got better since you left, Sandra, but there is no relationship between your leaving and things having got better.

Ms White: I want to ask about the involvement of tenants and residents with estate liaison committees. You talked about policy boards, but many people see them just as committees. Do tenants and residents have input into policy boards? Is there reporting back?

Tom Scholes: There is a formal reporting-back process. Only councillors sit on our policy boards, except the education and lifelong learning boards, on which church representatives sit.

Ms White: I just wanted to clarify that point. Are local people represented on estate liaison committees?

Ian Simpson: Yes. The estate liaison committees were established some time ago in 11 areas of Renfrewshire. They were established to deal with concerns that local residents expressed about vandalism and anti-social behaviour. The council had developed a policy initiative to try to find solutions to those problems. One of the main thrusts of that initiative was to involve a range of local residents, not necessarily only those from the tenants associations and residents associations. That resulted in tenants and residents working alongside council officers and with other agencies, such as the health board and Strathclyde police, to develop localised estate action plans. Those plans were agreed by the local residents and could be monitored fairly regularly.

Since then the estate liaison committees have evolved principally in a number of areas for which we have received better neighbourhood services fund money from the Scottish Executive. The estate liaison committees were fairly heavily involved in shaping the bids for that money and they will be involved in monitoring the action plans. We are considering further the role of the estate liaison committees in relation to the area development frameworks council and community planning partners, which are the frameworks for regeneration of the estates. We want the estate liaison committees to be adapted to take on a slightly wider long-term role in regeneration.

Ms White: Was the warden scheme that is up and running a direct result of the input of the tenants and residents to the review of the estates?

Ian Simpson: The warden scheme originated from local residents' identifying that one of the major issues in the area was the fear of crime and vandalism. In response to that, elected members and council officers went down south to see similar schemes. They reported back to the committee on what warden schemes involve and what the local scheme would look like. Based on that information, a number of the estate liaison committees said that they would like to pilot the warden scheme in their areas.

Ms White: Do you monitor ideas that come from the neighbourhood and from the review of the estates? Do you monitor whether residents perceive the ideas to be good or bad?

Ian Simpson: Yes. Regular meetings are held with council officers, other agencies and residents. As part of the preparation for this meeting I read back through the minutes of meetings and talked to some of the service managers, for example in our department for environmental services. They utilised the feedback from meetings to try to shape service delivery and local priorities within the

budget constraints that each department faces.

Ms White: It is good that ideas are being taken on board. If residents say that they want a scheme to be introduced and the council monitors it and says that it could be successful, is there a cut-off period of a year or six months for it?

Ian Simpson: We always try to develop and learn good practice. The estate liaison committees, which were set up about 18 months ago, are an innovative element. The council has played a lead role in bringing together a range of agencies. The committees have evolved since they were conceived. We have tried to use them not only to shape the council's new policies, but to respond to new initiatives. We continually review how the committees operate, how we involve local people and whether the committees are the most appropriate mechanism to involve local people and get their views across.

10:45

Tom Scholes: Our difficulty with the neighbourhood warden scheme is meeting people's aspirations, because it has been extremely successful. Every week I see statistics on the number of incidents that wardens have reported and on which council departments and other agencies have taken action. All the feedback from the four areas in which the scheme is up and running is extremely positive. The difficulty will be finding the money to roll out the scheme throughout the council area.

Ms White: That is the point that I was trying to make. Estate liaison committees have been successful in addressing residents' and tenants' ideas, but the assistance that you get is modest, and you will have great difficulty if you cannot find the money to continue the committees. I know that they are a pilot project, but could you say to the Executive, "This has been successful. Here are the facts and figures. We would like further funding for the next four years"?

Tom Scholes: The scheme has been successful. We will be heading in your direction on that point.

Dr Jackson: I have a question on community councils. Keith Harding and I are from Stirling Council's area. I do not know whether he agrees with me, but I think that our community councils work quite well, although I am sure that they could work a little better. I am interested in the training programme in which you are involved. In your submission you refer to transport and roads and how people have been going to community council meetings. Could you tell me a little about that?

You state in your submission that you have a community council forum, which is not dissimilar from the Stirling assembly but is limited to

community councils and elected members. How is that going? Is the relationship positive? How many elected members attend, and do they take the forum seriously?

Ron Morrison: Altogether, 21 community councils are up and running in Renfrewshire. We appointed a community council liaison officer to encourage participation in community councils, which has helped. We provide training. Indeed, we have a series of sessions planned for the next few weeks, at which members of each council department will address groups of community councils to explain what we do—for example, the chief executive's department will explain what it does in communication, regeneration, equality and so on. It is an education process, so that community councils are aware of what each department does. Through that, I hope that they will see ways in which to become more involved.

There has been good representation on the community council forum. Of our 21 community councils, 15 attended, and the total number of community councillors who attended was 25. The level of participation was not perfect, but it was fairly representative.

Dr Jackson: I have a question on people from community councils becoming councillors. Could providing additional training increase their interest in council work?

Ron Morrison: I see no reason why not. There appears to be a natural progression. The matter is for community councils, but we would provide support if people wished to go down that route.

Tom Scholes: Some of our community council office bearers have been councillors, and I strongly expect them to stand at the next election.

Mr Harding: Are all the community councils active? Are any areas in your district not represented?

Tom Scholes: There are still areas in the district that are not yet represented. One of the reasons why we employed a community council liaison officer was to generate a bit more enthusiasm in some of the missing council areas.

Mr Harding: How many areas do you feel are unrepresented, and how many community councils would you expect to have if the scheme was full?

Tom Scholes: About another five.

Mr Harding: As few as that?

Tom Scholes: We are quite a compact local authority.

Ron Morrison: The scheme for community councils can accommodate 26, and we have 21 up and running.

Ms White: I am interested in young people's involvement in citizenship and in education for citizenship. The statistics for community councils show that most of the people involved are slightly older than perhaps we would like. We should encourage young people to get involved. Does Renfrewshire Council run schemes to encourage young people to be good citizens, to be involved in the community and to take part in council life later on?

Tom Scholes: The council has five or six youth forums, which we are trying to roll out, and they are mentioned in our briefing paper. The 1,500-strong citizens panel is a truly representative cross-section and a number of young people are involved in that. At the moment, we are specifically targeting youngsters in the housing sphere. If that is successful, I hope that we will be able to grow that out to our other services. A third of the people on the citizens panel are replenished each year to ensure that they do not suffer from questionnaire fatigue, and we try to continue the balance. We set up the panel to go beyond what might be called the usual suspects—the folk who are involved in the elderly forum, the community council and every other group, so that you see the same faces every time you turn up. The panel was a proactive way of achieving what we felt was a truly representative sample of people, who might not have a bee in their bonnet about things and could perhaps give us a more measured response to council services.

The Convener: We are talking about communication and consulting the communities that you represent. Have any changes—small or significant—to your community care plan resulted from consultation with carers or services users?

Tom Scholes: I am not sure that I can give you an example, but I know that a number of changes were made. We consulted widely on the community care plan, and that consultation generated a number of changes. As chief executive, I am careful to ensure that we are seen to be making changes rather than just consulting for the sake of ticking a box and moving on. I know that we made a significant number of changes to the community care plan, the children's services plan and the community plan itself after the first consultation. We told people clearly that those changes had been made as a result of the consultation. If you want, we can send you more details about the changes to the three plans.

The Convener: That would be useful. It is easy for us to receive written information and then to cross-examine people who say, "Yes, we consult," but we have to look at the results of that consultation.

Social inclusion partnerships are an excellent idea because they show how local authorities can

work in conjunction with local communities. Our inquiry is about widening access. Do you think that such capacity building in local communities results in people being made more aware of the democratic process? We have talked about community councils, SIPs, civic education and community care plans, and lots of consultation goes on with communities. Does that mean that local people are beginning to be aware of the democratic process in a way that perhaps they were not before?

Tom Scholes: I think that the answer to that is yes, but it is difficult, particularly in an area such as Renfrewshire, which has a politicised urban council, for local people to become members of the council if they do not have the strength and resources of a political party behind them. The transformation from someone who is involved in all the other public activities to someone who wants to be a councillor and becomes one will be a relatively long and slow process. As I perceive it, the reality of life in the central belt is that someone would have to join a political party to have the resources and backing that put leaflets through letterboxes to secure election.

The Convener: Councillors will not like me for saying this, but the converse of that is that a community activist might get much more done by being involved in a SIP. Someone who is involved as a carer, for example, might be able to input to a community care plan. They might want to operate at that level because they can see the difference that they make. They do not have to get involved in the political process to do that.

Tom Scholes: I am sure that that is a major element. People are more interested in attempting to change the council and its services through being members of the various forums. There are a large number of forums and, although you see the same people at them, as a bureaucrat, I would balk at rationalising them, because they do not always consist of exactly the same people. The more folk who are involved in different things the better. The differences might be marginal, but other people are involved in some forums and in some issues.

Ms White: Some people say that SIPs are a good idea, but others say that they are not such a good idea, because members of the public do not really have an input to them. You commented that you would not like to rationalise the forums, but that you sometimes see the same people at SIP board meetings and so on. How much input do ordinary people have to what is done with SIP moneys? If ordinary people had more input, SIPs might have different programmes. Local government hands out the moneys, but my worry is that some people might want to push their own agenda and think that SIPs are one way of

bypassing local government to pursue their own interests. As a council, would you consider opening up SIPs, so that people do not have to be involved in community councils and so on to be members of them? Should all members of the public be able to put forward their name to attend a SIP meeting and vote on how SIP money will be spent?

Tom Scholes: The problem that we had with SIPs—and we probably still have it to some extent—is that members of the public still look on things such as the urban programme and expect to see bricks and mortar in their area. In certain areas, the size of the programmes means that they will not achieve bricks and mortar. We had a fair bit of difficulty in moving people away from that expectation. We had to encourage the idea that the programme is about community participation, training, influencing council policies and so on rather than building a community hall in every area. A fair amount of discussion took place, which led to a recognition that the situation had moved on.

Ian Simpson: It is important to recognise that the council's role in community participation is primarily to be the accountable body. The SIP board is made up of a range of partners, and decisions about the SIP budget are taken collectively. The local authority does not decide that it will capture a certain amount of the budget to run projects. Local people and other agencies were involved in what was called the appraisal group of the SIP board, which considered each project as it came through and decided on its merits and whether it contributed to the SIP's objectives.

Compared with the halcyon days of the regional council, Renfrewshire Council operates a small number of departmental projects. Most of the projects that have been funded through the SIP have been voluntary sector projects and have not been council-led. That is the real test of whether there has been a change.

11:00

Ms White: I want to pursue the point about tenant participation. As you pointed out, most SIPs are driven by what the communities want, but my point is that sometimes the people who sit on SIP boards and make proposals belong to tenants associations and community councils, and the wider community does not always know what is going on. Are SIPs mentioned at meetings, in agendas or in any other communication that Renfrewshire Council has with tenants groups, community councils or the public, to ensure that the wider population knows that not just a small body of people are able to input to the partnerships?

Ian Simpson: The staff employed by the Paisley partnership play a key role in ensuring that the residents and community organisations located in SIP areas are aware of the moneys that are available for major or small-scale projects. Indeed, over the past two or three years, budgets have been dedicated to small-scale projects because we recognise that, in such localities, organisations such as mother-and-toddlers groups that provide a relatively important service might need to access relatively small amounts of money. Paisley partnership staff are responsible for ensuring that local communities are aware of the budgets that are available.

Furthermore, council staff who work in community education and social work community development in the area try to ensure that local organisations are aware of available resources, and work alongside SIP staff to develop the community capacity programmes that we identified in our submission.

The Convener: We have exhausted all our questions. I thank you for your clear answers. If we have any other questions, we will be in touch with you.

Comrades, I welcome to the meeting representatives from the Improvement and Development Agency. Judi Billing is the leader of the leadership academy and Councillor Laura Willoughby is the chair of the Local Government Association equalities executive. They have been sitting at the back, so they should know the drill. I believe that Judi will make some introductory remarks.

Judi Billing (Improvement and Development Agency): I thank the committee for its invitation to talk a little bit about what we do with local government. The IDeA was formed in 1999, which means that we have three and a half years' experience of developing the work that we carry out. Our mission is to promote and support sustainable improvement from within local government, not to impose improvement on it. Our funding, which we bid for every year through the LGA, is mainly top-sliced from the rates support grant. We also charge local authorities for specific services. Because we bid each year for our funding, local government would be very quick to tell us—both orally and through the funding that we receive—if we were not doing a useful job.

All our interventions with local government are voluntary as far as local authorities are concerned. In other words, we are not part of the inspection regime. Although not all officers and members of local authorities are universally thrilled to see us, our relationship with local government tends to be that of a critical friend and we work hard to maintain that relationship.

There are five main strands to our work with local government. We produce information about websites and interactive discussion groups on the internet, and commission research such as the census of local authority members which, as our submission points out, is undertaken every two years. We also do more specific academic research into matters such as political leadership.

We produce publications every year such as a new guide for councillors; the quarterly "Modern Members Magazine", which goes to every elected member; and specific specialist publications on matters such as overview and scrutiny.

Most of our work during the past two years has been associated with new political management arrangements—around 90 per cent of local authorities in England and Wales operate a leader and cabinet system and there are few elected mayors. We make particular interventions: big ones, such as our local government improvement programme and peer reviews, and even bigger interventions with performance support packages for authorities that are either failing or are at risk of failing and need a lot of work to help them. We also do small pieces of work for councils who call us in for a half-day to work with elected members or officers on a specific topic. We work with top teams—officers and members—which is an important development in building capacity for the future.

We run national programmes, such as the leadership academy—about which I am happy to answer questions—and a new fast-track scheme for young councillors. We are establishing the black and minority ethnic councillors leadership group and we do a lot of manager development work. We run national awareness-raising initiatives, such as the good employer award and the charter for member development, to signal the changes that we need from other parts of society if local government is to improve.

We work in constant collaboration with other bodies that are interested in local government improvement, such as the new local government network, the Scottish local government information unit and, not least, the LGA. Laura Willoughby is here in her capacity as equalities chair of the LGA. She is also here to prove that we have some young, effective leaders in local government, although we do not have enough of them.

Councillor Laura Willoughby (Local Government Association): Members might want to think about their responsibility—as members of political parties and as local councillors—to change the face of the people who get elected. We must move away from the importance of whether someone has had a direct debit to the party for years and, instead, find people in the community who share values and who are active.

The council I sit on is considered to be one of the most representative. That has happened not by accident but by design.

A lack of mechanisms makes life hard for councillors. Considerable barriers are the lack of pensions, of a career structure, of provisions for disabled and old councillors and how their work affects their benefits.

We must bring faith back into public service. Nobody understands what a councillor does—if I left my seat, I do not know what job I could get because nobody understands what I do. There is little public knowledge about the job. Until we deal with such issues, we will not attract the right quality of people to local government—neither staff nor members.

The Convener: Thank you. You have spoken about what we are trying to achieve through our inquiry into renewing local democracy, which we hope will become an act.

Will you tell the committee more about the local government improvement programme? I know that two councils in Scotland—Highland and East Renfrewshire—have been involved in the programme, but please tell us more about what taking advantage of the programme means.

Judi Billing: The local government improvement programme was developed two and a half to three years ago and is based on the premise that people learn and develop best by learning from their peers. The IDeA puts together a team that consists of a local authority chief executive, elected members from different local authorities who represent the political colour of the council that the team is to go into, and one or two outside people, who are either from other public services or from industry. The team works with a council for an entire, intensive week, examining everything that the council does, drilling beneath the surface and talking to officers, members and external partners and stakeholders. How they feel about the local authority provides us with revealing information.

The team's work is measured against the benchmarks that we have developed for leadership, community engagement and similar issues. We then produce a feedback report, which we give on the spot, before we leave the site. A couple of weeks later, we produce much more detailed feedback for councils to work on. We go back six months later and a year later to help the council to conduct basic health checks on what it has been able to achieve as a result of the feedback. We might suggest further interventions as a result of our work. So far, about 130 local authorities have asked for our programme—some more than once. Many are asking for the programmes now, in the lead-up to the

comprehensive performance assessments, because the programme can act as a health check, highlighting the issues that might arise during Audit Commission visits.

Mr Harding: I am trying to get a feel for how the Improvement and Development Agency compares with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. What is your annual budget?

Judi Billing: I do not have the figures for our overall annual budget with me, but we will send them to the committee.

Mr Harding: What is your staff complement?

Judi Billing: That is an interesting question. The IDeA is the smallest organisation that I have worked for. Fewer than 200 people form the core of the organisation. A vast amount of our work is done by bringing in peer support. We bring members and officers from different authorities together and act as a conduit to enable relationships to grow.

Mr Harding: You said that your funding was predominantly top-sliced and that councils are charged fees. Does that mean that you are funded by central Government, rather than by councils, which is how COSLA is funded?

Judi Billing: Yes, in a sense. We must submit a bid for our share of the top slice to councils, which are able to tell us to go away.

Mr Harding: Therefore, your funding is allocated to you from within local authorities' budgets.

Judi Billing: Yes.

Mr Harding: Thank you.

I am interested in what your submission calls the "Fastrack" scheme for future local leaders",

particularly as I am so much older than the qualifying age group. I think that you referred to future council leaders. Is that correct, or were you referring to future community leaders?

Judi Billing: I was referring to future community leaders.

Mr Harding: So you were not specifically referring to future council leaders.

Judi Billing: I was, in the sense that the scheme is offered to young people who are already councillors. Work with that group falls within the remit of the IDeA, whereas work with people from outside local government does not fall within our remit.

Mr Harding: Have you any evidence that the scheme helps local authorities to retain councillors from that age group, who tend to do one term and then disappear?

Judi Billing: We cannot say yet. It is far too early to judge because we have just started work with the first group.

Mr Harding: I became a council leader in my early 50s, so I would have been excluded from the scheme. Has the scheme caused any jealousies or anxieties among established councillors who are outside the age group and who aspire to become leaders?

Judi Billing: Only when they misunderstand and think that they are to be offered nothing. Most people who aspire to leadership positions sign up for the leadership academy, through which we run 10 programmes a year. Laura Willoughby can speak about that.

Councillor Willoughby: I am considered an old hack now, so I go on courses at the leadership academy—there you go.

Mr Harding: Has there been a good take-up of the scheme? Do you think that it has been effective?

Judi Billing: I was thrilled that so many young councillors came out of the woodwork to join the scheme. I am talking about 21 and 22-year-olds, as well as those who are as old as 30.

Mr Harding: On the problem of attracting different types of people into councils, have you any evidence from England and Wales that political parties are taking specific action to encourage people from under-represented groups to stand for election as councillors?

Councillor Willoughby: As far as I know, there is no evidence that the parties are taking such action, although it is a big issue for discussion among all the parties. In political parties, we can sometimes get tied up in our own processes, which are not particularly useful in themselves. We all know that the perspective that our political parties take can vary from area to area.

I get annoyed when councillors from all parties turn round and say that they do not have many ethnic minorities or young people in their area. If they were to spend some time out there in an active campaign to find people who share their values—perhaps they might find them involved in community groups or on the board of governors of a playgroup—they could find people who are different. That would make a difference.

My council is an urban authority, so one would expect it to have a younger age profile. We have councillors from the age of 24 all the way up to those in their early 80s, so we have a nice spread. Exactly half of our councillors are men and half are women. We have six out gay councillors and five ethnic minority councillors. We are also probably the most tattooed group in the country.

Mr Harding: Which is your council?

11:15

Councillor Willoughby: It is Islington.

However, it would still be easy for us to have a council that was predominantly male and older and very white. Labour's selection processes in London meant that many of its ethnic minority councillors did not win selection, so the make-up of some other councils has changed quite a lot. We need to consider how we can change our processes to attract more people in.

Local government has its attractions. Councillors get some remuneration and help with child care. There is also positive stuff that councillors can do on personal development that will stand them in good stead if, after a term, they want to move on or move up in their political career.

We should try to tell people that they do not need to be overly educated to be a good councillor. If they have worked hard to fight for the tenants on their estate and can take the tenants with them, they should be able to move that on to the next level. As political parties, we have not tackled that; there is still a lot to be done in breaking down some of the armour with which we protect ourselves. We should not need to have loads of people who are on message. We need to think a little bit more about the communities that we are trying to represent.

Mr Harding: How far have you gone in trying to persuade the Government in England and Wales to devolve more powers to local councils?

Councillor Willoughby: The LGA is working hard for more devolution, which is a key issue. At the moment, my sole responsibility as a councillor is to deliver cuts year on year. That is not an attractive prospect for anyone at the best of times. The things that people complain about increasingly are the things that the Government is increasingly taking away from us.

I want our council to be given more responsibilities and more money, so that we can show what we can do to create a council that represents and serves the needs of the people who live in the area. Our needs will be different from those that are faced by a council in a rural area. The Government is trying to impose a one-size-fits-all style of local government on us, but we need a more flexible system. Perhaps people would then have some trust in the system, so that when they go to see their councillor, the councillor can actually do something. At the moment, we can only apologise and say, "There is nothing that we can do and, by the way, we are cutting even that nice bit next week."

Ms White: The fast-track scheme was mentioned. If my memory serves me right, Renfrewshire Council once had the two youngest councillors—who happened to belong to the SNP. I do not think that that record has been broken yet.

Mr Harding: Did they lose their seats?

Ms White: No, they still have their seats. They have just got a little bit older.

The fast-track scheme sounds a good idea, but if we are to get people from all over the community involved in politics, we need to start from before their membership of a political party. I know that the fast-track scheme is only just up and running, but have you any ideas about what information could be given to help to get community groups, rather than just political groups, involved?

Judi Billing: Our remit is to work with people who are already in local government, but that does not stop us joining forces with organisations such as the National Council for Voluntary Organisations to consider the needs of other people, such as school governors. We need to look at the deficit in volunteering across all sectors rather than just be concerned about getting people into local government. In my experience, there is now a culture that says that community participation is not the natural thing that one does of an evening after work. We join together in many different forums to try to influence a range of people. However, as Laura Willoughby said, there is a vast amount of work for the political parties to do before people even get selected to stand for local councils.

Councillor Willoughby: That is related to what we do with youth councils. Areas that have youth councils tend to produce larger numbers of people who start to understand the system. There comes a point when they become too old for youth councils—perhaps, at about 18, they have become a bit bored—but they cannot sit on a board of governors, stand for election, join the governing body of a college or sit on a regeneration board until they are 21.

We have a gap. We are working really hard to get young people up to a standard at which they can represent their communities, but we have nowhere to move them on to. We must find a way to streamline the system so that, once we have engaged and enthused young people, there are places to which we can lead them for specific interests or ways in which we can develop their knowledge and skills. In other words, we must not let them out of the system, but keep them there.

Ms White: We hope that, when young people move on from the stage that you described, we will have interested them enough for them to join a political party and know something about local community groups. If they move on from that

stage and get elected, they are just young councillors. Do you provide training programmes for that group?

Judi Billing: We do. It is interesting that the word “training” has been batted backwards and forwards a lot this morning. I distinguish between training and development programmes. Training is necessary for new councillors. They need training in quasi-legal functions, planning and IT skills. However, a lot of the work that they need to keep them interested—particularly to keep young councillors from dropping out after one term of office—is in our development programmes. That is how I like to describe the leadership academy, the fast-track scheme and the induction interventions that we make.

We have just done a London-wide induction programme. All the London boroughs could buy in for particular modules, which covered matters from quasi-judicial issues to how to do casework in the constituency, how to get surgeries going and how a councillor should behave differently in overview and scrutiny from how they used to behave in the committee system. Some modules in the series were about training, but many more were about development.

Historically, councils have been appalling at providing induction for new members. They are getting better. I have been invited to one council to do some work for the first time ever with the candidates before they are elected.

Councillor Willoughby: There are some interesting issues for young councillors who get involved in politics, as I did. I was elected four years ago when I was 24. That is it: my other career has gone. It hardly existed. I worked part time for the YMCA for the past two years and I am lucky now to be a paid member of the council executive. It is the only job in the world that I could lose overnight. Unlike MSPs and MPs, councillors do not get redundancy pay if they lose their seats. They can also lose them through internal elections.

How do councillors go back into the world of work and say that they have a lot of great skills, when most employers do not understand the job that they did? We need to ensure that improving perceptions is not just about improving how the public regard councillors and whether they want to become councillors, but about how employers regard the skills that councillors have built up. I, for one, am not sure what I would do to get a job with a comparable income if I lost my seat.

Most young people have to make a choice between getting a job that will get them a mortgage and becoming a councillor. If my mortgage lender knew that I could lose my job overnight, it might not have given me my

mortgage. There we go. Someone who wants to be in politics has to get round all sorts of things.

Dr Jackson: What is your relationship with COSLA? You obviously do not want to tread on COSLA's toes, but can you be involved in training and development in councils in Scotland?

Judi Billing: We have done the local government improvement programme. We always ensure that we do that with COSLA's agreement and support. If one of the outcomes of the committee's review and deliberations is that further IDeA-style work should be explored for Scotland, we would be happy to work with COSLA, suggest ways in which we have worked, or even come and join in if that was required. COSLA was made aware of the fact that we were coming here today and was perfectly happy with that arrangement. We keep in close contact with COSLA.

Dr Jackson: Can you say something about your training involvement with councillors in Scotland and about how your website might be accessed?

Judi Billing: Up to now, we have undertaken only a couple of local government improvement programmes. COSLA has been responsible for most of the work in Scotland.

We have an IDeA website, which gives information about our organisation and the sort of activities in which we are engaged. Just over a year ago, we launched at the LGA conference a knowledge website that contains a vast amount of information that is shared in local government. The website gives information on new structures that councils are trying and e-government initiatives, and it hosts some chat rooms—of the nicest kind—in which local councillors and officers can discuss various issues that are of importance to them at any given moment. It is important that, through initiatives such as the leadership academy, the cohorts who work together throughout the country get to know each other and want to support each other. I am trying to set up a web page for each cohort, as that is the easiest way for them to continue to network and to support each other after their programme has finished.

The Convener: The Scottish Parliament and one of the political parties have been positive in promoting women, to the extent that 37 per cent of MSPs are women. What ideas or processes have you initiated to target women, or has that not happened?

Councillor Willoughby: I do not think that we have done that as a council. I do not know whether Judi Billing offers any specific training. The political parties do not always look to develop women councillors; they look to develop parliamentary candidates, members of Parliament and assembly members.

Judi Billing: We have not formally targeted our programmes at women, although we are taking positive action with young people and black and minority ethnic groups. Interestingly, last year we had a far higher proportion of women on our leadership academy programmes than would be expected from the national population of councillors. That may be because of something subliminal in our marketing. It may just be that women are more open to learning, but I could not possibly say that.

Councillor Willoughby: Women always feel that they need more training, although that is not the case.

The Convener: You have talked about younger people, people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, women and people who are disabled. What about councillors who seem to have been in post for 100 years—although I am sure that they have not—who are stuck in their ways and will not change because they have always done things in particular ways? They may not be so old that we are giving them a window of opportunity to go, but sometimes they are the hard core of a council. How do we get to them?

Judi Billing: As I said, we are not welcomed universally. On a wet Tuesday evening in a small shire district where the officers have asked us to come and do some work on the representational role of councillors, some councillors will be jolly angry that somebody from the IDeA has come to tell them what they have always known and to talk about what they have been doing for 100 years. In such cases, if we can move a small distance from where somebody is to some new thoughts and ideas in one evening, that is the best that we can do. Some people will not change. New political management arrangements have set some people against change and perhaps people are standing down earlier than they would have done, although not earlier than they should have done.

The Convener: Were you involved in any training in the new structures?

Judi Billing: For the past two years, that has been the major focus of our work around the country.

The Convener: But that work has not been undertaken with all councils.

Judi Billing: Few councils have not availed themselves of our work at some level. We held huge simulation events for 80 or 90 councils, at which we brought together all the elected members, the chief officers and the external stakeholders to play, for a day, at what the new political management arrangements would be like. Those were high-risk events, but they were very successful.

Councillor Willoughby: It is important to try to strike a balance and not to make those councillors who are 55, white and male feel embarrassed about who they are and what they have done and achieved. I always try to be clear that we should not make people apologise for who they are. We should try to work with them to help them see how they can be catalysts for change in their authority. Those councillors need to recognise that, in order for the authority to improve, change has to happen. They also need to recognise that they need to take more of a back seat. However, given that it is difficult to find new talent, older councillors can feel that all the responsibility rests on their shoulders and that they cannot give up. We need a bit of give and take on that issue.

The Convener: We have exhausted all our questions. As part of our inquiry into renewing local democracy, we are asking whether councillors should have a salary and a pension when they retire. We are also considering whether they should be given some kind of recompense if they are not re-elected.

In Scotland, it is possible to get married at 16 and to vote at 18. It has been proposed that it should be possible to become a councillor at 18, but Richard Kerley, who wrote the report, balked a bit at that. Perhaps that was because his 18-year-old son was driving him mad at the time and he may not have wanted to think about his son being able to become a councillor. We are, however, giving serious consideration to that possibility. Young people have a contribution to make and it could be said that the earlier they make it, the better.

The committee is considering the kind of things that you have talked about this morning. We have a long way to go, but at least we are making an attempt to do something about local democracy. I thank you for your time. If we need to get in touch with you about anything, we will do so. I hope that you have a safe journey home.

11:31

Meeting suspended.

11:48

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome Steve Thomas, who is head of strategy policy for the Welsh Local Government Association. After he has made an introductory statement, I will open the floor to questions.

Steve Thomas (Welsh Local Government Association): I start by apologising for the fashionable gloom that underpins our written submission. In Wales, we have tried to generate

interest in the theme of renewing local democracy. However, when I was asked to give this presentation, I was reminded of a famous quote from Homer Simpson, who said that trying is the first step on the road to failure. Sometimes we feel like that when we try to renew local democracy and raise levels of participation.

I will briefly give some background to the WLGA. The association, which is partly made up of the Improvement and Development Agency, has 60 staff. We have an equalities unit, which is sponsored by the National Assembly for Wales, and we will shortly have a procurement unit and a health unit, which will also be sponsored by the National Assembly for Wales. Our data unit compiles local government statistics for Wales. Those units go alongside the association's traditional lobbying roles. We form part of the Local Government Association for England and Wales, but we are autonomous and take our own line on Welsh affairs.

In my written evidence, I tried to show that there are huge problems with representation in Wales, where one can see the residue of a certain form of politics. The people in Welsh councils are of a certain generation and have a style of politics that is traditionally associated with valley politics in south Wales and with the independent tradition of having no political alignment. We are disturbed by the fact that representation in Wales does not reflect the social and cultural background of the Welsh public. We aim to solve some of those problems, but that is a huge task.

The fact that only 19 per cent of councillors in Wales are women shows that there are significant problems, but there have been changes. The Assembly has led to a leap forward in balance. For example, the most powerful positions in the Assembly Cabinet are held by women, which is a progressive and welcome development. We seek to use the findings of a number of recent reports, particularly Dr Declan Hall's University of Birmingham report, which has created a new framework for Welsh councillors' allowances. We want to build on those reports to increase participation.

We propose a campaign to increase participation in local democracy and a package of reforms that, we hope, will mean that, although standing for a council will not become a path to riches, it will be a more attractive option for many people. My written evidence does not mention the recent report by the Commission on Local Government Electoral Arrangements in Wales. The commission proposes the introduction of the single transferable vote for local government, which the WLGA opposes, the lowering of the voting age to 16 and the lowering of the age at which people can stand for election to 18, both of

which we greatly welcome. We have given the report a mixed reception, but it adds to the great debate.

Our work on remuneration packages would create a reasonable basis, but we also propose distinct reforms such as the introduction of a dependant carers allowance so that more people can be reimbursed for the time that they spend in councils. We propose a pension scheme for Welsh councillors that would tie into a similar scheme that has been proposed in England, although in Wales it would apply to all members.

We also propose a severance scheme for councillors who are 65 or over, about which more detail is provided in our submission. That scheme, which has generated controversy, is based on a similar scheme in Ireland. We are working with the National Assembly for Wales to generate space on the issue and to allow people's work to be recognised, which is vital. I despair when I hear comments about unreconstructed councillors, because many people have given up careers to be councillors and have put in huge amounts of effort over the years. It is easy to be cynical about the system, but those people should be applauded for the work that they have done. The severance package that we propose is an attempt to recognise that work.

We try to push strongly on the equalities agenda—hence the creation of an equalities unit and the production of the equality standard. The equalities unit has been established to work with the 22 councils to promote equalities policies in Welsh local government. We want the unit to push the "Equality Standard for Local Government in Wales", which is a multilevel written document to which councils must aspire. We want that document to apply more widely in the public sector in Wales.

I hope that, in that short time, I have given you a flavour of some of the things that we are doing. We are running events on widening participation and a number of other themes. We are dealing with something slightly more deep rooted in terms of participation and people's willingness to go into politics. We want to examine that in the Welsh context.

The Convener: How far do you believe that the councils in Wales have embraced the Government's modernisation agenda, from the new political structures through to community leadership? It would be interesting for the committee to hear how elected members in Wales feel about moving from being providers, in a sense, to being enablers and taking on the mantle of community planning with the range of partners with which they will have to be involved.

Steve Thomas: Newport City Council was the first council in England or Wales to move towards

a cabinet structure. That was partly due to the leader of the Welsh Local Government Association, Sir Harry Jones, who very much supports the modernising impulse.

All 22 councils in Wales have a cabinet structure, but three have what is known as a board structure. In the Welsh context, the board structure is known as the fourth option. However, all the structures are a variant on executive models. They are all underpinned by overview and scrutiny committees. Many are underpinned by area committees.

I think that the move towards executives has been successful, although I suspect that part of the debate around the move has crowded out some of the work that should have been done on community planning. Some of the Welsh councils that have been more successful in community planning are those that did not have prolonged debates about moving to the executive model. They moved quickly and then got on to the next item on the agenda, which is community planning. That is a far more important element of the agenda, in our view.

There are some excellent examples of community planning dotted around Wales. Community planning in Wales is a curate's egg—it is good in parts and where it is excellent, it is really excellent. Some authorities, such as Caerphilly County Borough Council, Carmarthenshire County Council and Cardiff Council, are incredibly good at the community planning process. A huge range of things underpins that success. In Caerphilly, for example, there are business forums with 200 members and there are successful youth forums that are based on the concept of a youth parliament. In Cardiff, the capital congress attracts something in the region of 250 organisations. There is a diverse range of activities under the community planning framework.

Those are the leading examples. In other areas, people are not where they should be—I suspect that that is mirrored across England, Wales and Scotland. The WLGA is encouraging people to go down the community planning route, but another impeding factor has been the nonsense over best value that we have faced over the past few years. That has put an enormous amount of energy into processes and not much energy into outcomes. I hope that community planning will be seen to be the first among equals in relation to the major corporate programmes that councils are facing.

As you know, we in Wales have moved away from the process-led variant of best value that is emerging in England—the comprehensive performance assessment framework. We believe that that approach is an abomination. We are looking to put in place a programme for improvement that is locally owned and where local

change is self-directed.

The Convener: You talked about the range of forums in the community planning process. Do you have any evidence of pressure from a political group within that process?

Steve Thomas: I do not have any evidence of that. Many of the community planning processes are dominated by local authorities, but the authorities seem to be getting their heads around the idea that a community plan is not their plan. They are starting to recognise that community planning is not about the production of yet another plan. I do not know what the situation is in Scotland, but in Wales we need another plan like we need a hole in the head.

On community planning, we are looking to build a partnership-based inclusive process that brings on board the range of Assembly-sponsored bodies, voluntary sector bodies and private bodies that are producing a strategy for their local area. In the Welsh context, we argue that the 22 community plans that are produced should form the framework for national strategic development in Wales. I think that the Assembly is listening to that view. If the plan is owned by all the agencies at the local level, it will include all the local priorities. The Assembly is taking on board the argument that it should build on that.

The danger of producing a national plan is that it might not reflect the country's geography and its sheer variety. Wales faces exactly that problem and I suspect that the danger is probably more pronounced in Scotland. Language and geography are not the only differences between Blaenau Gwent in the south and Anglesey in the north. There is a cultural gulf.

The Convener: Do you have any evidence that some pressure groups that are engaged in the community planning process would bypass the local route and go straight to the Assembly?

12:00

Steve Thomas: The Wales Council for Voluntary Action has been successful in lobbying the Assembly. In Wales, three partnership councils are in place. The local government partnership council with the Assembly is a statutory partnership council; it is enshrined in the Government of Wales Act 1998. The two other partnership councils are a business partnership council and a voluntary sector partnership council. That means that the voluntary sector has a direct line into the Assembly, with the result that it can wield considerable influence. We do not have a problem with that. We are happy that the voluntary sector has such influence, because it is part of a groundswell upwards. The influence that was exerted before, particularly under the old Welsh

Office, formed part of a colonial relationship.

Dr Jackson: I want to ask about the equalities unit that you have set up, which sounds interesting. In setting up the unit, you have worked closely with the National Assembly for Wales. In your submission, you mention that you have already held seminars and have put together a list of factors that represent deterrents, hurdles and barriers to wider participation. How will you address the issue? On page 5 of your submission, you mention that the association's improvement arm will undertake a project before the 2004 local government elections in Wales. I guess that your approach will be tied in with that project. Please elaborate on how the equalities unit will develop and on how you will overcome some of the hurdles.

Steve Thomas: You must pardon my ignorance, because I do not know what the situation is in the Scottish Parliament, but in Wales the Equality of Opportunity Committee is one of a number of cross-cutting committees in the Assembly. Edwina Hart used to be responsible for equality of opportunity in Wales. She is the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities. I do not know whether it would be accurate to say that she is our version of Gordon Brown—in the Welsh context, she is slightly more powerful.

We have been working closely with the Assembly to form an equalities unit to implement a recognised standard. The purpose of the equalities unit is to act as an assisting tool for Welsh local government. The unit forms part of the Welsh Local Government Association and is funded by the Assembly. Its job is to ensure that the equalities agenda rolls out in Welsh local government. In Welsh local authorities, there are some brilliant examples of responses to equalities issues—in Swansea, in particular, the work that has been done on the Macpherson report is an example of best practice. Other Welsh councils are well behind on the equalities agenda, as the recent Audit Commission report concluded.

The hands-on job of the equalities unit involves rolling up its sleeves, getting out there and ensuring that councils come up to a certain standard—the equality standard. The unit is feeding back to us a range of issues. We seek to integrate the work of the equalities unit with Syniad, which is the improvement and development agency in Wales. Syniad is working on a range of peer reviews, which are associated with the Wales programme for improvement. Those reviews are throwing up the concept that we need more mentoring support for new councillors. That is becoming a key issue. We are looking to create such a resource. We are discussing with the Assembly the funding of a mentoring programme and provision of extra

support for local authorities that are struggling with some of the key agendas associated with the Wales programme for improvement.

From our point of view, all those things should be complementary in the way that they roll out. We are hoping to see over time a quantitative leap in the equalities agenda, local authorities' progress against the equality standard and member training, induction and development.

Dr Jackson: I have a follow-up question on seminars. Did you feel that you were attracting people whom you had not reached before to talk about local government and to consider becoming councillors?

Steve Thomas: Definitely. We arrived at a situation in which only a few councillors attended the widening participation seminars. We actively discouraged councillors from coming along, because we did not want to have one of those preaching-type events; we wanted people to learn from experience. We got a range of councillors—a council leader, an executive member and, I do not mean this in an insulting way, an ordinary back-bench member—to relay their experiences at the seminars. We drew participants from a wide range of social backgrounds. They included representatives of youth groups, the voluntary sector and community groups. We were not necessarily hoping to sign people up to stand for council at the next election, but we were hoping to raise awareness of what councils do and why that is important—the previous witness mentioned that.

If that message got across, and I think that it did, the seminars served their purpose. We have to follow that up with a more concerted campaign to show people how to become a councillor and we have to invest in that. We have to start thinking about more innovative ways of getting the message across, rather than just giving people leaflets. We have discussed with the Assembly the possibility of using a range of measures such as television adverts and radio campaigns. We have to be innovative about how we go about attracting people. If the severance scheme that we are talking about goes ahead, we could lose a lot of councillors in Wales.

Dr Jackson: Exactly. Thank you.

Ms White: I want to touch on the severance scheme. You are quite right to say that councillors are predominantly white and male. In Scotland, the average age of a councillor is 57 and in Wales it is 59. We have to attract younger people into councils and politics as a whole. We, too, have considered the Irish model. Do you have evidence that by introducing the severance scheme or the pension scheme you will attract new and younger councillors?

Steve Thomas: The jury is out. Last week, I spoke to two local authorities, one of which has 70

members and the other of which has 50 members. The authority with 70 members fears that it will lose 30 councillors in 2004 as a result of the severance scheme. The authority that has 50 members thinks that it will lose 25 councillors. We are talking about losing something like 50 per cent of councillors.

In the Irish scheme, the number of councillors who went out was much smaller. When the National Assembly for Wales proposed the scheme, it did not think that the proposal would attract some of the attention that it has attracted, particularly in terms of council membership. We have to do something. In some councils in rural Wales 50 per cent of the seats are uncontested already. There is a situation of almost pretend democracy, so we have to do something to revitalise the system.

The severance system is a brave stab at trying something new. It could be an utter disaster if it does not bring in a new range of councillors. However, it is also an acknowledgement of the work that councillors have done over the years. While I was taking part in a TV debate in Wales I was harangued by a 75-year-old councillor who thought that the whole concept was an insult to the process of representative democracy. The point that I am trying to get across is that that person had given his life to the council, so why should he not be awarded for some of the work that he put in? He made the point that his employment had suffered and he had never built up a proper pension. The severance scheme involves a maximum payment of £15,000. It will create huge headlines in the local press in Wales but, in the great scheme of things, it is not too much to ask for a lifetime's service.

Ms White: You said that your submission was full of doom and gloom. You also mentioned a 75-year-old councillor who opposed the severance scheme. Are councillors hostile to the idea of severance pay or redundancy?

Steve Thomas: The vast majority of councillors over 65 would welcome it, as they would like to retire. The point that we are trying to make is that many councillors will lose out even if they take £15,000. If a councillor stayed on for another four years as a cabinet member, they could get a great deal more than £15,000. The average cabinet member in Wales earns about £20,000 a year.

Most councillors see the severance scheme as a progressive measure. We see it as a one-off experiment in the Welsh context. It is a risky strategy and we want to see what implications it has. However, unless we do something significant to shake some of the existing cultures, we will struggle to attract people into local government. We will have to wait to see whether the strategy works.

Ms White: You said that this is a one-off experiment. Would you not want the measure to be enshrined in legislation or in a voluntary code?

Steve Thomas: The association believes that this should be a continuing scheme, rather than a one-off. However, the Assembly is not prepared to make that commitment—and I understand why. When we were asked to choose between a one-off scheme and nothing at all, we chose a one-off scheme.

Mr Harding: According to your report, one of the reasons for introducing the severance package is to create space and opportunity for new members. Has consideration been given to the suggestion that AMs who are also councillors should give up their role as councillors?

Steve Thomas: The member may not know this, but there is a great debate in Wales about the number of politicians in the country. There are far more councillors in Wales than in Scotland. There are councils in Wales with 80 members, the Assembly has 60 members, and there are three MEPs and X number of MPs. We are starting to feel that there is political overload in Wales.

I know that this will go down like a rat sandwich with elected politicians, but the association is seeking codification of who does what. We want the constitutional architecture of Wales to be sorted out, because at the moment the division of responsibilities is not clear. Some Assembly members see their role as being to add strategic value. Others see themselves as glorified councillors in Cardiff bay, which is proving problematic.

I suspect that similar debates may be under way in Scotland. At the moment we are trying to codify the division of responsibilities, so that there is clarity about what each level of representation does. We want to ensure that the architecture of government in Wales makes sense to people. One of the turn-offs in Welsh politics at the moment is that the constitutional architecture does not make sense to people. No one is quite certain who does what. Such incoherence is not sustainable in the long term.

Mr Harding: Is some of the confusion created by the fact that 40 per cent of AMs are also councillors? You are trying to persuade the public that both jobs are full-time jobs.

Steve Thomas: We have argued that we are pleased that people from local government backgrounds have been elected to the Assembly. Many members of the Scottish Parliament also have strong local government backgrounds. A number of council leaders are members of the Assembly.

The member's question should be directed at

the political parties, which have rules governing whether members may serve as AMs and councillors at the same time. I have a view on the issue and share some of Mr Harding's sentiments, but this is a matter for the political parties.

Mr Harding: I agree totally. What do your proposals for remuneration and special responsibility allowances cost compared with current expenditure?

12:15

Steve Thomas: Under the new Hall recommendations, each council will receive additional revenue of about £300,000. There is a range. Some councils, such as Newport City Council, have few costs because they were already on the level of basic allowance that was suggested. Other councils, such as Flintshire County Council, had a basic allowance of £3,000, so the additional cost of an allowance of up to £10,000 has been massive. The allowance has been uprated for inflation recently, which has been a further cost.

Mr Harding: Has the money to implement the changes come from within the existing Welsh block?

Steve Thomas: Yes—allegedly, the money is in the standard spending assessment.

Mr Harding: Could you expand on the issue that you refer to in your submission as "over regulation and inspection"? How have the Office for Standards in Education—OFSTED—social services inspections, best-value inspections and corporate performance assessments influenced council membership?

Steve Thomas: In the next three years, we will spend £27 million in Wales on inspectorates, including the Audit Commission, the best-value inspectorate, Estyn—the Welsh equivalent of OFSTED—and the social services inspectorate for Wales. There are a couple of other inspectorates. The other day, we discovered a new one—allegedly, there is an inspectorate for archives. In the best-value context, our view was that we were being over-inspected, or inspected out of sight.

Welsh local government clearly recognises the value of external regulation, which we see as validation for public assurance. However, we do not want an inspection regime that is based on a one-size-fits-all principle. Inspectors went into local authorities to conduct 20-day inspections on corporate marketing and public relations reviews, for example, but the cost of those inspections was not justified. In the new Welsh programme for improvement, we have asked for an inspection regime that is based on risk and risk assessment. We want inspection to be proportionate to risk.

There is no point applying a one-size-fits-all approach to inspection.

The WLGA has a broader philosophy—we are somewhat worried by the growth of inspectorates. The comprehensive performance assessment process in England epitomises that growth—in one sense, it is the ultimate flag of convenience for centralisers. We are greatly worried about the Audit Commission's role in judging councils. Irrespective of whether the Audit Commission's final judgment of a council is "good", "striving", "poor" or "fair"—or whatever terminology it uses at present—the judgment is based on subjective criteria and a fundamental distrust of local government. Our relationship with the Welsh Assembly Government is much more based on trust than that, and we want to work in partnership with the Welsh Assembly Government to produce a slightly different model of public sector reform. Hence, the role of the Audit Commission in Wales is not as profound as it is in England.

Mr Harding: You mention your relationship with the Assembly, which has been built up through mutual respect and is based on trust. How has that relationship been developed?

Steve Thomas: The devolution settlement in Wales lends itself to a slightly more privileged position for Welsh local government. The National Assembly for Wales does not have the powers that the Scottish Parliament has; it has powers only to deal with secondary legislation. The result is that local government is, if you like, the front-line service delivery arm of the Welsh Assembly, although many of my colleagues in Welsh local government would not thank me for saying that.

The key priorities for the Assembly are similar to those of the Scottish Parliament: education, social services and housing, all of which sit within local government. If we are to achieve the public sector reform that we want in Wales, it is fundamental that both elected tiers of government work together, particularly given the fact that Wales is a small country. There are only 3 million of us on our side of Offa's dyke and it would be a tragic let-down for the Welsh people if local government and the Assembly did not work together.

Dr Jackson: You mentioned education. We are interested in education for citizenship and civic education, and in how they might help to involve more people in local democracy. I assume that the same things that happen in England happen in Wales. How are you developing education for citizenship and civic education?

Steve Thomas: The approaches are similar, but there are distinctive issues in the Welsh education agenda—for example, we will talk about the Welsh baccalaureate over the next period, which is topical in the light of the recent scandal over A-

level results. We have done a range of things, for example in respect of free school milk.

We want civic education. Years ago, there were school courses on the British constitution, for example, but we seem to be failing now. I was taught in a college by the former Secretary of State for Wales, who used to teach A-level politics, if you can believe that. That is a strong background.

I am interested in things outside the formal education system. The Workers Educational Association is still massively active in Wales and there is still a tradition of learning outside universities. Such activities must be encouraged. We think that there cannot be a noisy public conversation about supporting democracy through the formal schools process—we want the conversation to be wider and we want a range of organisations to take it up. Recently, I spoke at the University of the Third Age's conference in Wales, which is probably one of the best debates that I have attended in 10 or 15 years.

Dr Jackson: I have a supplementary question. From what I have read about what is happening in England and from what you are saying, you seem to be thinking of extending education much more into the community. Are there any initiatives for schoolchildren, for example, to work in the community?

Steve Thomas: The universities are doing things. For example, in the south Wales valleys, there is the valleys gateway scheme, which aims to attract young people into the university environment. It comprises a humanities element and a more formal education qualifications element and has been done in partnership with the Assembly. It is a matter of getting out into communities and getting people studying at community level. That is a progressive approach and will be seen as one of the Assembly's major reforms since its inception.

Ms White: If we are to attract people to local government and have them do a good job, they must be provided with training and development. We heard Mr Scholes of Renfrewshire Council say that only 27 out of 40 councillors picked up on training. How has training and development developed in Wales? Do you have any problems with councillors who will not be dragged along to training sessions?

Steve Thomas: We have a problem with a senior leader in Wales who will not use the word "training". He thinks that training is not needed, as being elected by the public involves training. We tend to use the word "development". Many councillors have already had an education in their party-political spheres through standing for councils.

Syniad is a training and development body that does a variety of modules in a variety of training streams. In 2004, there will be a huge emphasis on member induction. We no longer want members to be thrown in at the deep end in councils. They should not have to wait for five years to go into a committee and have to work out—with a bit of luck—what they are doing in the meantime. We want councillors clearly to understand where and what they are as soon as they walk into a council.

We discussed the leadership academy in Wales this morning. There is scrutiny training—there is an overview, which is almost like that in Scotland. However, in Wales, the process is not functioning as it should. I suspect that I am teaching members to suck eggs in saying that it is difficult for councillors who have taken decisions in the old committee processes to get their heads around that role. Not many councillors find scrutiny particularly rewarding. That links back to schemes such as the severance scheme.

With training and development modules in particular, we are trying to get across the message that scrutinising can mean an incredibly powerful role, particularly when it links into the community planning framework. In Wales, there will shortly be a new national health service that will be based on the boundaries of the 22 local councils. For the first time ever in Wales, there will be an injection of democracy into local health boards, as four local authority representatives will sit on them.

We tell councillors that they need to understand the processes in which they are involved. In respect of the scrutiny process, we ask councillors to get the chief executive of a trust or the chair of a health board in front of them so that they can ask that chief executive or chair about their priorities. We also ask councillors why they do not adopt the scrutiny role that is played by the select committees in the House of Commons. Those committees bring a process of forensic scrutiny into play that subjects policy makers, particularly non-elected ones, to account. Despite the worthwhile nature of that argument, it is difficult to get it across.

If I am to put our cards firmly on the table, I suspect that that role would be far more rewarding for councillors than sitting in committees and sticking their hands up when they have grouped before on a decision.

Ms White: Will the scrutiny process and the training and development processes be voluntary or will everyone have to undergo them? Have you had any success in that respect with any of your councillors or local councillors?

Steve Thomas: The take-up by councillors of

Syniad courses is brilliant, especially given that attendance is voluntary. There is a great admiration for Syniad in Wales, which may be down to the personalities or to the way in which it was set up. Now that Syniad is part of the Welsh Local Government Association, our 22 members are conscious that, as they are paying for courses, they should use them. There are only about two councils that seem reluctant to get Syniad through their front doors and that have taken up courses only in a limited way.

The first part of the Wales programme for improvement is a whole-authority assessment. Indeed, Syniad and the IDeA are undertaking 17 whole-authority assessments. That shows the hold that Syniad has on council cultures, which is a splendid move forward.

The Convener: I was interested to hear that your new health boards will have the same boundaries as local authorities. We have discussed that, perhaps not in the committee, but in other places. I was also interested to hear of your dialogue with the Assembly about television advertising and how to get across to people that being a councillor is not what they think it will be. We could pursue that way of working.

As you were sitting in the public gallery before you gave your evidence, you would have heard discussion of some of the issues that were raised earlier. Some of them are set out in the “Renewing Local Democracy” document.

Your evidence was very helpful. Thank you for coming all the way from Wales to give it. I hope that you have a safe journey home.

12:27

Meeting continued in private until 12:40.

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