

PROCEDURES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 26 March 2002
(*Morning*)

Session 1

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PROCEDURES COMMITTEE

6th Meeting 2002, Session 1

CONVENER

Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)

*Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD)

*Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP)

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Professor David McCrone (Adviser)

WITNESSES

Councillor David Alston (Highland Council)

Councillor Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire Council)

Mr Alistair Bruce Dodds (Highland Council)

Councillor Audrey Findlay (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor Len Ironside (Aberdeen City Council)

Councillor Rob Murray (Angus Council)

Douglas Paterson (Aberdeen City Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

John Patterson

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mark MacPherson

LOCATION

The Chamber

Scottish Parliament

Procedures Committee

Tuesday 26 March 2002

(Morning)

[THE DEPUTY CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:34*]

Consultative Steering Group Inquiry

The Deputy Convener (Mr Kenneth Macintosh): Good morning. Welcome to the sixth meeting in 2002 of the Procedures Committee. I thank everyone for attending. I have just received apologies from two of our colleagues—Frank McAveety and Gil Paterson—who unfortunately cannot join us this morning. However, we will proceed.

I thank all the witnesses for coming to give evidence. I also thank their many colleagues in local government who have submitted evidence. The witnesses have come to discuss our inquiry into the implementation of the consultative steering group principles.

Councillor Anderson from the City of Edinburgh Council is not here yet, but I wanted to quote from that council's submission, which makes a good comment:

"Evidence is sometimes taken in the traditional manner of each group or deputation being given a time slot in turn. However, where various organisations submitting evidence have sat round the table together there has been added value."

That is what I would like to happen this morning. I would like everyone to give their opening statements, but I will convene the meeting more as a round-table discussion. All witnesses should feel free to contribute at any stage in the proceedings. We will take the opening statements in alphabetical order by council. I invite Councillor Ironside from Aberdeen City Council to go first.

Councillor Len Ironside (Aberdeen City Council): Good morning. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to join you in this process. It is indicative of the openness of the Scottish Parliament that it lays itself open to scrutiny in such a forum. The views that I will give are ultimately mine as leader of Aberdeen City Council. I will try to reflect what I believe to be a wider view, although I suspect that a spectrum of views exists throughout the council, reflecting the different perspectives of elected members. I will

also try to reflect the views of the wider community in Aberdeen.

I find the question of how well the Parliament has shared power difficult to answer in simple terms. I presume that we must compare the Parliament's performance to some benchmark. Compared with the old Scottish Office, the Scottish Parliament is clearly far better at power sharing—the situation has improved considerably. If the comparison were with expectations of the Scottish Parliament when it was set up, my answer would be twofold. First, the Parliament's performance is better than we feared. There was concern that the establishment of the Parliament would intensify the centralisation of power, with the Parliament controlling key services such as education, police, social work and fire services. We were told that that would not happen and it has not happened.

Secondly, if I am asked whether power sharing has gone as far as we hoped, my answer is that it has not done so thus far. There are two areas in which the Parliament could do better and both are within its grasp. The first concerns the forthcoming local government bill. Do not mess around. Give us a real power of general competence, which is central to the legitimacy of any level of government and marks out those parts of the world in which subsidiarity works. The second area concerns the review of local government finance. If we do not gain effective, accountable funding, we will not have the power to deliver what our communities aspire to. I welcome the fact that the Parliament has, in essence, defied the Executive on that issue and I look forward to tangible outcomes from the process.

The committee will realise that I come with the knowledge of the fairly strong feeling among the public that those in power deem Aberdeen and the north-east to be a provincial area and pay little attention to our problems because they think that we are doing all right. The Parliament must be aware of how powerful that feeling is in the public psyche. The challenge to the Parliament is not to reinforce that perception by its actions.

There are real issues about accountability. Those issues may not be the specific responsibility of the Scottish Parliament, but they form part of the wider scene within which parliamentary politicians will all be judged. Although I do not think that people are really aware of which powers have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament and which powers are reserved to Westminster, frankly that does not matter. More important is the fact that most people neither know of nor understand the distinction between the executive and the legislative on which the Scottish Executive and the Parliament are founded. If they do not grasp that, they will not appreciate the whole

system of checks, balances and accountability that you seek to create, even given some of the major successes that you have had in that area.

Within the Parliament's structure, there is a lack of accountability for quangos. Although we can argue about the number of quangos, I feel that in key areas such as the enterprise network and Communities Scotland the power of quangos has increased while their accountability has diminished. Such a situation will increasingly cause difficulties.

As for corporate accountability, although we are rightly being asked to work more corporately between services in the local authority and between key partners and across sectors in our city, the same thing is not happening across the parliamentary committees or Executive departments. It is vital that people perceive that such work is being carried out, and quickly.

I am not sure that I am best placed to comment on the accountability of individual MSPs in representing their constituents. My impression is that the constituents in my area are well represented. Indeed, we might argue that, because of the list system, they are over-represented. Members should see the high number of MP and MSP inquiries that we have to deal with in the chief executive's office.

In our eyes, the Parliament has probably been most successful in the area of accessibility, openness and responsiveness—or, at least, in meeting the first two of those aspirations. Aberdeen has hosted well-received meetings of the Finance Committee and the Transport and the Environment Committee. We also visited the Public Petitions Committee and were well treated by the convener and committee members. Furthermore, we supported a group of our school students who gave evidence to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, which was felt to be a positive experience. However, it is a little premature to rule on responsiveness, as we await the outcome of our various representations. We have had good access to ministers, but we have sometimes found it difficult to deal with their officials. Although the experience varies considerably, there is a feeling that not all the points that we raise actually reach ministers.

On the final question about review, self-assessment and monitoring, I am not sure that an annual review is warranted. However, the Parliament's success in delivering policy outcomes should be constantly reviewed, with reports on performance published from time to time. Any review of the Parliament's processes, and the review process itself, would require a longer cycle of about two years or more, especially as the Parliament beds in.

While I have the microphone, I just want to say that I will warmly welcome the Parliament when it arrives in Aberdeen in May.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you, Councillor Ironside. I hope that you enjoy our hospitality today as well. I ask Councillor Findlay to speak on behalf of Aberdeenshire Council.

Councillor Audrey Findlay (Aberdeenshire Council): I appreciate the committee's invitation to attend today and am impressed to find that even the bottles of water—from Findlay's—bear my name. That is a good start.

Until now, Aberdeenshire Council has been involved twice with parliamentary committees. Our director of finance has given evidence to the Local Government Committee and, more recently, our chief executive raised a complaint that was investigated by the Standards Committee.

The key principles under discussion are excellent and the new Parliament is going a long way towards making them a reality. However, although the Parliament is mostly doing well, it could do better in certain areas. For example, on sharing power, although the people of Scotland, the Executive and civic society are all mentioned in the CSG report, where is the place for local government?

The part that local government plays must be recognised. For example, since 1999, there has been a significant development in partnership working involving the different tiers of government, other public agencies and the voluntary sector. The joint futures project, which is being driven by the Executive, is a good illustration of that. Parliament should recognise that we must come into the loop if we are to close it. Community planning is vital. Local government must be given its place in the governance of Scotland in general and in community planning specifically, because local authorities are the lead bodies.

09:45

I very much welcomed the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. I do not enjoy some of the critics' comments on the Parliament and I do not think that you have been given enough time to bed in. There have been many new initiatives. That is good, but the consultation period for such initiatives is often very short. That problem could be overcome by more frequent engagement between the Executive, the Parliament and local government.

The committee structure is making everything much more participative, as the invitation to us to give evidence today illustrates. The role of the Local Government Committee is particularly important. As Len Ironside said, the inquiry into

local government finance came up with some excellent findings. I hope that the Executive will recognise that, take seriously and investigate the issues that were highlighted and bring the recommendations to fruition. That will demonstrate how the different layers can work together. Like Len Ironside, I am not sure how much cross-committee activity goes on to provide a more corporate view of issues that arise.

Ministers do not always appear to act in a corporate fashion, as they pay close attention to their portfolios. The Parliament's committee system could help to change that. I believe that local government needs to have a dialogue with the committee system of the Parliament. Perhaps we should even bypass the Executive at times, because it is in dialogue with the committees that we can get a real debate going, allowing a bottom-up approach to policy making.

There are times when people in local government are sceptical about the role of civil servants who work with ministers. Those civil servants are too influential and have not moved on since reorganisation and the establishment of the new Parliament in Scotland—they are still operating in the old way. Local government is not perfect, but we are not all bad. Similarly, not all civil servants are bad, but there are dinosaurs in both camps that need to be cleared out.

The public have shared power through the Public Petitions Committee, which has given ordinary people the opportunity to raise issues of concern to their communities. I do not believe that the public are clear at all about the distinction between the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament. We all still have a job of work to do on that.

MSPs sometimes create unnecessary work for local government officers. I recently asked for some statistics from my council. Between January and May 1999, the council received 166 MPs' letters but, between January and May 2001, we received 102 queries through the chief executive alone. Other queries are also taken up. We sometimes feel uneasy about the public perception that MSPs have a role in such matters as planning applications, which we deal with in a quasi-judicial way. Sometimes the public bypass councillors and ask their MPs or MSPs to write letters, which are not always readily understandable, shall we say, by councillors.

Our chief executive is disappointed in the result of the Standards Committee's investigation into his complaints over an incident during a by-election in Aberdeenshire last September. The concerns of the individual member of the public involved were dealt with, but I felt that the concerns of our officers were dismissed with little discussion—I have seen the committee's report. Officers have

no comeback; they cannot stand up in public and speak in the same way as politicians can. We felt a bit disillusioned with the committee system because of that.

I wanted to find out what our education service felt about accessibility for young people and schools. Schools in Aberdeenshire gave a good response to questions on that issue. In primary schools, people-in-society projects were started and several secondary schools have visited Edinburgh, which was a good experience for the pupils and gave them a real feeling for the way in which decisions are arrived at and how the Parliament works. MSPs are good at visiting schools, which helps with the curriculum and allows pupils to get to know their elected representatives.

Like Len Ironside, I welcome the fact that committees of the Parliament have made trips outside Edinburgh. Members of the Rural Development Committee attended a meeting in Laurencekirk. Again like Len, I am pleased that the Parliament is coming to Aberdeen. I hope that members will have the opportunity to come out into Aberdeenshire to see what is going on. There is a lot of close working between the shire and the city—through the local enterprise forum, for example.

An annual audit of how principles are being put into practice has been proposed. I wondered whether having an action plan annually might not be a bit too much, but it would be no bad thing to have an action plan. Members may want to consider that.

Thank you for listening to me; I hope that I will be able to participate in the debate.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you, Councillor Findlay. I hope that all the councillors will continue to make generous offers of hospitality as we go round. We should have invited more of you.

Councillor Rob Murray (Angus Council): I, too, would like to begin by thanking the committee for inviting my council to attend today. I am accompanied today by Angus Council's head of administrative services, Charlie Hood.

I will begin by making some general comments before highlighting some specific points from our response to your consultation paper. Although your committee's inquiry is essentially about the Parliament, some of my comments will be directed at the Executive because, clearly, the Executive is elected by the Parliament and should be accountable to the Parliament, so the Parliament itself is responsible for the whole of Scottish central Government.

Angus Council feels that the Parliament has not so far embraced local government as a power-

sharing partner in the way that it should have done. However, since we made that comment in our submission in August, there have been some signs that things are changing. An example has been the Executive's willingness to listen to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and others on the content of the forthcoming local government bill.

The Parliament should take the lead in clarifying the respective roles of councillors, constituency MSPs, list MSPs, MPs and MEPs. Committee members have already heard about the confusion over that. Clarification may help people to understand the role of the Parliament.

We also feel that the Parliament should exercise some control over the rash of new Executive initiatives, especially as many of them impact on local government. We feel that the rate at which we have been hit with consultation documents and the time that we have been given to respond to them have not been conducive to the Executive receiving good responses.

Not all my comments today will be negative. The council acknowledges and recognises the potential for the Parliament to offer effective scrutiny of a range of Scottish public bodies. Power sharing is discussed on pages 2 and 3 of our response. The council is disappointed that no serious attempt has been made to reduce the role of quangos or to democratise them, but we welcome the Scottish Parliament's less formal and intimidating procedures. We hope that that trend will continue and that the informal approach will be developed further.

We welcome the cross-cutting nature of many of the Parliament's committees. The scrutiny role of the committees is evident. We have limited experience of the dual inquiry and legislative scrutiny role of committees, but it appears to be working well in practice. Despite what has been said by other councils, we are disappointed that most of the business is still conducted in Edinburgh. We would like the Parliament to hold more meetings around the country.

We particularly welcome the opportunity to give evidence to committees such as the Procedures Committee. That is a valuable opportunity and I am sure that local government as a whole welcomes it. The council is heartened by the success of the Public Petitions Committee, which has opened up a line of communication between the public and the Parliament.

The Parliament could do more to share power effectively with civic society. As a significant member of society, local government must be recognised publicly as an equal partner. The Public Petitions Committee provides only a limited opportunity for the public to share the power of the

new Parliament. That area should be expanded.

Local experience in Angus has shown that the public do not understand the distinction between the Executive and Parliament. In our paper we mentioned the debate on the fishing industry and the subsequent vote by the Parliament, which was confusing to many of our constituents.

The cross-cutting approach to issues is welcome, but there is some confusion regarding ministerial responsibility for certain functions. Our mailbag suggests that MSPs are active in representing their constituents, but there remains confusion about the responsibilities of list MSPs and constituency MSPs. The Parliament has tried to take seriously the regulation of members' behaviour. We welcome the establishment of the Standards Committee.

Angus Council believes that the Executive is guilty of recycling money and dressing up resources by announcing the same money several times over. That is a particular problem for local government because everyone thinks that we have been given more money than we have. That does not help anyone. We are appalled at the spiralling costs of the new Parliament building at Holyrood. The council and the public perceive that there is a lack of public accountability. I hate to think what would happen to me and my colleagues if a project of ours were to get so out of hand.

We congratulate the Parliament on the steps that it has taken to publicise its activities. The Parliament's website is clear and easy to use. The council welcomes and acknowledges the encouragement that the Parliament has given to participation through the committee system. Our councillors and officers have often appeared before parliamentary committees to give evidence. We would never have been afforded that opportunity at Westminster. It also appears that the Parliament has established more appropriate working patterns than Westminster.

The establishment of the Equal Opportunities Committee is a highly significant and welcome step, which we applaud. However, it is too early in the life of the Parliament to judge the effectiveness of the Equal Opportunities Committee or any of the other committees and their impact on the consciousness of Scottish society.

As we indicated in our written response, there is a danger that the Parliament might become too inward looking if an annual audit is conducted. However, monitoring is necessary and it might be appropriate to conduct a review once in each four-year cycle of the Parliament. I may have repeated points made by other councils and by COSLA. If so, that merely emphasises the strength of feeling that exists in local government on those issues.

10:00

Councillor Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire Council): Like the other witnesses, I thank the Procedures Committee for giving me an opportunity to present some of the views of Clackmannanshire Council. I will keep my remarks brief, like the written submission that the council submitted. Maybe there is a point in that: we are a small council that does not have a large number of policy officers to formulate the number of responses that the Parliament and the Executive would like. At the moment we are overloaded. Some of the written submissions that the committee has received from other councils make the same point. That probably has something to do with the relative youth of the Parliament.

We have had a generally positive experience of the Parliament and feel that it is far more accessible than central Government in Edinburgh used to be. It is certainly more accountable—it is very hard for MSPs and representatives of the Executive to hide in the way in which ministers were able to hide before.

The Public Petitions Committee has already been mentioned. We think that it was a very good idea to establish such a committee and we intend to do the same thing ourselves. That is an example of local government learning from the Parliament.

We sometimes find the weight of consultation a burden. Councils do the same thing to one another—we are always being asked to provide benchmarking information—but it is a potential problem. As we make clear in our written submission, it is easier to respond to a consultation exercise if one knows what impact that response will have. Some method for ensuring that councils get systematic feedback on the responses that they have made would be valued.

Our biggest concern relates to the sharing of power, and the rest of my comments will be about that concept. We believe that there is insufficient understanding of what pluralist democracy requires in respect of local government. Local government has its own mandate and should have a place in the governance of a country, but we often feel that that is missed. There is still a hangover from the previous centralised system, which is perhaps seen at its worst in relation to the question of ring fencing. In our view, ring fencing is a negation of the concept of sharing the power. Local government has its own mandate and ring fencing is the imposition of someone else's mandate. We are not saying that it is always illegitimate, but the extent to which ring fencing exists is a negation of the idea that we have our own mandate.

I support Councillor Ironside's comments on the general power of competence as described in the draft local government bill. We are concerned that the bill contains so many provisions that limit, circumscribe and check the power of competence. We have made that clear in our response to the draft bill.

In the past our MSPs have given us some problems by talking very loudly to the local media about generous settlements. I know that there may be political debate about whether settlements are generous. However, because people see councils making cuts and hiking up council tax, they know that something is wrong somewhere. Statements of the sort that I have described blur the lines of accountability, making it difficult for people to see what is happening and where it is happening. We have a problem with our constituency MSP, who attacks the council on a regular basis. Given that the principle of parity of esteem has been agreed, comments such as "You're a bunch of amateurs" do not do much for local government or for the relationship between central Government and local government, regardless of the parties involved.

We have tried to set up regular meetings with MSPs from all parties, but we have not had a very good experience—unlike the other council representatives from whom we have heard, who said that they were overloaded with inquiries. We organised meetings in Alloa, which were badly attended. We then decided to hold a meeting in Edinburgh every six weeks, but nearly all those meetings had to be cancelled because MSPs could not make them. We have done our best to get the right venue and the right time.

We have had a very good experience of the Local Government Committee. We think that that committee is thoughtful and informed—it knows what it is talking about on local government. On the local government bill, our view is that it is essential that the Parliament and the Executive respect the views that the Local Government Committee expresses. I do not agree with everything that will be in the bill, but it is important that the Local Government Committee's views are not dismissed before they are even considered. By and large, local government trusts the Local Government Committee and the committee's understanding of local government has credibility, not least because of the involvement of Trish Godman.

There is much about the Parliament that we think is good. We understand the difference between the Parliament and the Executive, but I share others' views that the public may not understand that difference to the same extent.

The Procedures Committee is more than welcome to come to Clackmannanshire. I think

that we were the first council to invite every MSP to come to our council area and we were one of the first councils to invite a committee to our area. It is a matter of some disappointment that a committee has yet to visit Clackmannanshire. The area also seems to be something of a Bermuda triangle when it comes to visits from ministers. We are an SNP council, but we will not bite your head off. Any minister or MSP would be more than welcome and we are keen for any committee to come to Alloa to take evidence. I thank the committee again for the invitation to come to your meeting today.

The Deputy Convener: I thank Councillor Brown for his comments and for his invitation.

We have a few late arrivals, so, for the moment, our final witness is Councillor Alston from Highland Council.

Councillor David Alston (Highland Council): I do not want to repeat what we said in our submission—I would rather expand on one or two points—but our genuine sense of pleasure in the openness and approachability of both the Executive and the Parliament bears repetition. We also have a sense that MSPs are generally down to earth. I attended an event that was organised by one of the Parliament's committees at which everyone wore badges that showed only first names. Most people who attended that event were not aware who the MSPs were until fairly far into the day and it is good to see people who do not stand on their dignity and who are willing to be down to earth. We welcome that approach and we hope that it can be built on.

My comments will echo much of what has been said already. I will focus on the notion of sharing power. I have some worries about whether we are serious about sharing power between local government, civic society, the Parliament and the Executive. I have particular worries about the local government bill.

A number of points have been picked up already, but I will add to them by drawing attention to the fact that if we are to be serious about power sharing, the duty of community planning must apply not just to local government and other bodies but to ministers. Otherwise, community planning will simply become a tool for ministers to use if they so wish, whereas the intention ought to be one of setting the architecture for the way in which power will be exercised. The duty of community planning should apply to all the partners who are involved in that process.

If we are to extend power sharing to civic society, greater attention needs to be paid to the role of community councils, which are statutory bodies. We have been disappointed by the way in which the McIntosh commission's

recommendations on community councils have not so far been taken up by the Executive. I hope that that lack of response can be balanced by the actions of the Parliament and its committees.

I know that community councils work better in some parts of Scotland than in others. In our area, they work well. They are a vital part of civic society in a rural area that has a dispersed population. We must build on them. If they do not work well in some areas, they should not be ignored—something should be done to try to get them to work or to find some other way of engaging people at the local level.

I echo a comment that was made about the civil service and community councils. The recent consultation document "Getting Involved in Planning" should have been sent to all community councils in Scotland because they are statutory consultees on planning issues. As far as I know, that did not happen because the officials involved simply did not know how to go about contacting community councils. In my view, that was a fairly major failure in procedure if we are trying to engage with civic society.

The notion of subsidiarity has been mentioned. Let me make a fairly theoretical, but nevertheless important, point. The original definition of subsidiarity does not mention devolution of power; it talks about arrogation of power. For example, higher bodies arrogate to themselves powers that properly belong to bodies at a lower level. I hope that we are not working with the old British model of sovereignty, in which all power rests with and is devolved from Parliament. I hope that we are talking about power resting with the people of Scotland and, therefore, properly resting at different levels in society.

We should all, including local government, be asking whether we have arrogated to ourselves powers that could more properly be exercised at a lower level. That is partly why I highlighted the role of community councils. For example, I represent a ward in which the community council, myself as the local councillor, the local MSP and the local MP are all elected in contested elections in which about 70 per cent of the electorate take part. We have a parity of representative roles, right down to the lowest level. That fact must be taken into account.

There are important issues about the sharing of power between urban and rural Scotland. Historically, Scotland is very much an urban society. We are a nation that urbanised quickly, so it is inevitable that urban issues will have a higher profile. It is therefore incumbent on Parliament to balance that by ensuring that important issues for rural areas are given adequate attention. We feel that issues such as fuel prices and the lack of investment have perhaps not had the attention

from Parliament and the Executive that we would have liked.

I am a historian by trade and I hope that members will indulge my making a historical point. A characteristic of Scottish local politics is that people have often valued the making of decisions to their face at local level. That does not necessarily mean that power should be transferred to local level, but that people in Scotland have wanted decision makers to appear in the places in which their decisions will have an impact. It is pleasing that Parliament committees move around the country, but there seems sometimes to be an absence of people on the ground to justify decisions. That is inevitably a criticism of the Executive.

An example of such an absence is in the question of the trials of genetically modified crops. That issue has generated much public concern. It is clear that about 60 to 70 per cent or more of the population are seriously concerned about the issue. However, at no point in the process has a minister or an Executive representative been prepared to appear on the ground—literally—to justify what has been done. I think that there is a feeling of resentment about that. It is important for the Executive to get out and make an appearance in person to justify decisions on some issues.

We are pleased that parliamentary committees are meeting outside Edinburgh. I think that we are welcoming this committee to Ullapool in April. We would like meetings outside Edinburgh to happen more often. Again, I ask the committee to indulge my interest in history. I live in Cromarty, whose people in the 18th century had a major dispute with an Edinburgh merchant that was to be tried before the Court of Session. There was a dispute about where that court case should be held. The Cromarty people eventually wrote to their lordships in the Court of Session, pointing out that, contrary to what was commonly believed, it was exactly the same distance from Cromarty to Edinburgh as it was from Edinburgh to Cromarty.

That point must be remembered, if we are to hold the nation together. The Parliament and its committees must be encouraged to get out and about. However, a barrier to doing that is the size of the entourage that seems to be necessary. We wonder whether there are ways of cutting down that size to make it simply more practical for more meetings to take place outside Edinburgh.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you, Councillor Alston, particularly for the historical references.

I will kick off with some general questions. You all mentioned the burden that Parliament has placed on local government and the impact that that has had on your work load. Councillor Findlay mentioned that she did a survey of the number of

letters that her council has received from MSPs.

Has the burden of work from Parliament been onerous or manageable? Do you have systems in place to cope with the burden? Has the scrutiny of local and national decisions been improved? If so, has that improved the fairness of local decisions? That was a lot of questions. However, perhaps Councillor Findlay could start.

Councillor Findlay: I do not want to sound negative about all the contacts that have been made. Clearly, the scrutiny role is correct. However, the frivolity of some of the inquiries can be wearing for our officers, who might have to respond to MSPs on an inquiry that is for their own political advantage. There is no doubt that there are real increases in work load, which may take our officers away from supporting us in our jobs.

As you said, it is absolutely right that there should be scrutiny and that we should not be too precious about it. I am just stating that the work is time consuming and that the inquiries sometimes lack depth—they might be just a letter that has been fired off to the chief executive. Having said that, this is not just an issue for the Scottish Parliament; Westminster plays a role as well. To an extent, local MPs might feel a bit further detached from the council because of devolution, and perhaps they have been adjusting to that as well.

10:15

The Deputy Convener: Councillor Brown, considering the size of Clackmannanshire Council, do you have the capacity to cope with the volume of inquiries or the level of interaction that the Scottish Parliament has generated?

Councillor Brown: The written inquiries are not burdensome and the frivolous ones are better than those that require an awful lot of work. It is not the MSPs who put us under pressure. I mentioned the fact that there has been a lot of negative comment from the local MSP, but the inquiries that he and others make impose some scrutiny on us and we accept that. Generally—I will not give him the advantage of mentioning a specific inquiry—that has been a good thing and I do not worry about it. We are not short of scrutiny in local government—we have an awful lot of it—and for that reason it does not worry us.

The weight of consultation documents is where the problem lies. There are some very big documents that require responses from small councils such as ours and we do not have many staff who can be dedicated to that purpose. I am not saying that such consultation should stop. However, the Parliament and the Executive should be aware of all the different things that they are asking local government to do at the same time.

One committee asks something, another committee asks something else, the Executive asks something different and some inquiries seem to keep returning. I may be wrong, but I think that we have been asked to comment on a code of conduct for councils four or five times in the past two years. Some inquiries keep coming back although our comments do not change. There needs to be more co-ordination. The problem has arisen partly because the Parliament is just becoming established, and I am sure that the situation will sort itself out in time.

Councillor Ironside: I can comment on the situation in Aberdeen. It is not the Parliament that is creating the additional letters, but individual MSPs. The letters tend not to be about scrutiny of what we are doing. They tend to be replicated time after time, and concern members getting involved in other members' constituency business. It is the division between constituency MSPs and list MSPs that creates a difficulty.

The Deputy Convener: And possibly the confusion between the roles of councillors and MSPs. Is that the case?

Councillor Ironside: Yes. A lot of letters are about issues such as housing, which cannot be dealt with by an MSP, and they are passed back to the councillors. There is confusion with that as well.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): Where does the volume of the consultation come from? Is it balanced between the Executive and the Parliament and what are the percentages? Much of what we are discussing concerns what the Executive does, as distinct from the Parliament. What would be your response if the Executive suggested that it would stop consulting you or that it would consult you less? That might leave you in the reverse position of having too little consultation.

Councillor Murray: We do not want to be consulted less. Following the creation of the Scottish Parliament, it was inevitable that the work load of local government, in responding to consultations, would increase.

I do not draw a distinction—and have not done so in the past—between responses to the Executive and responses to the Parliament. The time scale for consultation is often the biggest handicap; too often it is very short. We suffer in the same way that Keith Brown described in relation to Clackmannanshire Council in trying to respond to consultations in a short time scale. We want to respond to all the consultations, but the time scale is often the problem. Fitting the consultations into a council cycle can also be relatively difficult. It can be difficult to get an official council response when the time scales to respond are very short, as they often are.

Fiona Hyslop: It sounds like we need a massive project planner. What would be a reasonable time scale for responding to a consultation exercise?

Councillor Brown: From my experience as an employee of Stirling Council, I know that the council has recently introduced a protocol, which states that it will try to consult its community councils and will give them eight weeks' notice of a consultation that is going to be issued. You can consult so far back that the process becomes impractical. However, as Councillor Alston from Highland Council stated, if local government is to act as a community leader and take into account the views of others, it is desirable for it to consult the community councils. In order to get a full response to a consultation, it is necessary to go back further and to fit in with council cycles. I appreciate that it is not practical for that to happen on every consultation, but the more time that there is to consult, the better the quality of the response tends to be.

Councillor Findlay: We are accused of consultation overload at local level by our community councils. To be fair to the Parliament, a lot of the consultations arise from Executive initiatives. We do not want the consultation to stop, but the problem is the length of time that we are given to respond. Eight weeks should be the very minimum. We are also required to devolve the consultation until we get to the grass roots. That is what community councils are about and it is important.

I welcomed Jack McConnell's statement when he became First Minister that the Executive would do less, better. I hoped that that would mean there would be fewer consultations. There was a shower of initiatives in the first year of the Parliament. It got to the stage where it was difficult for local government to cope, as there was one consultation after another, but the situation will even out. We certainly do not want the committee to get the message that we do not want to be consulted. The length of time that we are given to respond is important.

Councillor Alston: I echo what has been said. We want to be consulted, but the time scales have to be appropriate. The situation has been getting better because the Executive has realised that there was too large a burden of consultation with too short time scales. As a rule of thumb, about three months is probably required for a consultation, especially if it concerns the kind of issue that needs to go down to community councils or—in a council such as ours that operates a devolved system of area committees—go out to local consultation with areas.

Fiona Hyslop: An interesting point is made on page 6 of Angus Council's submission, which states:

"the flow tends to be one-way".

The council is asked to respond to consultations from the Parliament, parliamentary committees and the Executive, but there is not a flow in the other direction. If councils have an issue that they want to be addressed, they will often contact officials at the Scottish Executive and make direct inquiries. Would it be helpful if councils made more contact with individual parliamentary committees to ask the committee to take up a particular transport or education issue, as opposed to always relying on the traditional route of contact from councils to officials in the Executive? That is obviously where the power lies. If we want to shift the power sharing in another direction, perhaps a more active council-to-committee route could be used. I would be interested in your comments.

Councillor Murray: That is the point that we were trying to make. We did not feel that councils had the opportunity to input anything into the system of the work of the committees. That was extremely difficult to achieve. It was difficult to get anybody to take up an issue if we had a particular problem.

Fiona Hyslop: Why have you found that difficult? If the committees are meant to be accessible, councils should be able to contact conveners or members of committees. Is that something that any other councils have tried or would like to try, or would that not be the best use of time and resources if you have a lot of burdens from the Parliament and need to respond properly to those demands?

Councillor Ironside: We would certainly be willing to try the route of direct links with the conveners of committees. I appreciate the way in which the Scottish Parliament has divvied up the convenerships. I would like to see that done in Aberdeen City Council, but I do not know whether we would get away with sharing power like that. It is a very good idea and would make a difference. For transport issues, we go to the Transport and the Environment Committee or to the Public Petitions Committee because we see that as the route in, but direct links with conveners would certainly be an interesting way to move forward.

Councillor Findlay: There should be more interaction between local government and the committees of the Parliament, so I would welcome such links. That would help to colour the views of ministers when they come to make decisions in the Executive.

Fiona Hyslop: Would contact be made subject by subject, as it is now? For example, witnesses from councils gave evidence on the Housing (Scotland) Bill. Could it be done differently, so that the councils set the agenda rather than responding to what the committees are already

doing? Is that how you see the system working?

Councillor Findlay: It would be helpful for committee members to hear a variety of views on a subject; that could help them to form an opinion. Each individual council would want to express its specific concerns, but I have to say that local government is not in agreement about everything. Highland Council has already mentioned urban-rural issues. MSPs might want to speak to rural councils about specific issues and urban councils about other issues. Having said that, I still think that there needs to be an understanding from both sides. COSLA made a mistake by splitting rural and urban when it was setting up its new executive groups. It would be much better to have a combined executive in COSLA so that there could be greater awareness of the different problems in local government. There are difficulties on both sides.

Councillor Alston: To some extent, that is already happening. We have experience of approaching conveners of committees to take up specific issues. However, as legislation advances, things can change very quickly, as happened with the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000. It has been difficult for us to keep on top of what is happening from a distance and to try to influence legislation at the later stages.

The Deputy Convener: You said in your submission that there was

"no mechanism within the system to allow for further outside comment on any changes"

as bills go through the legislative process. I find that comment interesting, because that is not my experience. People continue to make submissions throughout stages 2 and 3. Are you saying that you felt disenfranchised once the bill process had gone beyond discussion of the general principles at stage 1?

Councillor Alston: It was difficult for us to keep on top of the process at those later stages, when substantial amendments were being made to the bill. It was difficult for us to be able to express our thoughts about how the amendments might affect us on the ground.

The Deputy Convener: Are you concerned about the transparency and time scale of those stages?

Councillor Alston: Yes. There might also be an issue of geography, as the debate must inevitably happen in one particular place in the Parliament, when we are not present to watch what is happening and respond speedily.

10:30

Douglas Paterson (Aberdeen City Council): I want to make a couple of points from an officer

perspective in response to the issues that have been raised. My own slight experience confirms that there would be value in having the more proactive relationship that Fiona Hyslop suggested. Peter Peacock and Andy Kerr have a group that acts as a sounding board on modernisation in local government. The group is fairly informal, has wide representation and operates with an evenly balanced power relationship. The group is an open forum, at which either side can raise issues about how to drive modernisation more quickly.

My other experience is of working with the ministers and civil servants on the task group on community planning. At the moment, we are helping the civil servants to draft the legislation. The task of drafting the guidance that will accompany the legislation has been delegated to a group—of which I am a member—that contains no civil servants but contains a mixture of people from various community groups and local government. Therefore, there are models available that work.

The interesting thing about that community planning group is that, at the outset, the ministers—originally Angus MacKay and Peter Peacock—gave us a fairly open agenda and told us to come forward with creative ideas. That seems to be the kind of model that Fiona Hyslop was reflecting on. My experience of that model is as positive as Fiona Hyslop hinted at. That idea would be worth building up as a working model for the committees and their conveners.

The Deputy Convener: I hope that Donald Gorrie's question is not on the same point, because I think that Susan Deacon wants to move the discussion on.

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): My question is on a new but related point.

Could some of the issues that have been raised be addressed by working out some system of regional mini-Parliaments, which would take decisions locally through the involvement of the MSPs, MPs, and the representatives of the councils, the quangos, the voluntary sector and the community councils? Any group could put whatever it wanted on the agenda and a serious decision would be taken on it. I take the point that was raised but, if it could be agreed that the event was serious, MSPs would turn up.

That might not be the right model, but by doing that three or four times a year we would save time. There could be some sort of concordat, under which we would halve the amount of bumf that we sent to you in return for having a regional meeting. I personally think that having a meeting such as this is much more useful than you laboriously writing out stuff that we must then laboriously

read—or not read.

Councillor Alston: To some extent, we have been experimenting with that idea with the convention of the Highlands and Islands, although that is different because it is a meeting with the Executive rather than with MSPs. There is an issue about whether there is the determination for the convention to meet often enough for it to have as great an effect as it might. However, the answer is yes. Donald Gorrie's idea might be worth pursuing.

Councillor Findlay: We held quite a large gathering at which our MPs, MSPs and list MSPs met a cross-party representation from the council. However, I was disappointed in the meeting, because it was turned into a way of opposing the council's administration by point-scoring, yah-booo politics, which is not what we had set out to achieve. We had genuinely set out to interact by saying, "We are a cross-party group of elected representatives from Aberdeenshire Council."

However, not to be daunted, we have arranged another meeting for 29 April. This time we will lay down the ground rules—that we are there to speak about the issues, and that if members want to indulge in point scoring we will not hold any more meetings. In any large and diverse area it is important that we understand what the real issues are. We have a devolved area committee system in Aberdeenshire that works quite well. Three of our area committees are chaired by opposition members of the council, with the chairpersons appointed by the committee concerned. We believe in devolving power. We are aware of the reality of politics. Donald Gorrie might be suggesting the sort of meeting that we arranged, for genuine reasons but without much success.

Fiona Hyslop: It can work in other areas.

Donald Gorrie: This may be hopelessly unrealistic, but the ground rules could be that anyone who made political points was shown the door.

Councillor Findlay: That is what I had in mind.

Donald Gorrie: We behave just as badly in the chamber as some councillors do—probably worse.

The Deputy Convener: We could end up in the same situation as the football team that was left with fewer than seven players, so that the match had to be abandoned.

Donald Gorrie: I would like the witnesses to consider one further suggestion. At a previous meeting, it was suggested that council tax demands be sent out with a standard wee card that people could keep and that told them who did what. It would say something like, "For X, Y or Z, see a councillor; for A, B or C, see your MSP; for MFI—or whatever—see your MP". One can never

get things right all the time. After many years as a councillor, I served briefly as an MP. Many people think that an MP—or, probably, an MSP—can wave a magic wand and put everything right. When I told people that they should go to see their councillor, they would say, “The councillor is useless”, or something along those lines. Would some sort of informative leaflet be helpful?

The Deputy Convener: Councillor Murray, you thought that Parliament should take the lead role in clarifying responsibilities.

Councillor Murray: What Donald Gorrie suggested would be only one part of an educational process. Anything is worth a try, because there is a great deal of misunderstanding among the public. Our experience is that people take out their council tax book to see how much they have to pay each month and put the rest of what is sent to them in the bin. We believe that the Parliament is the best institution to lead the educational process to which I refer. That is the point that I tried to make in my introduction. We need to try many routes to get the message across.

The Deputy Convener: Councillor Findlay mentioned something that chimed with my experience—MSPs being asked to involve themselves in planning issues. Frankly, that is the bane of my life. Planning is nothing to do with members, but they are expected to wave a magic wand, as Donald Gorrie said. Could mechanisms be developed for resolving such difficulties?

Councillor Findlay: There is nothing that gets people going like planning, especially if they want to build a house—or several houses—in the countryside and the policies are all against that. The issue that the convener raises is very difficult to resolve, because the public play people off against one another. Individuals tend to bypass councillors, to approach their MSPs and at the same time to write to the press saying, “This wonderful MSP listened to me, but my local councillor didn’t.” Perhaps there needs to be more agreement between MSPs and councillors. We need to make it clear that it is not helpful for members to take sides in planning disputes. It is okay for a member to point out that one of their constituents has raised certain issues, but they should not take a view on those. This is a cross-party issue—I am not protecting the party to which I belong.

Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): Although I wanted to pursue a separate line of questioning, I am keen to pick up the point about the relationship between parliamentary representatives at Westminster or at the Scottish Parliament and councillors, and the question of the issues that can or cannot be influenced. As Donald Gorrie pointed out, at one

level there is nothing new about that situation. People always thought that if they could not get satisfaction from their local councillor or local authority, they could go to their MP, who would somehow be able to overrule a local decision. It is important to remind ourselves of that.

I wonder whether you could provide us with some feedback. I know that such evidence will be impressionistic and anecdotal, but do MSPs behave differently from MPs over things such as planning matters? Are MSPs likely to say that a matter is entirely for the local authority and that it would be inappropriate for them to get involved, or are they likely to suggest that they could influence such matters? Is not there more of a quantitative difference than a difference in practice, because there are simply more parliamentary representatives around for members of the public to go to? I repeat the health warning that comes with those questions that any such evidence is bound to be impressionistic.

Councillor Murray: We know of several cases in which a person has written to his or her MSP who, as Donald Gorrie said, cannot wave a magic wand. The MSP writes to the council and receives a response with which the constituent is unhappy. The constituent then searches out a list MSP from a different party, who then sends us the same letter, asking the same questions and to which we give the same answers. Parliament should examine that issue. If a matter that has been pursued by a constituency MSP has been answered by the council, why should another MSP become involved? That does not help our work load, it does not help our perception of what MSPs want to achieve and it does not help the relationship that MSPs want to establish with councils.

Councillor Ironside: Because our MPs are very experienced, they would still be likely to take on a matter instead of passing it to local authorities. However, constituency MSPs, who are fairly inexperienced—after all, they are still in their first session—would be more likely to say, “That is a local authority matter; the council will need to deal with that”. The only difficulty is the list MSPs, who tend to have no portfolio and therefore take up every matter, sometimes for political mischief and sometimes constructively.

Susan Deacon: I am sorry; I do not know whether I picked you up properly. Did you say that, in your experience, experienced MPs are more likely to get involved? I do not subscribe to that view; I merely repeat what you said.

Councillor Ironside: Westminster MPs are more likely to try to follow up a problem and deal with it. The inexperienced constituency MSPs tend to accept that that is not their role; they know where the boundaries are.

Councillor Brown: My experience is the reverse. When we talk to our group of list MSPs, we find it convenient to work with one from each party. That approach tends to work quite well.

Our big problem is the constituency MSP. Recently, we launched a local organisation, which we had grant funded. He turned up and, as a junior minister, berated the council about the level of grant that the organisation had received. My experience is that, as was said earlier, no MSP is willing to say, "That is a matter for the local authority. I cannot get involved in it, so please go back to your councillor". If that happened more often, it would be useful both for us and for the people who are trying to get a grip on who is responsible for what.

The lines are blurred. Perhaps the system is being used mischievously in some parts of the country. Although I realise that Clackmannanshire Council is in a relatively atypical situation, in our experience, a lot of party-political stuff goes on. In my view, it is perfectly proper for MSPs and other local representatives to get involved in planning matters—even if you do not like it, convener. They should do so not to take decisions but to advocate particular points of view. Perhaps MSPs should deal with matters a little more responsibly, but I have not had bad experiences of the different approaches of list and constituency MSPs. Some might say that list MSPs are a pain but, to be honest, I would like them to be a bit more interested than they are. I have had no real problems with them.

10:45

The Deputy Convener: I say, by the way, that it is not that I dislike the situation; rather, I find the powerlessness a bit frustrating.

Councillor Findlay: In answer to Susan Deacon's question, there are more elected people around and the public are much more likely to contact them than they were 10 or 15 years ago. The demands of the public are different from when I became a councillor in 1988. However, like Keith Brown, my experience is different from that of Len Ironside. I find that MPs are more likely to say, "That is a local government responsibility". I will make myself unpopular with my party by saying that MSPs are more likely to make black or white comments, even when they hear only one side of a story. We councillors sit at the planning table at the local area committee and know that we cannot tell our constituents how we feel until we have all the facts before us, which is difficult. List MSPs may graze around and create a bit of mischief here and there. That is life; that is politics.

The Deputy Convener: Susan Deacon has a separate point.

Susan Deacon: I will make it only if we have exhausted that issue—I thought that other members' hands were raised.

I will move on to the oft-used phrase "focus on delivery". No doubt our local government colleagues will be familiar with the debate on the need to emphasise outcomes. However, I am conscious of the fact that, paradoxically, in much of our discussion today and in many of the issues that we spend time on, we tend to concentrate on process without necessarily making that connection. I would like to take a little time to consider outcomes.

People in the Parliament and—from what the witnesses have said—in local government agree that the problem with which we are grappling is that of trying to find systems of governance in Scotland that will deliver to people effective public services accountably and democratically. Will the witnesses say a little more about that?

We have said much about consultation but less about implementation. I am struck by the fact that the Parliament is moving into a different period. We necessarily spent the first couple of years on a great deal of policy development and on dealing with a huge backlog of legislation. The emphasis is turning increasingly to implementation and roll-out of that legislation. Is the involvement of local authorities in that implementation process as effective as it could be and how could it be improved? I scribbled down quickly the names of some of the acts for which key implementation processes are under way. They include: the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001; the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001; the Community Care and Health (Scotland) Act 2002; the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001; and the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000. It is in all our best interests to get those implementation processes right, but how can that be done?

Councillor Alston: It is important to keep it in mind that local government is not all about service delivery. Councils, like the Parliament, have a leadership role. Ultimately, the services that we provide will depend on what we as local leaders promote as being correct for our areas. We do not want local government to be seen as service deliverers on behalf of the Executive and the Parliament. Service delivery is vital, but one thing would help: local government needs clarity about when reviews will take place. At what point will the Executive and the Parliament sit back and ask what the effect has been of the initiatives that have been run and the acts that have been passed? How will they consider how to change things again? It is not clear to us at what point reviews will take place.

The Deputy Convener: I will bring Councillor Ironside in. In your earlier comments, you talked

about the power of general competence for local government and the difficulties of ring fencing. Would you welcome a move to public service outcomes?

Councillor Ironside: Yes. In fact, I would like some areas of my budget to be paid on the basis of outcomes. If we have delivered, let us have the budget for what we have delivered.

We set hard targets in our community plan. I know that not all councils have done that, but we thought that it was a good way of focusing minds, bringing all the partners together and reminding them that they all have a stake in the outcome of the community plan. Those hard targets bring together all the public service bodies, such as the national health service. The partners might have to deliver those targets separately, but the council monitors how things are going and how services are being delivered.

There are areas in which I would prefer outcomes, rather than a ring-fencing directive, to be the driving factor. I could work more easily with that.

Councillor Findlay: The public do not care two hoots about who provides the service as long as they have a good-quality service where they need and use it. Local government is about more than service delivery. It is about good partnership working to ensure that services are delivered in the way that people want and need. The needs of areas are sometimes lost in grant-aided expenditure, in the divvying-up of the budget and in the distribution formulae. We must work round that.

We in the different levels of government in Scotland must get across to the public that we are responsible people and that we are working in their interests. We must get across that we will listen to them and that we will deliver. Outcomes are important. We need to work collectively on governance so that we can regain some credibility for democracy and for those who put themselves forward for public service. That is important.

It is difficult to combine different cultures and ways of working when we work with outside agencies. For example, we had seminars months ago with the joint future group. It struck me that people want merely the best possible results from the money and resources that are available. However, there is much tension in the joint future group. The Executive needs to help to sell the idea, because the time scale for the delivery of the joint future is tight. The project will be spoiled if we get bogged down because people who are working side by side have different terms and conditions, for example. We must make more effort to have different agencies take leadership in the project at different levels.

We must always bear it in mind that, as somebody mentioned earlier, the power lies with the people. We should keep the people's needs at the forefront of our minds.

Councillor Murray: I would like to make two points, the first of which is on outcomes. The definition of outcomes must be wide enough to allow flexibility of operation. We have already heard about urban and rural issues. If outcomes are defined too tightly, "outcomes" becomes just another name for ring fencing. Clearly, we would like the definition to be as wide as possible.

My second point goes back to the first thing that Susan Deacon said about implementation. It is a bit of a failure if the Parliament has passed all the acts that she mentioned, but we do not know how to implement them. Consideration of implementation should have been part of the consultation process; local government should have been brought in much earlier. If we have come this far without knowing how local government will implement things, we have problems.

Councillor Brown: It is probably in the nature of the committee's inquiry that it will concentrate on processes, procedures and so on, but there is tension between the Executive—rather than the Parliament—and local government. One will want to concentrate on outcomes and the other will want to concentrate on inputs. Local government will say that we do not have the inputs that are necessary to achieve the outcomes, but it will suit the Executive to concentrate on the outcomes. That is probably inevitable.

Rob Murray made the point about local government's being involved early. A classic example of the problem occurred with the consultation on care for the elderly; local government was not involved at the right stage of that consultation, which has already had an impact on the time scale for implementation.

There has been much discussion on the experience in England and Wales of local outcome agreements. About 18 months ago, I discussed the issue with Sir Albert Bore, the leader of Birmingham City Council, which was one of the first councils to go for local outcome agreements in a big way. The council got various rewards for doing that. Sir Albert has sent me a great deal of information on his council's experience. Like Rob Murray, I worry that local outcome agreements could be another form of central control. It will inevitably involve a few councils—probably at the expense of other councils.

As things stand, we are judged by our outcomes anyway and some outcomes are judged more easily than others. If there is litter everywhere, people will know the outcome of a council's

cleansing policies, but in community care—which is more hidden from the public—it is less easy for people to know the outcome of policies. A separate argument might arise over how the Executive can ensure that what it is trying to achieve is being achieved.

I spoke earlier about the scrutiny that we are under and what I said applies equally to outcomes. I will give committee members an anecdote. Last year, the *Sunday Herald* published its league table of councils and wee Clackmannanshire Council came top. I had a good laugh, but then I wondered why all the other council leaders were laughing as well. They were laughing simply because they knew that I would be waiting for the coming year to see how far down Clackmannanshire had slipped by the time of the publication of the next league table.

We are judged on our outcomes by a number of different bodies. I accept that the Executive and the Parliament have a role in scrutiny—especially in the areas that are less open to the public. However, local outcome agreements could be the thin end of a wedge.

Susan Deacon: Do you feel that, in general, the balance is about right between the extent to which the Parliament is attempting to set national standards and practices and the extent to which things are being left to local discretion? I will pick up on something that Councillor Ironside said. I was struck by the fact that local government's pre-devolution fear—that the Parliament would simply suck powers up into the centre—has not been realised. With the Parliament has come a greater expectation among Scots that certain norms and standards will be set nationally. It is clear that an issue then arises as to what that means for local autonomy.

Councillor Ironside: Standard setting is to be welcomed, but members should consider how concessionary fares have been dealt with: they have been thrown open and left to local control, but are not properly funded. That appears to be a hotch-potch. The idea of national standards is good; we all welcome them and want them to be put in place, but there are barriers to that and it is more difficult for some cities than it is for some rural areas. If the matter had first been discussed with us, we would have willingly produced a national scheme rather than small local schemes. That is what everyone would like. Standard setting is good, but it requires wider discussion.

11:00

Councillor Murray: That is correct. There are issues for which national standards are appropriate and other issues for which local discretion is appropriate. I agree with Len Ironside

that local authorities must be involved in discussions early. That would mean that there would not be a clash when Parliament designs national standards and 32 local authorities say that those standards will not work in their areas. To ensure that we do not get into that position, we must involve local authorities far enough back in the chain.

Councillor Alston: National standards are a problem if they are not adequately funded. As a rural authority, the Highland Council sometimes has problems with funding. For example, we do not feel that we have adequate funds to reach the national standards that were set by the McCrone settlement, which impacts on our other activities. If we are to get the balance right, we must also address the issue of where quangos fit in.

Councillor Findlay: A lot has been said already. If there are to be national standards, it must be borne in mind that one size sometimes does not fit all; local discretion is required in some situations. That does not mean that councils should not produce acceptable standards in their areas. Ring fencing and hypothecation were intended to raise standards of provision of services, but councils that already had ring-fenced funds were left, for example, with money that was earmarked for nursery education. When national standards are set, there must be flexibility in funding.

Susan Deacon asked whether the balance is right. I suspect that there will always be tensions but, to take a buzzword from education, we need early intervention in the process between the Parliament and local government.

Donald Gorrie: To some extent, my question is similar to Susan Deacon's, but I will ask it differently. Some of the witnesses made favourable remarks about the relationship between local government and the Local Government Committee. What about the relationship with the other committees that are connected to local government, such as the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, the Health and Community Care Committee—because of social work—and the Rural Development Committee? Does local government have a good relationship with the committees, ministers and civil servants?

Councillor Brown: When the Parliament was first established, we tried to strike up a relationship, although that relationship was probably lopsided because it was with only the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee. To be honest, we have fallen into the trap into which most councils have probably fallen: we go through the Local Government Committee to make most of the points that we want to make. One exception is the Public Petitions Committee, although we tend to have contact with it only when we inform

constituents that they can go down that route. Generally, the council does not lodge petitions, although that is an interesting possibility. That is an area in which we have failed.

During its three years, the Parliament has become less accessible. The responses that we receive now are not quite as enthusiastic as they were at the beginning. Perhaps that is inevitable. There are faults on both sides. The only other committees that we have attended are the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee and the Public Petitions Committee.

Beyond that, we have tended to go to ministers or favoured MSPs who might be influential. We have not relied too heavily on the Local Government Committee, which is beleaguered by all the expectations of local government.

Councillor Ironside: If local government's relationship with ministers now is compared with that when there was no Scottish Parliament, the difference is like night and day. Ministers are much more accessible. We have built good relationships with them, but our relationship with committee conveners is not the same. Perhaps the answer to that lies in conveners' hands. We have not consciously built relationships with committee conveners, but it is obvious that we should do so with ministers. We have good relationships with ministers, but not with the committees. We must work on that.

Councillor Findlay: As Len Ironside said, we need to do more and we need to build relationships with the committees. I am finding today's experience to be useful. Ministers are human beings and have people who they get along with. Scotland is a small country in which there are but 32 local authorities. As a council leader, I now have much more contact with ministers. I have been part of COSLA delegations at meetings with ministers since 1995, during the year when the new councils shadowed the old councils. I will attend a meeting this afternoon, and compared to my first meeting with Michael Forsyth, the difference, as Len Ironside said, will be like night and day.

I was interested in Professor John Fairley's paper and what he said about civil servants' views of local government. Civil servants can be a barrier to partnership between local government, Parliament and ministers. As I said, I am not saying that they are all bad, nor am I saying that all local government is good, but there is a barrier that we must break through. Civil servants need to understand that elected politicians have rights. We have a place in society that has to be recognised.

Councillor Murray: In the early days, as committees and their conveners were trying to find their feet, the Local Government Committee was

receptive to hearing all our complaints. We found an ear from day one in the Local Government Committee. It is probably our fault that we have built that relationship and always gone to that committee, where we know we will have an ear, rather than try to influence the conveners of other committees.

The Deputy Convener: Donald, do you wish to come back on that point?

Donald Gorrie: No, that was helpful.

Has the Scottish Parliament had any impact on your relationship with quangos? Is it worse or better, or do you just hate them all?

Councillor Alston: First, I echo the points that were made about civil servants and how they are sometimes a barrier.

On quangos, the enterprise network has been freed up in the sense that it is not working to such short-term targets. That has opened up possibilities for greater co-operation. There are some positive signs. A lot goes back to community planning and the extent to which the best-value duty will be imposed on all the partners in the community-planning process.

Fiona Hyslop: Comments have been made to the effect that these are early days, that the early judgment seems to be that there is no intention to suck powers away from local government, and that there has been no Trojan horse. However, how much will ride on the general competence provisions in the local government bill? Could we be sitting here in a year's time, if a power of general competence is not included in the bill, with a more robust criticism? Are we in a wait-and-see period in judging where power is shared? How much rides on the inclusion in the local government bill of general competence and on the best-value results? Will we be offering local government a level playing field? Should there be a level playing field? If there is a level playing field, where do quangos sit within it?

We are looking backwards a lot and an awful lot is just about to happen. Will you look forward and give us your views? Perhaps you could give us a benchmark for where you expect to be in a year's time. Will there be equal sharing of power between the different levels of Government?

Councillor Murray: The granting of a power of general competence to local government by the Parliament would be a huge sign of trust in local government. Any step down from the granting of a power of general competence will be judged by local government to indicate the degree of trust that the Parliament has in local government.

We have no problems with best value. We are totally signed up to value for money. The extension of that principle to other public services

would be an indication of the Parliament's thinking.

Councillor Findlay: Rob Murray mentioned trust, which is an important word. No one in local government is particularly happy with the proposal to include a power of well-being in the local government bill. What exactly does that mean? It is not as if everyone wants to do things that they have not done before. Please trust us—we are quite capable.

The relationship with quangos was mentioned. Through the local enterprise forum, I find that the enterprise company and other bodies still experience difficulty with us. They feel that we are bureaucratic in our decision-making processes—in many instances, decisions are made by the chair and the chief executive before they come to the table. The quangos have a different way of working. They do not value the democratic process as we do. We must overcome many hurdles on that. Community planning will help. Having more contact—sitting across the table from someone—makes it easier to convince them that one's heart is in the right place and that one wants to do things in a decent way.

Councillor Brown: I will concentrate on a positive aspect of the bill. Perhaps the best thing about it is the requirement that it will place on quangos and others to get involved with community planning. Placing a community planning duty on councils is hard if they do not have the active—or, if necessary, enforced—co-operation of the other public sector bodies.

Fiona Hyslop's question is similar to the question that Susan Deacon asked about whether the balance is right. I have a fundamentally different view of the situation—the balance is anything but right. Although it is inevitable and natural that the Parliament and the Executive should want local government to be accountable for the resources that they give to it, they should not be in the position of distributing anything like the proportion of resources that they do to local government. Resources should be raised locally. That is fundamental. If resources were raised locally, the legitimate role for the Parliament and the Executive would be to check whether the moneys that they still gave—they will always have to give some form of equalisation grant—ensured the implementation of national standards. For example, if a council did not educate its children to the required standards, it would be entirely legitimate for the Parliament or the Executive to get involved and to take action to ensure that the necessary standards were met.

The relationship must be fundamentally different. If the Parliament was in a position to decide to send all its members around Europe—it is obviously not in that position—that is what it should do. That would show members the extent

to which local government in other countries has autonomy. Members would see that the relationship is not a question of trust—other countries do not have that kind of parent-child relationship—but a question of equality. If the Parliament and the Executive were to let go for a while, disasters would not happen.

One of the first actions that Jack McConnell took was to call in three or four councils because a few direct labour organisations had made a loss. DLOs up and down the country had been turning in profits year after year. Even in that year, about 90 per cent of DLOs returned a profit. There was no need to take a heavy-handed approach. Trust is the issue at stake. Even if local authorities are to be viewed as errant children, they should be allowed to make their mistakes. They will come round eventually. They must be allowed that opportunity.

The power of community well-being in the bill is beginning to attract ridicule, because of changes that have been made to its name. At the risk of adding to the ridicule, I suggest another name—community governance. As that seems to be the way in which Europe is going, that name might make more sense to folk. There are many qualifications to the power of community well-being. If members read the bill, they will see the number of ways in which the Executive can get involved, including through powers of intervention. The relationship is not one of trust.

11:15

On the powers of quangos, it would be useful to examine the European experience. I have the impression that other European countries do not have the number and range of quangos that we have in this country. As was said earlier, Scotland is not a big country. It would be useful for the Executive, Parliament or local government to consider redistributing the powers of quangos to elected bodies.

An example was given of how it is possible to use council tax demands to inform people about the role of different government bodies. We do something like that, in that we tell everybody that we have nothing to do with setting water rates, which we do not want to touch with a barge pole. I want to return to the idea of letting people know what tier of government does what, as we could take that idea further. It would be useful to do that by jointly agreeing and funding literature that goes out with council tax demands. Who does what is a fundamental question to the future of local government.

People do not want to get involved in local government any more and every party now struggles to get candidates. People who have

been involved in local government for years now ask themselves why they are doing it. They think that all that they are doing is managing the decline of a local authority and its services and voting through budget cuts. It may be a little overdramatic to say this, but we are at the stage when we are questioning whether local democracy—local government—will survive in this country or whether it would be better to have one-tier government.

The Deputy Convener: I welcome those comments, particularly the invitation to go around Europe. The discussion has focused on power sharing, which is one of the four CSG principles. It is no surprise that local government and the Scottish Parliament should debate that principle more than the other principles. Many of the issues that we debate concern Executive action. The Parliament is currently making a covenant with local government. It is unfortunate that Trish Godman, the convener of the Local Government Committee, is not here this morning—she has sent her apologies. I do not want to get into a debate about the covenant, but it would be useful to get an idea of whether it is a welcome step. Is the covenant the right route to provide the sort of clarity of roles that we seek between local government and the Parliament? There is a separate issue about the power of the Executive, but perhaps we should stick to discussing the powers of local government and the Parliament.

Councillor Brown: When the covenant was first mooted, the proposal gained a lot of support. However, if you asked anyone to recite the terms of the covenant, they would struggle to tell you them. The covenant deals with the question of parity of esteem. I remember a council leaders forum with the Executive at which Frank McAveety and others were present. The phrase “parity of esteem” is easy to say, but it is hard to achieve.

We have no problem with the terms of the covenant. I think that the original version proposed joint meetings between the Executive, the Parliament and councils. I am not sure if that idea is still in the covenant. Such meetings have not happened, but they would be useful. The issue is more relevant to COSLA. As our council is not a member of COSLA, we have not greatly followed what has been happening with the covenant. The issue may have been put on the back burner, as, in my experience, there is not a huge amount of discussion about it in local government.

Councillor Ironside: There is a need for something like a covenant. Establishing such a relationship between COSLA and the Scottish Parliament would be a progressive step.

The question of parity of esteem is important. However, members must remember that, over the past few years, it seems that every time anyone

has opened their mouth it was to attack local government. People would say how awful and how corrupt local government was. Those of us in local government have had to live through that. We are now trying to build up our confidence again. It is difficult to achieve parity of esteem, but there has to be mutual respect and trust between the Parliament and local government. That issue lies at the heart of everything. I agree that the covenant is important and that it represents a good step forward, but we have to have mutual respect.

The Deputy Convener: Perhaps Parliament has replaced local government as the butt of everyone's comments and vitriol.

Councillor Findlay: I think that that is just the case this week. I support the covenant because something must be down in black and white to remind people to what they are committed. I also support COSLA and believe that such a body must exist. We in COSLA try to speak with one voice, if possible, but the organisation has gone through a traumatic time. Councillor Ironside is right to say that, since reorganisation, local government has gone through a dreadful time. The media have played no small part in that, as people hear negative comments about COSLA but do not hear about the amount of time, energy and commitment that councillors give in day and evening work, and at weekends—if one is in a political group, one must catch up on political matters.

The covenant is a step in the right direction and will help. We must all work towards securing parity of esteem because, as Councillor Ironside said, there should be a two-way street between Parliament and local government. I hope that the Executive will welcome the covenant and participate as a partner in it. I am sure that that will be a step forward. We are lucky in Scotland to have the Parliament and to have our elected members of Parliament closer to us. We must build on that and give the Parliament time. However, by next year, the honeymoon period will be over and people will expect delivery. I support holding the local government and Parliament elections on the same day, as that will help to achieve parity of esteem. Why should not councillors and MSPs be elected on the same day? We are just representatives of different tiers of government in Scotland.

Councillor Alston: We, too, support the covenant, but, in relation to all the issues that we have discussed, parity of esteem must mean that the same duties are imposed on all the partners.

The Deputy Convener: I welcome your comments on the covenant and I agree that it is a good idea to have local and parliamentary elections on the same day. If we have the same turnout, our democratic mandates will be similar.

There will always be tension between Parliament and local government and between Parliament and the Executive. However, if Parliament and local government have a similar mandate—which we will have—the tension between them could be exacerbated rather than decreased, as neither area of government will seem to have the right to overrule the other.

The example about GM crops was interesting, as it involves an issue about which many people have concerns. It has been decided nationally that it is a good thing to pilot those GM projects, so they must take place somewhere. Who decides whether that decision should be taken in the national interest or in the local interest? How do we decide whether it is a local or a national issue? Who should decide that?

Councillor Alston: My point was slightly different. I was arguing that, wherever the power resides—and it is clear that the power resides with the Executive through the Parliament—it is important that Executive representatives are prepared to turn up at the local level to justify their decisions.

The Deputy Convener: That point was made well.

Councillor Alston: On the example that you raise, our feeling is that GM crops should be subject to the same kind of scrutiny as a planning application is, because they have an impact on the local community. We have argued that case. Whether that scrutiny happens at a local or a national level must ultimately be decided by Parliament. We have no problem with the power resting in a particular place, as long as those who take the decisions also take responsibility for them and are accountable to the people who will be affected by them.

The Deputy Convener: We should not hide behind the skirts of local government.

Councillor Alston: That is right, nor should you hide behind European legislation. The European Union is a convenient whipping boy. We often hear that something must be done because of European regulation, but when we look at other countries, we find that they respond to European regulation in different ways.

The Deputy Convener: Councillor Findlay, you talked about points that were raised by Professor Fairley. He suggested that local government might have a policy capacity problem. That might help to define the differing roles. Do you agree with the view that local government is hard pushed to contribute to the development of policy because it does not have the required resources? Do you think that local government lacks the time to develop policy at an early stage and that that results in its simply reacting to Executive

measures?

Councillor Findlay: If local government wants to ensure that it influences policy at an early stage, it should prioritise that. Whether one is in local government or the Scottish Executive, there are hard choices to make. If local government wants to be involved in policy development, it must manage its time in a way that ensures that it can be.

Donald Gorrie: Professor Fairley suggested that, since reorganisation—which was referred to as a disaster—policy-making staff, which the big regions used to have, disappeared.

Some of our witnesses suggested that the problem was one of time. If I understood them correctly, they think that civil servants who are developing a scheme should speak to local government representatives at an early stage—those representatives might be able to tell them that the plan will not work—but that they tend to speak to them too late. Have I got that correct?

Councillor Murray: Yes. The problem is one of timing rather than capacity. The stage at which we are consulted is important. We will respond to inquiries and we want to be consulted, but that consultation must take place at an early stage. I disagree with Professor Fairley. Even the smaller councils have the capacity to cope with policy formulation. Size is not an issue in this context.

Councillor Brown: On whether size matters, Clackmannanshire Council—which is the smallest mainland council—introduced free concessionary travel before the Executive thought of the idea. We had to implement the scheme using a little guesswork, as we did not know what the uptake might be. The fact that a small council can do that demonstrates that it has the necessary policy capacity. However, Professor Fairley is right to point out that there is a capacity issue in relation to responding to the Executive and the Parliament on policy initiatives. Previously, COSLA dealt with that but, as a result of the recent review, COSLA has devolved that function to particular councils in relation to particular issues. A lot of what came out of the recent COSLA review was good, but I think that that decision was short sighted. Often, responses are more useful when they come not from one council but from councils in general.

We are talking to COSLA and will revisit the issue of whether we will be a part of it. However, if COSLA is to exist, it should have a policy-making role. That bulwark is necessary partly because of the culture of central Government and local government over many years. In terms of the policy-making role, the void is not filled by bodies such as the Scottish local government information unit, although that does a good job. COSLA's policy-making function was welcome but it was

criticised by Glasgow City Council in particular because it was felt that it took a policy steer from particular councils and particular groups of MSPs who worked with them.

There is a policy capacity problem. It does not prevent us from developing initiatives but it prevents us from giving general policy responses to the Executive and the Parliament.

The Deputy Convener: I suspect that we will wind up shortly, but I would like first to tidy up a couple of points. If our witnesses have some last-minute comments, they should make them now.

Earlier, I wanted to make a point about feedback—I thought that we would get on to that, but we never quite did. A couple of councillors raised the issue. In your written submissions, you indicated that you were involved in consultations but received little feedback on those—sometimes from parliamentary committees. Can you suggest ways in which more feedback could be provided by individual MSPs or committees? That would allow us to deliver more on the expectations that we create when we ask people for their opinions. Can you suggest ways in which we could improve the process and provide you with answers, in return for the effort that you have put in?

11:30

Councillor Brown: I would exonerate the committees. My experience of the committees is limited but, when I have had dealings with them, such as with the Local Government Committee, I have tended to get feedback either by attending a meeting such as this one—where feedback is provided almost instantaneously—or by reading the reports that the committees produce.

We receive all sorts of consultation documents from the Executive. We still want to be consulted, but often our responses seem to go into a black hole. I reiterate the points that we make in our written submission. If a proposal that we make is not accepted, we should be given a reason for that—that it is impractical, that it would cost too much or that the Executive takes a different view. When a proposal is accepted, it would not be a bad thing for the Executive to recognise that a good idea from local government has found its way into one of its policies. Acknowledging ownership in that way would help to build up parity of esteem. I suggest that feedback should be provided as a matter of course. It should be worked into the systems that the Executive uses, to ensure that every time local government is consulted, how its responses have been dealt with are fed back to it.

Councillor Findlay: I cannot speak for other councils, but for us to criticise the Parliament for failing to provide feedback would be the pot calling

the kettle black. We are not always particularly good at feeding back to lower levels after consultation exercises. That is one of the problems that we are committed to addressing through continuous improvement.

There is an opportunity to provide greater feedback. That would build on some of the provisions that are contained in the covenant and it would help to build trust. We need to develop a way of working in which feedback is routine. However, I do not think that local government can criticise the Parliament and the Executive too much on that score, because we are not wonderful at providing feedback either.

Fiona Hyslop: Witnesses have referred to Europe on a number of occasions. Councillor Keith Brown is one of the local government members of the Committee of the Regions. My question is for him and for anyone else who wants to comment. Power sharing involves not only the Scottish Parliament and Scottish local authorities, but other tiers of government. The European dimension is particularly important. What do you think the Parliament can do to ensure that we make the most of our relationship with the members of the Committee of the Regions, both parliamentarians and councillors? We want the things that we talk about in the Scottish Parliament—power sharing, accessibility and participation—to feature not only in our relationships within Scotland, but in our relationships with institutions outside Scotland.

Councillor Brown: There is a public perception that a trip to Brussels is a junket, but anyone who goes on such a trip will know that there is nothing glamorous about it. It is essential for the Parliament to have greater awareness of what happens in Brussels and of the different tiers of government there. At the moment a swirl of changes are under way in the institutions of the European Union—the European Parliament, the Commission and the Committee of the Regions. Members of the European Committee will know that the Parliament must be involved in those. I know that people have a problem committing themselves to joint working with Europe, because they may be accused of going on junkets, but if this is to be a modern Parliament it is essential that it does that.

The big thing that is happening at the moment is the convention on the future of the European Union, on which I substitute for an alternate member. I have asked the convention working group in the Committee of the Regions to come to a meeting at the Parliament. In the current structure, that is how the Parliament is meant to use its influence—through the Committee of the Regions—as a region with constitutional powers. The Parliament should be more involved in that.

That experience will give a much broader insight into the way in which local government works in other countries. That would be useful, although I know that it is difficult. Even when you vote on your salaries, you get all sorts of adverse criticism. However, integrating with Brussels and Strasbourg is important. Sometimes it is worth being brave about such things and doing them anyway, whatever the public reaction.

Councillor Findlay: It is important that local government keeps several links going with Europe, such as the Committee of the Regions. There is also a role for COSLA and the various consortia working closely together. There has been some duplication in their work and it is important that they should have a closer working relationship. We should also liaise with the Parliament in that respect. I am the Scottish member of the North Sea Commission, which is part of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions. When I attend executive meetings, I am aware that local government in other countries—certainly in the North Sea Commission area—is very much involved. Parliaments are involved, but there are also direct lines through local government. It is important that we all keep our strands of connection with Europe, as there are so many opportunities for the future. If we are not in there as the emerging states come through, we will lose out.

Councillor Ironside: We keep active links with Europe as well. A lot of solutions and ideas are more likely to come from Europe than from London, especially on issues such as transport. Aberdeen City Council does not benefit much from European funding, but we still believe that there is an active role for us to play in Europe. COSLA is active in Europe; it used to have a good policy unit, but when some councils withdrew their funding, the unit folded and its staff were paid off. There is an opportunity for us in Europe. We brief our MPs and MSPs monthly, but we do not brief the MEP. Such links have to be built up and we must recognise that the issues for local government should not just be Scotland-wide, but should go beyond and into Europe. We need to work on that.

The Deputy Convener: My final point is about accessibility. Most of your comments on accessibility were encouraging. Many of you have hosted a parliamentary committee meeting or a meeting of the Parliament, or you are about to or would like to. Highland Council commented that we sometimes arrive with a large entourage—which makes us sound very grand. For the record, I ought to explain that that is usually because we need the official report present as well as the clerks, so that the meeting is a proper, functioning part of the Parliament, not just some members who happen to be in an area. However, there is a

balance to be struck and we should not waste money or indulge in tokenism. How important are those visits for establishing relationships between councils and the Parliament and between the public and councils? Are they a good thing and the best use of the Parliament's money?

Councillor Alston: The meetings are important. We are about to try holding some Highland Council meetings in different parts of the Highland area. We feel that it is worth the money for local people to see that the council is in touch with them. I do not think that it is tokenism.

On the point about having an entourage, if that costs money, it costs money. I think that it is generally money well spent, but it is important for it to be kept to a minimum. It seems clear that, when committees have met outside Edinburgh, they have been welcome. The system seems to work. I think that you ought to pursue the practice and explore whether it might be done better still.

Councillor Ironside: My experience has involved the Transport and the Environment Committee's meeting in Aberdeen, which was highly successful. I am not aware that there was an entourage. Obviously, a number of people were there, including security staff, but they were not seen as an entourage and I would not describe them as such.

The public benches were full. Whether that was just because the Parliament was there or because the issue that was being discussed was relevant to local people, I am not sure. It would have been nice and it would have made a difference if there had been a bit more time for the parliamentarians to connect with the people who had been sitting on the public benches. The public certainly enjoyed what was going on at the meeting. They saw it and were involved in it.

Councillor Murray: Len Ironside makes an important point in respect of the appropriateness of the agenda of any meeting that is taken outside Edinburgh. If the agenda is not appropriate to the area where a meeting is being held, holding the meeting there may be viewed as tokenism. Like any other authority, we would welcome a meeting by any parliamentary committee, but we would emphasise the need for the subject under discussion to be relevant to the people of Angus. If it were not, that would be something of an insult.

Councillor Findlay: I, too, support that view. The visit of the Parliament to Aberdeen is being looked forward to. The fact that the whole Parliament is coming out of the central belt is seen as a big step forward. I agree that, if a committee is to meet outside Edinburgh, the issues being discussed should have some relevance to the area.

Councillor Brown: Stirling Council has an

embarrassment of riches as far as parliamentary committee meetings are concerned. Meetings have been held fairly regularly in Stirling, whereas there has never been a meeting in Alloa. The first time that we requested one was in relation to a major closure in the area—that of Coats Viyella. We asked the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee to come on that occasion. When an area finds itself in the eye of a storm, that is when such visits will have most value. Local people were very concerned about the situation.

We take our council, with its 18 members, to all the little village halls on a rota basis. If we can do that with 18 members, any parliamentary committee could do it, whether that is in our council chambers or in other halls. There are huge differences in public attendance. There might be a big issue, perhaps relating to the budget. We have had meetings involving more than 100 people, which is a lot of people for an area of our size. If you were to choose the right agenda—even if you were to discuss something contentious—such meetings would do the Parliament no harm at all.

The Deputy Convener: The Procedures Committee will visit Ullapool soon, but perhaps there is a point about finding places closer to the central belt—I do not know whether Alloa considers itself to be in the central belt, but it is certainly not Edinburgh.

I thank all the witnesses for coming—without their entourage—and for their written and oral evidence. I hope that you get some feedback from the committee when we deliberate in due course.

Meeting closed at 11:42.

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