

SOCIAL INCLUSION, HOUSING AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR COMMITTEE

Monday 23 August 1999
(*Afternoon*)

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SOCIAL INCLUSION, HOUSING AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR COMMITTEE

2nd Meeting

CONVENER :

*Ms Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS :

*Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con)

*Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD)

*Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)

*Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP)

*Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab)

*Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP)

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)

*Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)

*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING MEMBERS ALSO ATTENDED:

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP)

COMMITTEE CLERK:

Martin Verity

ASSISTANT CLERK:

Rodger Evans

Scottish Parliament

Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee

Monday 23 August 1999

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:04*]

The Convener (Ms Margaret Curran): One member of the committee who is not yet present has indicated that he will join us later. I am also led to believe that Keith Raffan is quite ill.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): The poor man is flat on his back at the moment. He sends his apologies.

The Convener: I am sure that everyone sends him their best wishes.

I formally open the meeting and welcome everyone who is here, particularly the members of the committee, who look refreshed and happy after these wonderful summer holidays that the press tell us we get. I do not quite share the press's view on that.

I welcome other members of the Scottish Parliament who are not committee members, but who have joined us today. We welcome their interest in our work. I would also like to welcome those people sitting in front of me in what is called the public gallery. We are pleased that there is such interest in our committee. I am sure that we will be meeting many of those people in the future.

Everyone should have a copy of the agenda in front of them. There is a substantial amount of work for our attention this afternoon. We have some time to go through the agenda and there is no need to rush. [*Interruption.*] Public acclamation so early?

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): Everybody likes you, Margaret.

The Convener: It is a shame that they are outside and not in the meeting.

We have time to have a full and proper discussion today. Before I move on to discuss our priorities, which are of great significance to everyone, I would like an early indication of other points that members might wish to raise so that we can add them to the agenda.

As no one wants to raise anything just now, I shall plough on, and members may raise matters during the meeting.

For the benefit of everyone here, particularly for

the members who have not taken part in the committee, I will explain the context in which we have made the recommendations for our priorities. At the first meeting of the committee, we had a fairly full, but meandering, discussion about our priorities and the issues that needed to be brought to our attention.

Since the Parliament first met, we have been lobbied quite strongly by various organisations and interest groups about what they consider to be the work of the committee. Many people have raised issues for our consideration. We felt that there was a need to order our work and to manage it effectively, and the paper that I have written is an attempt to do that. At the last meeting, it was suggested that I come back to the committee with a paper. That paper is based on the discussions that we had at our first meeting and on the ranking order that was decided at our informal meeting.

I ask the committee to turn to the document, HS/99/2/1, which Martin Verity, the clerk to the committee, has produced. The paper is based on the ranking that we were asked to suggest. Although not every member of the committee contributed to the ranking exercise—because of illness or because certain members did not receive the papers or for another reason—we thought that it was appropriate to set the document before the committee as it provides us with a base from which to work.

Many issues arose as a result of the ranking exercise. I have stressed in my paper, and I would like officially to record, that we do not regard the issues that do not appear on that list as unimportant. I think that I speak for all members of the committee when I say that. The issues on the list are merely the ones that the committee thought it should deal with initially.

Mr Quinan: As I have already written to Martin to point out, I have a slight concern about the listing of our priorities. Fuel poverty is inseparable from a national comprehensive strategy for poverty. Fuel poverty is clearly an element of a national anti-poverty strategy. As soon as any of the poverty-proofing indicators are taken out of a national anti-poverty strategy, a hole will be created that will allow poverty to breed. At this stage, it is vital that, if we are to discuss a national, comprehensive strategy for poverty, we make it clear that fuel poverty, along with many other issues, is part of that strategy and is not a separate issue.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I was going to raise exactly the same issue. In fact, the convener in her paper subdivided the national strategy into three strands. Fuel poverty is not mentioned specifically under any of those strands, and there are no recommendations on how fuel poverty will be addressed. While, ideally, we want

to agree that fuel poverty will be one of the issues that we examine as part of the anti-poverty strategy, it has slipped betwixt and between the strands.

The Convener: I have an open mind on this subject and I am happy to put fuel poverty where you suggest, Alex. Given some of the Executive initiatives that are around, it may have linked into, and come up under, housing. We could put it into both strands, as we need to examine the warm deal initiatives and similar issues that relate to housing. However, I take your point that it may well have to be inserted under the national poverty strategy.

I think that we will find that a number of issues fall into different categories and, rather than be too draconian at this point, if there is overlap between the work of those different categories, so be it. It is better to cover a subject twice than not to cover it at all. However we decide today to pursue the work that is reported back to us, we can return to this issue. Alex, you should keep an eye on that to ensure that we do not lose sight of it, as I think you are right.

Robert Brown: It is also important to break the subject down into discrete, workable pieces that we can deal with, doing something useful, as opposed to the risk of having a grandiose strategy that does not get to grips with anything.

Mr Quinan: On that point, Robert—and I will be firm on this—there is experience from elsewhere in the world, such as South Australia, the Netherlands, Portugal and Ireland, where a national anti-poverty strategy has been applied. Indeed, South Australia started off by separating the issue into each particular section. It was discovered within a very short period of time that by isolating single elements, it was not possible to carry out a national, comprehensive strategy.

My plea is for us to consider a comprehensive strategy, allowing each element to be part of that, and to move a concept of poverty proofing. The only way in which we can do that is through a national strategy. If we attempt to do it in a piecemeal way, we will find gaps and spaces and we will not have an effective anti-poverty strategy. We will have an individual anti-fuel poverty strategy, or—

Robert Brown: If I may say so, convener, we should not be arguing about the detail of the strategy.

The Convener: Can I stop you, Lloyd, as we are getting into the meat of the paper itself, and your point raises one of the big arguments in this field. We should try to approach it logically as we work through the paper.

I want to log with members the fact that these

were the issues that emerged from our priority ranking, and to state that this is what we thought would be brought to our attention immediately and that we should deal with immediately. For example, the issue of housing stock transfers is not, I am sure, the only housing issue that the committee would wish to examine. However, that is what people's attention has immediately focused on, because of the context in which we are operating.

I say to those people who have an interest in this committee that, just because a particular issue is not on our list at the moment, please do not think that we are not willing to listen to what you have to say just now. We will be examining other issues in the future. I hope that the paper has been constructed in such a way as to give openings for issues to emerge. At the end of the meeting, we will consider the context.

I now turn to the paper, which members should have a copy of, and which I will work through section by section, so that we can discuss it. We will then discuss the committee's approach and make final decisions.

I will start with the background. It is important to establish at the start of the work of this committee that we are profoundly committed to tackling poverty and exclusion within Scottish society, and that we see that work as a fundamental element of what the Scottish Parliament is about. In doing so, we must understand what poverty is about, and we must listen to those people who are the most excluded.

14:15

The work of this committee is twofold. First, we have to work in partnership with those who are excluded and to hear their views on a wide range of issues, which implies considering mechanisms that will access them and will let their voices be heard. Secondly, we have to ensure that we properly scrutinise the work of the Scottish Executive and, where necessary, make independent representations to it. We have to see ourselves as the voice of those who are excluded from policy development. That is what is unique about the Scottish Parliament. We are charged with the huge responsibility of making that work, which will take up a great deal of our time, our energy and our abilities. Given the discussions that we have had in this committee, I think that, despite the ideological differences between us, there is a genuine, principled and deepfelt commitment to tackling exclusion across the whole range of social issues.

I also think that there will be much lively discussion in this committee about the future of housing in Scotland. Many of us have dealt with

the issue over the years and it will be at the very top of our agenda, part of which will include the need to access those who experience housing difficulties in Scotland. On Saturday, it was clear from a conference that I attended in Dundee with Scottish voluntary organisations and Dundee social inclusion partnerships that the Executive has a commitment to the voluntary sector. We have to approach the matter differently. By meeting face to face with people and by interacting with the voluntary sector, we can have a more straightforward dialogue and can begin to understand what the important issues are and to facilitate their development within Scottish public affairs and public life.

I think that the work of this committee is central to the development of politics, of policy and of opportunities for public participation in decision making in Scotland. Many of us have long been committed to that aim and it is quite exciting to be near some level of power where we can try to make things work. I might live to regret saying that, but here's hoping anyway. I think that each committee member genuinely feels the same and we will make our decisions within that context. Some decisions will be hard and we will have to be ruthless in our initial prioritisation, but things are not cast in stone and we will regularly review the situation.

At one point in the paper, I say that we need to build a degree of flexibility into our work, because we will need to deal with issues that might arise from the work of the Executive, from the community or from a member's bill. As time moves on, there will be all sorts of developments and we must have the flexibility to deal with them. I am sure that this committee has the energy to do that.

Do members wish to add anything to section 1 of the paper for the record?

Alex Neil: Two areas that are central to any discussion about the causes of poverty and, more important, about how to eliminate poverty are unemployment and benefits. Anyone who has studied the subject of poverty will know that poverty and unemployment go hand in hand. We cannot examine poverty and raise expectations about tackling it without considering the related issue of the need for a serious programme to tackle short-term and long-term unemployment.

We must also examine benefit reform, because it would be difficult to pursue a successful policy of eliminating poverty in Scotland while receiving benefit cuts from London. We need to investigate the relationship between welfare reform and our attempts to deal with the fundamental issues of poverty. I do not want to make too much of a party political point, but anyone who examines the matter objectively will recognise that the issues of employment and benefits are central to the relief

of poverty. Those are reserved matters in terms of legislation, but, if we are really serious about an anti-poverty strategy, we need to examine such issues.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): I apologise if I missed this issue being debated at an earlier committee meeting and it has already been discussed. One of my concerns early doors about this committee was that while it was worthwhile to talk about poverty and have a national strategy on paper, what had the committee accepted as a definition of poverty? How many people in Scotland suffer poverty? What ideas has the committee had about setting realistic targets, which we can use to assess the success of the Parliament in raising people out of poverty? The committee may have accepted a definition of poverty already, but there is nothing in this paper that tells me what has been accepted as a definition, how many people in Scotland suffer from poverty and what targets we are setting for each of the coming years so that we can assure people outside this room that we are more than a talking shop. As Margaret Curran said, we do not want to be a talking shop but we will be accused of being one if we discuss those issues without setting targets.

The Convener: Those are two big points that come up in the debate about poverty all the time. Part of the reason that I have structured the paper in this way—and I did this in my role as convener rather than in the way that I would respond politically—was to say, in the section that considers the national anti-poverty strategy, that when we get into that kind of work that is where the debate of those issues rests. Let us stick to the remit of the committee first and see what we can do. If we feel that we must go beyond that and tackle some of the issues, that will be the time to have that debate about whether we really have to examine benefits or look at the work that the committee is challenged with immediately.

Tommy, what I have proposed in the remit as a strategic framework for the analysis of poverty is where those points are mentioned. I have mentioned measures and targets there. We have to discuss that issue as people have different points of view on which measures we should use and which targets we should set. Should we be saying, as the Government has done, that we will tackle child poverty by measures A, B, C and D and this is how we should measure it? We will not manage the work of the committee properly if we have a limited discussion of that issue now. We should discuss the issue properly within a framework. We can discuss the politics of those issues then. Hopefully, the groups that have a vested interest in those issues will be able to give us their points of view as well.

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): It is important that the committee must set itself some guidelines as to the nature of its discussions, but we must also ensure that the achievements that the committee seeks to manage are measurable. I accept that there are many definitions of poverty. A document entitled "Poverty in Scotland", which I am sure that we all read, by Glasgow Caledonian University sought to highlight, underline and define what poverty was. I doubt if many of the members of the committee would fully agree with that document, although certain aspects of it did have some merit. At some stage, for our own benefit—and for the benefit of people whom we seek to assist—we must highlight what we define as poverty. It is against that definition that our success or failure will be measured.

The Convener: I am not suggesting that we should not define poverty and should not set standards as to how we measure our work and judge our effectiveness. What I am saying is that this paper is about setting a framework that allows us to do that and sets our work in progress. When we start the work of the anti-poverty strategy, it will hopefully tackle those issues.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): I suggest that we move on through the paper. It is important to stress that, although this committee was the last to start, we are now meeting for the third time. We have had our briefing and have agreed that one of the first matters that we should decide is a Scottish definition of poverty and how we should deal with it. That is a good thing for the committee.

Margaret Curran talked about the committee showing energy and moving forward—we have sent out a strong signal by agreeing that we are prepared to consider a Scottish agenda on poverty. When we get to the meat of the issue, we can talk about how we measure and define poverty so that we have an understanding of the way forward.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): May I say something before we conclude this part of the discussion? It is important before we start our work that we have a clear framework for the way in which the committee will operate and that we prioritise our work. Our work is so wide-ranging that it would be easy for us to scratch at the surface of lots of issues related to poverty and the causes of poverty without actually achieving anything. From the start, we must get right the way in which we operate. We can then consider setting targets, which is essential but which should be part of our drawing up a national anti-poverty strategy for Scotland.

The Convener: I now want to look at point 2 on the paper to propose priorities. As some of you may know, tomorrow afternoon the conveners of committees will meet to consider a substantial

package of papers relating to the work of the committees. I wanted to let you know about the meeting because it will have a big part to play in our work. However, I will report on it later, so as not to detract from our discussion of prioritisation.

Point 3 on the paper covers submissions to the committee. We have had a number of submissions and I am sure that we will have many more. I want publicly to record that the committee welcomes those submissions and encourages people to give us their views. Point 4 simply states that we must manage the committee programme of work effectively, but I want to move to point 5.2, which deals with the work of the Executive.

Alex Neil: We have been talking about the guidelines for the work programme but we have not mentioned the time scale. Is this work programme for the next 12 months or for the next four years? I would imagine that it is for the next 12 months, but could we clarify that?

The Convener: That is for us to decide today. I did not want to do so because I thought that that might have been pre-emptive. My view is that the work programme is for the next 12 months. I certainly would not want to say that it was for the next four years—it would be a bit crazy for me to do that. The time scale will obviously be altered, depending on what sections of the work come back to us. If we can broadly agree on the issues on the agenda, I hope that we can talk about time scales at the end of the meeting.

Let me talk to the work of the Executive. At our informal briefing session, it seemed quite clear that people were anxious that we should at an early stage have an indication of the Executive's programme. I recommend that we should write to the minister, or ask the minister to come to the committee, so that we can be informed about the Executive's programme. That would enable us to set our programme for scrutinising and responding to the Executive's work. We already know about the social inclusion networks and the green paper on housing, for example, but I am sure that there are other things as well. We want the committee to speak to the ministers and the departments to ensure that they set up both a programme of information for us and an opportunity for us to question the Executive. It is for us to discuss the ways in which we can inform ourselves about the work of the Executive, scrutinise it and comment on it.

Fiona Hyslop: One of the suggestions was that we investigate suitable dates for the minister to come before the committee, especially to discuss some of the issues that we think are time sensitive, as some of the housing and social inclusion issues will be. To help us to put our work programme together, has the minister indicated any available dates?

14:30

The Convener: At our informal meeting, we were not sure whether we should get a written statement from the minister, which would mean that we could question her and not just hear her tell us what is being done. We want to use the opportunity to question and to scrutinise. I understand that ministers will make themselves available to us whenever we need them.

Bill Aitken: It is important that we have a written statement prior to such a meeting. The minister can then by all means speak to us to augment that statement. We would thereafter have the time and the opportunity to study that document so that our questioning can, I hope, be more pertinent.

The Convener: That might be helpful across the range of subjects that this committee covers. We must think a wee bit about how we manage it. It might, for example, be worth producing our own briefing on the summary of responses to the green paper and then to question the minister on that.

Fiona Hyslop: That can be raised when we discuss housing. I have been through a number of the summary responses to the green paper on housing and my concern is that, by the time we get the official report on them, we may have missed the boat on some of the current stock transfer issues. We need to discuss issues such as whether Glasgow will have a single-landlord system or a multi-landlord system and whether it will have a single ballot or multi-ballots. I am concerned about the time scale during which this committee examines those issues and the time scales of the real world—those things will be happening in September and October and if this committee is to be relevant and pertinent we must not miss the boat.

The Convener: Immediately after this meeting, we will ask the minister for a statement, which we will have distributed to members of the committee. We will also request an early meeting with the minister on a range of issues.

I will plough on if no one wants to stop me.

Alex Neil: I would like to follow on from my earlier point. The Secretary of State for Social Security made a statement yesterday on targets for the reduction of poverty across the UK. That clearly affects Scotland. I am obviously in favour of an early meeting with the Minister for Communities and her staff, but we must invite the Secretary of State for Social Security at some point, although I am not saying that that should be our top priority. Once we get into discussions on a national anti-poverty strategy, the targets referred to in the statement he made yesterday and the work of his department will greatly affect the ability of the Scottish Parliament—with its limited powers and resources—to achieve the objectives that we are

talking about.

The Convener: I would like to raise that when we come to discuss a national anti-poverty strategy.

I welcome a rather rushed-looking John McAllion to the meeting.

Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab): I apologise for being late. I made the mistake of using public transport.

The Convener: We will need to refer that to the transport committee. We are discussing page 3 of the paper.

Henry McLeish wanted requests from outside agencies and individuals. I am sure that people will not have any profound disagreement with that, but I mention it to ensure that we make a decision on the subject and that it does not get lost. I would like the committee's permission to work with the clerk to manage sensibly the establishment of our own programme of meetings and seminars, which would depend on the needs of the committee, on requests from outside and on our work load. That will probably be a four-year commitment. It will be managed depending on what the issues are and so on.

Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): There are two lists of the various organisations that have said that they want some form of engagement with us. Is the suggestion that they come here to meet us or should we see the various projects in which they are involved at first hand? We could, perhaps, even question some of the people who are involved in the projects. Presumably there will be a different answer for different organisations. May I ask the clerk whether that has been specified?

The Convener: I understand that it has in some instances but not in others, as you anticipated. There has been a range of requests. Most of the organisations have said that they know that we are here and that they want to speak to us to bring their issues to our attention. They are waiting until we complete this exercise before making further requests.

Mike Watson: One of the organisations that responded was Shelter, but the report says only that it gave responses to the housing green paper. Does that mean that it only sent us a copy of its response?

The Convener: Perhaps the committee clerk could speak to that.

Martin Verity (Committee Clerk): That item relates simply to information that Shelter sent in. That does not mean that Shelter would not seek to meet the committee—I am sure that it would—but that that correspondence was simply a summary

of the responses that it had received to the housing green paper.

The Convener: I hope that you all know that now everybody will be asking to meet us.

Alex Neil: I have one more question regarding GPC Scotland, which is described in the briefing paper as being a

“public affairs consultancy, registering interest in work of committee and providing contact details of various client companies”.

I have written to the Presiding Officer about responsibilities and to clarify whether people who are providing evidence to or being questioned by the committee are required to give information about their interests in the same way in which members have to declare their interests. If we decide to take evidence from a private sector lobbying company, for example, there must be some declaration of that company's interests. I am not deliberately looking at Mike when I say that.

Mike Watson: But you are.

Alex Neil: Even if that is not a general rule of the Parliament, it is something that we should adopt as a matter of practice, given that we are the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee, so that we are aware of the vested interests of those who give evidence to us.

Mike Watson: As someone who used to work for a lobbying company, I am happy to rise to the bait. It is absolutely clear that everybody—whichever they are—should make it clear whose interests they are representing, whether their own or those of a client organisation. We should expect, and indeed demand, that to be perfectly clear so that we can ask informed questions.

Fiona Hyslop: We are considering having a rolling programme of meetings and seminars, which we all assume will suit the programme of work that we are carrying out. I suggest that, rather than our having general briefings, as I know some committees are, it is the duty and responsibility of all committee members to give themselves a general briefing and to take action. The briefings that we want as a committee should be evidence-based and relevant to the work issues and packages with which we are dealing. That would be the most productive use of our time and would allow the organisations that want to speak to us to get the most out of our meetings.

The Convener: Following on from that, we need to tell organisations to be as specific and as focused as possible when they give us information. One rider I would add is that if any of us think that something is coming up, we should bring it to the committee's attention. It may benefit us to take a wee bit of time out to consider a slightly different issue so that when we have set a

programme we do not miss other issues. Now that we have said that, the organisations of Scotland will be geared up to bring their issues to our attention. It looks as though we will be doing nothing but going to seminars and meetings.

Robert Brown: It is fair to say that the current list of responses is a bit arbitrary, in that it includes only people who have come to us. I assume that there will have been an element not of screening—that gives the wrong impression—but of the clerk asking, where there has been an approach, what exactly organisations want to make representations about. Perhaps he will give us a steer on how this all fits together and on when, and about what subjects, we should see particular people. There are far too many people to see in a shortish period—it is as simple as that.

The Convener: It is one of my roles as convener to engage with key staff to get an idea from them of what they are expecting from us and to tell them what we are expecting of them.

Robert Brown: We must also watch that we do not exclude people who have something slightly different to say, which does not quite fit our agenda but which we should nevertheless hear.

The Convener: That is what I was trying to say earlier. Thank you.

Let us move on to the big issues that we are desperate to talk about—we keep jumping in on them. Those are the issues around the national anti-poverty strategy, under which heading I have put a number of items: jobs and social exclusion, housing and the voluntary sector and the work of the Executive, which I have added for obvious reasons. Lloyd Quinan can keep an eye on his point about fuel poverty, if he thinks that we need to ensure that that is included.

The list is meant to initiate discussion; it is not meant to be exhaustive. It is meant to give only a general framework and an idea of where we are going; it is meant to help us to manage our enormous work load.

I will start with the national anti-poverty strategy. We talked a wee bit about time scales, but there is no easy solution to the problem of how we manage our work load, because the strategy is at the centre of the work not only of this committee but of the Parliament. So much can come under this agenda. Schools, health and social work services could all be included in our work, because they have an impact on so much of what we will consider.

This is not even the middle of a strategy; it is literally a beginning. I have tried to outline, on the basis of what I have heard in this committee, the areas that people want discussed. I will speak to that for a minute and then members can come

back to me.

I have categorised the issue into three broad frameworks. First, there is the national strategic framework, which includes the big debate about poverty proofing, the audit trail on spending, looking at some European models and debating with some of our Irish colleagues. I have done some quite interesting work and members have raised other interesting work. We have much to learn from that. Unfortunately, there is no need for us to go to Ireland or Australia to find out about these things, because much of the information is already available and I have asked the information service to start gathering some of it for us.

There is no doubt that we can make a valuable contribution to the Scottish debate about how to take matters forward. I think Tommy's point about measures and targets would fit in with that. How do we measure poverty? How do we define poverty? One person's definition of tackling poverty is another person's alleviation of it. We need to make some clear statements about how we will take that work forward. I will let people come back to me on that.

Secondly, the current arrangements need to be reviewed. That might sound quite boring after talking about definitions of poverty, but an important part of the work of this committee is to assess current arrangements. What is the Executive currently doing to tackle poverty? What is it doing in local communities? Are the social inclusion partnerships working? Is there something else that should be done? What is the evaluation of that kind of work?

Funding is critical for local community organisations. For any form of regeneration strategy, we need to get into the minutiae of the issues if people are to feel that we are genuinely operating in their best interests. Wendy Alexander spoke at the conference I went to on Saturday. At the end, three of the earliest questions were about funding arrangements from local social inclusion partnerships or organisations. The issue is important and forms a big part of the agenda in Scotland.

I am interested in regeneration strategies. It is not possible to talk about social regeneration without talking about economic regeneration. The problem with all the committees of this Parliament is that they overlap and would like to do each others' work. My plea is that we should focus on what we have just now; we can raise the other issues, as they present themselves, with the other committees.

Finally, we must consider initiatives to combat poverty. There are many innovative initiatives in Scotland that we can support and continue to support. We can consider the ways in which we

support the community and voluntary sector in combating poverty. I am sure that we are all familiar with various schemes such as food co-operatives, credit unions and schemes for micro-credit. We need to consider those important issues, which are the building blocks for tackling poverty. Credit and debt are huge issues in Scottish society. We need to investigate them and find out what recommendations we can make.

I think that that is the work of 10 years.

Fiona Hyslop: Thank you for setting out a programme and suggesting how we should work our way through it. We are the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee, and I think that there are some concerns about the voluntary sector. The work programme identified the importance of our dealing with the voluntary sector. Instead of hiving off the voluntary sector in a separate work programme later, we could include in this area the voluntary sector's provision of services. We might get a more useful analysis from it about what prevents it from delivering on issues to combat poverty. That would engage the voluntary sector at the heart of our work instead of dealing with it separately.

14:45

Robert Brown: I appreciate that we are half and half on the issue of employment initiatives, but it is important to note that the employment element has been missing from a number of projects that have not achieved what was expected of them.

The Convener: When dealing with matters from which connecting issues arise, such as employment, it might be useful for us to examine the issue and recommend it on if it goes beyond our brief. We will return to that theme. If we talk to voluntary organisations about how to tackle poverty and they mention employment, we cannot say that that is not a matter for us because it is for another committee. We will examine employment in the context of anti-poverty work, but if our discussions become concerned with more direct employment strategies we can refer the matter on to the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee or the appropriate committee.

Mr Quinan: Passing on an issue such as employment, when we are trying to develop a national anti-poverty strategy, will leave a hole in the strategy. The point of a national anti-poverty strategy everywhere in the world where it is applied is that it is an over-arching policy structure. It is the management of policy whereby each and every department and committee is subordinate to the policy.

If we accept that we want to develop a national anti-poverty strategy we must accept that there will be times when we are working in other

committees' areas. It is our job to convince the other committees that for the benefit of the country and for the eradication of poverty we need a national anti-poverty strategy, which means that some people have to put their egos in the bottom drawer for a while. If we are going to talk about a national anti-poverty strategy let us be clear about what it really means: it means effectively taking elements of power away from the Executive, committees and departments. That is the only way that the policy will work. If we do not do that the policy will end up with gaps in it. We must decide on that principle at the outset, drawing on the experience of those in the rest of the world who have implemented such a policy.

Fiona Hyslop: Lloyd's points will be covered by our analysis of how we are addressing the issue of poverty and on how a national anti-poverty policy works elsewhere. For example, the analysis should identify how people have dealt with employment issues and how they have made progress. That may ensure that we do not lose track of the big issues of employment that are so relevant to poverty.

Mr McAllion: As an old socialist I am normally in favour of seizures of power from the Executive or any committee, but we should be careful about building our own little empire that takes over the Scottish Parliament. The model is that there will be a lead committee for issues that come under the remit of more than one committee. Obviously, in developing an anti-poverty strategy for Scotland, ours is the lead committee. However, there will be times when we can refer matters to other committees because they have a legitimate interest and can primarily address the technical aspects of that interest better than we can. We can work together with other committees, rather than taking power away from them.

I am also concerned about funding arrangements for projects such as social inclusion partnerships.

Social security has a major bearing on poverty. Any discussion about poverty will inevitably talk about the benefits that are available to poor people. What is the committee's remit in that respect? I know that our Westminster friends are a bit sensitive about us stumbling into areas that they regard as their preserve. As I was late in coming here can someone tell me whether there was a discussion about benefits?

I was at the social inclusion partnership conference in Dundee. Speaking informally to ordinary people who were there, I was told that they were concerned about professionals—who work for voluntary organisations and who are not themselves poor but are paid a good wage for working in poor areas—dominating the poverty debate. We must ensure that poor people have

access to the debate.

Was there any discussion about the fact that we cannot expect everyone in Scotland who is poor to come here to give evidence to the committee? The committee will need to get out to the housing schemes in Scotland and into areas where poor people do not feel overawed. Perhaps that is the wrong word. It is not normal for them to come to meetings like this, so it is important for us to get out and talk to them in an environment with which they are more familiar and which we should become more familiar with. I hope that that becomes an important part of the approach to the issue of poverty.

The Convener: I was going to raise that issue later on, as it is important. If we are to understand social exclusion, it is not enough for us to have people come here; we need to feel and live it. The paper before us states that those who experience exclusion should speak to the issue. The voluntary sector and social workers have something important to say, but that is not the same as talking to those who have direct experience of exclusion. I have had discussions with some groups about how we can create a system for doing that. It would be done partly through those groups and partly through our visits. Our visits will not involve going off to nice conferences in places such as Milan, but going to places such as Whitfield, Easterhouse and Pilton—although I do not know Edinburgh that well.

Mr Quinan: Craigmillar, Pilton, Wester Hailes and Leith.

The Convener: We are genuinely committed to being in those places. Later I will talk about the nitty-gritty of organising that.

The issue of social security was raised before Mr McAllion arrived.

Alex Neil: It was I who raised it. Like the convener, I believe that the two key issues relating to the causes of poverty and tackling poverty in society are unemployment and benefits. I do not want to make a party-political point, but the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill that is currently before the Westminster Parliament would make the situation of some people worse rather than better. We cannot seriously discuss an anti-poverty strategy without tackling the related issues of employment, unemployment and benefits, particularly benefit reform.

In the next six months, the UK Government will announce its proposals for the reform of housing benefit. That may have a tremendous impact on the level of poverty among certain groups in society, both in Scotland and elsewhere. If we are serious about developing an anti-poverty strategy, we must be prepared to tackle those issues. Even though legislative power resides at Westminster,

there is no reason for us as a committee—and, indeed, as a Parliament—not to demand action from Westminster on employment, benefit reform, better social security benefits and other matters. There is nothing in the Scotland Act 1998 to prevent us from doing that. If we do not face the problems of unemployment and benefits as part of our anti-poverty strategy, we will be kidding the people on.

The cruellest thing that this committee could do would be to kid on the people of Scotland that, without tackling those issues, we can come up with an anti-poverty strategy that will begin to eliminate poverty. That would be a fraud and it would not do the Scottish Parliament any good in the eyes of the Scottish people. For that reason, I strongly support what John said.

Mike Watson: That is not a party-political point: it is self-evident. However, we must tread carefully and try to take people with us rather than to score political points for Holyrood against Westminster. There is no point in doing that. John referred to articles in the media today about the stresses that are—I suppose inevitably—emerging. It is my understanding that we cannot demand the presence of the Secretary of State for Social Security at this committee, but we should ask whether he is prepared to appear before us. That would enable us to link our proposals with policies at the UK level. It is self-evident that the two must be linked. There is no question of our trying to pursue policies in a vacuum.

Fiona Hyslop: It is interesting that we are meeting in the constituency of the Secretary of State for Social Security. It is obviously important that we forge links with him; I am sure that he, for his part, will want to forge links with us. We have indicated that we want that to be on the agenda.

Tommy Sheridan: I want to pursue Mike's point about taking people with us. I hope that, when discussing funding arrangements, support for regeneration and work with the social inclusion partnerships, we will remember that, lower down the administrative hierarchy, local government is often left with the task of making policies work. When it comes to funding arrangements, I hope that the committee will be honest enough to examine the facts and figures rather than Government-speak about those figures. As a local councillor, I find it galling to read about extra funding that is supposed to be being made available when we in the City of Glasgow Council are cutting services.

I know that you, convener, have been involved in the voluntary sector for many years and are acutely aware of that. I hope that we can arrange our affairs to take the local councils with us. We're not saying, "reinvent the wheel". Many local councils have good ideas but often do not have

the money to carry them out. It is important that we listen to them.

The Convener: To respond to this big debate, we must remember that we are one strand of a response to poverty. We are not going to answer everything in this committee. The councils do a very important job tackling poverty and other parts of the Government cover important areas of work. I do not think that that prohibits our commenting on their work when we have the evidence to do so. We should not shy away from that—I am not prepared to. Evidence will also come from the communities that experience poverty.

Let us really concentrate on what our powers are; we must ensure that we use our powers effectively so that people cannot tell us that we were so busy criticising other people that we did not comment on our own work as well. When we get evidence, we must take it to other committees or to the appropriate parts of the British Government, but we have to ensure that we focus on our own work.

Alex Neil: John raised an important point that I made at the first meeting about where the spending ends up in a lot of these programmes, particularly those previously funded under urban aid and which are now funded under social inclusion—the in phrase which I detest, as opposed to social justice—partnerships. I have no doubt from my experience or from what people who are experiencing poverty say that that they are fed up to the back teeth with people in what they call the poverty industry making a bob or two. When we examine the audit trail of spend, an awful lot of it ends up with what I call the woolly jersey brigade, not with the people who need the resources and assistance to get out of poverty.

We should also bear in mind that there is not a lumpen section of the population that is the poor people of Scotland. People regularly move in and out of poverty. Some people never move out of it, but all types of people can move into it and then out again. It is important to register that, when we discuss people who have had experience of poverty, we are referring to those who have been able to lift themselves out of it or, more likely, to those who kicked off life with not a bad standard of living but who, through a change in circumstances, have been forced into poverty. We are talking about a mobile population.

The Convener: There are also many dimensions of poverty, including discrimination. You, Cathie, know about women's groups and will give us information about them.

I want to push on. We broadly agree, but will return to make absolute priorities at the end, when we look at the summary. Can I move on to drugs?

Tommy Sheridan: You obviously know how

bad they are for your health.

The Convener: I deliberately referred to “drugs . . . and social exclusion” in the document on our priority areas of work. Keith Raffan, who is unfortunately not here this afternoon, made the point clearly at the previous meeting: there is a dimension of the drugs debate that does not really get proper attention. That has been evident in recent weeks. Much of the attention has been on individuals’ responses to and experience of particular drugs.

The focus of this committee should be the causes of drug taking, why it is such a problem in communities, its impact—in the document I called it

“the collective impact of drugs misuse”—

and the devastation it causes. We need to examine the means communities have to respond to that. That is our emphasis: it is not on having a big inquiry or study on drugs. Much of that work has been done. John told us about such work at the previous meeting and I have some information about drugs misuse.

I do not see drugs misuse as the focus of this committee; our focus is examining what is happening in local communities, on whether they have been given the means to deal with the problem and on strategies of prevention, care and rehabilitation. Some people will say that such strategies are in place, but when the situation is investigated on the ground, others will say, “We’re not so sure. There are other things that we need done.” They can be critical of some of the services that are around.

15:00

I would be keen for us to add that dimension to the public debate without necessarily considering the enforcement issues that are important to people. The Executive is considering issues surrounding enforcement that we may examine at some time. However, we shall begin by listening to what is happening in communities.

Robert Brown: That establishes an interrelation with other committees. This issue is a relevant focus for our committee, but the health and justice committees also have a role to play. Is that something that you will discuss at the meeting of conveners?

The Convener: Yes.

Robert Brown: This area should be made clear rather than considered by overlapping groups.

The Convener: Procedures for joint committees that could examine those issues are written into the papers for tomorrow. The feeling is that no more committees should be set up until the ones

that are already established are working. Once those committees are working, that possibility could be considered. I would argue that we are considering only one aspect of the subject. If issues arose that were within the proper remit of other committees, we would refer them to those committees.

Fiona Hyslop: I am concerned that the work of the Parliament and the committees has been restricted because of worries about staffing—the availability of the clerks—and financing. It is evident, however, that members from all parties want the issue of drugs to be dealt with. My concern is that if we pigeonhole the issue by saying that we are considering only the social inclusion aspects, other committees will identify and examine the justice and health aspects individually.

With the agreement of the committee, I would like you to suggest at tomorrow’s meeting of conveners that, rather than the whole of our committee considering the issue, some members of the committee could join members of the justice and health committees collectively to consider all the aspects. There is a danger that, otherwise, we might lose the issue or pass on a commentary about our findings that will not result in action, which is what people want.

I suggest—and we should find out what others think of this—that we should send two or three members from this committee to join members from other committees. If there is to be one additional committee in this Parliament, that should be the one.

Tommy Sheridan: I do not necessarily disagree with the principle that Fiona is suggesting, Margaret, although I hope that any committee will be much more focused than this one when it is established.

I get particularly fed up with the use of the words drugs epidemic, with the treatment of drugs and social exclusion, and with all the talk about consideration of drug-related issues. What is it that we are actually talking about? Is it alcohol, tobacco, heroin, Temgesic or cannabis? When we talk about drugs that relate to social problems, alcohol and tobacco are at the top of the list—above heroin, which gets most of the publicity, above ecstasy, which gets the next most publicity, and above cannabis, which does not know exactly where to fit in just now.

I hope, therefore, that we will approach the issue from a social point of view, asking why it is that people are taking drugs—whether to escape social problems or for recreation. There will be no dialogue with a lot of people out there who take illegal drugs for recreational purposes. They think it hypocritical that others who take more damaging

drugs, such as alcohol and tobacco, can do so legally and without criticism. I hope that we can establish an adult committee set-up that will examine the issue without worrying about tabloid headlines that will try to criticise people because they are looking at life the way it is rather than the way our moral guardians think it should be.

Mr McAllion: I agree with others that this subject is far too serious for us to play politics with it in any sense—whether playing to the tabloids or anyone else. However, I am concerned about the idea of an ad hoc committee comprising members of the social inclusion, health and justice committees. Such a committee would only go over the ground that the Scottish Affairs Committee at Westminster covered. There will be a debate about the medicinal uses of cannabis, which provide the basis for a legitimate complaint. Heroin and cocaine can be prescribed on the national health service, but cannabis cannot. The health committee will be interested in that. The Justice and Home Affairs Committee will be interested in drugs tsars and punitive regimes. The focus of this committee should be on the impact of drug abuse on poor communities.

I believe that the impact of drug abuse on poor communities is different from the impact on better-off areas of Scotland, where people also use drugs recreationally—but they can hold down jobs without in any way being disabled by going clubbing and taking drugs at the weekend. That issue must be examined, but it is not the work of this committee to consider the impact of that kind of drug taking.

We should be focusing on the impact of drugs on poor communities. I suspect that that impact is different, but nobody has ever established that. This committee must examine the impact of all drugs, including alcohol. We should not restrict our examination of this issue to the banned drugs; legitimate drugs probably cause more damage in working-class communities than even heroin does. We must look at those problems and highlight the different impact of drugs on poor communities and on the rest of society. The debate that dominates the press is not the debate about poor communities. The work of this committee is to focus on the poor and their problems and on how those problems can be dealt with.

In Dundee, there is debate about Calton Athletic. Some people in power do not like Calton Athletic—they think that its "Just say no" message is too negative—but Calton Athletic may be the best hope for some people living in poor communities. We should try to establish whether such groups have a legitimate role in communities around Scotland. That kind of rehabilitation and support is available in Glasgow but not in Dundee. Those issues have to be addressed, but they will

not be addressed directly if we go for a big ad hoc committee covering all the different committees and simply repeat the work of the Scottish Affairs Committee, which focused on whether cannabis should be decriminalised. Decriminalising cannabis will not affect the problem of drugs in poor communities around Scotland, and we should try to find a solution for such communities rather than for society as a whole.

Mike Watson: I agree with John McAllion. The incidence of alcohol and tobacco-related diseases and deaths is considerably higher in poor communities, so those drugs cannot be excluded from our work.

I do not dismiss the point that Fiona Hyslop raised about the need to work strategically with other committees, but I can foresee problems in aligning the work of this committee with what the Health and Community Care Committee or the Justice and Home Affairs Committee may do. Their work may have an impact on our work, but they may not be in a position to join forces with us because they may be considering other matters. We have chosen the path that we want to follow, but other committees may not be going down a parallel road at a similar speed.

I will be a member of the conveners group, as will John McAllion, and other members of this committee may also be there. However, the conveners group cannot drive the view of this committee. I accept the idea that Fiona Hyslop has outlined, but I think that it would be difficult to put into practice.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): I agree with what Mike and John have said. We must look at the effect of drugs on poorer communities. Linking up with other committees would widen the scope of our work, but we want to discover the facts about drug abuse for our poverty strategy report, and we must not lose sight of the point of that report.

I am not saying that committees should not work together; we all want members of the Scottish Parliament to work together for the benefit of the people of Scotland. We need to show the impact that the misuse of drugs—alcohol, tobacco, or any other drug—has on poor people. John pointed out that it impacts more on poor communities than it does on other classes, who seem able to manage their drug problems because they have cash to work with.

I resist Fiona's suggestion, although I agree that there are some points on which we should work together. Your recommendation, Margaret, seems to indicate that you would prefer a quick, short-term inquiry, so that we can look specifically at how drug abuse excludes people from our societies.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I am a member of the Health and Community Care Committee. My contribution will be brief as I have to leave shortly, but I agree with what members of this committee said in earlier discussions. There are many issues that will be touched on by several of the Parliament's committees. The Health and Community Care Committee will be interested in the health aspects of housing, but that does not mean that this committee cannot look at the issue, too. Similarly, the Health and Community Care Committee's interest in drugs should not preclude another committee from examining the issue from its own perspective. We do not have to set up sub-committees for all the cross-cutting issues; that is neither practical nor necessary.

There are lots of good ideas, but the one in the paper contains a dimension of the drugs debate that has been missing since long before the summer. There has been an individualistic approach to drugs. There are the crime aspects, but to relate drugs to social circumstances is central. Any work that the committee does on the subject will be valuable for other committees when they come to look at it and for the whole drugs debate. It is a brilliant and important idea—I hope that the committee will go ahead with it rather than wait until a sub-committee is formed.

Mr Quinan: Although I understand the responses of the other committee members, I agree with Fiona. We have never had a genuine, open, honest debate about drugs in Scotland or the UK. No one has ever said, "The following amount of money goes into the following communities because there is a drug problem." We look at enforcement, law, health and attitudes—which is why we have just had a debate about what are legal and illegal drugs.

Although this and many other committees touch on the subject, I agree with Fiona that there should be a separate committee on it. In that way, we can have a genuinely open debate, without fear, about the real problem with the drugs culture in Scotland and how it affects every section of society. To look at it purely in terms of how it affects the poor, which would be the responsibility of this committee, will deal with only one section of society and will not help us to find a solution.

As I said at the first meeting, if someone has a choice between going on the new deal and making £1,500 a week selling drugs, and that person lives in Whitfield, Niddrie or Craigmillar, what choice will they make? We should be looking at that issue. Tommy's point was that we should have a proper debate about what drugs are. Nicotine and alcohol kill more people in this country than all the class A, B and C illegal drugs put together, but we separate them because they are revenue-building.

To get a genuine debate, we need to take the drugs issue away from this committee, although we—and the health and justice committees—will touch on it. If we cannot even decide whether alcohol is a drug, or whether it is a kind of okay drug—unlike the other ones that are bad drugs—where will we go with our examination of the issue? It shows that there has been confusion and lack of honesty in the debate for many years; the time has come to deal with it properly.

On the front page of *The Sun* today is a ludicrous, out-of-context statement by the member for Leith—not the member for Leith, sorry, Pollok. The Bishop of Edinburgh is being pilloried—

The Convener: What have you been up to, Malcolm?

Tommy Sheridan: Malcolm's story is tomorrow.

Mr Quinan: The member for Pollok, Malcolm, sorry. You do look remarkably similar.

We cannot have an honest debate about the subject because people live in fear of talking about the realities. If we keep it within this committee, we will not deal with the problem on a national basis. We need to deal with it root and branch and to get right down to the simplest questions—what is a drug and what is damaging?

Cathie Craigie: I was not suggesting that we keep the issue within this committee. As previous speakers said, it relates to the remit of every committee. Our role is to look at the impact of the issue on poverty and social inclusion. We are all experienced in that role, and will be able to come to grips with it. That is not to suggest that it is the only thing that we will look at—clearly there are other areas in the Parliament. Ultimately, committees have to report; when we and other committees—whether health, education or justice—come back with our reports on this subject, the Parliament should be able to examine them and come up with a strategy that deals holistically with the problem of drugs. It is not right to suggest that we want to look at one small part of it.

Mr Quinan: I do not think that I said that—that is an interesting interpretation.

Fiona Hyslop: The heat that the issue is generating in this committee shows how strongly people feel about it.

I agree that this is the missing part of the debate, but I am concerned that if we proceed alone, the impact of what we come up with will be less impressive than if we worked collectively with the health and justice committees.

15:15

I also have a point about how we can go about

this. Some members of this committee, as Mike indicated, are also members of other committees. If some MSPs can be members of two committees and deliver their work, others should be able to do the same. I suggest that if we nominate a number of members of our committee to go on a cross-committee drugs working party, we can deliver. There are, I think, three members of the sub-committee of conveners here; they can deliver the strong message that we can work on this collectively.

This is the missing part of the debate and it is absolutely essential. I am not negating that, but to ensure that it has the impact that it undoubtedly should have, we must include our colleagues from the justice and health committees. Otherwise, the issue will be compartmentalised and drugs will become another jigsaw, with the social side having to fit in with the justice and health sides. If we act collectively, that will be more effective.

Robert Brown: I have some sympathy with Fiona, but one of my concerns is that we could dither about indefinitely. If there is an argument at the conveners committee or among committees about setting up some sort of joint group, nothing will get going. The central part of what has been said here, on both sides, is that the drugs issue is wider than just drugs but is, rather, about alcohol and general addiction problems. If the details were to be widened a little to include some of the alcohol-type problems, we would have a fairly discrete subject.

It will be useful for the committee to consider the subject, because there is a missing agenda that has not been focused on so far. At a slightly later time, once it has been discussed at the conveners committee—it is a little disappointing that that committee is only just meeting—

The Convener: Absolutely.

Robert Brown: There may then be scope for joining together the work that this committee and perhaps others have done and moving on with it. Something more overarching will certainly be needed at the end of the day.

My concern is that if we do not make some moves now, the issue will be lost in the conveners committee while various arguments go back and forward. We have a job of work to do, even with our slightly restricted role. We should get on with that, widen the scope slightly and try to come up with something useful.

The Convener: That is quite helpful. If we move ahead, that does not preclude the idea of the Parliament setting up some kind of joint committee at a later stage. The reason why I would prefer to pursue it immediately is that I disagree with Tommy; I think that communities would tell us—they have certainly told me—that drug misuse and

its impact are at the top of their agendas. All facets of drug misuse have an enormous impact on the way in which those communities live and their quality of life.

The people in those communities have to have faith that we will take the issue to the top of our agenda and show that we understand the problems that it causes within the excluded communities of Scotland. If we could do that fairly quickly, we could have powerful statements—not just from ourselves but from the people in those communities—to take to the joint committee. To address Fiona's concern, we could ensure that when the health, justice and education committees consider the issue, they will hear what the people who live with the problem have to say, rather than hearing the agendas of schoolteachers or health professionals, or of a committee of 10 MSPs sitting in a room.

We are the people who can facilitate the arguments. This is the beginning, not the end; all we are doing is starting the process.

Robert Brown: On the point of addiction, as opposed to drugs—

The Convener: I think that it might be worth asking the group to consider that.

Karen Whitefield: I agree with much of what Margaret said. The issue of drugs is very important to many of the communities that we represent. We had a death in my constituency on Thursday, which has shocked Airdrie because we have realised that the problem of drugs is not isolated within certain communities in the constituency. The death happened in the shopping precinct in the main town centre.

Many people who are following the committee's work will feel that we have missed an opportunity if we do not include this issue in our programme of work. Certainly it is something that the Parliament should look at, but we have a chance to start that work and to take the lead. It is an issue that people in my constituency are constantly talking to me about, and I am sure that is not unique. It is a burning issue for communities across Scotland and I do not want us to miss the boat. We should be taking the lead and pushing forward.

Alex Neil: We are all trying to achieve the same thing and we are all concerned about the drugs issue, including legal as well as illegal drugs, and their impact on deprived communities in particular. This is obviously a general paper; I suggest that for our next meeting we agree a more specific remit along the lines suggested. I also suggest that Margaret could agree with the conveners of the health and the justice committees what their remit will be on drugs so that we each know what the three committees are doing and do not reinvent the wheel. We could all focus on our

particular areas and bring the work together at parliamentary level to complete the process. In that way, we could overcome the objections to a joint committee but at the same time achieve the cross-committee co-ordination that Fiona is trying to ensure.

The Convener: I am happy to inform the conveners—however that is done—that we have decided that this is one of our top priorities and that we wish to look at and will move ahead on this dimension of it, but we wish to co-operate with them on other aspects. Is that acceptable?

Alex Neil: Will you also ask for clarification on what they are doing, so that we will not be at cross-purposes with each other?

Mr McAllion: I wonder whether the idea of a joint committee of 10 MSPs is an alternative to Charlie Kennedy's call for a royal commission. Is it the Scottish equivalent?

Mr Quinan: If I remember correctly, Angus MacKay made a statement about the formation of a drug enforcement agency and a new great plan that the Executive has. Surely a first step would be to ask him to come and tell us what the intentions for it are and what our role would be in scrutinising what it is doing. For the Executive, will drugs issues be led by a law and order approach or by Cathie's concept of a holistic approach?

The Convener: That is the point we are trying to make—that there are all sorts of dimensions to drugs. Enforcement is one of them and the Executive has—

Mr Quinan: The point I am making is that if we get Angus MacKay here and find out what the intentions are, that will clear the ground for us to do what Margaret is suggesting, which is to look at drugs in the context of poverty.

The Convener: I do not think that it does. With respect, I think that means the opposite of what we are saying. As I understand Lloyd's argument, he is saying that there are clearly enforcement issues around drugs, and health and education issues—which the entire Parliament and different committees have to address. What we are saying in this committee is that there is an often misunderstood dimension of drugs in relation to poverty, the social causes of drugs problems and their impact and, I would also argue, our inability to date to tackle the drugs epidemic—or whatever language we use—effectively and to put in place effective services. Other solutions and strategies must also be in place.

To me, the starting point is the local communities—let us hear what they have got to say and what the real problems are; let us ask them for their strategies. Perhaps at that point, when that inquiry is completed, we could suggest

an angle on enforcement that the Executive has not yet looked at, which we could try. The starting point has to be the communities, their experience, the scale of the problem as they see it and listening to what they have to say.

We need to move on. We have not started to discuss housing and it is nearly 3.25 pm. It goes without saying that housing will be a huge issue for us to consider; it has already featured prominently in our discussions.

I have tried to come up with a recommendation that will help us to move forward. Housing is the area in which we are most tightly tied to the Executive programme, as we will have to scrutinise its work in that area much more closely than in others, in which there is scope for us to be more creative. There is more of a timetable implication and more of a legislative role than in other areas.

Fiona Hyslop: Has there been further clarification of what work the committee will be expected to do, and when the committee will be expected to do the work?

The Convener: No, I have not received any information specifically on that. I understand that Wendy Alexander will inform Parliament of the summary of responses to the green paper, "Investing in Modernisation—An Agenda for Scotland's Housing", and that the programme will emerge from that. I do not have any more information than that.

Alex Neil: Stock transfers and housing partnerships are the priority and are the area in which we have legislative powers and responsibilities. Clearly, though, in the next six months or so, as a result of the green paper on housing in England and Wales, legislation on housing benefits that will affect Scotland will probably be proposed.

I recognise that the issues that are before us should have priority in terms of time scale, but—we talked about flexibility—at some time, probably before Christmas, we will have to consider the housing benefit issue, as it runs through this committee's anti-poverty remit as well as its housing remit. I want to place it on record that we are agreed that, at the appropriate time, we will consider housing benefit reform.

Fiona Hyslop: Housing benefit reform is an important part of the stock transfer issue as well. If the stock transfers that are proposed result in rent increases for many council tenants, and housing benefit rises faster in Scotland than it does in England as a result of this Parliament's legislative or economic programme, there will be an impact on the Scottish block.

We should consider the housing stock transfer

debate from two angles: we should examine economic and financial aspects but we should also—to tie in with what we are trying to do elsewhere—assess whether stock transfers are delivering on the community empowerment and social inclusion agendas. By considering stock transfers from those two angles we can bring in the housing benefit aspects, which are important. It will be useful to question whether stock transfers deliver community empowerment and participation, those buzzwords that we mentioned. That perspective will be a supplement to the results of the green paper.

Mr McAllion: It is a bad moment to make decisions about housing, simply because the responses to the green paper have not yet been published and the Executive has yet to announce when the responses will be published. We will need time to read them and to understand what people across Scotland are saying about the future of housing.

It is not just this committee that must consider housing benefit changes. The Scottish Executive will be very interested in what housing benefit reforms are proposed at Westminster later this year. In any case, the Scottish Executive will not be able to bring forward legislation until it knows clearly what housing benefit will be, as, obviously, the shape of Scottish housing in the next century will depend on the housing benefit system, on access to it and on how it can support rents and finance in housing. The Scottish Executive, as well as us, is a wee bit hamstrung at the moment because of the delay in publishing the proposals for housing benefit reform. No one in the Scottish or Westminster Parliaments would argue that we could debate housing without discussing housing benefit. Housing benefit is sustaining the social rented sector. If housing benefit is changed radically, housing in Scotland will have to be changed radically as well.

The convener's proposal that we take time to bring together a work programme on housing is the best idea. We need time to study the recommendations and to ask the Scottish Executive what its proposals are. We should also wait to hear what is said at Westminster about housing benefit. Until all the pieces of the jigsaw are put together we cannot argue sensibly or coherently about what should happen to housing in Scotland. Therefore, the best idea is to set up somebody to bring back a programme of work and to take us through all the different stages, so that we are able to keep in line, step by step, with developments in the Scottish Executive and at Westminster, and with what people in Scotland tell us. Stock transfers will come up at the same time, so there is no reason why we cannot ask people who are involved in the stock transfer process to talk to this committee. We need a structured

programme that goes progressively and rationally through the shape of housing in Scotland.

15:30

The Convener: When I made that suggestion, it was not to preclude an early debate of current events. It was to enable us to manage the work programme sensibly and to get a strategic view of housing and how the issues connect.

Fiona Hyslop: What John is proposing makes sense, particularly the timing of it, because we will be tied by debates that go on outwith this committee. His proposal will also tie in with getting an early indication from the minister—which we discussed earlier—of what is expected and when, and a view of how things are developing. I think that we are looking at a running brief. The anti-poverty strategy is a major piece of work—a meaty, strategic issue—but if we are to keep abreast of contemporary debates as we go along, then we must look at housing too. I do not want the suggested programme to kick housing into touch, but I do not think that we would allow it to do that. It is a case of keeping pace with the debate and with the legislative programme.

The Convener: If we have some flexibility—although we have so much work to do that we will not have any—then we all know that if the Executive makes an announcement or if people want to make a submission to the committee, we will make every effort to address that.

Robert Brown: I am also in agreement with the proposal, but housing stock transfers will catch us. It is a complex matter that is happening differently in different areas of the country, and as a committee we must come to grips with it. That probably means that we must have briefings, not so much individual briefings from Edinburgh and Glasgow and other areas, but more in terms of how the committee should approach the question and what the criteria of judgement should be. We need to think through how we can pursue angles and get a proper critique to enable us to view decisions on this matter properly. Housing stock transfers have major implications. Someone talked about the next century, but housing stock in many areas will be of great importance over the next scores of years.

The Convener: The Scottish Tenants Organisation has contacted me and asked me to tell the committee that it wishes to bring to our attention its views on housing stock transfers. I have reassured it that, although it was not on the agenda today, we will hear it.

Bill Aitken: The question of housing stock transfers to which Robert Brown alluded is central to the housing aspect of this committee's work, and perhaps other aspects. Earlier, we talked

about how we might define poverty. Many of Scotland's citizens are living in substandard housing conditions which are liable to deteriorate quite dramatically as the years advance. I know that there are different views around this table regarding the efficacy of housing stock transfers, but I think that I may be forgiven for saying that I do not necessarily agree. The whole question of housing stock transfers, what is likely to happen, and what the Executive is going to say about it, is at the nub of our deliberations and it must be looked at. We need more money in Scottish public sector housing—I think that we all agree on that. The argument is about where that money will come from. The public sector is not able to fund the improvements that we would like. There will not be a unanimous view around the table on that, but I suggest that consideration of the matter by the Executive must be accelerated. We must know what we are doing. If the funding is not to come from stock transfers, then we must seek another source. We would not like the situation of those who live in the peripheral schemes of our cities to deteriorate in the way that is likely to happen unless that money is found.

The Convener: There are many dimensions to this question, and you are right about housing stock transfers. There may be different points of view, but I think that we want to hear the arguments.

Bill Aitken: Of course.

The Convener: We do not need to make a decision about the reporter now—I will keep that for the summary at the end—but we are agreed that that is how we will move forward.

Earlier, Fiona Hyslop made the important point that we should engage the voluntary sector in our anti-poverty work. I think that it is very important that we should do that in the various categories of our programme. However, I have suggested that the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, the parent body, arrange a briefing for us. Although I know that a lot of us have experience of the voluntary sector, I am not sure whether we are on a level playing field.

Alex Neil: It is important to remember that, although a large chunk of the voluntary sector deals with the issues for which we are responsible—social inclusion and housing—a substantial part of the voluntary sector deals with other aspects that are of equal importance. As Fiona suggested, our discussions on issues such as anti-poverty measures, for example, should involve voluntary organisations. But how do we deal with the parts of the voluntary sector that are not involved in housing and social inclusion? Voluntary organisations are involved with everything from economic development to education to mental health. Some guidance from

SCVO on how we could include them would be helpful. From information I have received from SCVO, I believe that the voluntary sector is concerned about general issues to do with the registration of voluntary organisations and other aspects of law that discriminate against voluntary organisations or that do not provide for their needs. Those are areas on which we might be able to concentrate under the voluntary sector part of our remit, but we would want to have guidance from the umbrella organisation.

The Convener: We should begin discussions with SCVO. We will ask them to host a seminar to bring us all up to speed on the issues before we set an agenda.

You have a lot of experience in the voluntary sector, have you not, Robert?

Robert Brown: The citizens advice bureau has been my area.

There is a wide range of voluntary bodies—we receive 30 or 40 communications a day from them—who do not always share a sectoral interest, so it is right that we consult SCVO.

The Convener: Karen, you have a special interest as well, have you not?

Karen Whitefield: I agree with Fiona that it is important that we consult the voluntary organisations that deliver services and tackle poverty, but we should remember that there is more to the voluntary sector than that. The sector expects the committee to consider issues such as funding, how organisations can cope with things like national lottery funding and the rolling programme and how they can exit from that programme. The issues that we need to consider are not just about how the voluntary sector delivers services but about how the groups within it operate. We should also bear in mind the difference between the voluntary sector and community groups. There is a difference between professional voluntary organisations and community activists.

The Convener: At some point, we will have a profound discussion on that difference. I know where I stand on the issue.

We will also have to look at the ministerial programme of action that the Executive will announce.

There is a degree of consensus in the committee. I will ask the clerk to draw up a programme, which will include the seminar with SCVO. We will write to the relevant ministers—probably Wendy Alexander and Jackie Baillie and perhaps Frank McAveety, if there is a housing aspect—and request a statement on executive action. We will ask for briefings on those ministers' work and set aside time for a programme of work

based on that.

I will now go through the list of recommendations so that we can make formal decisions on them.

Fiona Hyslop: I would like to clarify something before we do that. I understand that our previous agreement was that, after having read the statement from the ministers, we would ask for an early meeting.

The Convener: Is it the view of the committee that we want an early meeting?

Mike Watson: There will be several meetings at that time. I suggest that we schedule the meeting, but get the paper beforehand so that we can form our questions.

The Convener: That is okay. We will get that going very soon, I hope.

Mr McAllion: Can I ask whether that will include all three ministers? I think that Frank McAveety should be here, if possible. Although he cannot say anything definite, it would be good to know what is being thought about housing and to receive any information that is available.

The Convener: Yes, if any ministers have a direct impact on the work of the committee, we should request that they attend. Sorry, am I misunderstanding that point?

Alex Neil: The point was that it might be asking a lot to get them all here on the same day.

Mr McAllion: Yes, that would be too much.

The Convener: Leave that with us. I take it that Wendy Alexander is the main person that we would wish to see. If we had more detailed questions about the role of the voluntary sector, for example, we could ask the other ministers as appropriate. I shall start with Wendy.

I want to move on the national anti-poverty strategy. How we take that forward will be difficult because there are so many different dimensions. I take on board the points that were made earlier about that. Alex, you can write to Alistair Darling.

Alex Neil: No problem.

The Convener: That was a joke. Re-reading the *Official Report*, what seem like jokes in committee do not come across like that, so I should be careful about what I say.

Mr Quinan: That is why we are in politics, Margaret—comedy.

The Convener: With the permission of members I will come back to the next meeting having talked to individuals in between times about proposals for taking forward the national anti-poverty strategy.

Alex Neil: In the housing section in your paper, Margaret, you suggest that a couple of reporters come back to the committee with a proposal. In the case of the anti-poverty strategy, under your chairmanship, perhaps another couple of members as well as you could report back. It would help to create a consensus about the work programme. We do not want to spend much more time discussing the work programme, but to get into the nitty-gritty of it. It might be useful to have a small group, with one member from each of the parties, agreeing on the proposals, to expedite the work of the committee.

The Convener: Yes, let us get it started and see how it goes. Is everyone agreed to that? [MEMBERS: "Yes."] I will convene the group, and perhaps Lloyd will take part. Bill, you do not have much choice about it.

Bill Aitken: With all due modesty, I shall nominate myself.

The Convener: Robert, I hate to say it, but you are in the same position.

Robert Brown: What are we doing? Are we having one group for each subject?

The Convener: It is ad hoc, a one-off, just to take us forward. If we include Karen too, that will get us moving.

Karen Whitefield: That is okay.

The Convener: Can we agree that we initiate a short-term inquiry into drugs?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes, as long as that does not preclude collective working.

The Convener: At a later stage.

Fiona Hyslop: But not too late.

The Convener: I will raise that at the committee of conveners. We are starting the inquiry, but we think that the other committees have a key role to play.

With permission, I will take advice from Paul Grice about terms of reference and options for an inquiry, and return to the committee with a work plan.

There seems to be consensus about having a reporter. I want to clarify what I mean by reporter. That is another issue that has come up in the papers for the consideration of the committee of conveners. My understanding is that, following tomorrow's meeting, we can appoint reporters and that we can decide their role. There is quite a bit of scope for that and I think that we should just do it. My recommendation is that we do.

Fiona Hyslop: Are we talking about a committee member or an external reporter?

The Convener: The reporter must be a member of the committee. I am sorry, I should have clarified that point. The reporter cannot work outwith the remit or powers of the committee and must report back to us.

Alex Neil: Is a reporter the equivalent of the European rapporteur?

The Convener: That is the debate. It is and it is not. The idea of a reporter is equivalent to the rapporteur, but we can develop that idea as we like. I am suggesting that we should not be too hide-bound, but should do what we want and let people stop us if necessary.

Robert Brown: There are two concepts here: one is to appoint a reporter to develop ideas and so forth and the other is to have an expert adviser to the committee.

15:45

The Convener: We need at some point to discuss the role of expert advisers and suchlike. We have the power to appoint them and I am sure that we will do so when we get down to the nitty-gritty. The role of a reporter is different from that of an expert adviser—we are asking one of our members to take on a specific responsibility and to report back to us.

Alex Neil: Is this a one-off appointment or will that member be the reporter on housing for the next 12 months?

The Convener: That is for us to decide. I suggest making an appointment now in order to get started; we can look again at the role of the reporter once the work is completed. It is not worth getting too caught up on that member's role. We want someone to get the work under way; they can come back to us with their proposals for a work load, having knocked some of it about. We will know whom to talk to about a particular issue.

There is an issue about managing the agenda. There are sensitive issues around housing and the agenda will give the committee a focal point. Although appointing a reporter seems a sensible way of managing the work load and of getting us started, I do not think that we should appoint a member for the lifetime of the committee. They might not want such an appointment and we might not want them to have it. Moreover, the role of the reporter is probably going to change, given the way in which the Parliament is bound to evolve. I recommend that we get started. *[Interruption.]* The clerk has just told me that we can put a time limit on the member reporting back to the committee.

I recommend that we agree the nomination of a member today, get them started and ask them to report at the next meeting on how they are pursuing their work. We can decide when we

discuss housing, which is bound to come up somewhere along the line, whether that member should continue. Do members wish to nominate someone? Is any member particularly interested?

Alex Neil: I nominate Fiona Hyslop.

Mike Watson: I nominate John McAllion, largely on the basis of his experience in housing issues and of the all-party Scottish group in the House of Commons in particular.

Alex Neil: Is there anything wrong in having two reporters working together and coming back with one report?

Mike Watson: We had better ask Fiona and John.

The Convener: I think that it is probably better to have one reporter—and I do not say that for any reason other than that I have just come up with my suggestion for managing the work load. If it does not work, we can review our decision, but I think that it gives us a focal point—

Mike Watson: This is not a question of party political advantage—even if it seems that way. If we establish the practice of the committee having reporters, different members can be reporters for the different issues that we examine. This reporter will be for a housing matter, which we are examining in our initial programme. In other programmes—and, indeed, in this programme—there will be other issues for which we may wish to appoint a reporter. This is just the first of a number of these appointments.

Robert Brown: I wish to ask a not altogether unrelated question: is the committee to have a vice-convenor?

The Convener: Yes, that has been decided. I understand that the Parliamentary Bureau will make that recommendation and that arrangements are being negotiated. The Parliamentary Bureau will meet tomorrow and, although I do not know whether the question will come up, I think that discussions are being held about it. I will report back when I am properly informed about it.

We should move forward—it is 3.45 pm. We have two nominations—John McAllion and Fiona Hyslop—and I think that we should have one reporter.

Cathie Craigie: I agree with Mike's point that, at some stage, we will probably have reporters on other issues. The committee consists of only 11 members, so we would not stretch very far if we were to break up into groups. If at this early stage we establish that there should be two reporters, it might be difficult to pursue that practice in future. I suggest that we have one reporter, and I support John's nomination. Moreover, I suggest that when we appoint reporters to an issue, they should not

be their party's spokesperson on that issue.

The Convener: We will cross that bridge when we come to it.

Fiona Hyslop: It will hide-bound the Parliament if the conveners, vice-conveners or reporters cannot be spokespersons for their parties. We should make it clear that that would be an unacceptable way for the Parliament to proceed.

Obviously, I am interested in housing. I have raised concerns about the timetable continuously and I think that the suggestion that two members should work on it makes sense. I am quite happy for John to be the reporter. Perhaps we could work together to consider the programme—as well as my analysis and close examination of the timetable and the agenda—although John could formally report to the committee. Is he willing to work on that basis?

Mr McAllion: I have no problem with that. I will be happy to work with anyone to make progress on housing.

Alex Neil: So there will be a reporter and a deputy reporter.

Cathie Craigie: I hope that any member reporting on an issue—whether on housing or on social exclusion—will work with the committee and have discussions with us throughout.

The Convener: We all have our party loyalties and there is no point in hiding them. However, I think that there is genuine co-operation in this committee—at least, we are all trying our best to co-operate with one another. Let us see how matters develop; we will deal with problems when we meet them.

Robert Brown: Are the reporters dealing only with the programme of work at this stage? Issues of party balance arise from this point. If there is only one reporter, I feel that he or she should not come from the same party as the convener. If we have different reporters dealing with different issues, that is a different ball-game. Against that background, I am more than happy to go along with what has been suggested.

The Convener: The reporters will be dealing specifically with the work load and will come back to the committee—they will not be taking any decisions and will not have any real power. I hate to say that, John.

Mr McAllion: That's why I have been nominated. *[Laughter.]*

The Convener: Now, now, John. As I have said, any decisions will be taken by the committee. If committees decide to appoint a lot of reporters, debates about party loyalties will invariably arise. Rapporteurs on the European model have much more power than our reporters will have, but we

will examine that issue. We are just starting out and this is just to let us make progress on the issue of housing. John, you will be formally charged to bring a report to a future meeting of the committee—we will decide on that in a minute—and you will do that with Fiona's assistance.

I think that we have agreed on the items about the voluntary sector and the rolling programme of meetings and we have made a start on how we should deal with the work of the Executive. Thank you; it was hard to get through that substantial piece of work and I am grateful for the committee's co-operation—it was a nightmare drawing up that paper from a long list of issues. One issue that we have still to examine is the time scale for managing the programme of work.

I want to move on to the items that will come up in the meeting of the committee of conveners, because they will have a bearing on our schedule of meetings. I will ask Martin to draw up a draft list of meetings with key organisations. It is just bad timing that the committee of conveners is to meet tomorrow afternoon; it would have been better if that meeting had happened before this meeting, but that's life. Tomorrow's meeting has a substantial agenda and I will flag up one or two key issues to be raised. I am not sure of the protocol of doing that, but I want to give you a flavour of what the conveners will be doing and to get your views so that I can pass them on. The following are suggestions, not decisions—however, some papers ask us only to note their contents, not to decide on them, so I think that some matters have already been decided.

Alex Neil: Is tomorrow's meeting an open one, Margaret?

The Convener: It must be, if it is a committee meeting of the Parliament.

No, I tell a lie. It is an informal meeting; to allow informal and open discussion, it will not be recorded or televised. I remember seeing that written on the agenda.

Mr Quinan: Will any decisions be made at the meeting?

The Convener: Yes, but I think that the decisions will go back to the Parliamentary Bureau.

Fiona Hyslop: I think that that raises a fundamental issue about how the Parliament works. What powers has the committee of conveners to make decisions and how many of its decisions will be referred back to the Parliamentary Bureau?

Alex Neil: One of the points raised in a previous meeting—I think that John strongly emphasised it—was that all powers should not reside in the Parliamentary Bureau. It is important for the

committees to establish their independence—ergo it is important for the committee of conveners to establish that it can take decisions. I hope that one of the loud and clear messages from everyone in this committee is that the committee of conveners should have a decision-making power. Obviously, we would need to consult the Parliamentary Bureau about decisions—and vice versa, as appropriate—but all power and all wisdom does not reside in the bureau.

The Convener: Wash your mouth out. My documentation says that the group will be chaired by one of the Deputy Presiding Officers, which will enable the conveners to feed their views into the corporate body and the bureau. I think that I will have to come back to members of this committee. Mike and John will be at that meeting tomorrow as well.

Mr McAllion: I have opened up the agenda for the first time, so I will have to read it tonight before I go to the meeting tomorrow. The first paper deals with the purpose of the group. I am sure that there will be a debate about that. It is important that the committees of the Parliament establish their independence from the Executive and the whipping system.

Even in Westminster, which we all deride in our speeches, the committees are entirely independent and their conveners decide the business. The Government has no input, although the whips unofficially try to fix things from time to time—but they are up against it as the conveners carefully protect the independence of committees. We must start on that basis here and make it clear to Sir David and whoever else would like to take power that that is not on.

The Convener: John will be in lively form tomorrow. Issues will be discussed that are important to us, such as the draft schedule of meetings, travelling in connection with committee business, issues about sub-committees and cross-cutting issues. I will raise the drugs issue and explain how we are beginning to work. Other issues such as the role of clerks will be discussed, which I will ensure members get some information about. This committee is scheduled to meet on Wednesday mornings. The schedule is only a draft document and our views on it will be taken tomorrow. Discussions are going on in the bureau about the management of parliamentary time. There are concerns that we do not have enough time and that we need to find more.

Alex Neil: For meetings of the Parliament?

The Convener: Yes. That may encroach into Wednesday mornings. I am raising this issue because I would like to get a general feeling about how members feel about when and how the committee should meet. There is clearly a view

that we should move out of Edinburgh at times and go to communities where we can meet key people. There are issues about travelling and how we manage the time. At our informal meeting we began to develop the view that we could perhaps set aside a whole day, for example a Monday, to meet outside Edinburgh. I know that that may cause difficulties for constituency business.

Mike Watson: It is important to draw a line between meetings of the committee in the Parliament, which are scheduled for Wednesday mornings and the times when we go out to engage with the people of Scotland. Although we all have other things to do on Mondays and Fridays, it will obviously be easier to travel then. If we go any more than 20 miles from Edinburgh it will be impossible to travel on a Wednesday morning and be back for the meeting of the Parliament in the afternoon. We must take a decision to use Mondays or Fridays, albeit we must plan far enough ahead to allow members to fit committee business in with constituency business and other commitments.

Bill Aitken: We could have meetings on a Tuesday as well.

Mike Watson: Other committees will meet on Tuesdays, though. Another option, with due deference to those who have children—I do not—is that it may be possible to do things during weeks such as the period in October when the Parliament is in recess.

Robert Brown: The key issue is to get notice. That is a disaster area at the moment with no forward dates. If we have dates for meetings in advance it will work; it will not work if we are told about a meeting two days before it takes place.

The Convener: The committee schedule takes account of members' commitments in terms of all the committees of which they are members. However, I warn members that the schedule is likely to change.

Mr Quinan: Are we not getting ahead of ourselves by talking about meeting people and consulting people, as the last I heard before I went away last week was that there is no money to do that?

The Convener: That is my second point.

Mike Watson: There may be a restriction on the money that is available, but it is clear—for example in the consultative steering group report—that the Parliament has been established on the basis that travelling to meet and consult people is part of the way our work must be done.

Mr Quinan: There is a lot in the CSG report that has not been stuck to.

Mike Watson: The CSG report was accepted,

and it contained the principle that committees should be able to travel, so we have to ensure that this and other committees push ahead with that principle, within the resources that are available.

16:00

The Convener: There is a schedule for tomorrow's meeting that considers the costs of committee travel and comes up with proposals. However, if we want to travel outside Edinburgh, we have to ask the permission of the Parliamentary Bureau.

Incidentally, I can fantasise that those cheers coming from the festival shows outside are for us. They have put me right off.

Mr Quinan: Margaret, I think that we should travel within Edinburgh, seeing as how you do not know it very well.

The Convener: I should not say Edinburgh; I should say the Parliament. They are not synonymous. We need permission in terms of costings, even if we go to Pilton.

Mr Quinan: Or Dumbiedykes.

The Convener: We need to get in very quickly with the idea that the committee may want to move, and make the point that if we have to travel to, for example, Dundee, it should not cost a fortune.

Bill Aitken: It should not cost significantly more than coming to Edinburgh.

Mike Watson: If we invite community groups, housing associations or whoever to come here to give evidence, the Parliament will presumably pay their expenses, so there will be a cost in bringing people here. Could the clerk clarify that?

Martin Verity: A scheme is to be drawn up for the payment of witnesses who give evidence. It is likely to be based on the scheme that is operated at the House of Commons, and would basically be travelling expenses.

Mike Watson: So there will be costs in bringing people here; it is not as if we save money—or spend no money—by doing that.

Mr McAllion: The convener said that we have to ask permission of the Parliamentary Bureau if we want to go out of Edinburgh. In Westminster, the committee chairs make that decision—and the decision of who gets what money—not the bureau or anyone in the establishment. It is important to ensure the independence of committee conveners so that they, and not the bureau, make the decisions and set the priorities.

The Convener: I can clarify that matter because I have just looked more closely at the papers. Initial requests to utilise the travel budget should

go before the conveners group. I think that that is better.

Mike Watson: We have to be careful about saying that because they do something at the House of Commons we should do it here, but if the conveners group is to have a function, and if a certain amount of money is to be allocated to it, I suggest that the allocation of that money should be decided in that group. That is an issue that I want to raise in the conveners group tomorrow.

The Convener: That is to be endorsed tomorrow. I just wanted to give members the opportunity to raise any points that they wanted to. Members know that the meeting is on tomorrow and that we can raise their points. The meeting slightly muddies the waters as to when we next meet. I asked Martin earlier, but I do not think that we can set a time for the next official meeting until after tomorrow's meeting and the formal rota of meetings has been agreed.

Martin Verity: That is correct.

Alex Neil: Can we not set a provisional date, subject to that decision?

The Convener: There is a problem—Cathie already has a clash with her other committee.

Fiona Hyslop: If we are going for Wednesday mornings, and if we want to start things moving, is there any harm in our meeting on the morning of Wednesday 1 September?

Mike Watson: That is just next week. Are we going to be much further forward? What about 8 September?

Fiona Hyslop: Any Parliament business that has been decided is unlikely to be changed before next week. We can move ahead with some of these briefings, for example.

The Convener: Yes, we can do that. I was in a blind panic about trying to get work done for 1 September. That might be difficult, but if members do not have diary engagements, we could certainly have a briefing that day. I cannot see this meeting determining anything for 1 September.

Cathie Craigie: I am definitely committed on the morning of 1 September for the work of the Audit Committee, but if there were briefing papers that would be fine.

The Convener: It is probably a fairly tall order to ask anybody to give us a briefing by 1 September, but we could try.

Fiona Hyslop: If we want to use time effectively, we could do something fairly quickly on issues such as the anti-poverty strategy, drugs or the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.

The Convener: Realistically, a week's notice is

quite short.

Bill Aitken: We will have to wait for two weeks.

The Convener: In that case it will be Wednesday 8 September, and we will have to consider the rota. Members will have to bear with us: we have to go to the conveners group tomorrow to get permission, and we will ask that papers go out immediately to clarify matters.

Will the committee help me out here? Would it be best to get papers out to committee members and to action the decisions that can be actioned? John can start on the work of committee reporter. We could organise a meeting of the anti-poverty group and we could process some of the official requests that we are making. That would not be a bad start. We have 12 months for our first stab at this.

Karen Whitefield: I would like to ask about the dates of meetings. Will you be able to give us a list of our programmed days shortly after the conveners meeting tomorrow?

The Convener: Committees are a wee bit ad hoc just now because the Parliament is just beginning to settle. My understanding is that once the conveners group has met and is formalised, committee meetings will become official meetings of the Parliament, with the same standing as meetings of the Parliament, and they will be in the rota system. We will have the powers to act differently within those meetings.

Robert Brown: Are we talking about fortnightly meetings?

The Convener: Yes. A fortnightly schedule has been recommended. We may play around with that regarding meeting in different places, and adding other meetings. That will need to be managed according to the work of the Parliament.

Alex Neil: I suggest that a sensible pattern would be to have our regular meeting every second Wednesday and to have the meetings that we will hold elsewhere on Mondays or Fridays.

The Convener: Yes, and I am sure that there will be times when we will ask people to come to the committee. Groups will want that platform to make formal presentations to the committee, but we will come back to that. Members should look out for the formal papers from the central parliamentary system on the date of the next meeting. Until then we will pursue the work that we have agreed on.

If there are no other comments I would like to thank everybody for attending. I look forward to meeting again soon.

Meeting closed at 16:07.

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