

SOCIAL INCLUSION, HOUSING AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR COMMITTEE

Wednesday 3 November 1999
(*Morning*)

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SOCIAL INCLUSION, HOUSING AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR COMMITTEE 7th 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 MEMBER ALSO ATTENDED:

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP)

WITNESSES

Joy Barlow (Scottish Social Inclusion Network)
Rozanne Foyer (Scottish Social Inclusion Network)
Trevor Lakey (Scottish Social Inclusion Network)
Gill Stewart (Scottish Social Inclusion Network)
Paul Zealey (Scottish Social Inclusion Network)

COMMITTEE CLERK:

Martin Verity

ASSISTANT CLERK:

Rodger Evans

Scottish Parliament

Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee

Wednesday 3 November 1999

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:06*]

The Convener (Ms Margaret Curran): I formally open this meeting of the committee by welcoming all committee members. Now that we are meeting so regularly, we are getting to know each other quite well. I also welcome members of the public who have joined us. Finally, I welcome the members of the action teams. I hope that they will bear with us, as we have a few other items of business to deal with before we hear their presentations.

Before I move to the first item on the agenda, I want to raise one emergency issue—our accommodation. Although some people present might be impressed with the chamber, the committee feels that it is inappropriate for a committee meeting, and particularly for detailed questioning of witnesses. As we have made that view clear to the committee of conveners and to the Parliamentary Bureau, I am quite annoyed that we have been put here again. When I raised the point at yesterday's meeting of the committee of conveners, I was told that other committees like the chamber. As those other committees are in the committee rooms and we are in the chamber, perhaps the issue could be easily resolved by some organisation. The issue of accommodation in the Parliament has to be addressed urgently.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I agree with the convener. The committee has been moved about from place to place. It is noticeable that there is only one person in the press gallery. We should tell the clerks and the committee of conveners that, as we have booked committee room 1 every fortnight until Christmas, that is where we are going.

The Convener: Right. We need to take direct action.

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): Something must be done about accommodation generally. I would not have thought it beyond the wit of man to negotiate with City of Edinburgh Council for a committee room that we could use from time to time. The situation is totally unsatisfactory.

The Convener: We will take those representations seriously, and Martin Verity and I will pursue those issues. I hope that the matter will

be resolved for future meetings. Unless any members disagree, we will move on to our first item.

Action Points

The Convener: Rather than read out the action points from the previous meeting, I would like members to raise any issues that they might have.

At the previous meeting, we agreed that we should take five or 10 minutes after we hear all the evidence to think through how we should pursue matters. Because of the rush on the agenda last week, we did not quite manage to do that with the evidence from Scottish Homes. With such a substantial presentation and so much detailed questioning from members, we needed some time for reflection.

Given the pressure on our agenda this morning, I ask members who have specific points to make to raise them with John McAllion, the reporter on housing, who will collate the views of the committee.

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): With regard to that and to Martin's briefing paper on the remit of reporters, I am unaware what remit we have given John and the other reporters who have been appointed. Before we proceed, we need, as Martin pointed out, to define clearly the remit of each reporter and to agree the time of their appointment.

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): I support what Lloyd said. We must act more formally. Things are happening—we are finding out that people have been appointed reporters or have been made responsible for different areas—and the rules must be defined. We must know who appointed the reporters and when, and that must be ratified by the committee. I am sure that the committee will agree to the appointments, but we need to be organised and to know what is happening.

While I am speaking, I want to make one further point—to save my having to press my request button again. I am increasingly concerned about the committee's work load. I am on two committees, and have spoken to other members of this committee who share my concern. The problems of accommodation might be due partly to the fact that committees were originally intended to meet once a fortnight, rather than twice a week, as we have done on occasion. I am not averse to a big work load. However, I am concerned that I am coming to this committee without having had enough time to go through the considerable amount of documentation that arrived in my in-tray on Monday morning, as I spent most of yesterday in the Finance Committee and other meetings. That is unfair. I was up until 2 o'clock—I am pulling

on everyone's heart-strings—going through this material, because I think that it is only fair to those who have taken the trouble to come to give oral evidence to us today.

We will not be disbanded at Christmas—we are not on probation, and the Parliament is not going to disappear suddenly. Quite frankly, there is a danger that if we take on too much and try to do too much too quickly, we will end up doing none of it well. That will not redound to the credit of this committee. It is important that our first report should be a substantial, solid piece of work, not something that is put together hastily.

The Convener: I strongly endorse those views. So that we can proceed with today's business, I refer Lloyd Quinan to item 3 on our agenda, when we will discuss the role of the reporters. Perhaps we can revisit the issue of Scottish Homes then, because we need to ensure that it is dealt with. We will return to the point about work load under item 5.

Alex Neil: I have a quick point to make about Scottish Homes. I do not think that it is just a question of assimilating the views of the committee. Scottish Homes undertook to do two specific pieces of work. One of those, which interests me greatly, relates to the additional cost of raising housing investment money through the private sector rather than in the traditional way, through the public sector. I do not know who is responsible for this—perhaps it is Martin—but they need to pursue Scottish Homes, to ensure that that work is done for us and that we receive it within a reasonable time.

The Convener: I was assuming that that would happen. It is the clerk's job to pursue that.

Martin Verity (Committee Clerk): Scottish Homes was on the phone this morning and will be sending the reports to me.

Alex Neil: Were you told when?

Martin Verity: No. Obviously, Scottish Homes had anticipated the questions that might be asked.

The Convener: You should get back to Scottish Homes if it does not send the information speedily.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): There should be a mechanism for keeping a note of such matters—perhaps at the end of the agenda—so that we do not lose track of them. As the committee develops, there will be quite a few outstanding bits and pieces, which will be easy to forget about.

The Convener: Can we look to doing that, Martin? The action points from the previous meeting are quite helpful, but it would be useful if we could add a forward plan detailing things that we are expecting in the future, with some

indication of when we expect them.

I will quickly run through the action points, to ensure that we have covered them. I hope that the letter from the Scottish Executive has been circulated. Karen Whitefield will look into the issue of police criminal records and the Abertay University report.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I have written letters.

Mr Quinan: I want to clarify something. I think that you will find that the report on charities is being produced by Dundee University, rather than Abertay.

The Convener: Thank you. Could you sort that out, Karen?

Some information has been circulated on the mapping exercise.

Alex Neil: The information was extremely useful, but it was not a mapping exercise. The mapping exercise that we requested was to cover all the social inclusion work that is being done. Much work is being done by Scottish Enterprise and other agencies, such as health boards, and none of that has been included. Spend figures were not included either.

I thank the Scottish Parliament information centre for what it has done, but ask it to complete the job and to do a proper mapping exercise, as we originally requested.

The Convener: We will pursue SPICe on that.

10:15

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): I said at the previous meeting that we recognise that there are five action teams. I am pleased to see members of the action teams here today. We will consider only two of the groups' reports, one of which deals with local action to tackle poverty. As we are also considering a national strategy, we will be particularly interested in the report that deals with the evaluation framework.

I thank the clerk for getting a copy of the progress report to me last night. We have some full-colour published documents and one that is a progress report. I understand from the Scottish social inclusion network minutes that the progress report on the evaluation framework is still open. David Belfall invited network members to write with suggestions. The evaluation document is about how poverty and the Executive's progress on poverty can be measured. The committee must have full information on that.

I ask the convener to clarify when the report will be published and given the same status as the other glossy documents.

The Convener: I was at the launch of the action team reports on Monday, when I asked about the status of the report. I was told—only in passing, so this information will have to be followed up—that the report was intended to feed in directly to the work of the Executive in terms of announcements that will be made about measures and targets. It was never intended to be a report of the evaluation action team. I am not entirely satisfied with that answer, so I will write formally to David Belfall and ask for written clarification about the status of the work of the evaluation team. We want to know if and when a report will be published.

Mr Quinan: Can the date of the document's publication be clarified? An Executive spokesman said that it would be published in June. Clearly, it has not been published, so where did the confusion come from? When will the committee be given copies of the interim report?

The Convener: I took copies away with me after the launch on Monday so that members could get them as soon as possible. I understand that the progress report was published in June. I hope that I will be able to clear up the situation with letters to the Executive and to David Belfall.

Mr Quinan: Are copies available?

The Convener: Yes. I gave copies to Martin, the clerk, last night.

Martin Verity: I will circulate a copy to every member of the committee.

Alex Neil: I suggest that the next time we get people in from the social inclusion network, we invite the chair of the action group on evaluation.

The Convener: I recommend that we return to our discussion about how we should deal with the action team reports at the end of the presentation. Alex, you should raise that point again then.

I always seem to be cast in the role of the one who rushes things forward and pushes things on.

We agreed our programme of work on housing matters. We will return to the issue of the timetable. We are beginning to move the drugs inquiry forward, and the programmes for that are starting to be established. SPICe will circulate them to members.

Alex Neil: One of the action points from last week was the paper detailing recommendations for the hearing of evidence in the drugs inquiry. We need to go out and talk to people about the subject, rather than have people come to talk to us all the time. Those visits will have to be arranged in advance and are therefore a high priority.

The Convener: Keith Raffan and I have been trying to meet. If other members of the committee want to join us, we can start pursuing that issue.

Mr Raffan: That is the point which I wanted to raise. Such visits are important. We need representation not only of the city areas, but of some of the industrially deprived rural areas in Fife and elsewhere. I am not making an advertisement, but the all-party committee on drugs misuse meets tonight at Simpson House on Queen Street—it is a rehab and through-care centre for offenders. I hope that members will come along, as the meeting is relevant to the drugs inquiry.

Fiona Hyslop: Money is available for us to travel. The committee must put commitments in the timetable, on where we want to go and when. On housing, there is a strong case for going to Glasgow. On drugs, we must travel and must remember the rural dimension. We must speak to John McAllion, to see whether we can schedule taking the tenants' evidence to the committee in Glasgow.

The Convener: At the committee of conveners last night, I pre-empted this discussion slightly by putting in a bid for the committee to travel in relation to the drugs inquiry. I imagine that we will also travel in relation to housing. Our bids will be expected quite shortly.

Mr Raffan: I want to emphasise that point. Because so much has been said about not travelling, no committee is applying for funds from the travel budget. Apparently, a huge—or relatively large—pot of money is available. The sooner we get our bids in, the better.

The Convener: We must work on that quickly. Keith and I will pursue the issue of travel for the drugs inquiry in the first instance. Fiona can speak to John McAllion about housing. We have arranged seminars.

Alex Neil: Will they be held in Edinburgh?

The Convener: They will take place in Edinburgh, somewhere in committee chambers, although I am not sure where.

Another action point from last week was that correspondence was referred to the appropriate reporters. I am sorry to rush folk. I just want to get on. We will talk about the role of the reporters later. Is there anything under this agenda item that cannot be left until the end of the meeting? I hope that the answer is no.

Members: No.

Evidence

The Convener: Agenda item 2 covers the social inclusion action team reports.

I give a warm welcome to the members of the action teams: Joy Barlow, chair of the excluded young people action team and Gill Stewart, chair of the action team on local anti-poverty action. Each has members of their team with them, who will assist in fielding our questions.

We are running six minutes late, according to my plan. It can be difficult to ensure that everyone is able to ask questions, and I want everyone to feel that they have had a proper shot. However, I am afraid that we have a packed agenda. I will allow the debate on both action team reports to run until 11.45 am, as there are discussions that we must have after that on the Abolition of Poidings and Warrant Sales Bill and on the role of reporters. If I try to silence members, therefore, it is not to be rude, but to get us through the agenda.

My understanding is that witnesses will give a brief introduction. We will deal with the report on excluded young people first. We will talk about that for about three quarters of an hour and then move on to the next report. I welcome Joy Barlow to the meeting.

Joy Barlow (Scottish Social Inclusion Network): I thank the committee for asking us to come along to talk about our reports. I believe that committee members have received a copy of the report of the excluded young people action team. It is the glossy document. Members should also have received a short handout, which, I hope, will assist with our discussions later this morning.

The five action teams began their deliberations in March this year after the launch of the Government's social inclusion strategy. The membership of the excluded young people action team is at the back of the report. Suffice it to say that people were drawn from a wide variety of backgrounds who had a strategic vision of the needs and concerns of excluded young people in Scotland. I introduce members in particular to Rozanne Foyer from the youth committee of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, who is a member of the action team and is here to help with your questions.

We were aware that we could not deliberate in isolation. That would have been entirely inappropriate. We decided therefore to put in place a consultation process. A number of organisations involved in youth services, services for children and local authority departments became what I euphemistically called the doughnut group—we were the jam and they were the doughnut around us, although that is no reflection on the density of

those involved in the consultation process. But seriously, we wanted to engage with people in a consultation exercise. The people in that group were aware of all our deliberations all the way through. They received our minutes and papers.

In our wider consultation, we had a letter in the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations' weekly newspaper, "Third Force News", which invited any individuals or groups with an interest to write to us. We also commissioned two pieces of work: a literature review entitled, "Excluded Youth—What Works?" and a report entitled, "Social Inclusion in Rural Areas". Both accompany our "Excluded Young People" document.

Members will see from our remit that we were asked by the Scottish social inclusion network to make recommendations on what more could be done to tackle the social exclusion that is faced by young people in Scotland, with a particular emphasis on people aged between 16 and 21. We had considerable discussion about that age limit. You will see from our report that we have not confined our recommendations to 16 to 21-year-olds. We were all aware—and became more aware when we spoke to young people, organisations and departments during our consultation—that, for some young people, things began to go wrong, or off the rails, before they were 16. We therefore made some recommendations, which I will come to shortly.

We were aware that we could not engage in that process of consultation without talking to young people themselves. Our visits are detailed in the report. Wherever possible, we spoke to young people. There was only one exception—when we spoke to Dr Pamela Munn about the Scottish schools ethos network. Everywhere else, we met young people and deliberated from their perspectives as well as from others. I record my thanks to those young people, who gave much of their time and talent to inform us.

Because of the breadth of our remit, we have not attempted to set out a comprehensive review of policy. Neither have we set out detailed proposals on the way in which a particular aspect of policy or service provision should be developed. Rather, we have tried to exploit the uniquely broad range of perspectives that are represented on the team, and in the work that we have done, to set out what we consider to be the main issues in youth exclusion, and to outline some steps that we believe will help to address those issues.

We began with an examination of the key themes, which are set out in the report in considerable detail, before our recommendations. The first theme is empowering each and every young person. We met young people who, unfortunately, did not have the personal resources to manage successfully the transition into the

rights and responsibilities of adulthood. The areas on which we need to focus are self-esteem, self-confidence, aspiration and practical life skills for every young person. We met young people who were leaving the school system and, particularly, who were leaving the care system, who did not have the practical resources to take on board the responsibilities that were expected of them in the adult world.

We met young people who were discriminated against because of their age, circumstances, gender, race, disability or sexuality. For some of them, that set up a double discrimination. I would put it in these terms: we met people with very little or no stake in society. As they believed themselves to have no part in society, it was not surprising that they did not feel that they had much to offer. We have made recommendations about empowering each and every young person. I will come back to them in a moment.

10:30

In the report, the second theme is called "Better structures, better services". We met organisations, youth workers and local authority departments that are involved in the delivery of structures and services for young people. I am afraid that, in the majority of cases, we discovered that the present system of service and support is extremely disjointed. We met individuals who provide invaluable support but, time and again, we encountered situations in which the system—whether because of funding mechanisms, barriers within or between organisations, or conflicts between agencies' working practices—hindered efforts and harmed the young people who needed help. We therefore opined that we need to work better to understand one another's values and principles. We also need to be supported by a national legislative and fiscal framework that promotes effective joint working.

The final theme was getting policy right. Again, we encountered a number of situations in which aspects of Scottish Executive or UK Government policy were either unhelpful to excluded young people or could be improved. For example, there are inappropriate balances between conflicting objectives and unintended effects of poor co-ordination between policy areas. In particular, the report mentions the benefits system, to which I shall return.

What have we recommended? In the handout, there is a list of recommendations, and the report illustrates the recommendations in relation to each of its key themes. On the empowerment of young people, I mentioned our need to consider what happens to young people before the age of 16. We believe that personal resources must be developed in the school curriculum. Schools must

become more inclusive. The team did not believe that there was a fundamental tension, as some have suggested, between an inclusive school helping young people to develop self-esteem and self-confidence and a school that seeks to maximise academic achievement.

We were impressed by the projects that we visited, on alternatives to exclusion. The flexibility to provide an individualised curriculum should be extended to young people who are identified in every school as vulnerable to social exclusion. The individualised curriculum should seek to meet all the individual's needs, including the development of life skills. Thus we have made recommendations about the inclusiveness of schools.

We were very disturbed to hear from young people and from some of those working with them about the place of young people within the power structures of society. We heard of professional as well as lay attitudes that seemed actively to discriminate against young people, based on prejudice and stereotyping. That was compounded for some young people by their ethnic identity, gender, disability or sexuality. For those young people, there was very little stake in society. We have therefore recommended a national publicity campaign to tackle the stereotypes of excluded young people.

With regard to better structures and services, we found that much good work was hampered by difficulties within and between organisations. We have made a number of recommendations to try to alleviate and ameliorate some of those problems. We have recommended that a youth inclusion strategy plan and youth support services be brought together under the responsibility of a senior officer in the local authority and that youth inclusion strategy plans be held in the Scottish Executive under the direction of the Minister for Children and Education. There are a number of recommendations along those lines, and members might want to ask questions in a moment.

We were also aware that, in terms of how people viewed young people within structures and organisations, there was a need for a youth awareness function in agencies that work with young people. By those agencies, we mean the police, the benefits system, housing departments and other bodies. We recommend that they develop a youth awareness function to improve the way in which they deal with young people.

Finally, we looked at getting policy right. We are mindful of the fact that the responsibility for benefits legislation still resides with the Westminster Parliament. However, we urge the Scottish Executive to request a review of the benefits system for young people.

The complexities and inconsistencies of the current system cause difficulties for many vulnerable young people. In the report, we gave the example of a young woman who had the chance to become better qualified in child care. Because she was aged 17 she had to decide whether to take that opportunity and do so without her housing benefit, or give up the opportunity to try to become better qualified and keep her housing benefit. It is intolerable that young people who desire to get on, get qualified and have a stake in society should have to make a choice about getting better qualifications and sleeping rough.

In terms of the criminal justice system, we recommend that as many young people as possible are retained in the hearing system until they are 18. However, we wish to draw to the attention of readers of the report, and particularly this committee, that we met a lot of young people who believed that they did not receive equal treatment from the criminal justice system. Many believed that they were not protected by the police in the same way as other elements of society are. You may say, "They would say that," considering some of their backgrounds and life situations, but we are nevertheless concerned that a system that does not protect young people properly, which does not give them confidence in its fairness, which brands some of them criminals at an early age—we heard some concerning stories from vendors of *The Big Issue* in Glasgow—and which in general does not give due weight to their interests as members of society, is a society that will not support their inclusion in the longer term.

We examined the subject of drugs and drugs policy. We made no major recommendations because we were aware of the drugs strategy produced by the Scottish advisory committee on drug misuse, but we witnessed the catastrophic effect of serious drug dependency coupled with homelessness, prostitution, offending and prison. They leave young people in such desperate straits that it seems unlikely that some of them will ever recover. We have therefore recommended that we need far more rehabilitation programmes for young people, addressing their particular needs with imaginative service design.

With regard to homelessness, we make particular recommendations about models of transitional accommodation, linked to practical support, with training and employment opportunities. Hostel accommodation is expensive, and while more hostel accommodation is necessary, young people do not always see it as safe. Some of them told us that they prefer to take their chances on the streets, where they can look out for each other. We need to listen to young people about what their particular service design might be.

Finally, I believe that I speak for the rest of the team when I say that over the past few months social inclusion for young people has become not just a policy imperative, but a moral imperative. We saw so many wasted youths in Scotland. Although they were vibrant, articulate and had ideas aplenty, they had no stake in society and some were branded as no good before they even made a start. We met young people with the same aspirations, desires and visions as my child and, I am sure, your children, yet their opportunities were manifestly different.

I am not suggesting that they are all little angels. Most of them need to understand about responsibilities, rights, social order and the need for social skills, but life has dealt them a raw deal. Inequalities, driven largely by poverty and unemployment in their families, mean that some young people will always find their life chances severely restricted from birth. The excluded young people's action team believes that until those wider inequalities are tackled, some young people will always begin life at a severe disadvantage.

We believe that within the Scottish Executive and the UK Parliament we have a policy imperative with regard to social inclusion: it lies at the heart of Government objectives. We feel that it would be very sad and, indeed, morally reprehensible, if changes did not take place to equip excluded vulnerable young people in Scotland to take their rightful place in society and give to Scotland in the 21st century what we know they are capable of.

The Convener: Thank you for your presentation and report, which was substantial. Members are desperate to talk to you: I can sense it in the body language. I will begin by asking you a few questions, and then I will open the discussion to other committee members. I will ask you all of my questions, because it might be easier if we group our questions together.

I have been involved in youth work for some time. I think that there is tension between a standardised youth strategy that attempts to meet young people's needs in the areas of discrimination, stereotyping, exclusion from the political process and so on and one that tries to address the needs of vulnerable young people in the areas of leaving care, homelessness, chronic drug misuse, prostitution and so on. Sometimes strategic responses have not properly met young people's varied needs. For example, a youth forum might be appropriate in Bearsden but might not be appropriate in Easterhouse because of young people's experiences and other factors that impinge on their needs. The same applies to young people from rural areas—do they have distinct needs? Do we resolve that tension if we rely too much on a global approach to youth

strategy?

I will move on to my other questions to give you a chance to think. You refer to gender throughout the report, which is welcome. Youth workers tell us that, over recent years, there has been a need to develop unique responses to the needs of girls and young women, as the term youth often refers to boys and young men. I was not sure how deeply you had examined the need for distinct approaches across the service, rather than trying to remind people that gender issues exist by just saying "gender". Those issues need to be considered in depth.

Finally, how much attention did you pay to the resource implications of your recommendations? Do they fall within existing resources? If new resources were required, what would you prioritise?

Joy Barlow: What a surprise. I will try to answer those questions.

On strategic responses, convener, you will see in the report our suggestion that youth services should come together at local level under the umbrella of a youth partnership, if you like. In fact, I will use the word partnership, as I know that our colleagues in the making it happen team are saying important things about partnership.

I accept your point, but I still think that while one could have local meetings, local partnership and local responses, a strategic youth inclusion programme for Scotland is also required. I expect that perhaps I was looking at the issue from the point of view of strategic developments in the area of drug misuse, for example. We have a national strategy that we hope will be devolved to and examined at local level. We accepted that there will be local responses—and rightly so.

One problem was that a lot of good work was going on at local level, with individual youth workers talking to each other, but no one took responsibility locally for what happened. Rozanne Foyer will agree with that, as she visited some of the projects. That is why we recommended that senior local authority officials should take some responsibility and be accountable.

On the question of unique gender issues, we admit that in only very few places did we see many young women. Where we did see young women, it became obvious that they had unique issues. Rozanne went to Cornton Vale and examined closely the issues for young women in the remand wing.

We believe that gender, disability, sexual orientation and ethnic minority background should come into all our deliberations, so they are threads that run through the recommendations. Therefore, I could not agree with you more—there is a good

deal of work to be done specifically with young women and that should be examined both at the local level and within organisations. It seems to me that there is a need for the youth advocacy function as, in a lot of projects, young women do not get the assistance with advocacy that, perhaps, some young men do.

10:45

Regarding resource implications—wow, that is a good question. I think the view was that there would not be much new money. I hope that what we recommended is not a wish list for millions of pounds. Our priorities should be at the hard end of social exclusion in terms of homelessness, offending and drug misuse.

The Convener: Can we move on, as I am conscious that other members wish to get in.

Mr Raffan: I would like to follow on from that last point, because resource implications are important. There are two or three other points that I would like to raise quickly but I will deal with resource implications first. I am very much in favour of youth forums. I attended one in Aberdeenshire, which was one of the most difficult political meetings I have attended, although that was good for me. There are admirable projects throughout Scotland, such as the youth advice project at Inverurie, but the trouble is that they are grubbing around for money. Best practice is not replicated throughout all local authorities because they do not have the crucial resources to do so.

What methods are there for sharing the best practice of local authorities that have schemes, such as the Corner in Dundee, which are highly successful? Such examples are, unfortunately, isolated.

The Convener: Keith, will you ask all your questions now as that will speed us up a bit?

Mr Raffan: The second thing I want to mention is the involvement of the private sector. To what extent have you examined what happens in other countries, particularly the United States? We do not want to follow them blindly, but in areas such as mentoring—I am surprised that it has not been mentioned—the private sector is very involved in helping socially excluded young people. The major banks in Manhattan help the Hispanics, the black youth and so on in the Bronx and in Harlem. We must examine that kind of scheme because it does not necessarily have resource implications.

My third point is about drugs policy and drugs strategy. Fairly strong criticisms, with which I wholeheartedly agree, have been made of both the UK Government and the Scottish Executive in the document "Excluded Young People". You have said that treatment, rehabilitation services and—by

implication—after-care services are hugely under-provided. Is there a need for a change in emphasis on drugs policy towards treatment, rehabilitation, after-care services, half-way houses and so on?

Are you also looking for non-custodial sentences to be made available through drugs courts? Should young people be given the option of—or be pushed into—treatment rather than being put in prison? You have recently visited prisons and you referred to the inadequacy of counselling and care for those who have the guts to get off drugs when they are in prison.

Joy Barlow: I will try to answer the first question. Rozanne Foyer will, I hope, answer the others.

We discovered that it is currently impossible to determine how resources could be shifted to share best practice. Extremely good work that no one knows anything about is being done. We have suggested a coming together at national level of local partnerships, including service providers and other organisations, to share and examine best practice and to monitor evaluation.

We also discovered that we do not really know about good practice, apart from through anecdotal evidence and in terms of internal reviews of projects. There are no centrally held data about what works and what does not. I hope that a national strategic body would assist with that.

We did not look much further than our own shores. David Coulter from Scottish Enterprise raised some questions about mentoring and about the situation in the States, where he has visited.

Rozanne Foyer (Scottish Social Inclusion Network): We looked at mentoring, but we called it advocacy. We think that it is important for people to build personal links with others that will build their self-esteem and help them to get through the maze of support that might—or might not—be available.

We envisage advocates or mentors with teeth, and flexibility from the other services so that the advocate can help the person get the package they need. At the moment, even where good people from voluntary projects are supporting people, they are in many cases unable to offer the kind of support that they would like. There are some examples in our report of where that has happened.

We met many people who were struggling with funding problems. The problem was not so much that they lacked money, but that the funding was short term. Funding was also provided in a competitive environment. I do not know that the problem is a shortage of money. We must completely review the way in which money is

provided and make funding more flexible and much broader.

I would be worried about too much private sector involvement. We found that the picture is already very fragmented and that a more strategic approach is needed. Things must be allowed to happen at the very bottom in a way that is individual and that suits the particular needs of young people in different areas and circumstances, but that must be led by the people at the very top. We mentioned that we thought there should be a minister for youth—someone who could look at the social inclusion issues for young people and draw them all together. There must be leadership and a national strategy.

Mr Raffan: What about drugs?

Rozanne Foyer: We feel strongly that drugs are at the root of many things, but that they are not the cause of social exclusion. Serious drug abuse is a symptom of social exclusion. It is something that young people do when they have no hope. There is a massive difference between that and recreational drug use. There should be a complete change in the way in which the criminal justice system deals with drug abuse. At the moment, young people are being criminalised and socially excluded because of the way in which the criminal justice system operates. We hope that the Scottish Executive will debate this and look at the issue with fresh eyes.

When I went to Cornton Vale, I met prison officers who said that they were not rehab counsellors and had none of the appropriate skills to deal with the young people in their care who were on the verge of death. The prison officers felt that those young people should not be in prison.

The Convener: Thank you. I hope that we will be able to look at that again.

Bill Aitken: I am interested in a number of aspects of the report. First, it highlights the point—with which I agree—that the benefits system prejudices people in this age group. I know that you may have general ideas about that, but I would be interested in more specific ideas.

I feel that your points on the criminal justice system are sadly lacking in realism. You are suggesting that people up to the age of 18 should be dealt with by the children's panel. At 16, people in Scotland can get married, can have sex—if some have their way they will be able to have homosexual sex—and yet you are suggesting that they should not be held liable for their own criminal acts. Frankly, I find that incredible.

I agree that more should be done to rehabilitate people who are the victims of drug addiction. Can I point out that none of those people are in prison for drug addiction per se? They are there as a

result of crimes that they have committed to feed their habit. We have responsibilities to the socially excluded youth of this country—real responsibilities that we take seriously. At the same time we have responsibilities to the vast majority of people in this country, who lead organised lives, and to the young people of the self-same generation as the drug addicted who get on with their lives without any problems regarding drugs or crime.

When we put the emphasis on those who fall by the wayside and suggest that they should not be dealt with as criminals after the age of 16, we are letting down the broader aspect of Scottish society. Can you address that?

Joy Barlow: One of the reasons we suggest that it is appropriate to retain young people in the children's hearing system up to the age of 18 is that we have seen that it is possible to reduce offending between the ages of 16 and 18 where that is happening.

I fully accept that we have a responsibility to the rest of society and that the criminal justice system is concerned with social order. Our concern was that, while young people were within the criminal justice system between the ages of 16 and 18, very little was being done to assist them after the age of 18. That was laying the foundations for more difficulties in the future. I accept that our suggestion may be difficult for many members of society to take on board, but we believed that we saw good practice that could create an opportunity to turn young people's lives around.

On drugs and drugs policy, I could not agree with you more that many young people are in prison because of the crimes that they commit, but I repeat that they get very little help in examining that offending behaviour if they are in the prison system. The record is appalling. We are talking about young people whose lives are characterised by severe drug dependency in their teenage years. We must assist them to get out of that.

Some of the people we met are beyond recall. We will not be able to do anything for them, but perhaps we can help the next generation. I urge the Scottish Executive to examine treatment and rehabilitation much more closely, rather than criminalising young people whose lives are characterised from an early age by a host of difficulties that prison will never solve. Perhaps a different approach within the criminal justice system could begin to solve those difficulties.

Alex Neil: The report contains a lot of useful information and it is helpful to bring the whole issue of youth inclusion into perspective in one report. If I may say so, the report falls down in three areas.

The first concerns funding and resources. As

you said, dealing with this problem is a high moral priority. We will not deal with it unless substantial additional resources are made available. Nowhere in the recommendations do you state the obvious—the need for more resources, the need for better use of resources and the need to get rid of the competitive element in the allocation of resources. Without those hard-edged recommendations, the report just seems to be motherhood and apple pie. If you follow up your own analysis, the conclusion that you must reach is that resources have to be made available to tackle these deep-rooted problems. Your action team, which is, after all, called an action team, should have made that recommendation.

Secondly, I find it incredible that jobs and employment opportunities for young people are barely mentioned in the report. The underlying cause of many problems is the lack of job and employment opportunities, not only for young people, but for their families, who have lived in communities with high levels of unemployment for two or three generations. A policy to guarantee jobs and employment opportunities for young people must be at the core of any strategy that will be a prevention rather than a cure.

Thirdly, on benefits, you are specific. On page 19 of your report you rightly state that "benefit levels remain low" and that young people regard the benefit system as "unapproachable and unsympathetic"—and you rightly recommend a major review of the benefits system. We need to hear what you want that review to do.

One of the major issues over the past 10 years has been the gradual elimination of benefit entitlement for young people. There is ample evidence to prove that one of the main reasons so many young people are being forced into cardboard city, prostitution and drugs is that they cannot get a job or benefit. To be honest, your report could have a harder edge on those issues.

Rozanne Foyer: I will start with your last question. We were concerned about how benefit support has been stripped from young people. However, it was not our place to make specific recommendations about what action should be taken. We took a broad-brush approach to highlight the issues and problems and to suggest some broad recommendations on which the committee could agree.

11:00

However, the report says that the benefits system has to be re-evaluated so that young people in that age group can be properly supported, which implicitly means that more benefit support will have to be given. The main problem is that young people at this age are

moving from youth to adulthood. Contrary to popular opinion, many young people are not able to stay in the family home. It is up to this committee and the Executive to decide whether the benefits system should be individualised so that such barriers can be got over and exceptions made, or whether a blanket approach should be taken by restoring benefits to 16 to 18-year-olds.

As for jobs and employment opportunities, our report says clearly that poverty and unemployment are the major causes of social exclusion. As we had a very tight few months to prepare the report, we did not want to impinge on areas that might be covered by other groups such as the action team set up to tackle poverty. However, we said frequently that the quality of employment opportunities for young people should be improved and that there must be economic development to provide such opportunities.

Furthermore, there is a major problem with young people's self-esteem and general sense of hope. A young person's perception that he or she will never get a job is just as powerful as not being able to get a job.

Joy Barlow: When our group met, we were expecting the Beattie committee's report, which is mentioned in our report. We would obviously follow that committee's vision and recommendations on jobs and opportunities for young people. Perhaps I should have said in my introduction that our report should be read alongside the Beattie committee's recommendations.

Rozanne Foyer: On the last question, about funding and resources, page 7 of our report refers specifically to the complete lack of resources in Glasgow in particular. The report says:

"It was clear to us that if any major steps are to be made in addressing youth exclusion in Glasgow, there will need to be a major increase in the funding available to agencies and organisations working in the city".

Our report makes clear that not only does funding need to be increased, it has to be used in a better and more long-term way. Putting money into the prevention of youth exclusion now can only benefit society in the long term.

Alex Neil: So you agree with me.

Rozanne Foyer: Absolutely.

Fiona Hyslop: You paint a picture of Scotland's youth being wasted and forgotten. You acknowledge that poverty and unemployment are the key issues affecting young people. I am concerned when you say that the paucity of resources might make you prioritise homelessness, drugs and offending, as that exposes the gap between our aims and the reality of Government policy.

Furthermore, are you in danger of losing the gender analysis if the three areas of homelessness, drugs and offending are prioritised? On the issue of drugs in particular, do you think that the Executive's emphasis on a drugs enforcement agency might lose Scotland's young people? Is that an inappropriate emphasis?

Joy Barlow: If we do not put money into prevention, we will be in the same situation in 20 years' time. I recommend that we look not just at the hard-and-sharp end, but at prevention. I would like the Scottish Executive to examine this issue as a whole, rather than just in priority areas. I hope that a redistribution of resources in some areas will free up some money. If the Executive takes our report as being about rather more than motherhood and apple pie—as saying what it is really like out there for young people—it will see the need for prevention initiatives, as well as for hard-end crisis intervention.

I wear another hat, as far as drugs and young people are concerned. I am a member of the advisory council on the misuse of drugs at the Home Office and of the Scottish advisory committee on drug misuse. I feel that we have to concentrate on treatment and prevention—treatment and care, in particular. I therefore have some questions about a drugs enforcement agency.

You are absolutely right about the gender issue. Recent research, particularly that of Professor Neil McKegany of Glasgow University, indicates that by the end of secondary 4, many young women are using substances that are addictive in the longer term, such as heroin, to the same extent as, if not more than, young men. Tackling that is a major issue. We will not do it through the criminal justice system: we must do it through prevention, treatment and care.

The Convener: At the end of this discussion, once we have heard the second report, we will return to the question of how we should pursue some of these issues and incorporate them into our agenda. Many of the points that you have made today will not be lost from our agenda. I think that Roseanna has extended the power of our committee slightly. We are happy with that, although I am not sure whether others are. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your straightforward and frank answers to our questions. You are welcome to stay to hear the rest of the discussion.

I move on to the second report. I welcome Gill Stewart and her team and ask them to provide us with a brief introduction.

Gill Stewart (Scottish Social Inclusion Network): Thank you, convener—[*Interruption.*]

The Convener: I am sorry. If there are

questions—[*Interruption.*] I did not see you indicate that you wanted to speak, Lloyd. We will come back to questions later. I have to manage the time.

Mr Quinan: You were looking at my face.

The Convener: No, I did not see you indicate that you wanted to speak. We have business to pursue. Robert indicated to me earlier that he wanted to speak, and I made clear to him that I would not take his question. On you go, Gill.

Gill Stewart: Thank you, convener. Like Joy, I am grateful that we have been given the opportunity to speak to the committee about our report on local action to tackle poverty. With me are Trevor Lakey from the Greater Glasgow Health Board and Paul Zealey from the Glasgow Development Agency, who were also members of the team. I can spot another member, John Mulvey, in the public gallery, but he has his head down at the moment. I am glad that he, too, is here, because I want to emphasise that this was very much a team report.

I think that you all have a handout, which I will speak to. I am sorry that some of you did not receive the reports at the time that you were meant to. I think that they were distributed on Friday, in the hope that you would have them over the weekend, but I appreciate that, because of logistical difficulties, reports may not have reached members until yesterday. The first part of the report has the merit of being brief, so at least it has something to commend it.

I will begin with the team's remit. In the handout, I say that we were asked to look at the

"effectiveness and sustainability of local anti-poverty action".

The thinking behind that was that, over the years, there has been a great deal of investment in local anti-poverty action throughout Scotland. Two problems that we have not tackled very effectively are assessing how well the action has worked and managing to sustain projects or to replicate them more widely. There have been pockets of good practice, but disseminating the findings and sustaining the approach have proved difficult.

We were asked to consider what more could be done to make things better, to generate new ideas for action and to identify ways of supporting best practice. We all felt that we were not starting with a blank sheet of paper. As I have said, there has been a great deal of activity over the years. There is a great deal of knowledge, activity and investment out there, in communities, which can be drawn on and developed.

In the context of the earlier report, we talked about the difficulty of disseminating best practice. That is a common theme and an issue that arises

in other reports, such as "Inclusive Communities" and "Making It Happen". When considering social policy, one bumps against such matters all the time.

In pursuing their remits, all the teams were asked to take particular account of gender issues, the racial dimension, disability and the problems faced by people living in remote rural areas. We tried to do that, although we are all aware that we were not able to devote as much time to those dimensions as we would have liked. There were exchanges with people working in rural areas and with people representing ethnic minorities. We did our best to pursue that.

I have outlined the membership of the action team—it also appears in the report—to demonstrate that the team covered a wide range of skills, experience and knowledge. Two people on the team, Lynne Main and Carey Sinclair, have had first-hand experience of living and grappling with poverty in impoverished communities. There was practical experience as well as professional and theoretical knowledge. I was very grateful for the hard work of the team, the commitment that its members brought to their task and the contributions that they made. Three members of the team, Damian Killeen, Lynne Main and I, are also members of the social inclusion network, so we have that connection.

What is anti-poverty action? The slide gives some examples of the kind of projects that we undertake. There is a wide range of activities, dealing with the basics of life: food, warmth, money, work and benefits. Possessions are also important: some of the local exchange and trading schemes are about exchanging skills and practical items. Child care, as we have already mentioned, is one of the key components. One of the main ways out of poverty is work, so for many people, especially women, good-quality child care is critical.

At our first meeting, we were knocked back by the scale of the task. We are facing a very large canvas. We had limited time in which to present our initial report, and we felt that we needed to break it down into manageable areas. We knew that if we continued to meet as a team, we would not cover much ground. Although the team met monthly, we also broke down into four main groups.

One group was asked to consider money and financial services, because the main themes that we were pursuing were how local anti-poverty action could maximise income and how that action could reduce living costs. The two things go hand in hand. The second group considered food, health and living standards. The third group considered the importance of routes into training and employment for people who live in

impoverished communities. The fourth group considered the social economy: activity that is not conducted for profit—any surplus is ploughed back—and is tailored to people's needs.

11:15

We had a fifth group that did some work on assessment criteria, which fed into the work of the other four groups; in other words, it asked "how do we assess this action in the first place and how do we know that it is working?"

Our report falls into two parts, the second of which consists of the reports from those four sub-groups. The first part, which is quite short, tries to focus on some of the big questions. The findings were based on discussions between the sub-groups and a range of people, while members of the plenary group came to talk to us about specific issues. Through a letter in *Third Force News* and other mechanisms, we invited contributions from external groups, agencies and individuals and tried to boil the matter down to various key questions.

The first question we asked ourselves was why we have local anti-poverty action. We concluded that its primary purpose is to alleviate the immediate impact of income poverty and to help people who are living impoverished lives, in impoverished communities, with limited resources—not just money—at their disposal. Our second conclusion was that, although most of us access opportunities, goods and services through the market, it does not work well for people who live in poverty. At best, it works imperfectly for such people. We saw local anti-poverty action, therefore, as a grass-roots response to that failure of the market, and the failure of public services such as the benefits system, the health service and education. People who live in poverty find it more difficult than most of the rest of us to access the kind of services that we take for granted.

The second question that we asked ourselves was why we should support anti-poverty action. We did not take it as a given that such action is good. We have to look at what purpose it serves. Can it justify itself in its own terms? We came up with three specific points. First, we felt that in a society that claims to care about all its members and to be equal and inclusive, there is a moral imperative to alleviate the worst effects of income poverty. If local anti-poverty action does that, that is a justification for it at a fundamental level.

We also saw it as a mechanism for people who find it difficult to make their voices heard, to articulate to the providers of services, whether in the public sector, private sector or government, what it is that they want and need. It is a mechanism for providing the continuous feedback

loop that forms part of the modernising government agenda. If services, whether they are provided by the public or the private sector, are to improve, their providers need to know what is wanted. We saw local anti-poverty action as a means of articulating what poor people want.

Thirdly, while it is an activity that has merits in its own right, it offers many people a way out of poverty and exclusion. For some of them it is their first involvement in working with others, in taking control of their lives, and in making a difference—in increasing their self-esteem.

The next slide—I am being hurried on, so I will move a bit faster—identifies the key characteristics of an effective local anti-poverty action. I will not go through all the points, but will emphasise the importance of rooting the action firmly in the community. The action must also be consistent with, and complemented by, activity at national level. The process is two-way: it needs to be both top-down and bottom-up, and it needs to connect. Often support needs to be sustained. We cannot always expect to get it right first time.

The next slide sets out our main recommendations. The first is about

"complementarity between national and local action".

We recommended that there should be,

"Flexible benefits pilots in SIP areas".

That is about using the discretion in the system. It is also about improving the clarity of the system and helping people to find their way through the system.

The Convener: Can I interrupt? Perhaps we could explore the recommendations in the questions, as I think that members have seen them and are getting anxious to move on to questions. Is that okay?

Gill Stewart: Yes.

The Convener: After you have concluded briefly, we will go to questions.

Gill Stewart: I will not say any more about the recommendations. We hope that the Executive will adopt some of them. We have also set out a list of people who need to take action. In that list I want to highlight the private sector. We feel that the private sector could do good work. That is not to say that it is not doing good work, but we think it could do much more and should be a full partner in this. It is partly about the provision of financial services, but it is also about goods and services.

The Convener: I am terribly sorry to have rushed you.

Karen Whitefield: I want to cover two areas of your report: credit unions and local enterprise company action plans for the social economy.

Your report said that credit unions have shown varying degrees of success over the years, and suggested that those that have been more successful have been based in the workplace rather than in low-income economies. How did you reach those conclusions? Can you expand on your idea of a central support system for credit unions? What type of support would be offered? Did the action team identify a need for improved legislation to support credit unions and their expansion throughout Scotland?

You recommend that the Scottish Enterprise inclusive economy leadership group should be encouraged to insist on action plans for developing the social economy in LEC business plans. Were LECs consulted on that idea? If so, did they welcome it, and how will they take it forward?

Gill Stewart: Unfortunately, the member of the team who considered those issues in particular is not here. I will have to do my best to answer your questions.

Karen Whitefield: I appreciate that you are not an expert. If there are questions that you are not able to answer, can you consult with one of the members of your action team, who may be able to give me some more in-depth information?

Gill Stewart: There is more detail about credit unions in the back of the document. Paul Zealey might be able to provide some information.

Paul Zealey (Scottish Social Inclusion Network): I might be able to pick up on a couple of points. People who have been involved with the Scottish credit union development agency have examined credit union development across Scotland. The evidence on the success of credit unions in the west of Scotland has come from SCUDA and other development agencies

It seems that the bulk of credit unions that have started in low-income families have a high dependency on mainstream urban programming or similar funding to get them started. The success of credit unions with low overheads is due to volunteers and the organisation of volunteers. The best examples have been in workplaces: the former Strathclyde Regional Council credit union was perhaps the best example.

The real issues are training for volunteers, and ensuring that there is scope in the definition of common bond so that it can be more widely applied. For example, the recently established Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations credit union uses membership of the voluntary sector as a common bond and therefore opens up wider possibilities for extending credit union membership to low-income families.

I am a member of the Scottish Enterprise

inclusive economy leadership group, so I have given feedback about the local enterprise company action plans. This week, the Scottish Enterprise board will consider a proposal that includes recommendations on practical action to support the social economy from the beginning of the new financial year, although some LECs are already doing that.

Gill Stewart: Our recommendation for the establishment of a social economic fund also links with the points about credit unions as it would provide a pan-Scotland resource.

Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): You referred briefly to the "Making It Happen" report, which criticises partnership groups that have been set up to deal with social inclusion at local level and says that there is often confusion or conflict between them. Why does your report not say much about the social inclusion partnership areas, except in terms of a more flexible approach to benefits?

I am on the board of the Castlemilk Partnership and we are trying to pull together local organisations. Your report does not make much mention of the role of the social inclusion partnerships, despite the fact that many of the things you mention fall within their remit. They are trying to pull groups together and get them represented on their boards and are dealing with some of the umbrella groups. What do you think the experience of the early days of the social inclusion partnerships can offer you in making your recommendations?

Gill Stewart: You are right to say that we do not make many specific references to the SIPs, although we have recommended the benefit flexibility pilot project in the SIPs areas. As I said, we were aware that we were not starting with a blank sheet of paper and we did not want to go over ground that had already been covered. We were more interested in trying to identify gaps.

You are right in saying that the SIPs will yield a lot of useful information about how to make that kind of action work. That ties in with our recommendations on supporting networking and dissemination of best practice. We do not spell out in great detail how that should happen, but it is about ensuring that those structures and organisations that are already in place are connected up. When we were doing the exercise, we felt that we had networked with a lot of people and groups and that we needed to keep that dialogue going so that people were aware of what is being done elsewhere, what works and what does not. References to SIPs may not be littered throughout the document, but that is not to say that they were not at the back of our minds when we were writing it.

Mike Watson: May I ask a brief supplementary question?

The Convener: A very brief one.

Mike Watson: It is about benchmarking and monitoring, which is an important aspect of tackling the problem. One of the most important issues is the question of setting targets and measuring against them the effectiveness of the programmes. This is not really a question, but I just want to say that the points on benchmarking and monitoring are apt because the debate is now moving on, based on what the Minister for Communities said earlier this week. The report is helpful and will complement that.

Robert Brown: The last report identified a fragmentation of approach and you alluded to the variety of service providers. Do you consider it a problem that there is fragmentation, conflict and difficulty in identifying a national strategy in local operations?

Secondly, on page 11 of your action team's report, you mention the problems that people have going through bureaucratic hoops to access funding. Do you have a clearer view of how that should be overcome? There is still a need to monitor, have best practice and get people to conduct good projects. One of the reasons for the hoops is to guide people in that direction. Are there ways of marrying the two together to encourage groups with fewer resources than others to access funding more successfully while not losing focus or the need to develop? How do we deal, in other words, with the empowerment bit?

Thirdly, you identified independent advice agencies as being fairly fragmented, with the exception of Citizens Advice Scotland. There have been difficulties with competition between local authorities—with internal advice agencies—and the voluntary sector. How do we get over that problem and that in-built conflict of interest? Do you see any linkage with the youth information service provision that was dealt with in the last report?

11:30

Gill Stewart: On fragmentation, we felt that the distribution of productive activity across Scotland is fairly mixed. As we would expect, we get a lot of activity in certain densely populated areas such as west central Scotland.

In my opening remarks, I said that one of the characteristics of social policy is finding pockets of good practice. Agencies are not joining up and working as well as they might, which is one of the reasons why the Executive is majoring so heavily in the cross-cutting agenda, to ensure that the

major public agencies work better together and join up the resources. Considerable resources have been devoted to tackling local anti-poverty. I do not think that any of us was convinced that the best use had been made of resources over the years. We really need to improve co-operation between agencies.

There are constant complaints about access to funding. The funding routes for the voluntary sector are multiple and complex. Funding can be short-term. We have said that we need to review funding regimes: we envisaged longer-term and more transparent funding regimes that made it easier for people to access the available funding. I would link that to our recommendation about the social economy fund. We see that as a high-level resource which would help plug some of the gaps.

Trevor, would you like to say something on advice agencies, or whatever?

Trevor Lahey (Scottish Social Inclusion Network): Certainly. The whole question of fragmentation came up time and time again, no matter the subject focus. I was part of the group which examined living costs. We considered food initiatives in particular. Members will see some examples in our report on them, although food initiatives are just one example of what is going on.

We often saw that the funding regimes are quite keen to support individual, isolated projects rather than ask what they were part of. The most successful projects were part of something wider, perhaps a multi-centre project with money, advice, community transport and so on included. We are struggling most of all with small, isolated food projects, which were perceived to be falling between several stools. They were viewed as health projects by local authorities, who therefore looked to the health service for funding; they were seen as community projects by health authorities.

It is not that everything should be a massive conglomerate, but that funders should consider the community infrastructure. We have tried to make that point in various ways. It is less glamorous to fund the bread-and-butter community infrastructures, such as community buildings, transport links, child care arrangements and so on. Without the basic backbone, all the smaller projects with the good ideas would flounder. Many of the recommendations centre around the idea of linking things together at the local level without removing community innovation.

We are trying to improve links to welfare benefits and so on. There is a whole range of activity on welfare benefits in health care settings across the UK. One example from our work in Glasgow is the welfare benefits advice session, a half-day-a-week clinic in a general practice. In the past year alone,

the clinic in Carntyne in the east end of Glasgow has generated £125,000 of reclaimed benefits for patients of what is a small practice.

Active linking of initiatives can work. The health service is not traditionally seen as a place to get financial advice, but research shows that it is highly effective, because a large proportion of the population visit their GP or nurse. We give examples in our report of how good links can be achieved at grass-roots level, which gets new services to people who would not otherwise use them. There are resource implications, but even modest increases in funding for services such as citizens' advice and advice on money can make a major difference, especially if that is combined with putting such services in places where people will use them, publicising them and linking them together.

Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab): It is timely that you should mention the example in Carntyne where GP services are being used to enable people to access benefits. The action team sub-group on maximising income draws attention to the benefits initiative in south Lanarkshire that aims to ensure that people get their maximum benefit entitlement.

The sub-group report mentions the lack of co-operation from the Benefits Agency and its refusal to become involved in such work. From my experience of dealing with constituents as a Westminster MP, it appears to me that the Benefits Agency and the medical service that is attached to it actively discourage people from getting benefits. They pull people in and tell them that they must be re-examined for entitlement to disability living allowance and incapacity benefit. People who have been on those benefits for 10 or 12 years suddenly find themselves taken off them and left in limbo for a year while they go through the lengthy appeals procedure.

I see no recommendation in the report that targets the Benefits Agency, saying that it is a problem and is making poor people poorer, instead of doing what it is meant to do, which is to improve people's income and help them out of poverty. Should not we confront the Benefits Agency about what it is up to in Scotland?

Gill Stewart: We hoped that our recommendation on the benefits pilot projects in the social inclusion partnerships would tackle that problem. We were aware that practice could vary. There is discretion. In some areas, people can access things more easily. Depending on what else is going on in an area—south Lanarkshire, for example—things may be pulled together more or less effectively. Your point is proper and we fully recognise it. In part, it goes back to what we said about ensuring that what is going on nationally meshes with what is going on locally and that

national initiatives do not cut across local initiatives, making things more difficult. Everything must go with the grain—in one direction—otherwise time, money and energy are wasted. What is more, people's lives are undermined more than need be. We have tried to acknowledge the problem. We hope that the pilot projects will help to demonstrate how things can be made to work better.

Mr McAllion: Would it help simply to name and shame the Benefits Agency?

Paul Zealey: The report of the sub-group on preparation for, finding and sustaining work says explicitly:

"Our remit does not extend to making recommendations about welfare benefits but their role in successful or unsuccessful action cannot be overstated."

Time and again, the impact of benefits came out as the most significant factor. There is some good work, as Gill said, and there have been examples of Benefits Agency staff being very helpful when, for example, they have been empowered in maximising whole household income in workless households. Such local flexibility is crucial.

The Convener: Before I take a question from Tommy Sheridan, I want to ask about insurance companies. We do not have time to explore the role of the private sector properly, but it seems that we need to ask the public sector to intervene in some of the cases that you have mentioned, where the private sector has failed poor people. You have properly flagged up real issues about the lack of insurance and the conduct of insurance companies in poorer areas. We are trying to get the insurance companies to accept some social responsibility. In your document, you talk about engaging them in anti-poverty action. How can we do that?

Paul Zealey: We got a clear steer on that not from the insurance companies, but from the banks. Social responsibility needs to be sold as a way in which companies can grow their market. The problem with insurance companies is often that the minimum insurance that can be taken out represents a greater contents cover than many poor families want. By block buying for housing association tenancies—as the Scottish Federation for Housing Associations has done—one can ensure that one gets the highest cover at the best rates. Unit costs can therefore become more affordable.

The banks are considering the same principle. If they remove the bells and whistles from current accounts and offer free-of-charges accounts to everybody in Scotland, the people who open those accounts will have the potential to grow and become significant earners if they make the transition from unemployment and poverty into

employment.

An analogy has been drawn with services for students—the banks may not make anything on such services at the time, but the longer term potential is significant. Similarly, sympathetic people in the utilities market may say, “It’s a competitive market and we need extra selling points to persuade people to buy heat, light and power from us. If they see that we are investing in the local community, they might be persuaded.” For example, Scottish Power is involved in the learning centres and, in some areas, British Telecommunications plc offers direct sponsorship of third-sector projects. When people have a choice of organisations to buy from, they may choose to buy from a company that has shown some social responsibility.

The Convener: I am sure that that debate will go on.

Gill Stewart: Some people looked uneasy on that point about the market, but we are not talking about a small number of people. The report indicates that a million people in Scotland would fall into this category—that is a fifth of the population. A market would exist, if it could be explored and supported.

The Convener: That issue will definitely be explored in future.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): I apologise, Gill, if my points are covered in detail in your document. As I am not a member of the committee, I have not managed to read the full document; I hope to get a copy today.

My first question relates to John McAllion’s point. I was not aware—I do not know whether other members are—that the medical services of the Benefits Agency had recently been privatised. The interviews and medical assessments that are carried out in relation to incapacity benefit are now carried out by a private agency. Many people who rely on that benefit now find that they are either losing the benefit completely or receiving a lower rate. Could the action team hold an inquiry into the independence of the medical advice that the Benefits Agency has sought?

Secondly, during your discussions with the action team, did you examine the rigidity of the social inclusion funding network and what it is allowed to fund? In Glasgow, we have been frustrated about funding for many years, particularly in Pollok, where we recently obtained SIP status. The problem lies in our inability to secure funding for projects that have done a great job and achieved their objectives but have run out of funding—the SIP has been told that it is not allowed to re-fund, even though a batch of new funding is available. The system seems insanely rigid. Does your report refer to that? Was the

matter discussed during your deliberations?

11:45

Gill Stewart: Not in such specific terms, but the general point about short-term funding and the need to scabble around for funding was discussed. That is why we recommend the review of funding regimes, to ensure that the funding base is more durable, more transparent and longer term. We also heard the view that proceeding by way of pilots is not necessarily the best way forward. One comment we received was, “We have had more pilots here than Heathrow.”

We need to move from piloting ideas to mainstreaming ideas. That is the thinking that underpins the thrust of social inclusion. We need to mainstream the funding, too. If we do not make that shift, we will just keep bumping up against the same problems. We can improve funding regimes for projects but we cannot get rid of the basic problem of how long the funding will last. If the project is good, it should be mainstreamed.

I do not feel equipped to answer your first point about the privatisation of medical services. I do not think that we considered that at all—[*Interruption.*]

The Convener: I do not know what that noise is. Is it coming from the press? It usually does.

Tommy, it is your pager.

Gill Stewart: I thought that it was a countdown signal, telling me to stop.

The Convener: That would be a good idea. We will introduce it at our next meeting.

Gill Stewart: As I was saying, I do not have an answer to Mr Sheridan’s first point.

Mr Quinan: You were talking about pilot projects. At any time when you were preparing the report, did you examine local anti-poverty strategies such as those used in Northern Ireland under the policy appraisal and fair treatment scheme and under the targeting social needs structures?

Gill Stewart: We had a presentation from an English academic whose name escapes me. He talked about local anti-poverty strategies generally, but I think that he concentrated on work that was being done south of the border. Can you remember, Paul?

Paul Zealey: The principal focus of the academic research was mainland UK, not Northern Ireland, but there were some links in terms of projects.

Mr Quinan: The sub-groups produced reports on the four areas. Were there any recommendations on the assessment criteria?

Gill Stewart: Recommendations are woven into the body of my group's report. The final two recommendations about appropriate monitoring and evaluation point out that, sometimes, fragile projects have to bear a heavy burden in terms of the information that they are supposed to give about how they are doing. The burden needs to be spread more evenly.

We need practical tools that will gauge what effect the activities are having on social budgets. We need harder measures than we have had in the past. Some of the evaluation has been useful, but some of the measures have been quite soft. People need simple tools that will tell them whether what they are doing is working.

Mr Quinan: I am interested in the definition of "local". Were the local initiatives that you considered developed under the Robson indices of locality?

Gill Stewart: I do not think that there was much debate about how we would define the word.

Paul Zealey: There is some detail in the text about whether something is a genuine example of local anti-poverty action.

Mr Quinan: I mention the issue because a national poverty strategy in Scotland could be thought of as being local to Scotland within a UK context. That would allow us to deal with issues that are reserved. Do you have an opinion on that?

Paul Zealey: We would all have a personal opinion, but whether we have a corporate opinion is another matter.

Gill Stewart: When we talked about local, we meant very local.

The Convener: I will draw this part of our meeting to a close. I thank the witnesses for their submission and for answering our questions in the way that they did.

We will now discuss how we will pursue the information that we have heard. The witnesses are welcome to stay. As a way of introducing this general discussion, I assure the witnesses that many of the points that they have raised will not be lost on our work. How influential they are is another matter, but judging by the responses, members are taking a number of points very seriously.

I have made a list of the various things that we might be able to pursue but, before I go through that, can I get a general response from members about how they wish to take this forward?

Alex Neil: There were four social inclusion network groups, plus the evaluation group, and there was a question mark over whether the evaluation group's report was a progress report or

a final report. Given that the point of the inquiry is to look at poverty holistically, would not it make sense for this committee to hear evidence from the chairs of the other two groups, as well as the chair of the evaluation group, before it decides what it is going to do? If we get the chair of the evaluation group in we might be able to get to the bottom of whether it is producing another glossy report. We can then consider our follow-up in the light of all those reports taken together.

Mr Raffan: I support Alex Neil's point. I would also like to say that I think that it is unfair on those who have given evidence today that the evidence session was so brief—just over an hour and a quarter. That is thoroughly inadequate; it is unfair on them and bad for the committee. Each report should have had a session of an hour and a half to two hours.

This is not a criticism of you, convener. I appreciate the difficulty that you have in convening this committee. Grouping questions is, however, not an adequate way of taking evidence; it does not allow a member to follow up with supplementaries. We must be able to ask one question at a time, followed by a supplementary, so that we can pursue a line of questioning. That is what taking evidence is about. That is the way in which evidence can support solid, thorough reports. We must slow down and begin to operate this committee more effectively.

The Convener: I will respond to that directly. We will have to return to the point about work load. I have a responsibility to ensure that we get through the timetable as it is laid out and I will keep to that. If the timetable slips, you will point out that we have not got to an item on the agenda.

As you will have noticed, I have adopted different approaches throughout the lifetime of this committee to try to establish the best way of operating. I do that in the best interests of the committee. Our basic problem is that there is insufficient time to get through the work that we have determined that we should do. Later in the discussion, when people are asking whether we can do this or that by next week, please bear in mind the points that have been made. It is extremely difficult to get through business when people keep adding agenda items without appreciating that to deal with evidence properly we need more time.

I would much prefer it if we had had one action team report per meeting—I am sure that you would have preferred it, too—but we have a cramped agenda. I am sympathetic to Alex Neil's suggestion that we get the other action team reports in. Fitting that into our timetable will be extremely difficult. We are all on a learning curve and we must take into account the varied issues that we have to deal with and the varied interests

to which we must respond. Please bear that in mind when we discuss the timetable.

Robert Brown: The whole thing is very difficult for a convener. These committees are experimental and convening them is a new task. Keith Raffan's experience in Westminster is useful and I confess that I share some of his concerns. Like Lloyd Quinan, I did not get a chance to ask questions earlier and I think that our proceedings must be more structured.

Two things have crossed my mind. The first is whether there is any advantage, before the start of the meeting, in identifying those issues in the report on which we want to home in and the person who has the responsibility for asking questions on them. We must stick to a subject-based approach so that we can exhaust the issues. Many interesting themes have been left hanging as loose ends without our having been able to get at the specifics.

Second—this is a semi-housekeeping issue—I wondered whether there was any value in having a member of the committee act as a rapporteur at each evidence session. Their job would be to do what you are doing, convener—to draw out the conclusions and to lead the discussion on the report. They would not be bothered by having to chair the meeting, but could sit at the side and not ask questions. They could then draw the questions and answers together at the end in terms of the issues that we want to take forward. That method has been used by commission-style organisations and I think that it would have some value for this committee.

Fiona Hyslop: We must be focused about what we are doing. This committee has two roles. One is the job that we have given ourselves to examine the proposals for a national anti-poverty strategy in Scotland. It is the job of members of the sub-group to take this information away and use it.

Secondly, we must remember that our job is to scrutinise the Executive. We must use all five reports, the four glossy reports and the progress report—if it is a final document—to scrutinise the Executive's social inclusion strategy when it produces it. I think that it will do so towards the end of this year or at the beginning of next year.

We must divide our work between those two elements. Members who are examining the national anti-poverty strategy must consider the evidence in those reports. We must use those reports as reference points when we examine the social inclusion strategy. That is why it is essential to have the fifth report, as we have to know what we are judging and scrutinising—are we scrutinising the final version of the report of the evaluation action team? We must use all five reports to scrutinise the Executive's strategy. We

also have the opportunity to examine some of the excellent ideas in those reports and to build them into the national anti-poverty strategy, which is the priority for this committee.

The Convener: I understand that the Executive will make an announcement about measures and targets this year. We must be geared up for that. It will announce phase 1 of the strategy early in the new year, so we must be ready to respond to it. I recommend that the sub-group on social inclusion and the anti-poverty strategy considers the outcome of the discussion that we are having just now. It can schedule that we bring the other chairs of the action teams to a committee meeting as appropriate. The sub-group should keep a watching brief on these issues, follow up the points about evaluation, for example, which Fiona has flagged up, and report back to the committee. That is the only reasonable way of making progress. We will return to the work load and how we manage evidence and such like later.

I take your point, Robert—I know that you mean well, but to add another meeting into the diary may create difficulties. I do not know whether all this is resolvable in the way that we perhaps think it is. We are taking on an enormous amount of work. I understand members' frustrations. I feel that I do not get a chance to ask rigorous questions myself—I feel disfranchised by that. Please bear in mind the issues about the work load. We must be rational about that.

A number of big issues emerged from the evidence that we have received; the sub-group must examine them. One is funding—we have a role in scrutinising the funding strategy for Scotland, which has been mentioned time and again in all the evidence that we have heard. We must listen to views on that and represent those views at a Scottish level.

We are considering homelessness—John McAllion is our reporter on that, and we must ensure that youth homelessness and the evidence that witnesses have presented to us is dealt with.

On the drugs issue, the witnesses from the Scottish social inclusion network will be able to tell by Keith Raffan's enthusiasm for their perspective that he will certainly pursue the matter. We have started an inquiry, which will address the issues that the witnesses mentioned.

We must ensure that the sub-group pays attention to the work and training issues. There is a range of issues about benefits, which we must comment on and develop ideas about. Again, I remit that to the sub-group, but we will bring it back to the committee.

Alex Neil: I think that it was Paul Zealey who said that the subject of welfare and benefits comes up time and again. I suggest that the sub-group

considers inviting the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The Convener: You suggest that we invite a Government minister at every meeting, Alex.

Alex Neil: Those are the ministers who are taking the decisions. Unfortunately, we cannot take the decisions here. We would take very different decisions.

The Convener: We should not rehearse the arguments of the referendum campaign again.

Alex Neil: We should invite the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Social Security to justify to this committee their benefits policy and its impact on poverty and social inclusion in Scotland.

The Convener: There are huge issues about benefits that we must debate—there are various ways to address them—but I will refer them to the sub-group. If we deem it appropriate to invite members of the British Government, as well as members of the Scottish Government, we will do that, but we should have a proper debate on the issue and put it in context.

Fiona Hyslop: I would like to back up what Alex said. John McAllion said at a previous meeting that housing and housing benefit are major issues and that it may be possible to combine issues that cross portfolios, such as housing and social inclusion. That might be a way of managing our time effectively. There is a key interaction between those issues and it is important that we have a dialogue, especially if there is to be a review of benefits for young people. If that is the case, we have a duty and a responsibility to take evidence.

12:00

The Convener: That is why our work is getting so difficult: as soon as we decide something, we change the agenda, and that is why the agenda is so difficult to manage. We should refer the matter to the social inclusion sub-group so that it can report.

Mr McAllion: I want to re-emphasise the points that you made. Everyone is complaining that we do not have enough time to deal with the people who are coming before us, but what is the solution? It seems to be to invite more people to give evidence, and to extend the work programme. We are already dealing with drugs, stock transfers and a national anti-poverty strategy: now we want the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Social Security to come before us. Why are we not inviting the Prime Minister to come up here every week so that we can hold him to account for the way that he carries on? We should sort this matter out in private session.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): I enjoyed this morning's presentations because we did not get the papers until Monday and, as Keith said, our full schedules make it difficult to examine the details of submissions. I want to address the details and understand the issues that affect poverty, in order to empower people. The presentations referred to empowering people, to get them out of the cycle of exclusion. I want this committee to get into the details of documents and understand the issues better, before we hear evidence. We do not have enough knowledge to bring people in and question them on the real causes of poverty. Let us educate ourselves and study the detail of the documents. Margaret, I agree with your recommendations.

The Convener: Thank you. I am sure that Alex will bring the issue that he raised to our attention in future. We will refer it to the social inclusion sub-committee. I will ensure that everything that we have just discussed is referred to that sub-committee.

Once again, I thank the witnesses. They are welcome to stay, but may leave if they wish.

Reporters

The Convener: We will now address item 3 on the agenda, which concerns the remit of reporters. Lloyd Quinan raised a pertinent matter earlier in the meeting. I think that it was in reference to time scales.

Mr Quinan: No, my point relates to the committee's guidance on reporters. I have not seen a written remit for reporters. According to Martin Verity, the remit should have been agreed when the reporters were appointed.

More important, if we are to examine a national anti-poverty strategy, we need to decide whether to create a sub-committee according to rule 12.5 of the standing orders or whether, under rule 12.7, we have reporters who meet other members of the committee without those other members being formally appointed by the committee. We appear to be in some confusion. The group has been called an ad hoc group, a committee, a sub-group and a sub-committee. Until we have a constitution for that organisation it should cease working.

The Convener: Oh dear. In light of our previous decisions that would make life quite difficult.

Mr Raffan: I would not take the drastic step that Lloyd suggests, but I have every sympathy with what he said. Basically, the group has been called every name possible. I did not even know that it had been set up: perhaps it happened when I was in hospital.

I know that John McAllion is the reporter on housing issues and that Karen Whitefield is the

reporter on the voluntary sector, but I do not know whether anyone is on drugs.

The Convener: We have to decide that.

Mr Raffan: If we are going to have reporters we must do it in a formal way, so that everyone knows who is doing what. I do not want to complicate matters or make them more bureaucratic, but if we are having reporters, those who have an interest in specific areas—obviously, mine is drug issues, and others are interested in housing and the voluntary sector—should work closely with the reporters so that they have an input. That is how we should be doing it. We do not want to be over-bureaucratic, but we must know who is doing what.

Cathie Craigie: I am confused if people do not know who the reporters are. John McAllion has been doing a report for the past couple of months.

Mr Raffan: Yes, I knew that he was.

Cathie Craigie: At the previous meeting, or the one before that, it was unanimously agreed that Karen Whitefield was to be the reporter on the voluntary sector. Do not let us confuse the issue.

Mr Raffan: It is not in the minutes. It is not down here.

Cathie Craigie: I do not see anything wrong in committee members meeting informally to discuss the issues in greater detail. That can only improve our knowledge and our performance when we come here to the committee. But when we will find the time to do that, I do not know. I am confused here—

The Convener: You are confused by the confusion? If they have missed meetings, members should read the *Official Report* to ensure that they keep up with the business of the committee. That is important, because we have returned to the same issue—who is doing what—again and again. However, there is a sense of direction to what we are doing.

On Lloyd Quinan's point, we must decide whether to establish a sub-group or a sub-committee on the anti-poverty work. The group was deliberately kept informal, and I remind members that it was a committee decision to do that. We have therefore been implementing a committee decision. If we decide to make it more formal, we have to go through the procedures of the Parliamentary Bureau. That will take some time. I am not averse to making it formal—I would be sympathetic towards that idea, because anti-poverty work is a substantial part of the work of the group. Making the group formal will change the nature of decisions that we have already made. In light of what we have said about pursuing the evaluation report and such like, it would be a great pity if the group stopped working. There is such a

lot to be done, as we know.

I feel that the membership of the sub-group should stay the same and that it should continue working. We should raise with the Parliamentary Bureau the possibility of setting up a sub-committee.

Alex Neil: Margaret, I think that we are getting all confused on this. There are two issues here. One is the status of the sub-committee, which, as you rightly say, we agreed should be informal, at this stage anyway. We made it informal because it had a specific remit, which was not to address the issues of anti-poverty and social inclusion, but to come back to this committee with suggestions on a remit, work plan, time scale and modus operandi for dealing with those issues. It has not yet come back to the committee. I suggest that the sub-group has at least one more meeting and then comes back to the committee having fulfilled its original remit. That would be the appropriate stage at which to decide whether the committee wants to delegate responsibility to a formal sub-committee.

Mr Raffan: I would like to make a positive point, if I can. It is all very well to say that we can plough through the *Official Report*—I take your point—but we still have five reports to get through. Let us be realistic.

There seem to be two routes—the reporters route and the sub-committee route. Sooner or later we will have to rationalise this. I quite like the idea of having reporters for different issues—one on drugs, one on housing, one on the voluntary sector and one on social inclusion. When we get their reports—whether that happens fortnightly or whatever—it would help to have bullet points on a sheet that showed where they had got to. That would help to keep us abreast of what they are doing, and would be in their interests too.

I feel that we are undertaking too many inquiries at one time.

The Convener: I accept that, but we are getting into the dangerous area of changing our decisions meeting by meeting. We have to learn to live with the outcomes of our decisions, and take some time before deciding to change them.

Karen Whitefield: At last week's meeting, I sought clarification from other members on my role as reporter. When I was appointed as reporter, I was advocating that we should set up a sub-group on the voluntary sector. After a lengthy discussion, the committee agreed unanimously that I had talked myself into the position of reporter on the voluntary sector. It is important that we do not fight over whether we are to have reporters or sub-groups.

The committee has made the decision to appoint me as its reporter on the voluntary sector and it

should concentrate on defining my role so that I can get on with the work. My role as a reporter is to ensure that issues that are important to the voluntary sector, including those that have been raised at previous committee meetings, are kept on the agenda, and to liaise between the committee and voluntary and community groups around Scotland. I can report to the committee, but I need a clear definition of what my role is.

The Convener: Yes. Is Lloyd going to refer to the paper?

Mr Quinan: We can clear all this up if we have a written remit for the sub-groups and reporters. That would fix it. That is what was asked for last week.

The Convener: We will raise that at the next meeting, but now we must return to the committee paper.

I accept Alex's suggestion about the anti-poverty sub-group. If we bring a report back to a further committee meeting, we must spend time discussing it. When we have 15 or 20 minutes at the end of a discussion, members will get frustrated and angry with me if I have to cut them off to let somebody else start.

Alex Neil: Never.

The Convener: I know that Alex would not.

We must ensure that that item is timetabled properly. That is one of the difficulties: we are not timetabling properly. Can we finally agree and stick to this agreement—I am trying to remember Lloyd's words—that at the next meeting we will circulate a paper that details the role of the reporters and their work load? Perhaps we can include a recommended time scale for reviewing the role of the reporter and the work they have done, the work of the sub-committee—sub-group, ad hoc group, or whatever we are calling it—and what action we want to take. Members should bear in mind that, at the next meeting, we will have to dedicate some time to discussing that. They should remember that when I cut their questions short and they get agitated with me.

Do members want to have any further discussion on that?

Mr McAllion: If we are to have four reporters, I suggest that they take it in turn to report to the committee. We do not want four reports on every agenda.

The Convener: It would be likely that that would be timed according to what was happening in each particular subject area. If there were urgent housing issues, we would try to time the hearing of a report appropriately around that.

I ask for members' forbearance in some matters. Do members have any other issues to raise

regarding the paper on reporters, which might inform next week's discussion?

Members: No.

Abolition of Poindings and Warrant Sales Bill

The Convener: The next item overlaps with item 5 on the agenda, which largely concerns the timing of our work on the bill. I invite members to address the two items together, as they are part of the same discussion.

The Local Government Committee has indicated that it wants to be involved in the evidence session on the bill. I attended a meeting of the Parliamentary Bureau yesterday. Other members who were there will verify that I argued vehemently that we are concerned about our work load. I also stressed that we are keen to create time to scrutinise the bill, despite what we have said about our work load. One of our problems is that we must fit this work in. However, we are keen to do so.

I have had brief discussions with Roseanna Cunningham, the convener of the Justice and Home Affairs Committee, and the clerks of our two committees have liaised with each other, so Martin Verity may want to comment on this as well. We briefly agreed on two key points. First, our committees will share the evidence. The evidence will be distributed to all committees, and the Justice and Home Affairs Committee and this committee will share evidence to achieve a balanced perspective on the cases for and against the bill.

Secondly, the Parliamentary Bureau must provide an indicative timetable. The Justice and Home Affairs Committee needs a report from us at the beginning of February, so our work must be concluded by January. That is what we must understand today. We must conclude our hearings and finalise our view by January, so that our conclusions can be passed on to the Justice and Home Affairs Committee.

Do members have any general comments on that? We can address specific issues as we proceed.

Alex Neil: Under our original time scale, we were supposed to report by December. My understanding was that the Justice and Home Affairs Committee hoped to conclude its work—evidence and so on—by mid-December and to report early in the new year. The timetable for the bill has been slipping. From day one, I have detected the hidden hand of the Executive in that.

12:15

The Justice and Home Affairs Committee, which has an even heavier work load than we do, will probably conclude its work on the bill before we conclude ours. The difference between the bill and the other work that our committee is doing is that the bill will become something tangible—people will be able to say that the Scottish Parliament has done something of benefit for the people, which has not been the case in the past six months. As far as I am concerned, the bill is a top priority and we should give it the billing that it deserves.

The Convener: The committee has given the bill top billing and that must be made clear. We have cleared our agenda to deal with the bill.

At the meeting yesterday, I resented the suggestion that the committee was not co-operating in some way, because it needed more time beyond Christmas. At least 20 to 25 organisations want to submit evidence; some will have to be in written form. Members will get very agitated when they receive piles of documents that they have to read, rather than hearing evidence. We have to hear and read substantial evidence.

Yesterday, I was given to understand that a month would not make that big a difference to the bill. It would not make that much difference if the bill were to be heard at the end of December or at the end of January. That would give us a wee bit of scope to fit in extra meetings. Between now and Christmas, our agenda is extremely pressed, and those extra meetings would be to our benefit.

Tommy Sheridan: Could I suggest that the background to the bill is quite important. The original proposal was submitted in August, and was resubmitted—after various bits of advice—in September. We had a great many problems; people not a million miles from me—Mike, in particular—will understand the difficulties surrounding members' bills. Members have been fighting to try to get the bill discussed as early as possible.

As members will know, the committee to which the bill was referred—the Justice and Home Affairs Committee—is dealing with two pieces of Executive legislation, inquiries into domestic violence and the Law Society, and other matters to do with legal aid. Last Thursday, the clerk to the Justice and Home Affairs Committee contacted to me to say that the committee was determined to make time to hear evidence on the bill as soon as possible. He said that the committee will hear evidence on 17 November, from 9.30 to 12.30 and again on 23 November, and that it would write its report by mid-December. That would allow the stage 1 debate—aside from obstruction by the bureau—to be heard in the earliest parliamentary meetings in January.

I was happy with that arrangement, although I had hoped that we would have got further with the bill before the end of the year. The timetable has slipped. I am unhappy about the suggestion that the timetable should slip again, to the end of February or the beginning of March.

I appeal to you, Margaret, to set in train the original timetable, which was that a stage 1 committee report would be submitted by December.

The Convener: I will take Keith, Fiona, John and then Karen. We need to hurry up.

Mr Raffan: Tommy has made his point and I do not want to repeat what he said.

However, I wish to make a minor correction to what Alex said. The Justice and Home Affairs Committee, as the lead committee, cannot report on the evidence that it has taken until we have reported to it.

Alex Neil: I made that point earlier.

Mr Raffan: It is crucial.

Roseanna Cunningham has been extremely co-operative. She is almost a running fixture at the Parliamentary Bureau as she has been at its meetings on each of the past three Tuesdays. As Tommy Sheridan said, that committee has problems that make our committee's work load look relatively light.

The Convener: Keith, you are repeating what you said earlier. This is ridiculous.

Mr Raffan: The Justice and Home Affairs Committee has three bills. We have to cope with the work.

I was not criticising you personally, convener, and I hope that you did not take it that way.

The Convener: No, I did not.

Mr Raffan: As you said, the timetable is extremely tight and we do not want to let it slip. You are right—we must not keep on changing decisions. However, we are in charge of the timetable and it must not be allowed to take on a life of its own. In order to insert something like Tommy's bill, other items might have to be postponed. We must start working alongside the schedule.

I am sympathetic to what Cathie Craigie said, as we are all on a steep learning curve. I might know a bit about drugs, but I know far less about housing and other issues that I will have to learn about. If we do not have time to consider written submissions before we take oral evidence, we will have a problem—an increasing problem—as a committee. We must address that problem, but it is difficult to do that when legislation comes in on

an already very tight timetable.

Fiona Hyslop: Can we talk practicalities? From what we have heard, the Justice and Home Affairs Committee will have two evidence sessions and then will have a meeting to put together its report. So far, on our timetable, we have the same number of meetings. We would start to take evidence on Wednesday 17 November—it is interesting to note that that meeting will probably take place at the same time as when the Justice and Home Affairs Committee is hearing its first evidence. That committee will also meet on 1 December.

If we think that two evidence sessions of three hours' duration will be enough to allow us to do justice to the bill, all we need to do to pull the timetable back in line is to swap sessions, with John McAllion's co-operation. If we swap the session on 8 December, which is meant to be an examination of housing stock transfer, with that of 15 December, which was originally the third session on the Abolition of Poindings and Warrant Sales Bill, we can discuss and agree the final report on 8 December. From what I have heard, that will allow us to progress in tandem with the Justice and Home Affairs Committee.

The Convener: This is a bizarre discussion. Earlier, members were saying, "Oh my God—we can't do this; we can't do that." Now, they are saying, "Yes, we can." I wish to make one or two points on which I want us to be clear. I do not want to be put into a corner.

As members know, I am sympathetic to Tommy Sheridan's bill; given my constituency, I am hugely keen to assist it. If we take our time to hear proper evidence from a range of organisations, we will do our job properly.

I resent being put into this corner, because I suggested at the Parliamentary Bureau that we could stray a couple of weeks into January so that we could hear more evidence. Is that undermining the bill? I want to be clear that that is not undermining the progress of the legislation at all. It is about doing our job properly.

It will be impossible for the committee to do its work if we make a decision and then overturn it when we reach the next item on the agenda. I am going to have to start being firm with people. We have agreed a housing agenda, but we keep changing it. May I remind the committee that, during November, in one week we will be meeting for a full day and a half, and that it will be the same the following week? I do not know what other commitments members have, but we are getting to an absurd point where we cannot manage the work load. With due respect to Tommy—who is keen to see the bill through, as am I—I honestly do not see the difference that a

couple of weeks or three weeks will make.

Mr McAllion: It seems to me that, from what Tommy said, we are holding more meetings than the Justice and Home Affairs Committee is holding, although I have no idea what that committee is doing. There would be no problem with swapping sessions—putting homelessness back one week and bringing forward the evidence session. In fact, we agreed at the previous meeting not to hear the homelessness organisations right away, but to bring someone else in—I have not yet had a chance to sit down with Martin and to report back on that.

I sympathise with you, Margaret: it is impossible to convene this committee as members continually change the agenda—not from meeting to meeting but from minute to minute in the course of a meeting.

The Convener: That is right.

Mr McAllion: I do not see any problem with finishing those sessions before Christmas, as nothing can happen until after Christmas. It would not be a problem to hold back the homelessness organisations a week, if that meant that we could get through the work on the Abolition of Poindings and Warrant Sales Bill before Christmas.

The Convener: With all due respect, that is not the point. We can swap certain things round—that is not changing the timetable, as such. Given the range of organisations that want to give evidence on warrant sales, I do not think that two evidence-taking sessions and one meeting to decide on our view are enough. The Justice and Home Affairs Committee can take its own view. At least 20 organisations want to submit evidence, and I do not have the time to do the reading that is required, to ensure that we cover all the angles.

Fiona Hyslop: How many sessions do you think that we will need?

The Convener: I was going to suggest four, but that is just my view.

Karen Whitefield: It is interesting that we are being told that we can swap meetings round, as we have been over the issue of timetabling repeatedly and have repeatedly been told that, because housing stock transfers are high up on the political agenda, the matter must be considered straight away by the committee. We cannot put it off, because there is a pressing political imperative.

The bill is important and, like the convener, I support it and want it to make legislative progress. However, it is a complex bill and the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee would be failing in its responsibility if it did not consider the impact that it will have on society and on poor communities, which many of

us represent. We, as a committee have a responsibility to consider how they will be affected if warrant sales are abolished. How will those people, who are already on low incomes, access credit? We need to listen to those arguments and to consider those issues. Like Margaret, I think that that will take time and that two evidence sessions will not be enough. We have a responsibility to poor communities in Scotland to get the legislation right.

Bill Aitken: I am basically sympathetic towards the bill, although I would require a number of reassurances on it, in everybody's best interests. We are repeatedly getting ourselves into a guddle—a guddle that is largely of our own making. Basically, we must decide on a course of action and stick to it. As Keith Raffan said, we should not accept any more work until we have cleared our backlog. I am firmly of the view that we should stick to what we have agreed thus far. If there is anything else that we can do to expedite the bill, by all means let us do it, but let us also adhere to our timetable.

Cathie Craigie: I support what you were saying, Margaret. Like most of us in the Parliament, I am sympathetic to the bill. However, as Karen said, we have to do our job properly and take the evidence.

Earlier somebody made the throwaway remark that they saw the hand of the Executive in the timetabling of the bill. I do not think that the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee should allow its timetable to be dictated by that of the Justice and Home Affairs Committee. It might think that it can take the evidence in a couple of meetings, but we have to take the evidence as we see fit, so that at the end of the day we arrive at a proper decision. We have waited this long for the bill to come before Parliament, and I cannot see a few weeks making much difference.

About 15 minutes ago, we agreed how important it was to stick to a timetable. If we change that now, anyone who reads the *Official Report* of our meeting will think that we are making fools of ourselves. I realise that there will be occasions when timetables will have to change to deal with emergencies, but I do not think that this is one of them. We need this amount of time to get good and proper legislation through the Parliament. We would be doing ourselves a disservice if we tried to rush it.

Alex Neil: There is a reasonable way out of this. Three committees are involved: the Justice and Home Affairs Committee will hold two evidence-taking sessions; we have already agreed to three; and the Local Government Committee must be having a minimum of one. That makes a total of six meetings, which means that a minimum of 12

to 14 hours will be spent on the bill. That must equal if not surpass the average time spent in consideration of a bill. There is no question of the Parliament as a whole not properly considering the implications of the bill.

I think that I am right in saying that there is agreement among the conveners of the three committees involved that there will be no duplication or overlap: anyone who gives evidence to the Justice and Home Affairs Committee, for example, will not give evidence to the other two committees. That would be an absurd waste of time. We have already scheduled three evidence sessions. Given that the Justice and Home Affairs Committee and the Local Government Committee are also considering the bill, I would have thought that three evidence sessions would be adequate for this committee.

If we agreed on that, the only change to our planned schedule that would be needed would be to swap round the meetings that were set aside for dealing with housing stock transfer and warrant sales respectively. John McAllion and Fiona Hyslop indicated that that would be fine. We would then take warrant sales a week earlier and housing stock transfers a week later.

That fairly minor adjustment to our planned schedule would allow us to complete our work on the bill in December in tandem with the Justice and Home Affairs Committee and the Local Government Committee. That would solve the problem.

12:30

The Convener: I do not think that that will solve the problem. I am constantly being reminded that we do not have enough time to ask witnesses follow-up questions. Keith Raffan did that again today. It would be difficult to find two hours for the thorough questioning that Keith expects. As Roseanna Cunningham said at the Justice and Home Affairs Committee yesterday, members will also be required to read the *Official Report* of proceedings in other committees for an overall view of the bill. Substantial work has still to be done; committee members are underestimating the work involved.

I want to suggest a compromise. Perhaps we should swap consideration of the bill with our consideration of housing. Loth as I am to make the change, in that way we would recognise that we must shift our timetable slightly. If we had one or two meetings in January—depending on the range of organisations that sent in submissions—we could try to get our report to the Justice and Home Affairs Committee by the third week of January.

As it is almost 12.30 pm, I need the committee's quick views on the issue. Does the committee

agree to my proposal?

Tommy Sheridan: Margaret, you talked about one or two meetings in January, depending on submissions. The deadline for submissions has passed.

The Convener: I am talking about the organisations that we want to hear from. The committee has already decided to investigate warrant sales in the context of debt and credit. Keith, were you going to say something?

Tommy Sheridan: Sorry, Margaret, but you interrupted me in the middle of making a point.

The Convener: Hurry up, Tommy, because we are running out of time.

Tommy Sheridan: It seems unfortunate that you have been accused of undermining the process because you wanted more meetings. However, the fact that the Justice and Home Affairs Committee thinks that it can deal with the matter in two meetings does not mean that its investigation will be any less detailed.

The Convener: That is the view of that committee.

Tommy Sheridan: Exactly. I do not think that such a remark is particularly helpful.

Furthermore, I ask you to bear it in mind that this is only stage 1 of the bill. We still have a detailed, line-by-line consideration of the bill to go through.

The Convener: Absolutely. I know that well.

Mr Raffan: I tend to agree with Alex Neil. We spend too much time discussing our work programme instead of getting on with it. We could meet at 9.45 am or at 10 am. I support Robert Brown's point about grouping questions before every evidence session, including those for Tommy's bill. We should go into the session no later than 10.30 am and continue to 12.30 pm or 1 pm. A decent length for evidence sessions will allow us to take two or three sessions of oral evidence in two and a half hours. We will get a lot more done that way. However, we have to change our working practices, not the programme.

Bill Aitken: Perhaps the convener could put a motion to the committee.

The Convener: Yes, I will. I propose that we stick to the outlined agenda. We will swap around housing, as Fiona Hyslop suggested, which will give us the space to take extra evidence in the first two weeks in January. Barring accidents and emergencies, we will report to the Justice and Home Affairs Committee in the third week of January.

Alex Neil: I want to propose an amendment that three sessions will be enough and that we can

complete our work in December. We will then be able to submit our report to the Justice and Home Affairs as the lead committee. If we do otherwise, the lead committee will be ahead of us in the work programme.

The Convener: Okay, Alex.

Mr McAllion: Members are being asked to vote on an issue for which they do not have any evidence. We should accept what the convener is saying and keep the matter under review. If we are making good progress, fine—we will be able to report in December; if we decide that we need further sessions, we will have those sessions.

I have not seen which organisations have been asked to give evidence. It is stupid to force votes that will only go down party lines.

Alex Neil: I will accept a compromise that we review the situation in December. If it is necessary to have a fourth or fifth session, that is fine, but we should not commit ourselves to five sessions on the bill on top of the Justice and Home Affairs Committee's work.

The Convener: I will have to make a report to the Parliamentary Bureau on this matter. I have gone out of my way in this committee to be co-operative and to ensure that other people's agendas are taken into account. I have genuinely tried not to pursue my own agenda. Given all the representations that I received from every committee member about changing the work load, and having trawled through the *Official Report*, I thought that I had come to the committee with an extremely reasonable suggestion. All we are talking about is two weeks in January.

Alex Neil: On a point of order, convener. The committee takes the view, not the convener. You have proposed a motion to the committee; I have proposed an amendment; John McAllion has suggested a compromise. I have said that I am prepared to accept a compromise; you are not prepared to do so. In that case, the committee should vote on your motion and my amendment.

The Convener: I am quite happy to go along with that.

Alex Neil: Does John want to push his compromise to a formal proposal?

The Convener: If Alex wants to press his amendment formally, he can do so. He will lose.

Alex Neil: No, but John's compromise—

The Convener: Order. It is absurd that at this stage in the committee we are arguing about two weeks in January. My proposal is that we give ourselves space in January to formulate a view to report to the Justice and Home Affairs Committee.

Tommy Sheridan: That is eight weeks.

The Convener: No, Tommy. We had timetabled up to December for this issue. I am requesting that the committee give itself extra time in January to hear further evidence if that is necessary. Alex has suggested that we do not need that time and that we should conclude our deliberations in December. That is the vote.

Alex Neil: On a point of clarification, convener. Is John formalising his compromise proposal? Yes or no?

Mr McAllion: No.

The Convener: The question is, that we conclude our hearings on the Abolition of Poidings and Warrant Sales Bill by December in order to give our recommendations to the Justice and Home Affairs Committee. Can I see all those in favour? There are three.

The question is, that the committee gives itself extra time in January to hear all the evidence. Can I see all those in favour? There are eight.

Therefore, the committee will give itself the extra time in January.

We are over our time. I will liaise with the conveners of the Justice and Home Affairs Committee and the Local Government Committee to achieve a balance in the organisations that have made submissions. I will circulate a list of those organisations. Committee members should give their views to Martin Verity and to me about the evidence that we should hear. Although we will proceed with our timetable, we will switch housing and consideration of the bill to facilitate speedy progress of the bill.

Meeting closed at 12:37.

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