



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 15 June 2010

Session 3

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CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	3187
TRANSPORT AND LAND USE PLANNING POLICIES INQUIRY	3188

TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE
17th Meeting 2010, Session 3

CONVENER

*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con)
*Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
*Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)
*Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
*Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD)
Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP)
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

David Anderson (Transport Scotland)
Stewart Stevenson (Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change)
Helen Wood (Scottish Government Directorate for the Built Environment)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee

Tuesday 15 June 2010

[The Convener opened the meeting at 14:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Patrick Harvie): Good afternoon. Welcome to the 17th meeting this year of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee. I remind everyone present that all mobile devices should be switched off. We have received apologies from Shirley-Anne Somerville.

Agenda item 1 is consideration of a proposal to take in private item 3, any future consideration of the draft report on our inquiry into transport and land use planning policies, and consideration of our work programme at future meetings. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Transport and Land Use Planning Policies Inquiry

14:01

The Convener: Item 2 is the continuation of our inquiry into the relationship between transport and land use planning policies. This is the final oral evidence session for the inquiry. We will hear from the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change, who is accompanied by Scottish Government officials. I welcome Stewart Stevenson MSP, who is familiar to all of us. He is joined by Helen Wood, principal planner at the Scottish Government directorate for the built environment; Alastair Mitchell, from local authority and regional transport partnership liaison in the Scottish Government transport directorate; and David Anderson, head of transport economics and research at Transport Scotland. I invite the minister to make some brief opening remarks before we begin questioning.

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): We see effective integration of transport and land use policies as essential to the success of strategic and local planning, and as important in our response to the challenges of climate change and sustainable development. The modernised planning system puts much greater emphasis on early engagement and the involvement of stakeholders, which should be beneficial in helping to ensure that transport considerations are properly integrated into development plan operation and given due weight in development management decisions.

The Scottish Government is actively encouraging a partnership approach to plan preparation. Transport Scotland and other transport interests are engaging with the process from an early stage. At national level, the second national planning framework highlights the importance of the relationship between transport and land use in our drive to reduce transport-related issues. The recently published "Designing Streets" policy statement shows how residential streets can be more attractive for pedestrians and cyclists. The Scottish sustainable communities initiative, which is well under way, provides early opportunities to put those principles into practice and to create exemplars of sustainable living. I am happy to take questions from members.

The Convener: You have told us that, in the Government's view, the integration of planning and transport is essential. To what extent is that happening effectively at the moment? I am sure that you and your officials have had time to look at some of the evidence that we have taken over the past weeks. We have heard a range of views from

witnesses about the effectiveness of what is being done and whether some development plans and specific developments that will lock in unsustainable travel modes, for example, are still being approved. To what extent is integration achieved and working well?

Stewart Stevenson: We have made substantial progress, but we have yet to complete the journey of achieving the necessary levels of integration of transport and planning. At national level, as planning minister, I am responsible for the planning system, and I am also the transport minister, so at least transport and planning are integrated in one minister. However, planning decisions are made at many levels of government and it is fair to say that there remains variation in practice.

The ministerial team is working closely with local government and has its active encouragement in this and other areas in the reform of the planning system. This morning, I chaired a meeting between the private sector and local government at official and political levels in which integration of transport and planning was one of the key subjects. *[Interruption.]* Forgive me if I cough from time to time, convener. We heard some substantial success stories this morning but, equally, we heard of some areas in which difficulties remain. One of the responsibilities that we have given to the chief planner is to be a troubleshooter—in other words, to help local authorities, park authorities and those of our departments that are involved. A wide range of departments gets involved in planning and might have an influence on transport and planning integration. The chief planner helps to talk such organisations through good practice and to review what they do in a particular situation. Progress made? Yes. Complete? No.

The Convener: What are the barriers that have prevented us from completing the transformation? Will you give us examples of what is not happening and is still to be done?

Stewart Stevenson: We have in place a policy framework, quite a lot of which has developed in different parts over recent time. However, when you make major change, it is never easy to get the substantial numbers of people involved to sign up to the reality of that change.

We are in difficult economic times. One useful tool for councils and the Government has been the use of section 75 agreements to require developers to make public transport provision at their own cost for, typically, the first three years of a development. That is good practice, but it is proving more difficult to come to those agreements with developers, which depend largely on bank borrowing to finance their developments. The pace of development has slowed down so, on the other

hand, we have more resource per development in local planning authorities to look at the issues and work out innovative ways that are appropriate to local needs. Prima facie, a development in one place might have different implications for the transport infrastructure and local communities when moved to another part of Scotland. Getting the development plan framework right so that it recognises transport needs is key to laying the groundwork to getting everything right. It is fair to say that that policy is at different stages of progress in different parts of Scotland.

The Convener: Having the policy framework in place is a step in the right direction. Do you agree that, as we have heard from numerous witnesses, a number of developments still gain approval when they conflict with those policies or with aspects of local plans in a way that continues to lock in unsustainable transport patterns? Where that happens, why does it happen?

Stewart Stevenson: Remember that the 34 planning authorities—the 32 local councils and two national parks—are masters of their own destiny in that sense. The political input that is part of the planning process can decide that it is legitimate in particular circumstances that a development should not fall within the plan—the plan may have been laid down some time in the past and need to be replaced, or there may be particular needs. However, it is precisely to try to get that exchange of good practice that Mr Swinney, Mr Mather and I meet planning interests on a very regular basis—this morning's meeting that Mr Swinney and I attended is an example of that. In that way, we ensure that we can learn from each other. Equally, such meetings allow us to hear the frank views of people who are engaged in the system when, in their view, we have more to do and are not reaching the required standards. The sessions involve straight talking. That is welcome because, if people do not articulate what requires to be done and illustrate it with examples, things will simply continue as before. However, getting all the people who are involved in the system to change and getting all the plans brought up to date cannot be achieved overnight, and that has not happened yet.

The Convener: I am still trying to get a sense of what issues you believe make it difficult to make faster progress. For example, the policy is well understood and there is a degree of integration between the different disciplines, but decisions are still taken in the opposite direction. Is that because of economic considerations or local political considerations? What are the counterbalancing factors? What might draw people away from making a decision that is consistent with the agenda?

Stewart Stevenson: We need to be careful about moving from the particular to the general. There is not necessarily a crossover. There are a variety of reasons why individual planning decisions might be made, but we have a considerable number of examples of good practice in Scotland. We want to try to identify them and ensure that they are shared.

One factor is certainly that, as developers are less able to make up-front investments in transport infrastructure at present, we are increasingly retiming developer investments in transport infrastructure to the point at which the development itself delivers the money back to the developer that then funds the transport developments. That is a change in practice and we recognise that, from time to time, a price will be associated with that. There might be degradation of the local transport system because some of the impacts that are associated with the development begin before we have upgraded the local transport infrastructure.

When we take that approach, we are careful not to let the system get out of balance and certainly not to create danger or risks, but we are prepared to accept that, in the early stages of some developments, there might be some congestion that we did not have in the previous world, where we could get investment in transport infrastructure upgrades at the outset, before the development was complete. The fact that we are having to take a different approach reflects the reality of the economic circumstances that we are in. Part of our role is to ensure that we keep developments and our economy moving forward.

The Convener: We all acknowledge that the next few years are likely to be difficult on a number of levels. Is there not a danger that the agenda could stall? Investment that it was hoped to bring into a project later on rather than up front might not materialise because the company that hoped to provide it finds it more problematic than it expected to do so. Also, when local authorities make planning decisions, they might find themselves between a rock and a hard place. They might think, "We'll get a development that's badly designed in transport terms or no development at all. We can't afford to place more constraints on the developer."

Stewart Stevenson: I do not believe that there is substantial evidence that that is, even to a limited extent, the kind of behaviour that councils are undertaking. Councils are close to the communities that they serve and they are clear about the needs of their communities. The public duties that form part of the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 create a legal environment in which councils have to take account of such matters.

The broad issue that you seek to probe me on is our saying that we will let developments proceed and then get the money for the infrastructure upgrade later. It is worth making the point that we are looking at that not in terms of big, one-off developments. In housing, for example, if we give authority for 4,000 houses, for the sake of argument—I am thinking of a particular development—they will not all be built in six months or even a year but will be built over a period of time. Therefore, we are now looking at the contributions starting when the first 10 or 15 per cent of houses are built because that is when the developer starts to get some return for the investment.

14:15

If the developer does not provide that contribution, the contractual and legal relationship between the developer and the permissions granted is such that, to be blunt, the development will not proceed further. Does that create a risk for the public? There is a risk, but we simply have to take a balanced view of it. We are certainly not signing away all prospects of getting the appropriate investments in local transport infrastructure. Far from it. In the way that we seek to structure matters, there is a huge incentive for developers to make the contributions—not from their own capital or bank borrowings as traditionally they would have done, but from the revenue that they generate from their first receipts from developments—to enable them to continue and make the progress that, as businesspeople, they wish to make.

The Convener: I have a further question on the perceived disconnect. We heard an idea that was described to us as a hierarchy of transport modes. The expectation is that walking and cycling would be given the highest priority, followed by public transport, with private motor car use at the bottom of the hierarchy. Is that an accurate description of the way that the issues are understood or expressed? Is it a fair reflection of the expectation that walkers, public transport users and motorists have of the decisions that affect them?

Stewart Stevenson: By placing a duty on local authorities, as the Parliament did in the 2009 act, we inevitably force them to consider modes of transport specific to the development concerned that will provide an effective response to climate change challenges. That means that there are developments for which the developer is required to provide bus transport for the first three years, as I mentioned earlier.

That fits in with the bus route development grant, which is a system that the previous Administration introduced and we continue to support that allows bus routes to be put in place

for developments at a point at which there is no commercial justification for a bus service. That means that, in effect, there is a subsidised bus service. However, that enables the early users in a development to choose public transport and not get established in other, less sustainable means of transport.

That is a key part of what we are trying to do. We are focusing on practical projects. The Scottish sustainable communities initiative, which has 11 exemplar projects that we kicked off in 2008, is an example of that. We will learn from those initiatives and ensure that they feed into future decision making.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I am interested in what is being done. In general, it is the right approach. It is fine to try to set up bus routes, but the feedback that we got from a member of the private sector was that there was real reluctance to have buses going into small communities. We were told that we wanted buses to go into “dead-end corrals”—I think that that was the phrase—which upset a number of us quite a bit because, if we want to encourage people to use public transport, the public transport needs to exist. How do you ensure that there is not only planning for bus routes but services that follow and serve the communities that they are planned to serve?

Stewart Stevenson: It is fair to say—I might look to Helen Wood on my left on this—that the design of housing estates with dead-end corrals is not now as favoured an option as previously. Without regard to the agenda that we are discussing today, design is moving on.

We recently held a series of charrettes. At the one in Aberdeen, which I attended, it was clear that we were starting to explore with communities a different approach to how we enable people to travel from their place of residence to their place of work. First, an essential part of good, modern planning is that we get those places closer together; equally important is that we do not design layouts in which all tributaries converge on a single road and direct people to one place, thereby creating a source of congestion and pollution.

We want a much more organic and diffuse set of options for pedestrians, cyclists and, where appropriate, cars, so that we create environments in which it is easy for buses to get to within a reasonable distance of every house and for buses to be visible from a huge proportion of the houses, so that people know that they are there.

It is up to us to ensure that we deliver the right quality of bus services, so that people who are not used even to the idea of travelling by bus, far less actually doing so, are converted, start to use the

bus and realise that it is a perfectly normal, practical and useful means of transport. That is why bus use needs to be integrated into the early design stages.

In essence, we want the commercial bus industry to take the lead in that regard, but we want developers to be a key part and to provide funding before bus routes become commercial. If we get it right, that is how it will work.

Cathy Peattie: I want to consider organisational structure. The committee is keen to explore strengths and weaknesses of the current transport and development system. If there are weaknesses, how can the situation be improved to ensure that we get better planning outcomes?

Stewart Stevenson: Last year, in particular, we identified that the regional transport partnerships were not being fully played into in that regard. It is the RTPs’ job to act at local level and within the national framework to identify how transport will work locally. We realised that there is a disconnect in that regard. Therefore, in December we had the chief planner write to every planning authority, in essence to say that they ought to be talking to the relevant RTP, even though RTPs are not statutory consultees, because the involvement of RTPs, which are members of community planning partnerships, will benefit decision making and accelerate things. The more people we can get together in a room at the outset, the more we can be sure that the planning process will run smoothly and deliver the outcomes that we want.

A good example is the environmentally challenging proposal that was mentioned—forgive me, I cannot remember whether it was a mining or quarrying proposal. Because the approach was to get everyone together in the room from the outset—the council, the community, the developer and others—the proposal was able to go through the planning system with the agreement of all parties in 15 months. Of course, such an approach might also quickly enable people to identify that a proposal was not a runner and could not be made to work, which would also be good news.

We are beginning to flush out examples of good practice, and the issue to do with involving RTPs demonstrates that we have not made best use of the structures that we have. After all, most planning decisions have significantly local effects and RTPs are much closer to what is going on than are the people at the other end of the table.

Cathy Peattie: I was going to ask you to say whether there is more capacity for joint working and to give me examples, but you have done that, which is helpful.

Stewart Stevenson: I will expand on that, if it is of use to the committee. We have realised that many of our agencies that get involved to varying

degrees in the planning system—I am thinking of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Transport Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and Historic Scotland in certain circumstances—have in the past worked entirely independently. We are now getting to the point where, if any of the agencies is to make a site visit, it covers the needs of all of them. We have seen the agencies, SEPA in particular, taking the lead in dramatically changing how they work, ceasing to be the owners of a set of traffic lights and, together with the other agencies, engaging and making positive suggestions about how it might be possible, with adaptation of the proposals at the earliest possible stage, to make acceptable changes subject to further workings.

In my earlier example about quarrying or mining—I forget which—I should have said that the developer started the process with six options and, at the first meeting, was able to identify that four of those options were not runners and so dropped them before a penny was spent on them. It is good planning practice to prevent people from wasting money on things that ain't going to go anywhere. There is plenty scope for collaboration.

We have also had good collaboration with people in the development industry, which has helped us with that industry. I will not quote the percentage because it would be a bit unfair at the moment, but a not insignificant percentage of planning applications simply cannot be accepted because they are incomplete. We are working with the planning industry to raise its game just as we in public service are trying to raise our game. Not everyone has been performing to the required standard, nor have they been working on an open-book basis with each other. We are beginning to see that change.

Cathy Peattie: On the point about the open-book basis, and given your responsibilities, what expectations do you have of planners and developers to consult the people who live in the areas that they want to develop? Do those people have any involvement or even participation in the planning processes that are going on around them?

Stewart Stevenson: It is clear to us that involvement and, more particularly, participation improve the quality of the outcomes and speed up the process, curiously enough. Of course, the need for up-front engagement on the part of the developer is now embedded in the legal requirements. In other words, the plans will not get through the system until the developer has done certain things. It is in the developer's interests to engage proactively because, if it does not, the development will not proceed into the planning system.

We want to build on the consensus that existed when the Planning etc (Scotland) Act 2006 went through on taking an approach that does the hard work before we get to the planning system. Equally, we are seeking to take a different approach to the development of local and strategic plans, and councils are trying to take an approach that engages people to a greater extent than perhaps happened in the past.

Let me sound a wee note of caution. It is genuinely difficult to get people to engage in the planning process strategically, whereas it is incredibly easy to get them involved when a specific proposal affects their interests. The difficulty is that that specific proposal is made in the context of strategic planning decisions that have been made without those people because it is difficult to get them to engage strategically. I would not like to suggest that we have managed to square that circle, but we are conscious of it and we will continue to try to do that, as will local councils. It is fundamentally difficult because people would rather watch the footie than go to a meeting about abstract planning that is not about a specific project.

Cathy Peattie: It is possible if it is done properly.

Stewart Stevenson: It is possible, but it is difficult.

The Convener: I suppose that I might be one of the few who would put football right at the bottom of his list of preferences.

Stewart Stevenson: Me too, convener. I have not watched a single match so far.

The Convener: Leaving aside the difficulty of getting the public and communities to participate in the planning system, the planning reforms brought that issue to the foreground and raised it as a challenge for the professionals who work in planning as something that had to be done better. To what extent does the idea of a culture change need to be brought into transport as well? There has been less emphasis on consultation within transport than there has been on consultation within planning as a result of the 2006 act.

14:30

Stewart Stevenson: I am not sure that I share your sense of transport not being engaged. We have just been through a substantial exercise with the strategic transport projects review, for which David Anderson and his team trudged many streets throughout Scotland to engage people. In the ferries review that we are currently undertaking, I think that we have had—subject to verification—more than 50 meetings even before we have brought anything forward. If I recall

correctly, we will have 30 meetings over the next eight weeks for the current phase of the ferries consultation in communities right across Scotland that are affected by ferries issues. I think that we undertake some pretty formidable engagement with communities and individuals throughout Scotland. For the regional transport strategies, which we approved in 2008, substantial consultation was carried out in each of the areas that they supported. That work was initiated by our predecessors in government and contributed to the value of those strategies.

We are seeking to do what we can. Are there areas in which we can improve? I am sure that you will be able to identify some, as I can.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I wonder whether we have got too many organisations involved in the process. We have the regional transport partnerships and the plans that involve councils, the Government and so on. Do you think that we have the right organisational structure to allow people access in the areas that are affected? At present, many of our councils are far too large to claim to be near the community. Coming from the north of Scotland, I find the argument somewhat remote from my experience.

Stewart Stevenson: Do not let me pretend to have the detailed understanding that a member from the Highlands and Islands will have of the issues. Some councils cover large areas, such as Highland Council. I am thinking of transport in the Highlands and Islands. Highland Council and Aberdeenshire Council work on a strongly devolved regional basis as they seek to get closer to the communities that they serve. My experience of Aberdeenshire is that that approach works relatively well—I do not say that because my political allies are in power there. Is it capable of further improvement? Even the area committees cover quite large areas of land, but one gets a sense that the councillors are not able to hide from their communities when they make decisions that affect them.

However, it would be unwise of us to imagine that there is not equally a role for shared services. Strathclyde partnership for transport, which has been around for a significant time, is an example of the value in having a delivery mechanism to which all the councils in the area are able to contribute. That is specific to Strathclyde, where there is a large commuting population that crosses local authority boundaries and it is clear that, because of the density of population and the travel-to-work patterns, transport cannot be considered in neat boxes that are limited to council areas. As for the Highlands—as elsewhere—our strategic transport projects review looked at national level at the main transport corridors, which complements the work that we expect to

see being done by regional transport partnerships and by the councils on how their transport needs feed into, complement and, in many cases, run at right angles to the major transport channels that we have identified.

Rob Gibson: Given that the RTPs and the strategic development planning authorities have to work together, is there a need for both of them? You mentioned Strathclyde and the large number of commuters in the areas around Glasgow. Are two organisations necessary there?

Stewart Stevenson: They do quite different jobs. The strategic planning authorities do not cover the whole of Scotland; they cover only 20 of the council areas.

Helen Wood (Scottish Government Directorate for the Built Environment): That is right—the strategic planning authorities cover four city regions.

Stewart Stevenson: Yes. We are talking about a pragmatic response—just as the establishment of SPT was—to needs that are particular to areas. Should SPAs be working closely with the RTPs? Yes, and we believe that that is beginning to happen, although the SPAs are relatively new, so we probably do not yet have a sense of how effective they will be.

RTPs and SPAs should work together. In a number of cases, they are co-located and are sharing administrative services, which is clearly a good thing from the point of view not just of operational efficiency and getting the biggest bang for the public buck but, more fundamentally, of ensuring that the co-ordination of policies and actions is appropriate. *[Interruption.]* It is time for the second Fisherman's Friend, convener.

The Convener: I understand. I will ask my question slowly. It is similar to Rob Gibson's but is more about the practicalities of producing land use plans—whether at local or strategic inter-council level—and transport plans. Are we thinking coherently about issues such as boundaries, timing and for how long plans will be in place? Do we need to square off some of those issues in order to make plans more effective and to boost the impact that public involvement in the process of developing them can have? The development of those different plans might be separate processes, but it might be more effective if people can be involved in and influence both in a coherent way at the same time.

Stewart Stevenson: An old project management saw is that plans are worth nothing until they degenerate into work. In other words, a plan is just that—a piece of paper. Of course we want to have pieces of paper that help the people who do the work to make decisions and to make progress more quickly, and which give the

communities that we serve some certainty about what the future holds.

The timelines for different plans will be different, as they should be. The strategic transport projects review looks a significant distance forward as one would expect, given that it deals with major infrastructure projects, and the national planning framework contains references to 2030 because major projects may have significant timelines. The first round of targets that we seek to set on climate change will take us to 2022, which is 12 years away. We need to give private sector industry certainty on what the policy will be over the long term because many investments may take 10 years to come to fruition.

As one moves down to smaller-scale projects that are progressed at local level, some of the issues that require a long-term view to be taken are attenuated and it is possible to take a shorter-term view. As one descends into greater levels of granularity, it is appropriate that the timescales become shorter, which is why although when work is done at any level of planning consideration should always be given to how a plan fits with surrounding plans, it is not appropriate that all plans should run to exactly the same timescales.

Those are all issues that we know are considered. Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council, which now work very closely on a wide range of issues, have been working together on planning issues involving communities. That is happening increasingly across Scotland so that people can be involved in strategic planning matters to the maximum extent. I think that we are seeing some of the progress for which we have been looking.

The Convener: Finally, can you say more about the relationships at professional level and at training level between the people who are involved in transport and planning, which have traditionally been seen as different disciplines? We have heard from some witnesses that things have improved a bit over the years and that there is a bit more in the way of shared training, shared experience and understanding of each other's disciplines, but that more could be done to strengthen that shared understanding.

Stewart Stevenson: We now have some planning professionals in Transport Scotland. One of the things that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth has done over the last while is visit every planning training school in Scotland to speak to young planners. I shall meet young planners before the summer recess, although I cannot pin down exactly when. David Anderson has just passed to me the new overview requirements and routes that are coming from the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation in conjunction with the Transport

Planning Society, in relation to training being developed for a transport planning professional qualification, which joins the two disciplines together. We are involved, and David Anderson is involved—wearing his other hat—in that work outside Transport Scotland. There is a coming together and a recognition that there are shared disciplines that can be applied to traditional planning but which are also required in transport planning.

The Convener: On the qualification that you mentioned, is that—

Stewart Stevenson: I invite David Anderson to speak on that, because he is better placed to do so.

David Anderson (Transport Scotland): The transport planning professional qualification has been developed specifically for transport planning professionals. The traditional route for many people who are involved in transportation planning is through becoming a civil engineer or a chartered engineer. The qualification was developed to recognise that a number of different skill sets are involved in transportation planning. For example, if someone's first degree was in geography, it would be very difficult for them to become a chartered engineer, so the qualification recognises a professional set of qualifications for transport planners.

The point is that one of the core competences that are required is that the people who put themselves forward for the qualification have—I quote—knowledge of

“Developing strategic and master plans for transport”,

so they need to understand the

“inter-relationships between transport, economic activity and land use ... priorities in the development of action plans”

and so forth. The qualification is including, in the key competences that a transport planner should have, much of what we have discussed through the course of the committee's inquiry.

The Convener: Will that have a specific focus on issues such as sustainable communities, the impact on society and local communities, and the need for lower-carbon transport systems?

David Anderson: I think that that is coming out of much of the thinking on the qualification. For example, two of the other bullet points within the requirement are

“the procedures for the formal adoption of transport plans prepared by regional and local authorities”

and the

“approval of master plans for specific sites”.

There are a number of other details below that, so it is bringing out the relationship between and importance of walking, cycling, parking, taxis and so forth. It is trying to bring that together to recognise that it is not just about cars and trains.

The Convener: As there are no further supplementaries on the questions about organisational structures, we will move on.

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): Earlier, the minister told us about some of the encouragement that the Scottish Government gives to the development industry in relation to applying for planning consents and using best practice in terms of use of active travel measures, public transport and the like. That often results in green travel plans being tied in to planning consents. Can you tell us how green travel plans are followed up and monitored?

David Anderson: The travel plan usually comes out as a planning condition attached to a consent. The monitoring and evaluation should therefore be set out in the travel plan, and it would be for the planning authority to follow that through in respect of whether it is being monitored and evaluated at that level.

Charlie Gordon: The committee has heard evidence that insufficient resources are available for effective enforcement. What is the minister's view on that?

14:45

Stewart Stevenson: We are in difficult times and we have been in difficulty for a while, because most people who graduate with planning qualifications have gone into the private sector, where the rewards have been greater and the work has been perceived as being more interesting. One purpose of Mr Swinney's visits to training schools has been to paint the picture of the changed way in which local authorities work, because they are changing. As a by-product of our removal of ring fencing, we have sought to make local authorities much more responsible for more of what they do. In planning, that makes the job much more interesting and exciting.

Planning authorities throughout Scotland have had great difficulty in filling positions. However, the reduction in planning applications has created a better balance between the number of people who are available and the work that requires to be done. A balance exists that enables the current volume of applications to be dealt with appropriately.

Of course, there is pressure on local authorities, as there is on all levels of government in the current economic circumstances. We seek to make the system more efficient, in addition to

making it more effective. I cited from a development the good practice of making processes work with less effort if they are approached differently. That does not involve bending the system or bypassing any rules. Simply having people in a room to collaborate early has value that improves efficiency as well as effectiveness. That is one reason why we will continue to promote such good practice.

Charlie Gordon: Should more work be done to establish where a gap exists, if it does? One can conceive of a scenario in which, two or three years after consent has been given, agreed green travel plans start to wither. For example, would a bus service that was regarded as marginal in commercial terms still be provided three or four years after consent was granted, if planning authorities did not have the resources to police that?

Stewart Stevenson: I understand why the question is being asked. The consent conditions that are being used apply typically for three years. Local authorities are close to the people whom they serve. The public duty in the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 makes clear the duty that is on local authorities. In our continuing dialogue with local authorities, we talk about planning issues to ensure that good practice on enforcement of consents is shared. However, the matter is for local authorities. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local authorities are engaged in the issue and realise that a challenge exists. We in central Government will seek to help them to the maximum extent that we can.

Helen Wood: The committee might be aware that the Atkins report contains a number of recommendations, which our Scottish Government transport colleagues are examining. It contains recommendations on how planning and transport services could do more to address climate change issues. The longer-term application and monitoring of transport plans are being considered in relation to that, so I imagine that more ideas about how to ensure that such plans are effective will be produced.

Stewart Stevenson: Alastair Mitchell has just reminded me of an obvious point, which is that it is open to local authorities to subsidise bus routes that they deem to be socially necessary.

Charlie Gordon: I will turn my question around somewhat and ask what happens when consents—I will call them more traditional consents—are granted for developments with which green travel plans are not associated. Do you agree that that type of consent can make the future installation and retrofitting of active travel measures in the built environment more difficult, if development takes place and the local road network gets busy with vehicular traffic?

Stewart Stevenson: It is self-evident that if the design and the consent regime are not right at the outset, then it is more difficult to adapt what has been implemented to modern needs by retrofitting.

Charlie Gordon: Is that scenario not still the norm for planning consents?

Stewart Stevenson: We are seeing a substantial change in local authorities' approach. Increasingly, travel plans are being requested of developers—development will be different in character. At the end of the day, it costs a local authority nothing to ask a developer to associate a travel plan with a development. I would find it slightly unusual if people were not to think in those terms. Local authorities are close to the people whom they serve. It is clear that one of the key determinants of whether a development will be successful is provision of appropriate travel arrangements. Increasingly, people realise that providing a car-only option will limit the commercial success of a development—that is a crude economic factor. Such developments are competing with other developments that the local population is likely to look on more favourably. I would be surprised if there were not a continued focus on measures such as travel plans as part of developments.

Charlie Gordon: How do you view the role and effectiveness of the school travel co-ordinators in taking forward the integrated approach that we have been discussing?

Stewart Stevenson: I suspect that you have found the small gap in what we might say. School travel co-ordinators have played an important role, but we understand that outcomes have varied among councils.

Charlie Gordon: Can the committee be sent information on the issue?

Stewart Stevenson: That is exactly what I was going to offer. I do not have with me the information to do justice in my answer to the integrity of the question, so I will write to the committee. If my response raises further questions, I will be happy to continue the interchange with the committee.

The Convener: On a couple of occasions, you mentioned the duties on public bodies under the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009. To a certain extent, that is a work in progress, because those duties have not been imposed. Can you say anything at this point about the way in which the public duties are expected to relate to issues of land use planning and transport?

Stewart Stevenson: The public duties will include land use planning and transport, but they will be much more broadly based. It is worth reminding ourselves that the scope of the public

duties is the same as the scope of the freedom of information regime. They affect not only the 32 local authorities, but some 7,500 bodies. It is a substantial effort to introduce duties that apply to all of those bodies. I have probably mentioned this before, but I remind the committee that the duties apply to, for example, each general practice and each dental practice. There are quite different needs that will be specific to each body that the provisions of the 2009 act cover.

The Convener: If I remember correctly, it is within the scope of the legislation for the Government to express differently the duties for different types of public body. What level of specificity and detail does the Government expect in terms of the public duties on major well-resourced bodies that have substantial planning responsibilities?

Stewart Stevenson: It would be fair to say that we have made a start through the revision of the Scottish planning policy, which we published this year. That is one of the early sights. We are still at the early stages. We have made some changes that relate to the built environment, but I am not yet in a position to give a full and comprehensive statement on that because we have a considerable amount of work still to do. What you said at the outset, convener, is broadly correct. Different public bodies can have specific responses. Indeed, we will be looking for that.

Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con): I was struck by an expression that you have used several times thus far, minister: local authorities are closest to the communities that they serve. In my experience, even the smallest authorities are easily capable of adopting the role of benevolent dictatorship when it comes to the communities that they allegedly serve.

Earlier, in speaking of insufficient resources, you said that a number of vacancies might not be filled. Have you surveyed comparative performance and enforcement? Is this one of those things that is often said but turns out to be an unsubstantiated anecdotal assertion, or is there evidence that authorities that put a great deal more resource into enforcing things perform significantly differently to those that are unable to fill all existing vacancies?

Stewart Stevenson: I would not want immediately to make a link between vacancies and performance. It is clear in a number of policy areas that councils and Government departments with comparable resources deliver quite different qualities of outcome simply because they take different approaches and have a different focus on things. There is not necessarily a relationship between those two things; at times, quite small resources can deliver quite spectacular outcomes.

That said, where there are vacancies, it is clear that that has the potential to inhibit the implementation of policies such as enforcement. Is there a quantitative answer to the question? The answer is no; I am not aware of one. Councils are, of course, audited regularly. An audit is not just someone going over the financial figures to see whether they add up; performance is also assessed.

There is also the concordat that individual councils sign with the Government. I have always characterised the concordat not as an agreement between two levels of government but as a shared commitment by both of us to the people whom we serve. We are seeing a focus on improving the quality of the services that we deliver, including the issue that is under discussion, which the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities also views as an issue. We are not in the business of telling local government how to do things. Councils are responsible for their duties and take an interest in this subject.

For the moment, I am not 100 per cent sure that I can say specifically what the response to the question is, other than to say that the matter has been discussed on a number of occasions in my presence.

Jackson Carlaw: That probably leads us on to the next area of questioning.

The Convener: If there are no further questions on development management, we will move on to the next area of questioning.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): As Jackson Carlaw said, we have been talking about working together in partnership and with shared commitment. I have questions on leadership. Several witnesses, including those from Living Streets Scotland and Planning Aid for Scotland, stressed the importance of strong national political leadership as well as strong local political leadership in securing the development of sustainable communities and transport networks. That led me to wonder whether the difference is leadership. What is the role of the Scottish Government in providing such leadership?

15:00

Stewart Stevenson: As I said, a couple of times a year, on a regular programmed basis, we meet councils' planning professionals—this morning's meeting was not one of those meetings—and all those who are engaged in the planning system. I think that we have stepped up the pace in exercising leadership, and we have seen many benefits derive from that. However, leadership is, of course, most certainly not about Government seeking to bully the planning professionals and the planning services that are a

part of local authorities, because planning is essentially a local government service. We have sought to ensure that our Government agencies work in a different and more effective way with those planning authorities. We have also sought to assist local authorities and COSLA in their exercise of leadership, because COSLA is interested in ensuring that experiences—good and bad—are shared across councils. Leadership can be exercised at lots of different levels; this is not a hierarchy but a heterarchy.

Marlyn Glen: I was going to ask about the role of local government leadership and about leadership at different levels. In addition, we must see the difference between leadership and responsibility. Leadership is really important. The role of the Scottish Government in providing leadership is key when we are talking about encouraging sustainable communities and not just any kind of development.

Stewart Stevenson: Sure, but we should not imagine that there were no examples of good practice on sustainable communities in local authorities before the Government came along and told them that they should be doing it. Local authorities are perfectly capable of working that out for themselves, and many have done so over extended periods. It is always easy to talk about our own local areas, but the planning rules on development in the county of Aberdeenshire, which are quite long standing, are related to sustainability. I could ask a committee member about this, but I believe that that has been the case for at least 10 years—I am getting a nod of agreement from Alison McInnes. It is perfectly possible for leadership to be exercised at any level in the system.

Marlyn Glen: Absolutely. I am trying to steer away, though, from the danger of talking about local communities in Aberdeenshire and what people there think about planning—I do not want to go there at all. However, I still think that the role of the Scottish Government as leader has not been addressed. You have moved on, though, to the roles of local government, developers and communities in developing sustainable communities and transport networks, so where do you see all those fitting in?

Stewart Stevenson: Everybody has a role to play. Many developers have sought to pursue developments that they brand as ecovillages or ecodevelopments because that responds to market needs. Of course, does that truly meet our long-term sustainable requirements? In some cases, it most certainly does not; in other cases, it is perhaps simply a tactical response to local circumstances.

We are seeing the introduction of service improvement plans in various bodies throughout

the public services. The key agencies—for example, Transport Scotland—are working and engaging quite differently than previously. Innovative design often comes from the private sector, and innovative planning ideas may come from the public sector, so everybody has a role to play.

Just to say what a heterarchy is: in my view, it is an inter-operating network of people with individual roles, and if any one of them is removed, the whole system does not work properly, so everybody involved is important for successful delivery and everybody has a role, whether small or large. We all depend on each other for good practice, so we have a duty to encourage and show each other what can be done better and what is being done well so that it can be copied.

Marlyn Glen: I will stick doggedly to the idea of leadership. Does Transport Scotland, which the minister has referred to quite a lot, have a leadership role?

Stewart Stevenson: Perhaps I have not fully understood the point that the member seeks to develop. I am seeking to assert that every part of the system needs to exercise leadership in carrying out its responsibilities, and I believe that that is happening. For example, when it was recognised that the 4,000-house development that I referred to—I will not be more geographically specific than that—would not proceed if the traditional section 75 approach was taken, whereby the developer is required to provide money up front for local transport infrastructure improvements, Transport Scotland was proactive in exercising a leadership role by recognising that another way would need to be found. After approaching the local council and gaining the agreement of that local partner, Transport Scotland approached the developer to say, “Look, we recognise the difficulties that you are having in taking forward this major development that will be of value to the community, so here is a way forward.” At the outset, a proposal was suggested only in outline, as there is no point in developing an idea to a final proposal if people are not going to run with it. I cite that just as an example.

Having an abstract idea of leadership is great, but that needs to translate into real actions on the ground, of which we can almost certainly find examples already. However, it is just possible that the member and I have a different view of what leadership means, so it would be helpful if she helped the minister if he is not quite getting it.

Marlyn Glen: No, I think that my question has been answered. Personally, I am used to working in a collegiate way with people, but I also understand that leadership is needed within that.

Let me move on. Mention has been made of market needs. What balance should be struck between economic development and the creation of sustainable communities and transport networks?

Stewart Stevenson: In a sense, the issue is quite straightforward. I think that we will increasingly see that, if a development is not sustainable, the value that it is possible to extract from investment in it will be diminished. Increasingly, the market will demand—and is demanding—sustainable solutions. In the choices that they make, people are looking for things that are more environmentally sustainable.

I have argued for some while—without success thus far, I have to say—that, when banks lend money to a householder for a mortgage, they should look at the sustainability of the property against which the money is secured, because a greener and more energy-efficient property will sustain more value in the longer term. Therefore, the banks should have a think about how they respond to that.

Generally, we are already in a position in which environmentally sustainable investments create longer-term value for the investor, so good behaviours are, in a sense, being driven by the environmental agenda. For sure, that is not the case universally yet, but we are increasingly seeing early evidence that that might be happening.

The Convener: Let me tease out that point a little bit more. It is certainly possible to make a market-based argument—which I might agree with, to a greater or lesser extent—that, once the price includes a cost for all the factors that once were called externalities, problems such as environmental impact and pollution will be worked out of the system because people will have incentives to do things differently. However, are we not a very long way from being in that situation? Surely, when the market conditions do not exist, we cannot just assume that the banks will consider such matters and thereby absolve ourselves of responsibility.

Stewart Stevenson: May I take a different view, at least in one narrow sense? It has become clear in the past five years that when people purchase private cars, they increasingly focus—for two reasons; let us accept that—on the economy of the car. People are now much more disposed to buy more economical cars rather than less economical cars. Objectively, the cost of fuel in terms of earnings is not substantially different from what it was five years ago, but people think much more about the environmental impact of their cars, so there has been a significant shift towards people buying more economical cars. That uprating of environmental considerations in

people's buying decisions is a pure shift in their thinking.

Now, is there adequate follow-through on that? Unfortunately, there is not. To an unhelpful extent, having got the more economical car and concluded that it is cheaper to run it, people are driving more miles. We are going to have to work on that behaviour. Nonetheless, the change in buying behaviour in that area of personal life is a clear indication that people are getting some of the agenda in some circumstances. Market-driven behaviour changes are taking place.

The Convener: Perhaps we can pursue the question of specific car models another time. Some people are making their decisions on that basis, but others are driving Chelsea tractors well outside Chelsea, are they not?

Stewart Stevenson: On the contrary, Hummer has ceased production because demand for its vehicles has vanished in the United States. The production line has closed—

The Convener: I am not talking about the United States. I am talking about the south side of Glasgow.

Stewart Stevenson: I was going to make the point that the proportion of economical cars that are registered—cars with low CO₂ output—is rising compared with the uneconomical vehicles that you mentioned.

The Convener: The wider point that we are looking at is the balance between economic factors and the paper idea—the instinctive idea at a personal level, or the policy-based idea at a local authority or transport planning level—of sustainable communities and transport systems. The tension between the two can operate at an individual level for each of us as well as at a government level and a policy level. Does not the fact that the tension has come out even in some of our evidence sessions for this inquiry demonstrate that, to an extent, the idea of what is sustainable has not been understood? If we are trying to trade off one factor against the other—the economic against the environmental and social—we have misunderstood what sustainability is about, because it is about the bit in the middle that serves all those agendas.

Stewart Stevenson: I am not quite sure what the question is, convener.

The Convener: Some people are saying that particular developments are justified even though they depart from the plan and will have a harmful impact on the transport system through increasing carbon emissions or private car use. The fact that they are justified on the basis of economic factors suggests that the idea that sustainable communities serve economic needs as well as

social and environmental needs has not been understood at some level.

Stewart Stevenson: All developments have a negative carbon impact at the outset. The important point in evaluating the appropriate thing to do with developments is to consider the carbon cost—there always is one; I cannot imagine a development without a carbon cost—and ask what the carbon return will be, when it will come, and when the development will go into carbon profit. Ultimately, we can and perhaps should compare doing something with not doing it at all. In other words, the status quo is always part of the competition. However, the status quo is not a static thing. For example, huge amounts of our housing stock are relatively energy inefficient and hence carbon consumptive. It is therefore entirely worth while to say that we should replace old housing stock that is in poor condition with new, much more environmentally friendly housing stock, even though a carbon cost is associated with doing that.

As we publish the carbon impacts of Government spending, I think that carbon considerations will increasingly form a key part of decision making. That is one aspect of sustainability. Sustainability is, of course, about whether investment will continue and endure, and it has economic as well as environmental aspects.

15:15

The Convener: It also has social impacts.

Stewart Stevenson: Indeed. That is correct.

The Convener: So, in short, you would not have any concerns if you heard an argument that it was justified for a development to depart from the sustainability agenda for economic reasons.

Stewart Stevenson: No development will go ahead if it is not sustainable. If a development is going to truncate after four, five or six years, it will not go ahead anyway.

The Convener: I am slightly taken aback by that. You seem to be contradicting what you said at the beginning of the discussion. You recognised that the change towards a sustainable approach to development and development planning has made some progress, but there is still a considerable way to go. You now seem to be saying that no unsustainable developments should take place.

Stewart Stevenson: You highlighted the fact that sustainability has economic, environmental and social aspects. On developments not fulfilling sustainability requirements, developments ultimately tend to have long-run returns, and I would find it rather bizarre if a developer said, "I'm setting out to lose my investment by going forward with something that is not sustainable."

The Convener: Indeed. That is because huge emphasis is often placed on the economic aspects. Traditionally, throughout most of the past century, the social and environmental aspects have been less significant in the developed west. The sustainability agenda is about trying to achieve a balance between those aspects.

Stewart Stevenson: Yes.

The Convener: We are trying to move away from unsustainable developments to sustainable developments, but we have not got there yet.

Stewart Stevenson: I do not think that unsustainable development happens. That is the point. Nobody would do unsustainable developments. There are economic, environmental and social aspects. If a development does not meet a social need, for example, it will fail anyway. Increasingly, the need for environmentally sustainable developments is part of the social need.

The Convener: I am slightly gobsmacked by the idea that no unsustainable development ever happens.

Stewart Stevenson: Tell me one.

The Convener: The committee has heard a number of specific examples, but I do not particularly want to emphasise one development over another. We could be here all day. One category is developments that do not have enough sustainable travel access. A development can have a car park at the front. If a person wants to walk or get a bus to it, they must walk through that car park, whereas drivers can drive right up to it. We have seen developments over many years that have been viable in business terms, but which have not been sustainable holistically and have caused social and environmental harm. Surely if the Government means something different by “sustainable economic growth” than its predecessor meant by “economic growth”, we are talking about a change away from a previous form of business as usual.

Stewart Stevenson: Yes, of course.

The Convener: Okay. I have only one further question. Does any other member want to try to make sense of what has been said?

Jackson Carlaw: I might not want to try to make sense of it, but there is certainly a point that I want to make. I am sorry, but I am still recovering. I must thank the minister for his assistance with my education. Until now, I thought that a heterarchy was something that I had seen in “Jason and the Argonauts” when I was a schoolboy.

I want to pursue the points that Marlyn Glen raised about leadership. I have only just joined the

committee. I sat in on the previous evidence session, when we tried to establish why it was that even with all the regulations and weapons—for want of a better word—that are at the disposal of those who are involved in planning, the disconnect still exists. I cannot remember who it was, but one individual made particular reference to the role of individual leadership and drew a relationship between those two well-known soul mates Boris Johnson and Ken Livingstone, who brought particular leadership to certain issues in London. That individual also seemed to think that in major cities on the continent, quite often the same individuals provide leadership when it comes to constructing, planning and drawing together all these issues.

Do you feel that, given the way that we are constructed, the right authority and mandate exists among individuals in larger local authorities that serve major conurbations to bring everything together and give it the oomph that is needed? Alternatively, do all the other competing factors mean that planning is just one of many things, and therefore it struggles at times to surface, despite all the legislation that is at our disposal?

Stewart Stevenson: The member asks a number of different things. One thing that I suspect that he is asking is whether planning is high enough up the hierarchy in local authorities. I do not think that I can answer that question adequately, to be honest. However, it is clearly pretty central in a number of authorities. Equally, if we are to believe some of the informal feedback that I receive, it seems that planning accounts for a substantial amount of the correspondence that certain chief executives get. I suspect that there will not be many authorities in which planning is out of sight of the formal leadership, if only to—

Jackson Carlaw: But is that to escape responsibility rather than to assume responsibility?

Stewart Stevenson: I was going to move on to that point. At the very least as a hygiene factor—in other words, people saying, “I don’t want the hassle”—I suspect that chief executives are quite engaged in the subject. There are certainly chief executives who are exercising true leadership by seeing planning as key. Planning is for a purpose; it is not simply about people sitting passively, waiting at the counter for somebody to come along with a plan, to which they say “yes” or “no”. Increasingly, we are seeking from the planning system proactive engagement to create the economic, social and environmental opportunities that are appropriate for different areas and to come up with plans that show the outside world the opportunities that exist within a council area. That kind of leadership is helpful.

Are there opportunities for somebody to assume leadership at different levels in the organisation? I

think that some parts of local authorities are more open to that and to saying, “Jimmy’s really doing well. Let’s let him run with this a bit.” Alternatively, are people being whipped in? I think that there is variable performance on that. Is there an objective measurement that would back up the feeling that I get from feedback? No, there is not. I do not think that I can suggest adequately that that is the case.

The Convener: I have one final question. You talked a bit about the national planning framework and the latest Scottish planning policy, which are established at national level, but you then said that local authorities have a significant amount of leeway and freedom to interpret and implement those how they wish—they can in some circumstances justify departing from them. To what extent does such leeway exist? At what point would the Scottish Government say, “You’re not having regard to the Scottish planning policy. You’re actually ignoring it completely”? At what point would the Scottish Government step in and say that such an approach was unacceptable?

Stewart Stevenson: I will segment my answer. First, the plans that strategic planning authorities and local authorities produce have to be consistent with the established hierarchy of plans, with the national planning framework at the top. Given the sign-off processes that are involved, we should manage to achieve consistency at that planning level.

The decisions that individual councils make are made within the context of that hierarchy of plans and of guidance that is provided. Guidance is precisely that—it is guidance, not a set of inflexible rules that may not be deviated from. Where there is deviation from councils’ own guidance, our guidance or our plans, we expect to be given an explanation of why that is the case.

When something is a matter of national significance, the Government has the option to call in decisions. However, that is a comparatively rare thing to do. The directorate for the built environment has a significant liaison role with local authorities, and that is the mechanism through which we seek to ensure that we do not have extremely eccentric decision making. Some eccentric decision making—in other words, decision making that is slightly off centre—is not a bad thing, because the rules, guidance and plans evolve over time in any case and, clearly, decisions are sometimes made in anticipation of what is going to be in the next plan.

When decisions are made that are at variance, the key thing is to ensure that we have adequate explanations that are open to scrutiny by the public that the planning authority serves. Certainly, when I make planning decisions, which I do from time to time, I have to explain to the system why I

have made them. It is important that that explanation can stand up to scrutiny.

The Convener: I am interested in what happens with developments that are not of national significance but are of a much smaller scale and are happening across the country. Such developments are necessary if we are to deliver a transformation to a low-carbon transport system, develop sustainable communities and comply with future duties that public bodies will have under the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009. Some people will understand the necessity of such developments and others will not. At what point would the Government trigger an assessment of a planning authority under the Planning etc (Scotland) Act 2006? Is that an appropriate mechanism?

Stewart Stevenson: We would not do so.

The Convener: Under no circumstances?

Stewart Stevenson: Where illegality is present, where national issues are associated with the matter, we would do so. Otherwise, it is for local authorities to take local decisions.

The Convener: So, even if the Government were concerned that Scottish planning policy were being completely ignored—

Stewart Stevenson: It is not an issue of whether Government is concerned; it is an issue of whether the law is being broken. The planning authorities have the legal powers to make planning decisions. They do that in the context of a set of legal constraints, an example of which is the set of public duties in the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009. Clearly, legal imprimaturs cover the decision-making process. The Government is not the appeal court, in that sense.

The Convener: So, if a local authority were simply ignoring Scottish planning policy—I am not suggesting that that is happening at the moment—the Government could do nothing.

Helen Wood: The focus of the Scottish Government’s methods, in line with the modernised planning system, is on the development plan preparation process, and ensuring that that is undertaken in a way that reflects the national planning framework and Scottish planning policy. That is largely where the liaison role that the minister has referred to is focused. We work closely with strategic development planning authorities as they prepare their plans, and provide a lot of input to that process in terms of how well that fits with national policy.

As the minister pointed out, policy is policy, and the planning authorities can present arguments for why they are taking certain approaches. However, our impetus is towards encouraging them to

ensure that their development plans are in line with national policy.

The Convener: If there are no more questions, I thank the minister and his colleagues for taking the time to speak to the committee. We will publish our report in due course and we look forward to receiving your response to it.

Stewart Stevenson: There is one matter on which we will provide you with information in writing.

The Convener: That will be much appreciated. We move into private for the remaining agenda item.

15:30

Meeting continued in private until 15:51.

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