



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

REFERENDUM (SCOTLAND) BILL COMMITTEE

Thursday 21 February 2013

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REFERENDUM (SCOTLAND) BILL COMMITTEE
4th Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

*Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP)

*Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)

*Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)

*Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con)

*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

*Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)

*Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP)

*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Gordon Blair (West Lothian Council and the Society of Local Authority Lawyers and Administrators in Scotland)

Stephen Carse (Isle of Man Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Andrew Mylne

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Referendum (Scotland) Bill Committee

Thursday 21 February 2013

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:31]

Proposed Referendum Franchise Bill

The Convener (Bruce Crawford): Good morning. Welcome to the fourth meeting in 2013 of the Referendum (Scotland) Bill Committee. Our first piece of work is a discussion with Stephen Carse, who is the registration officer of the Isle of Man Government.

Welcome, Stephen. Thank you for agreeing to speak to us. Do you want to start by making a general statement about what you do?

Stephen Carse (Isle of Man Government): Thank you for the invitation. I hope that what I have to say will be of use to you in your deliberations.

I am the acting registration officer for the Isle of Man Government and I have undertaken that role since January 1989, so I have 24 years' experience behind me. The responsibility is not my major role in the Government. I act as the Government's economic adviser and I inherited the role of registration officer when I took up that post in 1989.

The responsibilities of the registration officer are dealt with in the Isle of Man under the Registration of Electors Act 2006. My duties are concerned with the preparation, maintenance and revision of the register of electors. Attendant duties involve distributing the register, hearing appeals, objections and so on and, ultimately, making the final revisions to the register.

To help me to do that, I have within my division, which is part of the Government Treasury, four professionals and seven support staff, who help the professionals in their everyday duties. They are mainly responsible for the compilation and administration of the electoral register.

We build up the register from the local electricity company's database, which has comprehensive coverage of all the properties on the island. Eligibility for registration is fairly straightforward. You have to have lived on the island for more than a year and you have to be over the age of 15. We register on a household basis. We have yet to fully consider individual registration, although it has been spoken about politically.

We produce revisions to the register every quarter. We have 24 elected members across 15 constituencies, so in some of those constituencies there is more than one representative.

The Convener: Thank you. That was a good overview. What has been your experience of the process of lowering the voting age to 16 on the Isle of Man? If you can provide a general overview, that would be helpful.

Stephen Carse: A combination of changes happened in 2005 and 2006. Commencing in December 2005, the Registration of Electors Bill was going through the houses and, at the same time, the Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill was going through. We also had an internal matter, which was the fact that our mainframe computer system, which handled our registration and registers, was about to be dismantled. That was due to happen by May 2006. We were not going to lose the database of names and households and so on, although we found that not all the details on existing registers could be readily transferred over to the new software that we had to use in the event of the loss of the mainframe. We had three situations arising that we needed to be aware of from an administrative perspective.

When the Registration of Electors Bill began its passage in 2005, it was essentially going to do one thing, which was to move us on to a rolling register basis. Until then, on 1 September every year we produced an annual register, which could not be changed. That meant that people who would otherwise be eligible to vote were being disenfranchised because of the long lead-in and the fact that a register lasted for one year.

The main purpose of the Registration of Electors Bill was to enable me, as registration officer, henceforth to produce quarterly revisions to the registers. At the second reading of the bill, which I think was in February 2006, a member successfully moved an amendment to lower the voting age from 18 to 16. That amendment was accepted—I think that 19 were in favour and four were against. In May, that provision was included in the Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill, which, as I said, was going through simultaneously. As was necessary, the age of 16 was entered in those two important pieces of legislation.

Both bills completed their passage in March 2006, received royal assent on 11 July and were accepted in our Parliament, Tynwald, on 12 July 2006.

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): Good morning, Mr Carse.

Stephen Carse: Good morning.

Annabel Goldie: I am interested in the period between when the law changed and the first election, which I think was November 2006. Do I understand from what you were saying that everybody knew from about February 2006 that the voting age was going to be reduced?

Stephen Carse: Yes. The election date was 23 November 2006. There was always a strong possibility that, subsequent to royal assent, we would be dealing with a register that would have to include 16 and 17-year-olds.

Annabel Goldie: Did that mean that you were able to prepare in advance? I think that the forms went out in January, February and March 2006.

Stephen Carse: Yes. We were following the normal procedure, which was to canvass the population from January onwards. We were compiling the register on the traditional basis, while fully expecting royal assent to be given in July so that we could include the 16 and 17-year-olds, too. We were operating on the basis that the rolling register would be accepted and brought in and that we would have to compile a rolling register.

Annabel Goldie: Am I correct in saying that the Isle of Man's population is around 84,000?

Stephen Carse: Yes—it is 84,000.

Annabel Goldie: I know that there was concern about disenfranchisement and that an inquiry was held in the Tynwald about that. What did that inquiry discover?

Stephen Carse: We were about to lose key details on the register's database. In effect, we had to start afresh when compiling the register in 2006. Previous registers included an accumulation of details, such as the name of individuals who were on the registers, but who might have left the island or who had certainly not registered for a couple of years. That inevitably meant that there would be fewer numbers on the new registers than there were previously. We were, if you like, shaking out those who were no longer living on the island or who had no apparent interest in renewing their inclusion on the registers.

Annabel Goldie: At the end of the day, was there a significant number of people who were entitled to vote but ended up not voting?

Stephen Carse: The number of people who were entitled to vote and did vote was probably unchanged. However, we were in the process of eliminating from the new registers those who were not eligible because they had left the island, those who might have registered sometime in the distant past but who had refused the opportunity to renew that enlistment in subsequent years and those who did not bother to register when we opened up the new registers in 2006.

Annabel Goldie: You approximately had the period between February 2006 and November 2006 to get the register fit for purpose. Was that enough time? Were you under pressure?

Stephen Carse: We are always under pressure at the time of a general election. Things are much more relaxed in the intervening five years but, when it comes to a general election, naturally, political and public interest is a lot more focused on the accuracy and the size of the register that we have compiled. We did not need any extra staff; as I recall, there was a bit more overtime in the peak months. We fared comfortably.

There was a degree of public misunderstanding about why the numbers had gone down. The inquiry to which you referred at the outset of your questioning, which was undertaken by Mr John Wright, a local advocate, was initiated partly because of that less than full understanding of why the numbers were down. The initial reaction was that that was because the administration had not been correct—that we were not performing our task, if you like.

The report concluded that, in fact, we were fully up to the task and that the reasons why the numbers were down were simply that we had eliminated all those who had left the island and that we were excluding those who had not bothered to respond to the latest request.

09:45

James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab): You outlined in your opening statement the way that the process was changed for those who were over 15 so that they could be on the register and therefore entitled to vote. Was there anything in the process that allowed those who were 15 and approaching their 16th birthday to pre-register?

Stephen Carse: Yes. We have a system whereby anyone who is approaching the voting age can be put on the register. Obviously, prior to 2006, that was 18. We have always had what we call attainers, or those who are coming up to the eligible age. We put them on the register, and alongside their name and address we have the date at which they will attain voting age. Therefore, in the context that we are discussing, it did not matter if someone was not 16 because, if they were coming up to that age, they could complete the registration form—in practice, they would add their name to the household registration form—and they would subsequently be entered on the register.

James Kelly: Were the names of 15-year-olds who registered in that way published on the register while they were still 15, or were they kept as a separate list?

Stephen Carse: They were published on the register, as long as they were eligible to vote in the subsequent quarter. We should bear in mind that, at the same time, we were adapting from a once-a-year register to a quarterly one. Therefore, if someone was aged 14 when they sent in the application, we would not add their name to the register. We added those who were close to becoming 16.

James Kelly: Did that lead to any data protection or child protection issues, bearing in mind that you were publishing the names of 15-year-olds in a public document?

Stephen Carse: It did not lead to any data protection concerns. The issue was discussed during the passage of the bill, particularly in the upper house—the Legislative Council—where concerns were expressed in respect of human rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

James Kelly: Ultimately, what view was taken on that when the legislation was passed?

Stephen Carse: The concerns were merely noted. Certainly, when the legislation was introduced, there was no provision for the creation of a side register, as I understand is to happen in Scotland, and there were no moves to remove the identification of such individuals.

James Kelly: That is interesting. You outlined at the start that you used the electricity company's database to identify households in your canvass. Did you use anything specifically to identify 16 and 17-year-olds, or those approaching 16, so that they could be targeted?

Stephen Carse: Are you asking about how we could get 16 and 17-year-olds interested enough to register?

James Kelly: Yes. There was a new element to the franchise. Your existing processes simply identified households, so you did not know specifically about the 15, 16 and 17-year-olds who were out there. Did you have a mechanism for identifying that group and making a particular appeal to get them on to the register?

Stephen Carse: No. Our data protection officer was concerned that we did not use any existing information, be it school rolls or information from other Government departments, so we were unable to match records in that way. All that we could do was to address the issue in a more general sense and try to raise the media profile of the matter. To do that, we took out public notices and we had a stream of interviews and related articles in the press.

We also went to the schools and we put posters in the secondary schools. Some of the schools sent out registration forms along with GCSE

results, which was an interesting initiative. We did as much as we could to raise the profile of the matter, but royal assent was not given until 12 July, so the time that we had to raise awareness and interest was relatively restricted. That was shown by the relatively small numbers who registered in 2006 compared with the numbers that we have now.

James Kelly: What were the numbers, if you have them to hand?

Stephen Carse: I have them in front of me. We also had a population census in 2006, which was also run out of my office. The census results show that the maximum number of 16 and 17-year-olds who would have been eligible was 2,001. I say "maximum" because some of them would not have lived here for the required 12 months. All that I have given you there is the total number of 16 and 17-year-olds at the time.

James Kelly: Do you know how many of the 2,001 registered?

Stephen Carse: Yes. It was 689, which is 34.4 per cent. Of those, 397 voted, so out of the 689 who registered the turnout was 57.6 per cent.

James Kelly: Thank you.

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Good morning, Mr Carse. I note from the briefing that our clerks have helpfully provided us with that, moving on towards the 2011 election, further initiatives were undertaken to encourage 16 and 17-year-olds to register as voters and, I presume, to encourage a higher turnout. I understand that you organised some informal information sessions called "vote right", which were held at the island's youth cafe in Douglas. Will you explain what form those sessions took? Was there a direct correlation with an increase in registrations following those information and awareness initiatives?

Stephen Carse: I am not particularly familiar with that initiative and I did not attend the sessions, but a whole stream of things went on in the build-up to the 2011 general election. You should bear it in mind that we had had five years of a drip-drip effect on awareness and so on.

The most impressive thing that we did, which would undoubtedly have helped registration rates and indeed turnout on the day, was the production of a DVD and video by the students at a local college. It was based on something that a Lancashire council had produced—I think that it was Preston City Council. We pretty much copied that. The film was put on monitors at every secondary school, it was put on YouTube, it was referred to on and accessible through Twitter, and it was placed on a couple of local websites,

manx.net and manxtube.com, which are popular with local teenagers.

We just intensified the whole thing. We did more interviews with the press than we did in 2006 and there was more coverage on radio. A whole host of things were done in 2011, and that was reflected in the far better figures for that year. If you wish me to give you those figures, I can read them out.

Annabelle Ewing: Yes, please—that would be helpful.

Stephen Carse: The maximum number who were eligible was 2,052, of whom 1,234 registered. That is 60.1 per cent. Of those, 668 voted. That turnout rate was 54.1 per cent. That was lower than in 2006, which is interesting. We got more people on to the registers with the eligibility to vote, but marginally fewer people turned out on the day. I suspect that, in the intervening years, the heads of household started to include 16 and 17-year-olds on their returns, but we perhaps did not raise the propensity to vote as much as we might have liked.

Annabelle Ewing: That was presumably something to do with the political debate—who knows? I guess that that is an imponderable. It is interesting to note the increased registration figure, taking into account what I think was an increased level of information awareness activities, judging from what you have been saying. We can perhaps take that on board here in Scotland from the outset. It would be helpful if, in due course, you could provide our clerks with a link to your video. I am sure that we would be interested to see it.

I have a further general question about the principle of lowering the voting age. Is there any serious clamouring in the Isle of Man to reverse the decision of 2006 to lower the voting age to include 16 and 17-year-olds—in other words, to increase the minimum voting age to 18 again?

Stephen Carse: I am certainly not aware of any moves, politically, to do that. When the bill was going through, there was an overwhelming majority in passing the amendment clauses. I do not think that there is any such demand. As far as public perception and opinion were concerned, there was a great deal of scepticism initially. Now, following the change that happened seven years ago, there is far greater acceptance. The one-word answer to your question is no.

The Convener: Before we have Patrick Harvie's question, could you give us the overall turnout figures for the 2011 election, so that we can compare those with the figures for 16 and 17-year-olds? That would be helpful, as it would give us a benchmark.

Stephen Carse: The total number registered in 2006 was about 52,000. By 2011, it was up to 58,000. An element of that 58,000 would have come from the fact that we were still leaving people on the registers, even if they had not responded to the previous canvassing requests. Nevertheless, the population expanded between 2006 and 2011, so we would have naturally expected an increase.

Unfortunately, I did not bring with me the turnout rates for the whole of the population in 2006 and 2011, but I can readily supply that information.

The Convener: No worries—we can get that from you later.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I want to follow on from Annabelle Ewing's questions about registration and participation. In Scotland, registration takes place at local government level, while the Electoral Commission neutrally promotes awareness of and participation in the election nationally, and the candidates and political parties obviously promote participation in their favour. In your jurisdiction, is there a separate function for the promotion of participation similar to that of the Electoral Commission here? To what extent was there a barrier to schools and colleges facilitating not only the promotion of registration but the promotion of participation, for example with candidates appearing on a neutral basis at panel sessions with young people to encourage them to participate?

10:00

Stephen Carse: We have no links with the Electoral Commission, so pretty much all the efforts fall at the door of my section, at least with respect to registration, although not so much with respect to the turnout. We facilitate things and we might participate in events, but my particular responsibility is to focus on the process rather than on the political dimension of getting people, particularly youngsters, interested in using their vote.

Various things went on to raise awareness—someone alluded to cafe meetings and so on for the youngsters. We also have what is called a junior Tynwald debate—Tynwald, as you will be aware, is our Parliament. In July 2011, such a debate was specifically convened that raised a great deal of interest. In those sessions, youngsters come in and take the places of the members of the House of Keys—the political representatives. They go through the formal procedures of a typical day in Tynwald and ask each other questions about various topics. That debate was useful and was covered extensively by the media. I am sure that it helped to raise interest in the upcoming general elections, which had been

moved forward to September 2011. A whole host of things went on. My role in the background was just to facilitate and raise awareness of registration issues.

Patrick Harvie: Is there a barrier—legally or in any other sense—to schools facilitating the involvement of candidates in promoting registration or participation?

Stephen Carse: Not as far as I am aware. I can recall discussing whether we—the group of officers—wished to convene such things in school premises and we were not told that we could not.

Patrick Harvie: Thank you.

Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP): To go back to the 2006 process, did you undertake any staff training, in particular for staff who were working at polling stations as well as for other staff who were involved in the election process, in anticipation of their perhaps having to deal with younger voters—16 or 17-year olds—who were voting for the first time? If so, what training did you undertake? Are you aware of any problems that occurred at polling stations with the process of young voters coming to vote for the first time?

Stephen Carse: Our duties start and finish with registration, and we are not involved on the day at the polling stations or whatever. On the day of the election, we man the phones in case someone at a polling station complains that they should be on the register and that they have turned up to vote but they are being prevented from doing so because their name does not appear on the register. We are involved in that respect on the day, but not otherwise. We do not have a physical presence at the polling stations. Our duties are more or less over by the time that we produce the register that will apply to the election.

Stewart Maxwell: Given that you man the phones in case problems arise, are you aware of any problems that arose with 16 and 17-year-olds turning up to vote who did not understand that they had to get on the register, or did it go pretty smoothly? Was that group of new voters in effect the same as the rest of the population?

Stephen Carse: Yes. I was not made aware of any specific instance in which a 16-year-old found himself or herself unable to vote because he or she was not on the register. Generally speaking, the 2006 election went okay.

Stewart Maxwell: Was any follow-up work done on the process? Was a survey done following the 2006 election to examine the process and to see whether it had gone as smoothly as you had hoped it would in terms of the understanding of new voters and the process at the polling stations?

Stephen Carse: As has been said, a report was commissioned on the 2006 election. That focused

on the registration procedure, because the numbers were down so much on what we had been used to. I have explained the reasons for that, and the same reasons were given in the final report. No work was commissioned on registration or turnout rates among 16 and 17-year-olds.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): The Wright review of the 2006 election was produced in 2007. Did a review take place after the 2011 election, with a focus on 16 and 17-year-olds?

Stephen Carse: No. After every general election, we convene meetings of my people, returning officers and other people who have been involved at some stage in the election process. At those meetings, no difficulties or other issues that affected 16 and 17-year-olds were raised.

Stuart McMillan: Before the 2006 election, you had from February to November 2006 to get the register into the correct and appropriate shape. You said that you dealt with that comfortably and that that was enough time. Here in Scotland, the debate has taken place for some time and the referendum is due in autumn 2014. Do we have enough time to get the register into the correct and appropriate shape for the referendum?

Stephen Carse: I am not too sure that I am in a position to say anything definitive about that. However, to state the obvious, the longer the time, the better. Scotland has the benefit of the issue being high profile and of having a run-in even to the current point, because of the issue's importance. I would expect Scotland to be more successful in getting youngsters to register and subsequently to turn out and vote.

The Convener: I will ask a general question. Given what you have undertaken and seen in your role, what lessons can we take for the Scottish experience from the Isle of Man? Did you face wider challenges in introducing the vote for 16 and 17-year-olds?

Stephen Carse: The only difficulty that we had in adapting to 16 and 17-year-olds voting was that we started from a position of ignorance among 16 and 17-year-olds. In the Isle of Man, the change came somewhat out of the blue. A bill was going through to introduce quarterly registration and the quarterly production of electoral lists. During that process, an amendment was made to reduce the voting age to 16. No significant prior political or public debate had taken place on the merits of giving 16 and 17-year-olds the vote.

Scotland will have the advantage that the issue has been debated. People know that there is a good chance that the change is coming, so there is already awareness. We did not have just four or five months to administer the system; we had only four or five months to raise awareness and embed

it in kids' psyche that they would be presented with a great new opportunity.

The introduction of voting for 16 and 17-year-olds was a minor administrative issue in comparison with having to do quarterly registration, which required more changes in our software. Changing the eligible age from 18 to 16 involved only a tweak to the software program.

The Convener: I have no more general questions, and nobody else has questions. I thank Stephen Carse for his helpful evidence. We send our best wishes to the Tynwald and the House of Keys.

Stephen Carse: Thank you for inviting me to give evidence. I hope that my contribution has been of some use, and I will pass on your regards to our members.

The Convener: We will have a break for a couple of moments to sort out the information technology system.

10:10

Meeting suspended.

10:15

On resuming—

The Convener: For our next evidence-taking session, we will hear from Gordon Blair, who is the depute returning officer for West Lothian Council and the chair of the elections working group of the Society of Local Authority Lawyers and Administrators in Scotland. I welcome Mr Blair and thank him for coming to help us with our deliberations.

As a general question to set the scene—a starter for 10—the committee is interested in the role of the counting officers in referendums and their relationship with chief counting officers and the Electoral Management Board for Scotland. How do electoral registration officers, returning officers and counting officers relate to one another? If you could give us an overview, that would be helpful.

Gordon Blair (West Lothian Council and the Society of Local Authority Lawyers and Administrators in Scotland): In a nutshell, the counting officer has an operational role in conducting the poll and conducting the count locally. The chief counting officer has the role of ensuring the proper and effective conduct of the referendum, both by overseeing the conduct locally and by having the power of direction in respect of local counting officers. The chief counting officer has not just a co-ordinating role, but a functional role. At the end, the chief counting officer must also certify the national result.

The relationship with the electoral registration officers is, quite simply, that the EROs produce the register and the absent voter lists for postal voting. The relationship with the Electoral Management Board for Scotland is that the EMB has a co-ordinating role for elections. For example, if the convener of the EMB is the chief counting officer, clearly the EMB's role will be to advise the CCO and to issue, or assist with the issuing of, guidance from the CCO to local counting officers on the conduct of the poll. The CCO can also issue particular directions, which then become mandatory to follow.

The relationships on the ground have been excellent up till now. Those have been fostered particularly through the EMB. There is a good working relationship, both locally and nationally, with the EROs and the returning officers who will become counting officers. I have no reason to think that that close working relationship will not continue for the referendum.

The Convener: When the Parliament eventually passes the referendum franchise bill that we are discussing today, the Electoral Management Board will produce advice, guidance and general direction for all counting officers in Scotland to try to ensure consistency across Scotland. Is that the general purpose of the Electoral Management Board?

Gordon Blair: Technically, the power will lie with the chief counting officer, but the Electoral Management Board will clearly be the forum that the chief counting officer will use as a sounding board on an operational basis. So, yes, between them they will have that purpose. The CCO's power of direction will come into play, so there will be not just guidance but directions on the key areas for the purpose of, for example, the consistency that you mentioned.

James Kelly: I have a couple of questions on the organisation of polling stations for 16 and 17-year-olds and on the timing of the count. Assuming that the bill is passed, we hope that many 16 and 17-year-olds will take the opportunity to participate in the referendum. We want to ensure that the system is as efficient as possible when they turn up at their polling station on polling day, so that they can vote and will return at future elections. Many people among the general population who are not 16 or 17-year-olds will also vote for the first time. Has any specific consideration been given to ensuring that the referendum voting experience is as smooth as possible?

Gordon Blair: That has not been done as yet, as I think that it is too early for that. However, the issue will be the focus of attention on two fronts. There will be awareness raising generally, which will start with the Electoral Commission. It is

proposed that it should have the power to provide information to voters under the referendum bill. We will need to tie into that locally and give messages on the ground that are consistent with those that come from the Electoral Commission.

The other factor that will come into play will be the extent to which we will need to support the polling staff who issue ballot papers by providing additional staff, for example, as information providers. We have done that before in single transferable vote council elections. There will be a combination of awareness raising beforehand and on polling day.

Another gap relates to postal voters. The content of the postal vote package is regulated by legislation. Postal voters will not vote in a polling station, so they will need to be given attention. We will need to consider whether the postal vote package should include an explanation of the voting procedure.

Those issues still need to be picked up, and I am sure that the EMB and the chief counting officer will pick them up.

James Kelly: You mentioned the need for additional support for polling station staff. We would not want a situation in which 16 and 17-year-olds arrive to vote for the first time and there is an unnecessary queue at the polling station. Bearing in mind that some people have said that the turnout in the referendum might be as high as 80 per cent, will consideration be given to increasing the number of polling stations in the polling districts in order to move voters smoothly and efficiently through the polling stations on polling day?

Gordon Blair: The simple answer to that is yes. In every election, one of the risk assessment areas is the polling scheme, or the number of polling stations in each polling place. The number of stations is determined by several factors, not least of which is our estimate of the likely turnout. As a rule of thumb, the higher the turnout we expect, the more stations we need so that the throughput is managed, particularly at the normal peak times. Those are at tea time, shortly after tea time and in the early evening, for example, although peak times can occur at other times of the day. The number of stations could be increased. The EMB and the CCO will no doubt consider guidance on whether there should be more stations than normal.

Other logistics come into play, such as the physical restrictions of buildings. There is also a question about balancing the increased number of stations and the number of polling staff who are on hand to assist voters, whether they are young or old. We can anticipate questions that voters of any age will ask at the polling station, and I suspect

that extra staff will be needed to cover that. That takes us on to the issue of the script that we should give polling staff to answer those questions, which will no doubt be addressed. In the past, that has been dealt with through guidance from the Electoral Commission, and I hope that we will have the same kind of facility again so that there is a consistent approach on the information that is given.

I think that we would address the point that you made with those factors.

James Kelly: Thank you for that comprehensive answer.

With regard to the timing of the count—and thinking again of 16 or 17-year-olds voting for the first time in a major referendum—people will be keen to see the result as soon as possible and, of course, its accuracy will be important. Have you given any thought to the timing of the count? I know that my personal preference—and that of every other politician—is for it to start as soon as possible to ensure that we get the outcome as soon as possible. I note that some of my colleagues are smiling at that.

Gordon Blair: Yes, we have given the matter some thought. Clearly the EMB and the chief counting officer will have to consider it; in fact, it was the subject of a direction by the CCO for the alternative vote referendum and, in turn, for the council elections. I cannot tell you what the outcome of that consideration will be, as there will need to be a degree of consistency in the matter but, following the Gould report, I think that the principles underlying any decision should focus on what is in the voter's interest, which will first and foremost be about the count's accuracy and transparency rather than speed as an objective in itself.

The timing of the count will also depend on logistics across the country. As everyone will know, one or two areas such as the Inner and Outer Hebrides will have difficulty in getting in all their boxes, doing the count overnight and transmitting the result locally to the chief counting officer. Moreover, as I understand it, the desire in the draft referendum bill is for a national result to be declared before any local result, and we will have to factor in the impact of that on overnight counts and the fact that local people will want to know what the local result is. If there is to be no local declaration before the national declaration, there will have to be clear guidance on what the local counting officer has to do vis-à-vis the chief counting officer to preserve that objective.

A lot of factors need to be discussed, including absent voter identity checks on postal voters. An increasing number of postal votes are coming back with the ballot box at the close of the poll

and, given the requirement for 100 per cent checking, the process is not quick. In that respect, another little risk assessment should be carried out with regard to 16 and 17-year-olds, whose signatures are—so we are told—likely to change quite a lot at that age until they finally settle down. If their postal voting statement comes back to us with something different from what they put to the registration officer in the first place, it will cause difficulty. That is not a five-minute job.

All those logistical factors will come into play and decisions will have to be made on that basis. I cannot pre-empt the discussions that the EMB and the chief counting officer will have, but I can say that the chief counting officer consulted stakeholders on the timing of council election counts and I am sure that all views, including those of the committee, will be asked for and, no doubt, given.

The Convener: I do not know about 16 and 17-year-olds, but I can say that my own signature changes from hour to hour.

I believe that Rob Gibson has a supplementary to James Kelly's question.

Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Indeed. Good morning, Gordon—

The Convener: I am sorry, Rob, but I should remind folk that, in this session, we are discussing the franchise bill for 16 and 17-year-olds. For perhaps understandable reasons, the discussion is beginning to widen out a bit.

Rob Gibson: I wonder whether there might be extra lessons for us in the experience of the 1997 referendum, which had a high turnout. Is there anything that we can learn from that referendum that might affect our approach to the extended franchise for the 2014 referendum?

Gordon Blair: I have to confess that you are testing my memory of the 1997 referendum, but I think that to begin with we will be looking most closely at the AV referendum to see how referendums might be conducted. Given that 16 and 17-year-olds will be voting for the first time in the 2014 referendum, I do not think that the 1997 referendum will give us much insight in that respect.

We have to gauge the impact of 16 and 17-year-olds voting, which means considering a number of factors, not least of which is the way in which we go about raising awareness. There are one or two issues with the draft referendum bill, which I can expand on if you would like me to. There are also issues with the way in which we go into schools. The committee has heard evidence from Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man about going into schools. That is essential, and my council and other councils do it. However, there is no power in

the draft bill to encourage the participation of the chief counting officer or the counting officer; it all lies with the Electoral Commission.

10:30

The Convener: What did you say about there being no power? I did not quite pick that up.

Gordon Blair: As the draft bill stood when it was published, no power was given to the chief counting officer or the counting officer to encourage participation in the referendum, as there was with the AV referendum in 2011. The power to engage the voters with information lies with the Electoral Commission. We need clarity on that and how it will affect activity locally.

Clearly we are interested in maintaining our engagement locally with young voters. In this case, they will be 16 and 17-year-olds, and potentially 15-year-olds who will be 16 by the date of the referendum. We will therefore need two things. First, before the legislation is finalised, we need it to be clear about our powers locally. Secondly, we will need a robust framework, including education services, under which we can engage pupils in a neutral way that enables the process of getting registered and voting to continue.

The Convener: Thank you. I hope that Scottish Government officials are listening to this bit.

Tavish Scott and Patrick Harvie have supplementary questions, and then I will come back to Annabelle Ewing and Annabel Goldie, who has a wider question.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): Mr Blair, will you clarify your earlier remarks about the national declaration as opposed to a local declaration? I am not sure that I understood what you said.

Gordon Blair: The bill says that there is to be no local declaration of the result until the national result has been declared.

Tavish Scott: That was your point about the Inner and Outer Hebrides and how it means that the declaration could take for ever. The result will be tweeted and put out on other social media and everywhere else, so the practicalities of that requirement are impossible, are they not?

Gordon Blair: I would never say that something is impossible, but I agree that it will be difficult to manage. Returning officers or counting officers will have to engage with the observers who are present so that what they send to the chief counting officer is fit for purpose. However, doing so exposes us to the very danger that you just mentioned of leaks through social media. That issue needs to be talked through. No doubt the

chief counting officer will issue guidance about how it will happen, but if the draft referendum bill stands as it is, the policy objective will be to make no local announcements.

The Convener: If I remember correctly, the draft bill was issued in January last year. Lots of comments were made about the bill at that time, and I hope that, by the time that we get the actual bill, issues such as those that Tavish Scott has just raised should be reflected. We shall see. That was a good point.

Patrick Harvie: Good morning Mr Blair. I want to pick up on your points about the lack of a role for returning officers in promoting participation. You also mentioned schools at one point. We have heard about the experiences of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man, which do not, perhaps because they are smaller jurisdictions, have the functions of the Electoral Commission being held by a specific body.

SOLAR's point of view is relevant here. As providers of education and schools, local authorities have a role and some schools are keen to have mock elections, even though they do not have voters in their classes. Others are more reticent or think that there is a barrier or problem. Can SOLAR express a view about the role of local authorities in encouraging participation and registration through their provision of school education? Might that involve the facilitation of neutral panel sessions of candidates, and could such sessions become normal practice when the voting age is 16?

Gordon Blair: That is not so much SOLAR's role. I have been talking to my colleague who is in charge of education services, and it is more likely that the educational perspective would be taken up through the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland so that we have a robust framework to facilitate engagement with pupils as part of the school process.

SOLAR would play its part by putting its views to the EMB with regard to, first of all, whether powers are available locally to encourage participation and, secondly, the tools that could be used—for example, social media. Councils, including mine, use Facebook and Twitter regularly and provide links to relevant websites, such as the registration officer and the Electoral Commission's "About my vote" website. Guidance is needed about how we monitor those sites for material that needs to be deleted quickly, whether that material is offensive or party political. That is where SOLAR, the EMB and other professional associations involved in elections would come into play. The wider picture is for the educational institutions.

Patrick Harvie: Would you want the committee to consider a change to the bill to broaden or alter the existing powers?

Gordon Blair: Yes, I think that we would. Otherwise, there will be uncertainty about what we can do locally to encourage participation in the referendum. For elections, we have a standing duty rather than a power. However, according to the draft bill—as the convener said, that was the draft of a year ago—we do not have that power in relation to the referendum. We should have that power and it should be clarified.

Patrick Harvie: Some of the other jurisdictions that we have heard from were able to give us an estimate of the number of 16 and 17-year-olds who eventually participated. Will we be able to do that after the referendum in order to find out how successful we were at promoting participation among that age group?

Gordon Blair: That very much depends on what initiatives happen locally within each council area. West Lothian Council has some figures as a result of our democracy challenge initiative, in which once a year the communities youth team goes into secondary 6 classes and gets people registered. Last time, just over 500 registered through the democracy challenge and through stalls in the West Lothian civic centre in Livingston, the shopping centre and the local college. Those are people who would not otherwise have been registered through the canvass. I am talking about 2011 figures. There was a check-up following that, from the marked registers; in round terms, of those 500, about 45 per cent voted. It took a lot of resources so it is arguable, in the current climate, whether we can sustain that kind of manual analysis, never mind other authorities—

Patrick Harvie: In principle, such a sample is possible.

Gordon Blair: It is possible, but it must be resourced and I suspect that the measure would not necessarily be widespread throughout the country.

Patrick Harvie: That was very helpful. Thank you.

Annabelle Ewing: I will pick up on a couple of points on the evidence thus far. First, I will make an information point for the record. My recollection—which may also be a bit hazy—of the 1997 referendum is that the count immediately followed the close of the poll. You seem to suggest that when you consider the capacity of polling stations your officers make assumptions about the organisation of the poll locally for each election based on what you have anticipated turnout will be. I presume that those assumptions therefore differ from one part of the country to the

next—which is the nature of assumptions—as opposed to a specific standard being pursued. Will you provide more information about what you were saying earlier and explain a wee bit more about how you make those assumptions, what their basis is and whether capacity for recent elections has been in excess of the turnout that was achieved?

Gordon Blair: We estimate turnout for each election and—of course—turnout varies. For example, in West Lothian, turnout was 62 per cent for the previous United Kingdom parliamentary elections, 54 per cent for the Scottish Parliament elections and 42 per cent for the council elections.

A combined poll increases the number of stations. That is nothing to do with turnout; rather, it is because there are more ballot papers. That is the first thing that we look at. We then look at the experience of and feedback from presiding officers—they give their views on the polling stations after each election. We can see whether there are any particular areas where we would need to adjust the number of stations for future elections because of any local variations in our electoral area.

The bottom line—the objective—is that we need to avoid queuing at peak times. In my experience, we have never had excessive queuing in any of our areas, and I think that that is generally the case in Scotland. The chief counting officer came out with a direction for the AV referendum in 2011 that there would be a maximum of 2,500 electors allocated to stations. The figures that we run with in Scotland are well below that. That is the analysis that we do, but there is a built-in safety margin because, at the end of the day, the bottom line is that you cannot afford to have queuing. The pre-planning takes care of that.

Annabelle Ewing: That is very helpful. I have a minor follow-on question. An element to be factored into the capacity issue is the addition of 16 and 17-year-olds to the register. With regard to the overall anticipated maximum figure that that could entail, do you anticipate a queuing issue for any individual polling place? I imagine that there would be a reasonable spread of voter numbers throughout the length and breadth of Scotland.

Gordon Blair: The assessment—which has still to be made—will ask what will be the effect of 16 and 17-year-olds arriving at the polling station, asking questions and slowing down throughput. My guess is that we will need to factor in some increased capacity at polling stations. As I have said, that will not be only for 16 and 17-year-olds, but for older voters. There are two ways to deal with people's questions while maintaining throughput of voters—by increasing the number of stations, and by increasing the number of polling staff without increasing the number of stations.

Annabelle Ewing: Obviously, there is nothing new under the sun—you have experience with new voters. If one looks back at certain recent elections, when there was a plethora of elections on the same day, you have had experience of providing complex information and so forth. I imagine that where there is a will, there is a way to secure the objective of ensuring that the poll meets the aspirations of the people.

Gordon Blair: I will make a quick addition to that point. The guidance that we would anticipate coming from the Electoral Commission on how to train polling staff will give a consistent message across polling stations. That will assist in terms of the speed with which questions are answered and throughput. All those factors come together to deal with potential queuing.

10:45

Annabel Goldie: Before we leave that issue, I point out that the referendum will not be like normal elections, in that there will be only one bit of paper with one question on it. I am interested in what people will ask you. I know what I would like to tell them, but I am interested in what they will ask you. *[Laughter.]*

Gordon Blair: In my experience, polling staff can be asked anything under the sun. Are you asking what voters will ask at polling stations?

Annabel Goldie: Yes. We are not talking about a normal general or Scottish Parliament election involving screeds of political parties and individual candidates; there will be just one question with two boxes.

Gordon Blair: When we come to the guidance on doubtful voters—I meant doubtful ballot papers; that was a Freudian slip—we can see there being some variations in what voters put down. They might write “Yes” and “No” in the boxes rather than tick a box. There are questions that we anticipate that people will ask. The polling staff will have to have a script, as they have had previously, in order that they can remain impartial and answer—or decline to answer—some of the questions that are asked.

Annabel Goldie is absolutely right: it will be a straightforward ballot paper. In theory, it will be about as simple a ballot paper as we could have.

Annabel Goldie: The other thing that I do not know is whether the count of the ballot papers will be manual. Will that be the case?

Gordon Blair: Yes.

Annabel Goldie: That is very reassuring.

In an ideal world, what period of time would you like there to be between the legislation that will

change the franchise coming into force and the date of the poll?

Gordon Blair: I can answer that as someone who is not involved in the registration side. I think that the committee has heard from Brian Byrne and Joan Hewton from the Scottish Assessors Association. The basic rule is the six-month rule for legislation, which comes from the Gould recommendation. If that is followed, that is as good as we can expect. We would be happy with that.

Annabel Goldie: If we overlay that with the possibility of the application of individual voter registration and all the current uncertainties about the timetable for that, does that introduce a fairly major factor?

Gordon Blair: Yes. I read the *Official Report* of the meeting at which Brian Byrne and Joan Hewton gave evidence to the committee at the end of last month, and I think that that factor needs to be bottomed out, not least because they and their colleagues will have to produce the new register and the young persons register.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab): Good morning, Mr Blair.

I would like to follow up on that. We have been asked to curtail, to an extent, the process that we would normally go through in considering a bill, in order to give electoral registration officers the maximum amount of time prior to the canvass that will take place in the autumn. I presume that you and your colleagues are anticipating and working towards that. How much anticipatory work can you do at this stage? As a corollary, to what extent do you have to wait for us to get the legislation through?

Gordon Blair: You are absolutely right. Everyone is anticipating the legislation. We are also anticipating the European Parliament ballot. I wish that we knew the date of that—I presume that Brussels will provide that information. We know that it will take place in June 2014, we know that the referendum will take place in the autumn of 2014 and we know that the UK general election will take place on the first Thursday in May in 2015. All three polls come together—they are back-to-back polls. If you work it out, you find that there are fewer than 12 months between them, from start to finish. That affects our pre-planning. We are already beginning to think about our polling schemes, because different questions will be asked in the different polls. The EMB will undoubtedly be starting to think about that as well. We are anticipating and beginning to plan for the strategic issues nationally and locally.

Patricia Ferguson: Many of us would like to know the date of the referendum. Is the

uncertainty about that an additional hurdle for you and your colleagues?

Gordon Blair: It is probably more of an uncertainty for the registration side. We know that it will be in autumn. To be honest, it is not holding us back from proceeding with the major building blocks, which are the polling scheme, the information technology systems—not registration IT systems, but those on the returning officer side—and whether we need to renew the staffing profile. We can do all the significant major building blocks at this point in time. Obviously, we want the detail at least six months before polling day.

Patricia Ferguson: Is there anything that you cannot anticipate that you need to know to allow you to work ahead?

Gordon Blair: I cannot think of anything off the top of my head. I hope that we can anticipate most eventualities and have a good guess as to what is likely to happen.

Representatives from the Electoral Commission, the Scottish Government and the Scotland Office are advisers to the EMB, so it is up to speed with trends and what is being talked about here in Edinburgh and down in London, with regard to the UK parliamentary election. The EMB can see what is coming over the horizon, get its own plans into shape and assist us locally. I happen to be an adviser to the EMB, but I am not here today as a representative of it.

The Convener: As nobody else is indicating that they want to ask a question, I thank you for coming along and giving us some very useful evidence in such a cogent and clear manner. It was very helpful to us. Thank you also for taking questions that went beyond what we had asked you to talk about. I am very grateful to you for taking a wider range of questions than perhaps you expected.

Agenda item 2 is our approach to scrutiny of the proposed referendum franchise (Scotland) bill at stage 1. We have a paper in which the clerk has laid out various details. On the draft call for evidence, there is a suggested deadline of 22 March. The Deputy First Minister is coming on 28 March. It is proposed that those who are unable to meet the 22 March deadline are given a fall-back deadline of 12 April, to ensure that we gather all possible evidence. Of course, if any evidence comes in later, we could write to the Deputy First Minister to ask for her response.

The paper also suggests an overview of witnesses from whom the committee might take evidence. There are three dates: 14, 21 and 28 March. There is a small error in the paper, about which members were notified by email last night. The Scotland office of the Information Commissioner's Office, rather than the Scottish

Information Commissioner, deals with data protection.

I seek members' views on what is laid out in the paper.

Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): It is important that we get young people's views on the bill. I am glad that a session with the Scottish Youth Parliament and the National Union of Students Scotland has been suggested, but I am not convinced that we should have Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People on the same panel, as I think that we should give the young folks the opportunity to speak for themselves.

I suggest that we also pull in Young Scot. From what I have seen, it is very representative of young people across the spectrum in many ways, and it works in all local authority areas. I would like to see Young Scot in there somewhere, too.

The Convener: Tell us a bit more about Young Scot.

Linda Fabiani: I can only give an almost elderly person's view of Young Scot.

The Convener: Okay, that is a fair point. I am just trying to make sure that we get as much information as possible.

Linda Fabiani: Young Scot represents young people across Scotland. It is also highly respected by youth organisations and so on. From what I can see, it is pretty well informed on lots of issues. I think that it would be a missed opportunity not to have it along. I visualise the panel of young people being one of young people's voices. I have nothing against the Commissioner for Children and Young People, but I think that we should have a panel that has young people themselves speaking to us.

The Convener: Okay. Let me canvass views. Stewart Maxwell wants to comment, as does Patrick Harvie.

Stewart Maxwell: I do not have a problem with Linda Fabiani's suggestion. It is quite sensible to have all the young people on the panel together. I mean no offence to Mr Baillie, the children's commissioner, but young people should speak for themselves on the panel.

My point is about other possible witnesses. Frankly, I think that, because of overlap, we could take at least two together: specifically, the Information Commissioner's Office for Scotland and the chair of the Scottish child protection committee chairs forum. I think that there is an overlap there in terms of some of the data protection stuff and so on that we will be talking about. We will be asking both of them similar questions. I know that there will be slight differences, but there will still be quite an overlap.

It seems sensible to me to have both on the same panel rather than have separate panels. In addition—I had not thought about this until Linda Fabiani referred to it—if we are talking about child protection and issues that are similar to that, the Commissioner for Children and Young People should probably be on that panel.

That would mean that there would be a young people's panel and then a panel of commissioners and others.

The Convener: I do not know about other members, but I think that that is quite wise.

Stewart Maxwell: Thank you very much, convener.

Patrick Harvie: On the relationship between promoting legislation and participation and what role schools in particular might have, I wonder whether there is sense in trying to have some space to hear from heads of education and local authorities or other witnesses from whom we would get a similar perspective. I imagine that when we come to considering the referendum bill, we will want to hear from the campaigns on both sides. I am not sure that it is necessary to think about whether there are groups that represent young people that will be campaigning for or against and which will want to give evidence on the franchise bill. However, I certainly think that we need to address the question of the specific role of schools in promoting not just registration but participation.

The Convener: If I remember correctly, there is an organisation that represents directors of education, but I cannot remember what it is called.

Stewart Maxwell: It is the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland—ADES.

The Convener: That is an umbrella organisation that could come and give us some evidence. If we are going to bring it in, we should perhaps slot it alongside an organisation such as the Electoral Commission, because that would cover participation and encouragement.

Annabel Goldie: Patrick Harvie pre-empted me and covered the point that I was going to raise. I thought that we needed more oral evidence, and I jotted down that perhaps we could get the heads of education from two of the biggest local authorities. However, I think that that has been covered.

The two bodies that I definitely want to hear from are the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Management Board for Scotland. However, I honestly think that if we stray beyond having two panels to give evidence, we will begin to lose the sharpness and focus of interrogation and response. I do not know what the rest of the committee feels about that, but my desire would

be to try to rest with two panels per meeting. If that caused pressure, I would suggest that the Electoral Reform Society, for example, could be asked to give written evidence.

The Convener: There is only one panel on the day that Deputy First Minister is coming, unless we add somebody else.

Annabel Goldie: I know that we will have the chair of the Scottish child protection committee chairs forum, but I wondered whether we could bulk that panel out a little with the heads of social work in Scotland body, which is rather like the body that Stewart Maxwell referred to. I think that it would be helpful for the committee to have some evidence from the people who work with fragile, vulnerable youngsters and who are at the coalface of trying to protect them.

The Convener: It has already been suggested that we have the chair of the Scottish child protection committee chairs forum.

Annabel Goldie: Yes, but that is a global or composite organisation. However, it was just a suggestion.

The Convener: We have three dates. The first date is 14 March. Given what we heard from Linda Fabiani and the reaction to that, perhaps we should have the Youth Parliament, the NUS and Young Scot as one panel on 14 March. That gives us quite a significant space just for young people on that day.

The meeting on 21 March will be almost like a commissioners day. Stewart Maxwell suggested that the Information Commissioner's Office, the child protection folk and the children's commissioner could all come on the same day.

Stewart Maxwell: I suggested that they should all be on the same panel.

11:00

The Convener: So we would deal with one panel on one day and get all those bodies together at once.

Annabelle Ewing: We could have two panels on the same morning—that would be doable. We could have the young people on one panel and then the commissioners on the next panel on the same day, dealing with issues from their perspective. You would have the young people's perspective on issues to do with young people—

The Convener: Right. So that would all be on 14 March. Then on 21 March we will have the Electoral Commission and perhaps ADES on one panel. On another panel on the same day we will have the Electoral Management Board, the Scottish Assessors Association and the

Association of Electoral Administrators, all of which are listed in the note by the clerk.

That leaves 28 March. We could potentially have a panel with the Electoral Reform Society—I will come back to Annabel Goldie's point about the social work side of things. On the same day, we will take evidence from the Deputy First Minister.

Tavish Scott: Just to help you, convener—the Electoral Reform Society won. It got what it wanted. Annabel Goldie's point about allowing it to give written evidence is a good idea. That would deal with the problem of a panel on the same day as the Deputy First Minister, who would not then get the chance to review the evidence from that panel. I was a bit puzzled about why the Electoral Reform Society wants to come in to give evidence. It can give written evidence.

The Convener: It is not just about the issue of 16 and 17-year-olds policy though, is it? It is about the wider issues of engagement and participation.

Tavish Scott: So the question is: what would the Electoral Reform Society add that we would not get from the other panels?

The Convener: I am not going to die in a ditch over this one.

Tavish Scott: I was trying to help.

The Convener: If there is a general feeling that we do not require the Electoral Reform Society, that is fair enough.

James Kelly: We could take written evidence from it.

The Convener: Yes.

ADES—a body that encapsulates all the directors of education—will come to give evidence. Further to Annabel Goldie's point about the social work side of things, we can make a similar invitation to the body that represents social work in Scotland. That body should, by its nature, sit alongside the chair of the Scottish child protection committee chairs forum on a panel. I will leave the clerks to work out all the timings and the synergy to make sure that it all works. Is that reasonable?

Members indicated agreement.

Annabelle Ewing: Please excuse me if we already have this information, but the note by the clerk states that the call for written evidence will be flagged up to the media and to stakeholders. I do not know who those stakeholders are. Could I get a list of them? Do we have a list? When the paper references stakeholders, to whom is it referring?

Andrew Mylne (Clerk): In this context, all we are envisaging is a general call for evidence through the normal Parliament channels—our media office draws the call for evidence to the

attention of the media generally. I am not necessarily thinking of targeting the call for evidence, but if members have suggestions—

Annabelle Ewing: It is just that the paper refers to media contacts and stakeholders—I just wondered who the stakeholders were.

Andrew Mylne: We will draw the call for evidence to the attention of those who we think are obvious. If members have suggestions of particular stakeholders, we are happy to take those suggestions.

Annabelle Ewing: I am just interested in seeing the list, if that is possible.

Tavish Scott: There is no list.

Annabelle Ewing: Presumably there will be at some point, in order to be able to send the information about the call for evidence to stakeholders.

Tavish Scott: There is no conspiracy.

Annabelle Ewing: I am fine; I was just curious to see who was involved—that is all.

The Convener: If a member wants to see who gets the information, they can see that. That is a reasonable request.

Next week, we have an informal briefing from Scottish Government officials on the franchise bill. That might widen out to other issues, considering what we have heard today. We should try to limit our discussion to the franchise bill, because that is what we have asked them to come to speak to us about.

We had a general discussion about having a meeting on 7 March. We decided to have a meeting then to agree the themes for the oral evidence-taking sessions at stage 1 of the franchise bill, which will begin shortly. I suggest that we take that meeting in private because we will be freewheeling a bit around what we want to ask. On 28 February, we have an informal briefing. Therefore the next meeting of the committee will be in private on 7 March, to be followed by a meeting on Thursday 14 March, when we will take stage 1 oral evidence on the franchise bill.

Meeting closed at 11:05.

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