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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Wednesday 20 August 2014

Session 4

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE
22nd Meeting 2014, Session 4

CONVENER

*Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con)
*Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
*Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP)
*Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab)
*Alex Rowley (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Councillor Stephen Curran (Glasgow City Council)
Councillor Elaine Green (East Renfrewshire Council)
Steve Grimmond (Fife Council)
David Martin (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers Scotland)
Mark McAteer (Improvement Service)
Maureen McKenna (Glasgow City Council)
Elma Murray (North Ayrshire Council)
Mhairi Shaw (East Renfrewshire Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

David Cullum

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday 20 August 2014

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 09:30*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Kevin Stewart): Good morning and welcome to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee's 22nd meeting in 2014. I ask everyone present to switch off mobile phones and other electronic devices, because they affect the broadcasting system. During the meeting, some committee members will refer to tablets, as meeting papers are provided in a digital format.

Under agenda item 1, do we agree to take item 4 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Local Government Benchmarking System

09:30

The Convener: Item 2 is an oral evidence session on the local government benchmarking framework, on which three panels will give evidence. I welcome our first panel: David Martin, from the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers Scotland, and Mark McAteer, director of governance and performance management at the Improvement Service.

Good morning, gentlemen. Would you like to make opening remarks?

David Martin (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers Scotland): I thank the committee for the opportunity to talk to it about its interest in the local government benchmarking and improvement project. When we were here 18 months or so ago with Ronnie Hinds, the committee was particularly interested in the progress that had been made. A critical test for the committee was whether benchmarking information is being used to promote improvement across Scottish councils and whether senior people such as me and local government politicians are actively interested in that. I hope that what the committee will hear from the three panels today will convince it that we are embedding improvement through the local government benchmarking framework and that it is beginning to get significant traction in local government in improving and changing for the better.

The Convener: Is the framework fully embedded in all 32 local authorities?

David Martin: It is clear that the framework is fully embedded in all local authorities. In various ways, every council is participating actively in family groups to look at improvement. All 32 chief executives receive regular reports at SOLACE on progress under the framework. As the committee knows, the Accounts Commission is actively interested in how we are using the framework and it continually challenges us on and scrutinises progress.

To my knowledge, most—if not all—councils regularly report to scrutiny committees or the full council key data on their performance. It is important that we get beyond narrow league tables and try to understand what is behind the information, so that service improvements can be driven forward.

Mark McAteer (Improvement Service): I echo what David Martin said. Over the past year or so,

since we previously spoke to the committee, we have continued to progress technical issues around improving data. All 32 councils have taken part in that.

We might go into a bit more detail on the family groups. All 32 councils have fully participated in them—over a sequence of meetings, more than 100 officers have been part of that exercise.

The programme includes on-going work on how we strengthen public accountability. All 32 councils have taken part in developing a common reporting tool that will feature in their public performance reporting towards the end of the year.

The level of sustained engagement from local government has been significant and has involved not just the corporate performance colleagues with whom we began the project but service colleagues, with whom we have had family group meetings and so forth. Traction has got a hold.

The Convener: So all 32 councils are using the framework, reporting and improving. How are we ensuring that best practice is exported? One of the key reasons for the work is to ensure that best practice is exported from one authority to the others. Is that working?

Mark McAteer: A couple of things are happening. There are formal elements in the benchmarking work. As you know, we set up family groups, which we agreed with the councils last year. We decided to pilot two areas with councils. The project board that is overseeing the project agreed the themes of positive destinations for children and road maintenance.

We pulled all 32 councils together in their family groups. They interrogated the data for their family groups—they asked whether it was accurate. At the second stage, they asked what supplementary information was needed to make sense of the data. After that, they went into the improvement exchange, which involves asking who is doing what. A range of things came through from that. We have captured all of that, and we will be publishing a report on both those themes in the next couple of weeks. We now have a forward programme of activities over the next two years for those family groups. That is the formal side.

As you will hear during the meeting, individual councils are doing work over and above that. For example, I have been working with Dumfries and Galloway Council to support a strategic service review of roads and infrastructure services. The council has used benchmarking information to guide best practice visits, which the council carried out itself as part of its internal service improvement. That kind of informal activity is happening quite widely across the councils, and the benchmarking information feeds into that.

The Convener: You talked about an improvement exchange. Will you expand on that?

Mark McAteer: The kind of things that will be picked up through the family groups can be seen in the overview report. For example, some councils are starting to pursue positive destination data beyond the first year after school. When a child or young person leaves school, they are followed for a year to find out whether they go on to further education, university, employment or something else. Some councils have started to try to track beyond that and to tie that information back into their strategy to deal with youth unemployment. However, other councils are not doing that. There has been a lot of discussion on how that tracking can be done and how the information can be used for broader purposes to keep kids active. That is the kind of day-to-day practice exchange that has been taking place.

There was also good discussion with councils that give specific support on positive destinations to children in schools. There are dedicated staff for that, and parents are brought into school as part of the discussion about where the child wishes to be.

That is the kind of exchange that has taken place among the family groups. A number of councils have said that they will pick up that practice and look to replicate it. That is the type of thing that has been happening—the benchmarking data is driving the councils towards that conversation and exchange.

The Convener: Stuart McMillan has a supplementary question on that.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): Actually, convener, it is on a previous issue, regarding councillors, if that is okay.

Mr Martin mentioned engagement with councillors. Does that include opposition councillors?

David Martin: Absolutely. The overview report that was issued a few months ago was signed by the president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the chair of SOLACE. In practice, there is interest in how the process goes through COSLA leaders at the strategic level but, as the committee has said previously, the richness comes when councils actually drill into performance at the local level and then compare, learn and improve as a result. Across councils, the information goes to a leadership board or a scrutiny committee of one form or another and is then taken to a cabinet, if that is the form of governance in that local authority. Some authorities have an annual review or development seminar to drill into some of the information.

I have also tried to use some of that information—and I know that some of my

colleagues have done something similar—in the learning for member development days. There is a range of formal and informal opportunities. If the question is whether council performance is scrutinised across the parties and across the council on a regular basis, the answer is absolutely, because that is good governance. The data is used in that way.

The Convener: Mark McDonald has a supplementary question.

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I have been looking through the 2014 benchmarking overview report. I recall that, when we discussed the issue previously—I was a substitute on the committee at the time—I asked a question about what was being measured and the balance between input measurement and outcome measurement. Input measurement tells us how much is being spent, but that does not always tell the story about the quality of service that is being delivered off the back of that spend. Although it might look good on paper to spend a large sum of money on a service, the quality of that service might not be delivering bang for the buck. Do we have the balance right between looking at the inputs and the outcomes, and are councils not just looking at them but drawing a correlation between the two to inform what they do with their money?

David Martin: That was one of the main drivers for the benchmarking agenda and journey. The Accounts Commission's move from statutory performance indicators, which were predominantly about throughput or input measures, to embracing the idea that we need a mix of input activity and outcome has been a real step forward. The Accounts Commission has helped us to drive forward that agenda. There is a mix in the range of indicators that we look at, because both types are relevant. It is still important to know the costs for a particular activity and to compare them, but we need to know what we are getting for our money. There are a number of social care and education examples of that in the report. We can compare cost information in primary and secondary education but at the same time look at attainment and young people's achievements. When we put the two together, we get a much richer and deeper understanding of what is going on in a particular community and particular range of services.

That is an evolving journey because we are learning as we go forward that outcomes and prevention are what we want to achieve. The data and indicators that we collect are a reasonable—but not full—fit for that, so we continue to evolve the information to allow us to look across the full range of local government functions. A good example of that is the fact that, in the current overview report, we now have information on economic development, the nature of local government economic development services and the impact that they have on employment and unemployment.

We are trying to get inputs and outcomes. Part of the reason why politicians are interested in that at a local government level is the concern about outcomes. They want to know what difference services make to communities. Therefore, we will continue on that journey.

To answer your question directly, there is a balance between input, throughput and outcome measures.

Mark McAteer: The first time that we met the committee, we said that the indicators would be continually improved. That has happened.

Last year, we used for the first time a net costing for waste and recycling services because it was felt that that was a more accurate way of capturing the interrelationship between waste management and collection and the recycling agenda on which all councils seek to progress. That gives us new insights into some of the better recycling practices in councils.

For all the indicators, we also have a knowledge hub, which is a kind of private website, for want of a better term, with about 350 members from across all 32 councils.

We undertake the analytical work that underpins the report, which is shared with all 32 councils, so we consider the relationships across the various indicators. For example, if we are considering children's services, we not only ask whether high cost and high spend indicate good performance but—this addresses Mark McDonald's point—look for the relationships within the data and supplement that with additional analysis to try to shine a light on the matter.

That information is shared with all 32 councils and features as part of the family group discussions. The approach is starting to get a hold at that level, and there is a role for us and the councils in continuing to evolve it.

Mark McDonald: I remember from my time in Aberdeen City Council that there were statutory performance indicators and key performance indicators, as well as ad hoc measurements that councillors would request. To what extent do you analyse or get feedback from councils on the things that their members look for them to measure? What assessment do you make of the value that is attached to some of the things that are measured and what recommendations do you offer in that regard?

We talk a lot about the cohorts for the benchmarking. Often, the reports that go before councillors relate purely to their own councils. There is a valid reason for that, as they are

accountable for what their council does. However, how often are councillors given reports that show how their council is performing, the performance measures for their council, the performance measures for their cohort and how they compare on the benchmarking?

David Martin: I will try to answer that last question first.

The system ensures that benchmarking is done as part of the annual public performance report, meaning not only that elected officials get the information but that the whole community can access information for comparative purposes. Indeed, the Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland recently produced some information for all local authorities on assessing their ability and competence in public performance reporting, and within that a major indicator that was measured was the extent to which benchmarking was in the public arena.

Elected members clearly want to know what is going on in their own communities. However, my council—Renfrewshire Council—is part of a city region with eight other authorities and my leader and members are just as interested in knowing what is going on in East Renfrewshire and the city of Glasgow as they are in knowing what is going on in Renfrewshire, because they are driven to try to ensure that their local services are performing well.

My view is that the benchmarking project and the approach that we have taken have raised the bar for us all. We are much more aware of what is going on elsewhere and we are much more interested in trying to pinch good ideas—to be frank—if they can be transferred to a particular local authority context.

09:45

The approach is evolving. Mark McAteer mentioned the best practice approach in relation to school-leaver destinations and roads. Another tranche of activity is under way on, for example, how we improve young girls' participation in sport and how we use education and awareness to improve recycling rates. Stability of placements for looked-after children has been a concern of local government for some time, so we are also considering how we spread best practice in that regard.

That activity is a result of the confidence that has been built up after the first round of benchmarking activity. I hope that you can see that we are beginning to get a lot more traction in that regard, so that we can use the approach to improve services.

Mark McAteer: I cannot speak in detail about what happens in all 32 councils. I think that the committee will hear about practice from the authorities that will give evidence later. We have been more involved in giving general support. For example, just before summer we ran two cross-council master-classes for elected members. I think that it was attended by more than 50 members, who came from different councils and included opposition and administration members. We talked through with the elected members what they can get from the information and how they might use it internally.

Following those master-classes I was invited to Moray Council and Perth and Kinross Council to talk exclusively to their members about how to use the information. We get frequent requests of that type, and meetings are scheduled for the autumn with a couple more authorities at which we will have an internal conversation with the full council, to let people know that the information is there and discuss how it can add value for elected members.

As I said, we are involved at the general support end of things. I think that later this morning you will hear directly and in detail from councils about how they are using the information.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): An issue to do with benchmarking is the data that is collected and who collects it. It is about whether the data that is put into the system is accurate, up to date and relevant. How sure are you that the data that is collected is comparable across local authorities? You talked about the family groups structure. Is the same data collected across the family groups, so that we can accurately make comparisons across councils about what is being delivered and how?

Mark McAteer: We are as confident as we can be that the data is accurate and comparable across all 32 councils. We have talked to the committee in the past about the mechanisms for ensuring that that is the case. For example, there has been on-going work with directors of finance and Scottish Government colleagues to ensure that the finance data is comparable and that there is better standardisation in the local financial return. We are pretty confident that the information is accurate.

In relation to the family groups, we draw from the general source. We do not get additional information; we use the core information. Across the family groups, over the course of the past few months, we have wanted additional information so that we could interrogate the data. My team plays a role in the family groups project, and we ensured that the data on looked-after children and roads was consistent across all four family groups. It was agreed with the participants that for each of the four groups we would look at two themes. We

were there to ensure that if one group thought that it would be good to look at X the other groups looked at X simultaneously. We supported the process.

As I have said in the past, keeping the data relevant and up to date is an on-going process and remains a challenge. For example, this year we agreed that we will publish our report earlier, so that we can be more in sync with the local public performance reporting cycle in councils. The two previous reports were published in February to March; this year we will publish our report in November.

Work has been going on with directors of finance to ensure that we get the financial data that we need to populate the indicators, but we will be behind on other areas, because we are not the data owners. Where the councils are the data owners we get good access. Part of the on-going challenge is to do with our having to draw from such a wide range of data sources to promote the project. It is never perfect, but I think that the data is as comparable and strong as we can get it at this point.

David Martin: The question is pertinent. We have to be sure that the data is accurate. The Accounts Commission has worked hard on that and of course we have external auditing of all the data.

It is also about the maturity of the process. As members will recall, we spent the first year of the local government benchmarking approach cleaning up the data and ensuring that, if there were difficulties with the data, they were at the margins and did not prevent us from drawing conclusions and drilling into improvement. Of course, the local government benchmarking framework is essentially about improvement.

I made the point about maturity. The conversations that take place in the council family groups—in my council and in others—are about what we can do to improve services. We are not hung up on the comparability of the data. It is reasonable for members to assume that the information is accurate and correct. Certainly, I have seen the debate move on much more to how other local authorities are doing things. When we have opened a particular issue and our council's performance is not where we would want it to be, we ask, "Who can we talk to in trying to address some of these challenges?", as opposed to saying, "It's different here and we can't compare apples and pears."

The committee can take comfort that the data is good enough, as Mark McAteer says, and we will continue to improve its quality as we move forward.

John Wilson: You make an interesting point about comparing apples and pears in relation to benchmarking. You mentioned looked-after children and roads as the two areas that have been examined in detail. However, we are being asked to look at the benchmarking process across a wide range of services. Can that apples and pears comparison be made between local authorities in the same family group? Will we get council officials, outwith the financial accounting process, saying to elected members or to the public, "The situation in Glasgow is different from the situation in Edinburgh because although we spend X amount of money on that service, we do things in a different way. The accounting process is slightly different but we do it better"? How do elected members then home in on that and understand what is being delivered, how it is being delivered and why it is being delivered in that way by a particular local authority if they are being asked to compare its services with the services in other councils in the same family group?

David Martin: I think that it is the other way round. The data is comparable—we have taken steps to try to ensure that it is comparable. Members, rightly, might ask why performance differs. The answer should not be that the information is not comparable—that we are not comparing like with like—but might be that the councils have different socio-economic circumstances or that one council is pursuing a different priority or a different level of policy, which is why the information leads to those conclusions being drawn. If so, transparency is improved because elected members are then able to decide whether their relative priorities ought to change, whether there is a genuine lack of resource in a particular area, or whether there are inefficiencies—it could be any of those things or a variation on them.

What we cannot do with the local government benchmarking framework information is suggest that somehow a particular council is different because its approach to the process of collecting the information justifies that. It is not about standardisation; it is about being clear and transparent about why levels of service and priorities might be different in different local authority areas and allowing elected members and the public to take a view on that.

We are past the stage of the benchmarking project where the data is the problem; it is now about asking what the relative policy priorities are and how we can learn from the process about good or best practice across Scotland, as the convener said in his introductory remarks. It makes it much harder to hide.

Mark McAteer: I echo what David Martin has said. In the first year or so of the project, we spent

a lot of time trying to ensure that the data was clean, tidy and comparable. Over the past year or so, there has been virtually no discussion of that as an issue; instead, the discussion has been around whether there are supplementary pieces of information that we can use now that we have standardised data to start to understand performance. As David said, that moves us towards issues of policy choice, priorities and differences in councils' socio-economic make-up and then into the performance agenda itself. The data has not featured much in discussion over the most recent period. We are relatively confident, as are the councils, that the data is as good as we need it to be for the purposes that we identified, which were always about improvement.

John Wilson: The next issue that I want to raise is elected members' understanding of the whole process and why it is being done. Seventeen months ago to the day, I asked Ronnie Hinds about the situation with regard to all elected members understanding the process.

What we have heard this morning is that there have been discussions with executive committees, cabinets and senior councillors in local authorities. Mr McAteer, you referred to a master-class with 50 members. We have 1,223 elected members in Scotland. Not all of those are members of a group or a party; in fact, a significant number of members in some of the more rural authorities are independent. How do we ensure that all elected members understand this process? If we cannot get all 1,223 elected members to understand the process, how can we expect the public to understand it?

Mark McAteer: When we publish the overview report, a link is sent to all 1,300 councillors in Scotland to alert them to it and to try to draw them into the website.

We have a range of other communications with members. Relevant elements coming out of the benchmarking work will, in effect, be broadcast to all councillors electronically. In addition, we have a continuous professional development programme to support councillors. I think that 20 to 23 councils are using the CPD framework.

The Convener: Can I stop you there? We talked about CPD last week with a representative of the Accounts Commission, who indicated clearly that in many cases there was no CPD going on.

Mark McAteer: I can get you the details of where it takes place, through the programme that we support councils in running. Within that, information is made available for benchmarking purposes.

The Convener: The point that was made quite clear by the Accounts Commission last week was

that a number of elected members—by the sounds of it, a fairly substantial number of elected members—are not taking part in any CPD programmes.

Mark McAteer: That may well be true, but what we have tried to do is work with councils to make CPD available. We cannot force politicians to do training, but we certainly make it available and we certainly encourage members to do it. We work with members services colleagues in councils, who support elected members, to try to build that culture of engagement, development and training with them. Opportunities are made available, which include elements from the benchmarking work. We alert all councillors to those electronically and we say that if any member needs support or information from us, we will happily furnish them with it. We keep trying, but I cannot guarantee success in all 1,300 cases.

David Martin: Mr Wilson's question is about reach and trying to ensure that, across all 1,223 councillors, there is an active interest in this. My experience is that members are never reluctant to scrutinise if the information is provided to them in a format that they can get hold of and drill into. That has been my experience as a result of the local government benchmarking framework.

About 70 or 80 per cent of local government spend is broadly covered—you will see from the overview report the range of indicators that we are covering. We have broken them down into children's services, social work, environment, culture and so on, as you will know.

Whether there is a committee structure or a cabinet structure in the local authority concerned, portfolio holders, opposition members who are involved in scrutiny, committee chairs and their shadows or opposite numbers are getting information on their service area. Increasingly, the data is being reported in that way in local authorities, and not just on an annual or periodic council-wide basis.

The other aspect is that the press and the media are very interested in this information—understandably—and that gets members interested in it.

A range of things are happening that mean that all councillors are actively interested in what the information is telling them about their particular community and the services that they are either running through an administration or working on an opposition basis to scrutinise. I am pretty confident that that will continue. That is in addition to the council-wide scrutiny and audit committee activity that goes on.

Although we can always improve that, my sense is that all elected members are both aware of the benchmarking data and pretty actively interested

in what it tells them about their constituency or their ward. I expect that to continue to grow.

John Wilson: I thank the witnesses for their responses. Like the convener, I draw your attention to the *Official Report* of last week's meeting, at which we raised concerns about the level of continuous professional development and the level of information being provided to individual councillors, either through training or through the dissemination of information. We want to be clear as a committee that elected members can and do understand what is being presented and, most important, can convince the public that they know what is happening in their local authorities.

10:00

Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con): Good morning, panel. I was not part of the committee in March 2013, but I read about benchmarking families in the report from 2013. Mr Martin mentioned East Renfrewshire and Glasgow, but can you explain what you mean by benchmarking families? I understand the term, but I am not sure how you developed the idea.

David Martin: I will answer that first and Mr McAteer can supplement my points.

The disparate nature of local authorities was a challenge at the start of the project—Clackmannanshire, Highland, Glasgow and Renfrewshire are all different. We have tried to encourage each local authority to compare itself to others, first with whichever it wishes because good practice is not necessarily a function of the scale or rurality of councils. It is not just between the benchmarking families that such work goes on. As I said to the committee before, if I see good practice on looked-after and accommodated children in Moray, for example, I will talk to Moray Council about that. The committee should be reassured that that happens as a matter of routine.

The idea of the benchmarking families was that councils can have common cause or a similar set of circumstances and that therefore comparison within those benchmarking families was a good thing to do in addition to general engagement across local government. We had some significant debate about that in COSLA and SOLACE at the time and the benchmarking families that we have now reflect that degree of common interest. We are getting more sophisticated about that common interest, and Mark McAteer can say a little more on that. There is an option for local authorities to work in a group of authorities in which they will learn more by comparing their performance, for example, on roads or on educational attainment, because the councils that are in that family are experiencing similar challenges.

Mark McAteer: I have a couple of things to add to that.

We did a piece of analysis with the councils just over 18 months ago to look at the basis on which we could group councils, if we were to do so. The analysis showed that when we looked at people-focused services, such as education services, the key factors in understanding performance related to socioeconomics and deprivation. Therefore, we grouped councils that were close in socioeconomic and deprivation terms together to discuss people-based services. For more physical services, such as roads, a key factor in explaining the differences was population dispersal, so we used that as the basis for grouping those families.

There are other family group arrangements across councils. Again, education had good practice already established in terms of sharing information across councils and we support some of that work. As David Martin said, those groups are the baseline, but there are additional factors around that and there is nothing to preclude councils from going outwith the family groups to exchange information and good practice with other councils—indeed we furnish that information across all 32 councils.

Cameron Buchanan: Do you choose the families, or does each council choose its own family?

Mark McAteer: We agreed collectively with the 32 authorities what the family groups would be and they work on that basis. They also exchange information over and above that as well.

Cameron Buchanan: So the families are not necessarily the same for education as for street cleaning.

Mark McAteer: No. We used the analysis to guide us, as David Martin said, to try to get councils that face broadly similar challenges together, because we thought that there would be some relevance in the exchanges. As I said, they also exchange information outwith those groups.

Cameron Buchanan: Has that worked? Is it successful?

Mark McAteer: We ran two pilots earlier this year, one that looked at positive destinations for children and another that looked at roads. We did an internal evaluation with the councils at the end of the exercise, then we tweaked it and now we have launched the programme for the next two years, using the same family groups. Those groups have worked, but this time round the councils, rather than my team, will direct the family groups—we will stand back from the role that we played and leave it to the councils to run. We will help the councils to gather the information as part

of all that, but they are now taking the lead in that process instead of us.

Alex Rowley (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): I want to focus on how we use the information, which I find fascinating. It will be helpful for council leaderships when they look at budgets and so on.

If you are saying that you want the information to be more useful for councillors, how it is presented and how we use it is important. I will pull out a few examples, such as looked-after children, which you mentioned. If you did a comparison between, say, Fife and South Lanarkshire, you would find that Fife is spending a fair bit more. However, what does that tell us? For that money, looked-after children in Fife could be succeeding much more in terms of education and attainment.

How much detail do you go into? Are we saying that all the 1,500 councillors will have to try to drill down for it? You mentioned the website, but I have been told that it is a bit complex to get in there and understand it. I sometimes think that if we are going to have these councillors trained in all these different things, they will all need PhDs and we will be able to sack all the highly paid officials, and the councillors can start running the councils because they will be so qualified to do it.

What is it that we actually do on looked-after children? Can you also pick up on home care services? Again, they certainly look more expensive in Fife than in David Martin's authority, Renfrewshire. However, what does that tell us? I know that in Fife the proportion of services that are delivered in-house rather than through the private sector is much higher. Some in Fife would argue that, as a result of that, they are delivering a better-quality service, but I do not know whether that is the case. What does the information tell us, how are you presenting it, what information lies below that and how are we getting into the detail of that?

David Martin: Mr Rowley has just demonstrated the value of the data, because what he is basically saying is that he has gone beyond the headline and is trying to understand the reasons for it. That is exactly what happens. The data allows you to start a conversation; it is not of itself a solution and you cannot draw simplistic conclusions from it.

If we take the examples that Alex Rowley gave of South Lanarkshire and my authority, Renfrewshire, we have had conversations in the greater Glasgow area about the relative differences in the policies on looked-after children, which boil down to all the factors that he mentioned and more: the extent to which looked-after children are accommodated or looked after at home; the extent of the use of residential care; and all the issues associated with how education

and attainment plug into that. That kind of conversation allows you to get behind the headlines. Members might well conclude, as Alex Rowley just has on home care, that there is a policy choice to make on the basis of differential costs. They might believe that the quality or the approach is better in Fife and that it suits their local circumstances better than, for argument's sake, those in Renfrewshire.

The data allows members to scrutinise policy options and policy choices. The question of care at home, for example, may depend on procurement practices. When we recently retendered for care at home services in Renfrewshire, we looked at the benchmarking data, which gave us a sense of where we were in the Clyde valley in terms of procurement and comparative costs. My politicians were very keen to ensure that, when we tendered for services, we built in the living wage and did something about zero-hours contracts. We were also keen to ensure that there was quality training and learning for employees.

That conversation started because of discussions about what was going on in other authorities, which was flagged up by the benchmarking information. You can see how, in a very real way, the benchmarking approach allows conversations to take place about what is going on elsewhere, which then leads to political dialogue and member-led approaches to how you might take forward different services. I am sorry to give that example again, convener, but—

The Convener: No, I think that it is good to give the example, Mr Martin.

David Martin: The fact is that the benchmarking data just makes matters more transparent and allows us to take a comparative approach and have conversations with elected members about where they want to go with their policy priorities.

Alex Rowley: Maybe the Improvement Service could pick up on that. However, let us say that a member of the public who got this report—it is fascinating and I welcome it, because it is a step in the right direction—went to a councillor in Fife and said, "Well, you know, it costs quite a bit more for looked-after children in Fife than it does in South Lanarkshire," and the councillor says to them, "Well, that's because we're delivering a better service." How does the member of the public check out whether that is right or wrong? Can they go on to the Improvement Service website? Will that tell them anything? How do they drill down—or is not for them to drill down?

Mark McAteer: Anyone can access the website, so there is no problem with that. There is a tool on it that you do not quite need a PhD to run, but it is pretty sophisticated and it allows you to bring

different data together. It is important to stress that point.

The Convener: I believe that it involves a lot of hovering.

Mark McAteer: You can do a bit of hovering if you wish. There is another tool in development that we can maybe get you a link to in a couple of weeks. It is a tool that we have been developing with the Welsh local government data unit that we will publish or launch in tandem with the public performance reports later in the year.

The point that we have constantly stressed on the data is that people should not look at one indicator in isolation. For example, high costs or low costs are not in themselves an explanation. As David Martin said in reply to Mr Rowley's questioning of the data, it allows you to raise further questions. When you compare the performance data and the cost data you ask, "Why are they different?" The whole point of the benchmarking process is to get answers to that question.

The difference in the data arises sometimes because a council chooses to be different. If there is a perceived weakness in a service, a council will look at what other councils are doing so that it can learn from that and plug the weakness. That is how the conversations go on within councils. The data was deliberately constructed to do exactly what Mr Rowley did with it, which is ask questions. We will continue to simplify the data and make it easier for people to do that.

We should also remember that this report is a national one and that all 32 councils report locally on their performance. When we launch a revised version later this year of the local end of the data, the local reports will also include the improvements that are happening in each of the authorities off the back of the work that they have done through the benchmarking. We provide the national data, but it is the local data that gives you the real detail about what is happening in Fife, for example. Again, I think that we will see that detail improve in the next set of reports.

Alex Rowley: I have two other quick points. On best practice, if we look at the library service in Argyll and Bute, for example, its costs jump out as being high, but we assume that that is because it is a rural area. However, the costs for the service in Highland are significantly lower. Do we then link that difference to best practice? Given the costs in some authorities, it would be cheaper than lending books for them to tell people just to get their books delivered by Amazon and let the council pay for them and allow them to keep them. Are the lower costs for the library service in Highland the result of good practice? How has the council got those costs down? Do you follow up on the issue of good practice?

What also really jumps out at you is the direct payments spend. The use of direct payments has shot up in Glasgow, for example. The interesting question for me is about how direct payments are operating in Glasgow. It has clearly promoted it, so is it working well? Is it a better service? If so, why are other authorities so far behind?

Mark McAteer: On your last point, Glasgow has been part of a national pilot to look at direct payments, which is why you will see the spike in Glasgow's performance. As part of that national project, particular work has been done in Glasgow to encourage direct payments. The national project group is now looking at how we take the learning forward from what Glasgow and a couple of other authorities have done in the past year in order to improve the direct payments service.

Your point about libraries is a useful one. Again, at this stage, all that we have done is to use that data to raise the kind of question that you have raised. The family groups have not looked in detail yet at libraries, but the issue is scheduled for next summer. However, I suspect that some individual councils that have seen the data—we may hear more about this later today—are already asking questions and contacting other authorities to try to get some of their questions answered. I do not think that authorities will sit back and wait for us through the family group process that in a year's time will get round to looking at libraries. My understanding is that authorities are already doing that themselves, but I do not know which ones because we are not involved in those conversations, which are just between the councils.

David Martin: It is very refreshing to be able to reassure Mr Rowley that his questions are exactly the same as the ones that I am getting asked by culture, sports and arts conveners and, to take Mr Wilson's point, opposition members. They ask what the data is telling us and what we can learn. That is what I mean about transparency and, if you like, an inquiring mind. Elected members are well capable of the kinds of questions, analysis and scrutiny that we have spoken about and, indeed, direct all that daily to council officers, which leads to us having better services.

On Mark McDonald's earlier question, sometimes the answer is that there is an inefficiency that needs to be ironed out, which in the current public sector finance climate we need to do very proactively. Sometimes it is a question of a policy choice. I am not terribly aware of the issue of library services spend in Argyll and Bute and in Highland, but I do know that Highland has an information access and technology approach to the use of its libraries, which it sees as community

information hubs. That may or may not be the position in Argyll and Bute. That is an example of where two rural authorities could have a conversation—indeed, they are doing so—about what they can learn from each other in a particular area, which is driven by the availability of the data.

10:15

The Convener: John Wilson has a supplementary question.

John Wilson: Alex Rowley raised a point about the baselines from which local authorities started. The Argyll and Bute and Highland library services example is a good one to use. Not all local authorities started from the same baseline. What calculations have been made or what work has been done to try to understand the baselines that local authorities work from? It is clear that local authorities made decisions prior to the benchmarking exercise. I am thinking of care services in Glasgow. Basically, those care services were put out to an arm's-length organisation, whereas other local authorities provide care services in-house.

On Mr Martin's example, elected members have insisted that, for looked-after children work, there is a minimum wage and guaranteed working hours a week, for example.

Was any work done on where local authorities started from in the process? They would have found themselves with different decisions having been made, particularly when they calculated the financial aspects of what they deliver.

David Martin: The data is certainly comparable, and that immediately leads to such questions and issues. It is not about suggesting that one set of policy or political choices in one part of Scotland was better than another; the process merely makes it clear what has happened. The dialogue then leads to discussing how much is transferable between one authority and another. We then get into the richness of the debate about how to improve our public services.

We are comparing apples with apples, to use the earlier metaphor. The kinds of issues that Mr Rowley raised make it very clear that members get into asking, "Are we happy with what we are doing in our particular community compared with what is being done in another one?"

I would not want to give members the impression that there was an initial problem. The process was merely about ensuring that the data allowed such conversations to take place, and I think that they are leading to a significant willingness to look at quite difficult or intractable problems in local government.

As Mark McAteer said, we started with school leaver destinations and roads, but we very quickly, with a lot of support from councils, touched on areas that I mentioned earlier—museums, equalities issues, human resources practices and the libraries issue that was mentioned—and a whole variety of other areas in local government. That is all driven by an interest in ensuring that we are doing as well as we can and that we use the information that the benchmarking project has thrown up.

The Convener: I want to go back to the initial discussions when we first considered the matter. It was said that local authorities would, of course, caveat the reasons why they were at a certain place, because some will have made policy choices to spend more money in certain areas, and rightly so—that is what local democracy is all about. Have local authorities caveated the reasons why they are at a certain place by highlighting the policy decisions that they have made? Are others looking at what they have done and the outcomes rather than necessarily the indicator itself?

David Martin: Absolutely. Rather than caveating, they have explained. That is the key message for the committee. In explaining, they have perhaps sometimes revisited the original rationale for the particular service and either reaffirmed that or thought, "Maybe it's time we changed our approach." We are beginning to see evidence of that emerging, and I am sure that members will hear some of that later.

The Convener: As well as having the national report, it would perhaps be useful for us to see some of the local reports.

I am sorry to have kept Anne McTaggart waiting.

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): That is fine, convener. Good morning, panel.

We have talked about the comparators in looking at the 32 local authorities, but have we thought outside the box and looked at what happens in the United Kingdom or even further afield?

David Martin: Yes. The local government benchmarking project is important, but it is not the only thing that local authorities are doing. For example, over the past 18 months, we have spent a lot of time in Renfrewshire comparing the performance of our employability and labour programmes with those of Manchester, Leeds and a variety of other major city regions.

A city deal is being launched today. That partnership initiative includes a labour market element. A lot of work has looked at how city regions in England have dealt with the labour market agenda. I stress that there are lots of

examples of such work across local government services.

We are also rolling out the approach across community planning partners—perhaps Mark McAteer will want to say more about this if there is time, convener. While the benchmarking approach has enriched local government, that approach will be even richer when we start looking at a plan for place and how the health service and the other key partners in the community planning partnership operate collectively. That gives us an opportunity to push further towards meeting Mark McDonald's point about outcomes, because community planning partnerships are about outcomes and single outcome agreements. We are on that journey, and we have started it in earnest.

Mark McAteer: Before I pick up the point about CPPs, I will mention a couple of other matters relating to Anne McTaggart's point about working elsewhere in the UK.

We have had discussions with our colleagues in Wales. They have been working with us on a piece of software that we will launch later this year. In return for that support, we have agreed to support them on some of our benchmarking work. They are going through a reform process and a restructuring of local government. They have asked that later in the year we open a dialogue with them in detail, and we will do that.

This year, I was in Northern Ireland to talk to colleagues through their local government association. They, too, are going through a reform process and they have asked to do further work with us next year once their new councils are up and running. We will be able to share our practice and guidance on our experience. We will continue to offer such support to other colleagues across the UK.

On David Martin's point about CPPs, I think that that was a matter that we discussed with you the last time we were before the committee. We have since agreed a programme with the Scottish Government, which we will launch in the autumn, to take some of the insights on how to apply the benchmarking of local government to community planning partnerships. A project board is being put together, which is scheduled to meet early in October for the first time, to oversee the programme. We intend to publish a draft indicator framework in the autumn following the first board meeting, consult the community planning partners and come to agreement on what would be a core data set, to begin the dialogue and the process of benchmarking across the CPPs.

Following the autumn launch, we are looking to have what is, in effect, the equivalent of the overview report available some time early next

spring in March or April. That is the plan, but we will see how it goes. I hope that, come the spring, we will have something to say about the community planning process in a lot more detail. Obviously, the report will not be exactly the same as the one for the councils, because councils deal with services; rather, the report will look much more at the outcome end of the spectrum and it will involve all community planning partners.

Anne McTaggart: Way back when the committee began looking at benchmarking, we also had, at the outset, a concern about local authorities having to give data to different sources. Has the situation changed? Have any of the concerns been alleviated?

Mark McAteer: Data access and management remains a big issue for councils. Again, ours is not the only work on the issue; other groups at a Scottish level are looking at some of the issues, too.

The Improvement Service is involved with two groups. One is called the improving evidence and data group, which brings together colleagues across Scottish Government and the public sector to look at exactly those issues of making data easier to access not just for councils but for all public services. The other group is called the public service reform board. It is looking at the performance management frameworks across the public sector. Again, a rationale is to make it easier to access data and to harmonise the data that is provided across the public sector to different performance frameworks.

Data access is a perennial problem. The issue remains and the situation is not perfect, but there are attempts to clean up a lot of the data through our work as well as the work that is being done elsewhere.

Anne McTaggart: Thank you very much for all that information. What are your plans for the immediate and medium-term development of the framework from here on?

Mark McAteer: We set out some of the developments in the overview report. The family groups will be the biggest development over the next year. Over the next year, we will explore, I think, eight themes and, the year after, a further eight themes. That work is over and above councils' own work. That will be the big investment over the next period.

A second major area for us is strengthening the local public performance reports towards the end of this year. Again, that piece of work is well under way and we will work with the councils until about November to finalise it.

The last big area for us will be on customer satisfaction. We highlighted previously that we use

the Scottish household survey as the basis for customer satisfaction within the framework, but it has never been ideal. It is a good sample if we want to understand issues at Scotland level but, once we get down to the individual council level, the data samples become small and tend to be somewhat unreliable. Again, over the next 12 months, a big aim is to strengthen that data from the local authority perspective so that, in future, stronger customer service data feeds into the benchmarking.

Those are the three big areas, but there will be other things as well. We can send you through a copy of the full development plan, if you wish, so that you can see some of the other areas on which we will be working as well. However, those are the major ones.

The Convener: That would be useful for us.

Stuart McMillan: Last week, the COSLA commission produced its report on local government. Have you had any discussions with it, bearing in mind the recommendations in the report?

Mark McAteer: Do you mean with COSLA or the commission?

Stuart McMillan: The commission.

Mark McAteer: I was one of the advisers to the commission and, as part of its discussions, we certainly made it aware of the work that we had been doing through benchmarking. Its conclusions on the need for stronger local accountability in local democracy chime with work that we have been doing and, depending on what happens with the recommendations of the report, they give us fertile ground to continue to promote that work.

Our work was available to the commission as background information; there was no real detailed discussion about it at its various events over the past six months or so.

The Convener: Many people considered that the benchmarking project and data could be used as a stick to beat councils with. There seemed to be quite a fear about that at the beginning of the process—I do not know, but perhaps that is why it took so long—but that does not seem to have been the case. Would you like to comment on that, Mr Martin?

David Martin: It is a matter of local government being confident about performance and improvement. Certainly, that is very much the message that we have had from the COSLA leadership, from individual councils' political leaderships and from their oppositions. We need to know how we are performing in order to improve public services, especially as we have a burning platform in terms of public finances.

It would be fair to say that there was some nervousness about to what extent we would have unhelpful and uninformed league tables in the press. Through the launch of the project last year, we tried to begin a more informed debate, and that approach worked. The kind of feedback that we now get from the media is about interest in how public services are performing as opposed to naming and shaming and talk of postcode lotteries—that was part of the concern—and that has built confidence in using the data.

We have demonstrated with the project that local government is good at self-evaluation and can be relied on to do that and use the information for improvement.

The Convener: Thank you very much for your evidence, gentlemen.

I suspend the meeting for a couple of minutes for a change of witnesses.

10:28

Meeting suspended.

10:30

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our second panel of the morning: Steve Grimmond, chief executive of Fife Council, and Elma Murray, chief executive of North Ayrshire Council. Would you like to make any opening remarks?

Elma Murray (North Ayrshire Council): I would, convener. I thank the committee for inviting me here to give evidence. North Ayrshire Council has worked with the Improvement Service and colleagues across the council community over the past three years in the area of benchmarking, so I am happy to be here and will try to answer all your questions.

Benchmarking—the process rather than the benchmarks themselves—is a fundamental part of the council's overall approach to performance management and performance improvement. The local government benchmarking framework is not the only framework that we use. We do a lot of work with the Association for Public Service Excellence, which covers England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Benchmarking is very much about driving improvement, and for staff it is about learning more about critical thinking.

As the committee will have gathered from earlier questions and answers, the process is still evolving, and that evolution will continue. The process involves elected members—I can talk more about that, if you like—as well as chief officers and staff. I mention staff, because a lot of

the process is about the overall culture and ethos of improvement within the totality of the organisation.

Local reports were mentioned in the session with the previous panel. If you would like copies of some of the local reports that North Ayrshire Council produces for its cabinet and its scrutiny committee, I will be happy to provide those after the meeting.

The Convener: It would be useful to have those reports, Ms Murray—thank you.

Mr Grimmond can go next

Steve Grimmond (Fife Council): I have no opening remarks to make.

The Convener: Okay.

Ms Murray, in relation to the level of scrutiny and overview by councillors, you mentioned the cabinet and the scrutiny committee. How much access do all the elected members in North Ayrshire have to the data? How have you helped them to understand what it all means, not only in general terms but for North Ayrshire in comparison with its family members?

Elma Murray: The way that the process works in North Ayrshire is that, this year, we have provided pretty much identical reports to our cabinet and our scrutiny committee. All our elected members get copies of all the cabinet reports as a matter of course. They get a weekly delivery of reports and, each time we hold a cabinet meeting, a cabinet report will be included in that delivery. All our elected members get that information provided to them.

The members who sit on cabinet are members of the administration, and the scrutiny committee has cross-party membership, including independents, of which North Ayrshire has a fair number. In total, 14 of our 30 elected members would attend a meeting to deliberate on the reports with officers.

Last year, following the first annual report from the Improvement Service, we took the reports to council, which meant that all council members got access to the information the very first time that we considered it. This year, as I said, we have honed that down to the cabinet and the scrutiny committee to give us more time to debate the information and to allow us to go into a lot more detail than we can at a full council meeting.

We have been evolving our approach to performance management and performance improvement overall, and we have been looking at the overall approach to benchmarking, including all the different benchmarking forums in which we are involved.

We intend—we have not done this yet—that, once we have pulled more of that work together and can present it to members in a cogent way that allows them to see the overall work that we are doing, we will provide that information to all members at a performance management and improvement seminar. We expect that seminar to take place later this year.

The Convener: I will come to Mr Grimmond in a moment with the same questions.

I have said previously that, in order to drive improvement, front-line staff must be aware of where the council is at, because they are often the ones who come up with the best ideas for improving services.

How do you relay the benchmarking information to front-line staff? What impact do they have in driving improvement?

Elma Murray: Some of our front-line staff will take part in some of the benchmarking activities. When we look at particular aspects of our performance and determine how we will engage with the Improvement Service through our council family groups or through peer groups, which could be different from our family groups, front-line staff get involved in that work. Rather than cascading down, that work would bubble up to senior management and to chief officers, where appropriate, to allow us to have a look at the recommendations that come from it.

If you do not mind, convener, I can give you an example of how we have done that this year.

The Convener: Please do.

Elma Murray: One piece of work that we did over the course of this year involved looking at educational attainment for looked-after children. That is a family group piece of work that will be done through the Improvement Service this year across all authorities, but we did an early piece of work because the issue was particularly important to us. We had the information from the first couple of years' worth of benchmarking to point us in the right direction.

We got together with four other local authorities, and service delivery staff across all those authorities got involved in that work. They looked at the issues that were causing poorer performance for looked-after children and at the areas where performance was better. Looked-after children will be taken into council accommodation or private accommodation—certainly in North Ayrshire, it is council accommodation. If we take them into some of our children's units, their performance is generally much better than it would be if they had stayed at home. We also found that performance is better if the children are living with foster carers. We considered the conditions that

are needed for better performance, such as the environment in which the children are living and the support that they get. We also looked at the similarities and differences between what we and the other authorities do.

From that piece of work we found that, although there were a lot of similarities in what we were doing, there were some ideas that came from the staff themselves that they thought they could progress further. Spending a concentrated piece of time looking at the conditions for those young people and working with colleagues in other councils helped them to develop other ideas. Four or five recommendations came out of that piece of work, which then went to chief officers so that we could look at them and say, "Yes, we're happy for you to progress that work to try and effect even more improvement in what we've been doing and the outcomes for those children."

The Convener: I will take you back a wee bit. Before you gave the example, you said that some of your front-line staff had an input. How can we ensure that all front-line staff play a part in that improvement and know what the process is about?

I ask that because, in my days as a councillor, a member of staff would often come to me and say that they had never been listened to on a particular matter, and that we could improve things by doing X, Y and Z. It was often the case that that X, Y and Z made a huge difference to folks' lives in terms of service delivery. How do we ensure that all and not just some staff are involved in the process?

Elma Murray: That question does not relate directly to the local government benchmarking framework; it is about having an improvement ethos and approach across the whole organisation. North Ayrshire Council will adopt and facilitate a number of activities to allow all our staff to get involved in improvement activity.

I could not say to you, hand on heart, that 100 per cent of staff in North Ayrshire Council are involved in improvement activity, but there is an opportunity for all of them to be involved in improvement activity through things such as suggestion schemes, which allow staff to make suggestions for improvement; regular communication between staff members, senior managers and team leaders about what is happening in their service and how they can improve it; and a range of projects and initiatives on which we communicate clear information to all staff members. That allows them to see where improvements are being made and how their peers and colleagues are getting involved in improvements at different levels across the organisation.

You are asking about a much broader issue; it is more about the council's organisational development activities, which allow some of that to take place.

The Convener: I may come back to that.

Mr Grimmond, how do you ensure that councillors can scrutinise the benchmarks and that they have the ability to bring about improvement? I am also interested to hear how and at what level staff are involved.

Steve Grimmond: On elected member engagement, we have embedded the local government benchmarking framework in our council plan. At a very high level, we have recognised that suite of indicators as a good proxy for performance across the council and have identified that as an improvement target for the council over the council plan's lifespan. That was considered and agreed by the full council. Monitoring on progress on the council plan comes back to the full council regularly.

We have embedded the LGBF in our service plans, which has given more opportunity to interrogate the performance information forensically. Our scrutiny committee considers that biannually, so there is an opportunity to challenge services' progress and to look at that through the lens of the LGBF performance data, including a comparative analysis of cost data.

The third element is our executive committee and the administration's involvement in setting policy and undertaking decision making in relation to budget strategy. We have used LGBF data, particularly the cost-comparison data, as a fairly rich seam of information that helps—at the very least as a can-opener—members to begin to scrutinise spend in particular areas and to ask questions about the opportunities that exist for efficiency in areas in which the performance data suggests that Fife is an outlier in relation to our family groups and across the board.

10:45

On staff involvement, in setting the LGBF within the council plan as a high-level improvement target, I have ensured that we have engaged with staff across the council to improve the focus on, and highlight the importance of, performance. The LGBF data is a significant lens through which to look at performance, although it is not the only lens—there are a number of ways in which we can do that. We have shared information with all staff about our relative performance according to that data set and have encouraged staff to engage in dialogue about how we can improve over time. There are various ways in which that can happen, and they probably mirror what Elma Murray said about individual members of staff being

encouraged to make suggestions for improvement, more planned approaches to looking at particular areas and the involvement of staff across the hierarchy in improvement programmes. We also have improvement boards that are populated by senior staff on the council but which also involve staff right down at the front line in looking at how we can improve. There are a range of ways in which we engage staff.

As for elected members, in addition to the consideration that we provide through committees, we provide full benchmark information for all members of the council at the point of publication.

Anne McTaggart: Ms Murray, you mentioned your work with the Association for Public Service Excellence on looking at the UK and further afield. Can you tell us a wee bit more about that? Has it created loads of extra work and loads of different data?

Elma Murray: We have been working with the Association for Public Service Excellence for longer than we have been using the local government benchmarking framework. Although the association has its roots in a lot of what traditionally would have been the blue-collar operations of councils, it has now expanded. Some of the indicators and data that we send it are the same and some are a wee bit different, but it is all data that we feel is relevant to our council's performance. APSE also has benchmarking groups in which we are particularly interested in participating, including groups on refuse collection, building cleaning, highways, winter maintenance and so on.

Anne McTaggart: In any of those examples, have you made any changes because of an example from the UK of something being done differently?

Elma Murray: Sometimes we make small changes and sometimes we make bigger ones. I do not have the detail with me today, but I could get it for you if you wanted.

Picking up on Mr Grimmond's point about the different lenses that we use to look at our performance, I think that this gives us another lens and another suite of performance information against which we can compare ourselves. It is about looking outwith the council at other areas to get a broader perspective on what we are doing.

Mark McDonald: How often do you review the indicators that are put before council members? I know that some are statutory, but there are others that councils choose to place before members.

Steve Grimmond: The council management team reviews the corporate indicators on a quarterly basis. They are in a defined basket of indicators that includes a reference to the LGBF suite but which also contains other indicators.

That approach is mirrored in the council's scrutiny committees, which have six-monthly reviews of service plans and performance in relation to that. At the individual service level, there will be a more regular quarterly review of specific indicators in relation to an area of service.

Elma Murray: As a corporate management team, we do the same thing on a six-monthly basis, with some exception reporting, as well as between times, depending on what the indicators are telling us in areas where we are seeking to make a specific improvement. Again, that approach is mirrored in our cabinet and scrutiny committees. We also have our annual public performance report, which we take to council. In essence, there are three opportunities for review at elected member level and at least three opportunities at corporate management team level over the course of the year.

Mark McDonald: On the issue of when reviews take place, what about the statutory performance indicators? I am aware that councils have taken some measurements for a very long time; some of those will be relevant, while some of them might have become less so. Are there some things that we are continuing to measure that we should no longer measure? Are there some things that we ought to measure that we are not measuring at present? Do you have feed-in to the process of deciding what SPIs are being measured?

The Convener: At the very beginning of the process, there was discussion about creating uniformity in the measures that various bodies were going to use. Has that uniformity process started? Is it complete? Will it ever come to fruition? You might want to add those points to your answer.

Steve Grimmond: At its heart, the LGBF has been a significant tool in driving uniformity and comparability. That has been a positive development.

With regard to Mr McDonald's question, the other thing that the LGBF has done, certainly from a Fife perspective, is allow us to review the wider range of performance data that we currently collate, which has led to our culling some of that data. There was a sense that we had a myriad of forensic data that was not necessarily well aligned with the key priorities that we as a council were trying to deliver.

Almost at a service level, we have been reinforcing the need for comparable uniformity to give us key indicators with which we can compare ourselves. As a consequence of that, we—and, indeed, members—have been challenging our

services to find out whether we can reduce or remove some of the less relevant indicators.

As for whether there are other areas that would be useful, one of the issues is how we measure progress in relation to locally set priorities, which might well be consistent. The LGBF data might assist in shining a light on that, but there might be other local priorities that we would seek to capture data on.

The final point is that although the LGBF data provides a significant suite of data across local government, it is not completely comprehensive. There are other areas to which we might want to give more forensic attention. For example, we in Fife would wish, as a priority, to develop further intelligent measures on our economic development activity, and there is also the question of how we measure success and performance in our early years activity. That would not necessarily be covered comprehensively in LGBF data. Those are two examples; there are probably others.

Elma Murray: I do not want to say much more about uniformity than Mr Grimmond has, but I would like to reflect on the Accounts Commission's SPIs. For two years now, the commission's annual direction has been that it will use the performance information that it gets through the local government benchmarking framework, and that approach has been extremely positive with regard to how councils, the Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland work in this area.

From a council point of view, Mr Grimmond is right. I suspect that most councils probably review annually whether the range of indicators and measures that they are using to assess their performance is still relevant and appropriate to the delivery of services in their area and the range of services that is being delivered.

My council has a much broader suite of measures than that contained in the local government benchmarking framework. Although there are certain measures that we have identified, we also provide information to other regulatory bodies across Scotland on issues that are important for our public to know about and which relate to particular aspects of service delivery in our area. We clearly mark out in our public performance report the issues that are local government benchmarking issues, those that are statutory performance indicators, those that are additional measures used by the council and those that we might send to other bodies. Hopefully, that provides complete clarity.

One important aspect that shows that we are reviewing and reassessing the situation is that, only a year into the local government benchmarking framework, we have added another

measure on economic development in relation to our employment activity. I see that area as being important to all councils in Scotland and one on which we will want to do further work.

Mark McDonald: I asked the previous panel about an issue that I focused on at the very start of the process: the measurement of inputs versus the measurement of outcomes. I get the feeling that we are still a little too keen on measuring inputs when the policy agenda has been more about the delivery of outcomes.

When you measure an input, do you take any steps to identify measurable outcomes that enable you to draw out the narrative between the funding that is going in and the performance and quality of service that are coming out? I am aware that data will not always tell you how well the service is performing, but it will give some indication beyond simply saying that we are putting X amount of money into this service or that it is costing X amount per head to educate children. What is the outcome from that? I know that, in education, the attainment data is good but I do not think that, in other services, there is the same focus on outcomes that there is on the input data that is put before councillors.

Elma Murray: Our input and output measures are important in guiding us to where and how we should be asking questions.

Mr McAteer referred to a piece of national work that the public service reform board is doing and which I am leading on the national performance management framework. As you will know, that framework has been in place since the present Scottish Government took office in 2007—in other words, for seven years. It is focused on outcomes, and we are looking at how we can better demonstrate nationally that those outcomes are being achieved on an on-going and progressive basis.

I agree, in part, that we need to do more work on focusing on outcomes. However, to go back to my previous point, I think that the input and output measures that we use at the moment allow us to begin those important discussions with colleagues, either through the family groups or through peer groups, about the outcomes that they are achieving with the measures that they have. That allows us to think about how we do what we are doing rather than what the outputs are. That is the link between the outcomes and the measures.

Steve Grimmond: I want to avoid repeating the comments that have just been made, but perhaps I can add to them by highlighting an example. The benchmark framework indicators are largely input and output indicators that focus on cost. In Fife, we see them alongside our council plan priorities, which are largely based on outcomes, and we

connect the input and output data to those outcomes.

For example, there are clear outcomes in relation to providing quality social care to residents in Fife against a fairly challenging backdrop not just in Fife, but nationally. The input and output data in the local government benchmark framework gives us a useful opportunity to challenge whether we are doing the right things, and whether we are doing those things effectively to deliver on the outcomes. That cost data allows us to ask some fairly hard questions about whether we are organising the way in which we deliver social care as effectively as we can against the outcomes. That is how I would pull that connection together. Those input and output indicators should not be used in isolation, and they are not used in isolation in Fife.

11:00

The Convener: A number of members want to come in, so please keep questions and answers brief.

Stuart McMillan: On the composition of the family groups, how do you think they have been working? Are you content with them?

Elma Murray: We had quite a lot of deliberation before the family groups were finalised, so nothing that we are doing has been done without full consideration and I am pretty comfortable with them. The other reason that I am comfortable with the family groups that my council is a part of is that, in addition to the family groups, we have a range of peer groups for different measures.

I do not know whether this is in the full report that the Improvement Service gave to the committee—I am just trying to find it in my notes—but we use themed peer groups in some of the other work that we do. There are about half a dozen different peer groups, which allows us to work with different councils on different subjects. That is not necessarily part of the formal work that we do over the year and it may be more localised.

I will give you an example. North Ayrshire Council decided to look at non-domestic rates collection and we chose to do that with Perth and Kinross Council, which is not in a family group that we would normally be related to because it has quite different demographics and a different geographical profile. However, we decided to look at Perth and Kinross Council because it is a top performer and we wanted to find out what the council was doing and how it was going about it, to see whether there were things that we could improve in North Ayrshire. A couple of actions arose from that, which we will implement within our non-domestic rates team—it was the staff who did that work.

The groups are working quite well, but they are not exclusive—we can dip in and out of them to do other pieces of work where that is particularly relevant to our councils.

Steve Grimmond: I broadly agree with Elma's comments on that.

It is early days for the family groups. One advantage that the project offers is the potential for a structured approach to be taken through the pilots to further examine how effective the family groups can be. That is a positive development that we are comfortable engaging with, although it is not the only approach. For example, we have been looking at improvements in social work provision, prompted by the local government benchmark framework data. We are pursuing that with a range of partners, but particularly in relationship with North Lanarkshire Council—we want to explore what it is doing because that has a particular relevance to improvements that we want to make in Fife. North Lanarkshire Council is not in our family group, but we are still engaging with that council.

Cameron Buchanan: How could the family groups be improved? You also mentioned peer groups. You are obviously flicking between them by going to other councils such as Perth and Kinross Council. What is the peer group?

Elma Murray: I have found my note on peer groups and will include it in the material that I send to the committee. The note is part of an internal report that we wrote to remind everyone what the peer groups are. We have peer groups that deal with issues around population, employment, council size, young people, child poverty and rurality. Depending on the indicators or service area that we want to look at, we might do certain pieces of work with the local authorities in a particular peer group.

I guess that I am saying that I do not have a suggestion for improving the family groups at the moment. I am happy with how they work as long as my authority and I can dip out to examine particular aspects in other areas, because there are occasions when I would want the opportunity to compare what the council does with practice in another council that is not part of one of the current groups. Having all that information for 32 councils allows us the flexibility and the rigour that are associated with working as a part of the family group.

Stuart McMillan: When you or your staff speak to other local authorities to learn about their best practice and try to instil that in your own local authority area, do you consider trying to involve the third sector in delivering some of the improvements if there is an opportunity for it to get involved?

Elma Murray: My quick answer to that question is yes, but I think that Steve Grimmond has a specific answer.

The Convener: You can answer, "Yes", Mr Grimmond. However, if you could give us an example, that would be grand.

Steve Grimmond: Yes is the short answer. Another short answer is that the role of the third sector and learning from experience elsewhere are central to improvement arrangements in our social work services.

John Wilson: In the early days of the benchmarking process, we heard that local authorities were complaining about the number of agencies to which they had to report different data. Has the benchmarking process eased up on the amount of reporting that local authorities have to do to other agencies, or have we found a way of providing and collating the information that is required for a range of agencies within the framework?

Steve Grimmond: The framework has been a positive step. Local government must get better at and become efficient in providing information that will service more than one client.

It is less clear whether the framework has led to a significant reduction in the level of other external scrutiny. Its positive benefits for local government have related largely to having a more transparent approach to identifying performance and to driving an improvement agenda rather than its having been a driver in successfully reducing a wider range of scrutiny.

Elma Murray: I agree with the points that Steve Grimmond has made. Mark McAteer mentioned that the local government benchmarking framework information has not only local authorities but some other agencies as its owners. That is because some of the information that we pull together into the framework comes as a result of information that we put centrally into, for instance, education—that is the main service area that comes to mind.

We are trying to use data for a number of other agencies at the one time, but we have not streamlined it as much as any of us would wish. Part of the national work on the performance management framework to which I referred earlier will be to establish whether there are performance measures—in particular, inputs or output measures—that do not add real value to what we do in public service in Scotland. It will also establish whether there is scope for some of those measures to be removed from the suite of indicators that we provide to allow us to focus on those that absolutely add value to what we do. That is a separate and quite big piece of work.

John Wilson: Out of curiosity, I ask whether there have been additional resource implications for your local authorities of providing the information that is required for the LGBF on top of the reporting mechanisms that are and will continue to be in place.

Elma Murray: In the first year and probably the second year, we spent additional time on checking and verifying the data—Mark McAteer referred to that—to ensure that we were measuring the same things and that the quality was right. Staff from the departments that are involved have now regularised that more into a process. In my council, that does not feel inappropriate or as if it is an additional burden.

Steve Grimmond: I agree—Fife Council has no additional burden. We are using more intelligently the staff who would have been collecting performance data to deal with the balanced basket of indicators. We have reduced the provision of some information that was previously collected, as the council has decided that that is less important.

John Wilson: Ms Murray said that she places value on North Ayrshire Council's membership of APSE and that reporting mechanisms are in place as a duty of that membership. Will the council continue to be an APSE member in the long term? Will the subject of some of APSE's indicators be drawn out better under the LGBF? I understand that continuing to be a member of APSE has a financial cost to the council.

Elma Murray: You are right that we pay to be a part of APSE. We have an annual process to evaluate what we want to be a part of and what provides added value to the council. We would not be a member of APSE if that did not provide us with value, which comes from the broader comparison with what is happening in England and Wales and from comparing additional elements of service that we do not necessarily compare through the local government benchmarking framework.

We participate in a range of benchmarking clubs as well as in APSE—for example, we have the Society of Information Technology Management benchmarking club for information technology and we are a part of the Scottish community care benchmarking network. APSE is a big national body that looks outside the Scottish local authority area, but my point in referring to it was not just that it gives us a wider lens but that it demonstrates that using the local government benchmarking framework is not the only way to drive performance improvement. We believe in using a range of other benchmarking frameworks and being a part of other organisations to help us to do that.

John Wilson: Are you saying that, at present, the LGBF is not sufficient to cover all the areas that your local authority wishes to benchmark?

Elma Murray: That is correct. The framework does not have the broadest range of indicators that we could use. It gives us what we require for statutory performance indicators and it gives us a lot of very good performance areas but, as a council, we choose to make comparisons in other areas, as we think that that is important to the services that we deliver in North Ayrshire.

The Convener: I think that you heard my last question to the previous panel. It was thought that all this could create a set of league tables that would give various folk a stick to beat local authorities with. Has that been the case? If not, how have we managed to avoid that situation?

11:15

Elma Murray: Right from the start of the process, I was never fearful for councillors in introducing it because it was absolutely the right thing to do and it was done at the right time. The way in which we started to publish the information and the openness of our approach to it have served the local government community in Scotland particularly well, and I hope that that will continue year on year. The process has been of huge benefit to Scotland already. It has also been of huge benefit to a lot of our staff and to elected members because of the broader look at performance improvement and our understanding of what the benchmarking process is all about.

Steve Grimmond: I was not fearful of the process at the outset either, and the way that it has played out has confirmed that it was right not to fear the framework. We need to be bullish about being transparent and open about performance both within local government and with the public that we serve, and the benchmarking framework provides a means of doing that. If we do not know how we are performing, how can we possibly improve? The framework has been a helpful tool in that regard.

The other positive outcome is that it has not played out as a single set of league tables. There has been recognition of local circumstances, of the fact that Scotland is not homogenous and of the requirement to deliver services that are responsive to local needs and demands. The way in which that information has played out locally, through public performance reporting and wider examination of that, has recognised the local factors. The framework has been a positive force for good.

The Convener: Thank you for your evidence.

I suspend the meeting for 15 minutes for a change of witnesses and a comfort break.

11:17

Meeting suspended.

11:31

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our final panel for today: Councillor Elaine Green, chair of the education committee at East Renfrewshire Council; Mhairi Shaw, director of education at East Renfrewshire Council; Councillor Stephen Curran, executive member for education and young people at Glasgow City Council; and Maureen McKenna, executive director of education services at Glasgow City Council.

Would you like to make any opening remarks?

Councillor Elaine Green (East Renfrewshire Council): Just to thank you very much for the invitation to come to the committee.

The Convener: In that case, we will move straight to questions. Overall, to what extent is the benchmarking framework used in education services in order to learn from others and then drive forward improvement?

Councillor Stephen Curran (Glasgow City Council): It is a good opportunity for us to be here today. The benchmarking framework is an important facet and tool for us in the drive to raise attainment in Glasgow, which has the largest local authority and also the authority with the biggest issues of disadvantage, and to give every young person the best start in life. It has been a really helpful tool for us in relation to recognition, particularly for the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. We could have had a simple measure that did not take into account disadvantage and some of the difficult circumstances that our young people are facing in different parts of the country.

The important thing for us is that we can get a clear picture of what we are doing as measured against what our colleagues in other parts of Scotland are doing, and we can also talk about ways of sharing best practice to improve our practice. The benchmarking framework has been a helpful route for us in getting that information through.

Perhaps more important, it has been helpful for us in showing where we have made an improvement—sometimes a dramatic one—in raising attainment of some of the young people who are facing the most disadvantage. We use benchmarking regularly, but not exclusively.

Councillor Green: I agree with what Councillor Curran has said. We use benchmarking extensively across the authority. We use it with our family group of authorities, but also across the whole country. The elected members find it valuable because it helps us to scrutinise what we are doing well and what we could improve on. In East Renfrewshire, as in Glasgow, benchmarking is not used exclusively, but it is used extensively.

Maureen McKenna (Glasgow City Council): As Councillor Curran said, that set of statistics is not the only set that we use. I view the benchmarking tool as being quite high level, and from a director's perspective we would certainly want to be able to drill down much more towards the individual school and classroom levels. I am sure that Mhairi Shaw would take the same position. As directors, we do a lot of work at lower levels of statistics to really get down to look at what makes a difference for every child and young person.

The Convener: East Renfrewshire has areas of social deprivation as well, but its attainment levels are extremely high. Do you drill down to look at the differences between socially deprived areas and the attainment levels in them in East Renfrewshire, for example, and similar areas of social deprivation in Glasgow, and take lessons from that?

Councillor Curran: It is probably worth looking at the scale. Some 42 per cent of children in Glasgow schools are in the bottom 10 per cent in the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, so it is sometimes difficult to get a similar enough comparison. We would probably have examples with colleagues in Fife, with whom we have looked to share best practice in respect of some of the improvements there. There are similar challenges in Fife with the scale of deprivation. However, you have made the point that each council can find young people who face such disadvantage. Our priority is to show that a difference can be made for children who have in the past been deemed less likely to succeed.

We certainly have good conversations about practice with colleagues in neighbouring authorities such as East Renfrewshire Council. I suppose that, with the intensity of that practice in some of the school environments, we can look at what can make a dramatic difference for young people in using the benchmarking and show where we can see a difference in attainment levels and the raising of expectations. It is not just about raising the expectations of staff and elected members; it is also about communities, parents and families being able to see that things can be evidenced on the ground. They must have confidence that something is not just a measure and that it shows progress that they can feel in

their community and the schools that their families are part of.

Councillor Green: We punch above our weight in our areas of deprivation and we are very proud of our schools, particularly in the Barrhead area and Eastwood. It is all about aspiration for our young people. Regardless of where they live in East Renfrewshire, we look for them to have the best educational experience that they can have, and we ensure that they will have that.

The director of education can give members more details on how she drills down. It is about the quality of teaching, as well.

Mhairi Shaw (East Renfrewshire Council): Councillor Curran referred to the fact that the family groupings are helpful with the local government benchmarking framework. Our youngsters from areas of deprivation perform very well, and that is to do with the quality of education that they get in our schools. However, we, too, use the framework to measure ourselves against councils whose characteristics or profiles are similar to ours. For instance, East Dunbartonshire Council performs better than East Renfrewshire Council in these areas, and we use the information to work with colleagues in East Dunbartonshire to find out what they are doing that we can learn from. That is a benefit of both the family groupings and the LGBF.

The Convener: Let us stick with areas of social deprivation. Is it fair to say that you put more resources into those areas than you put into some of the more well-off areas in East Renfrewshire?

Mhairi Shaw: Yes. We have had great support from the council in addressing raising the attainment of the lowest-performing 20 per cent. We have had additional support over the past three years. That has not necessarily been focused only on areas of deprivation; it has been focused on youngsters across the authority, including those in more affluent schools. However, we have certainly addressed that. We have set targets for specific groups, but they may comprise, for example, those who are entitled to free school meals, rather than necessarily being area based.

The Convener: It seems from the written evidence that you have provided that East Renfrewshire Council is pretty forensic in drilling down and addressing any difficulties that it finds. Has that ethos taken a while to build up or is it quite recent?

Mhairi Shaw: I would say that we have a pretty mature approach to using benchmarking information. I do not take any credit for that, as my previous boss set up a unit in the quality improvement team to ensure that the intelligent use of data is the basis on which we identify where there is room for improvement or room for

celebration. Our schools benefit from that, right down to the level of the individual child, as we track attainment of individuals from primary 1 all the way through.

The Convener: I am interested in the language that is being used. Councillor Curran talked about expectation, Councillor Green talked about aspiration and now we have heard about celebration. Language is often important in driving a policy forward. It can form attitudes from the bottom up and from the top down. How much input do your front-line staff have in trying to reach the levels of aspiration and get to the celebration point? Are they aware of the benchmarks? Are they helping you to drive forward improvement?

Councillor Curran: Ultimately, they are the most important people in ensuring that we can celebrate success. Raising attainment and achievement is not as simple as meeting some of the measures in the benchmarking framework. There is a bigger picture for some young people who are in challenging circumstances. For example, we have a fifth of Scotland's looked-after and accommodated children, which can be a difficult set of circumstances. The target that we might aim for initially is to get such children to achieve as well as the next person in the class, but the aspiration has to be developed beyond that.

Our staff share that bigger picture from the framework. The comparator schools and the local authorities in the peer group are important parts of that, but sometimes good informal relationships develop from that. Those relationships can become quite formalised—there can be close connections between schools that have similar issues. For example, a school in the north-west of the city might have a relationship with a neighbouring school in West Dunbartonshire where the community faces similar issues. The schools can share best practice around that.

We need to evidence that we are making a difference and meeting the needs of all young people, and the staff are the ones whom we trust to do that. The leadership in the schools is trusted to take that work forward, to involve parents at every point in making decisions and to explain the prioritisation. For me, the key issue is that we have to make it clear that this approach is part of the picture. We expect the staff in schools and other organisations that they work with to understand every young person and their circumstances. That should be uppermost in the minds of staff if we are to make a radical difference and celebrate a dramatic change in attainment and other levels of achievement.

Councillor Green: In East Renfrewshire, everybody from the directorate as well as the elected members, headteachers, staff and parents have aspirations for young people and children in the area. Benchmarking is important, but we do not see it as a league table; we see it as a way in which we can challenge and celebrate where necessary. Our education committee, which meets every six weeks, will challenge the directorate if we think that that is necessary, but we also celebrate the successes of headteachers and young people. The aspirations are across the board. That has been the approach since the inception of East Renfrewshire Council in 1996, so it is mature, as the director of education said. Our elected members know exactly what questions they should ask.

Mark McDonald: Councillor Green mentioned drilling down into council-wide data to get local data. Is that local data made available to elected members and community bodies such as parent councils, so that they can see the data that is relevant to the individual school or schools in their communities? I am seeing lots of nodding, so I will take that as a yes.

Councillor Green: It certainly happens in East Renfrewshire.

11:45

Mark McDonald: One of the traps that we fall into all too often—it is a slight bugbear of mine—concerns the distinction between attainment and achievement, because academic attainment is not always the encapsulation of the child's experience through the school process. Obviously, it is difficult to capture that wider achievement through the data that you are collecting here. Is that something that councils have considered?

Another trap that we fall into concerns the fact that, when we look at attainment levels, we compare the previous year with the current year, even though that means that we are talking about two very different groups of children going through the process, and children are compared with those who have gone before them rather than being viewed against their own progress. What steps do you take to track the child's progress through the school system so that their attainment is looked at not only in terms of what previous years attained but in terms of the expectations for that particular year group?

Mhairi Shaw: We look at wider achievement and gather information on that. It is fair to say that that process is not as mature in terms of the information that we gather, but our schools are gathering information about youngsters' involvement and achievement in activities that we see as contributing to their attainment. Essentially, attainment is the measure of that achievement. Youngsters are not going to attain well if they do not also have the confidence to achieve, so we

conduct lots of activities and have various measures around, for example, the number of youngsters who go through the Duke of Edinburgh award programme, and we report that through our standards and quality report and our end-year and mid-year reports to the education committee.

As I said, we track youngsters' individual progress. That starts in primary 1 with a baseline assessment, and we have standardised tests that we administer in primary 1, primary 5, primary 7 and secondary 2. That enables us to have expectations of how those youngsters should progress and what they should attain at the later stages, information about which is gathered by the LGBF. That information is used to predict the range of attainment results that youngsters should have ambitions to achieve.

That tracking is essential. It is available at individual pupil level, but it is also considered in terms of school and stage performance. That information is shared with our headteachers and it is also made available to all class teachers so that they can see the expectations for youngsters alongside other assessment information such as that which they gather from seeing how well they are performing in class.

Maureen McKenna: Like Mhairi Shaw, we look at wider achievement. We feel particularly strongly that we need to raise our young people's expectations by broadening their experiences. We use wider achievement opportunities to broaden those experiences in order to develop the confidence and resilience that Mhairi Shaw mentioned, which is important if they are going to attain well in exams.

In the past two or three years, we have been working particularly hard in relation to the Duke of Edinburgh award and we have been getting more successes in that regard. That programme is challenging and it can be tricky for our young people who come from particularly difficult circumstances to deal with issues around planning for it, finding opportunities to take part in it and how to finance it.

We have focused a lot on sports leadership, for which we are now the UK's leading local authority. That has been a wonderful success for us, particularly in the run-up to the Commonwealth games. There are lots of opportunities in relation to achievement, and we report on them through our standards and quality reports, like all the other local authorities in Scotland.

I take your point about the one-year attainment statistics being about that particular cohort. However, as a local authority, we need to look at trends over time. We can allow for a little bit of local variation as regards one cohort compared with another, but we should be looking at that trend over time across any size of grouping to see whether improvement is coming through consistently. We allow for little fluctuations, but that needs to be watched carefully.

Our schools track individual young people's progress. We are not as mature as East Renfrewshire Council in relation to data about individuals, but that is partly to do with scale. We have 36,000-plus young people in our primary schools and 26,000-plus young people in our secondary schools. We have headteachers, whom I consider to be senior officers of the authority, and it is their responsibility to track individual young people. Central staff go out and sample that and we will work on and scrutinise some of the data. We also engage in a lot of activities in which we bring heads together to talk to and challenge each other about levels of attainment and how we are monitoring and tracking it.

Without a shadow of a doubt, we have a national gap at primary school level, where data is not there. We have looked at diagnostic assessment—

The Convener: Can you explain what you mean by a national gap?

Maureen McKenna: There is no national attainment data for young people from the age of three to the age of 15. The first national data appears in Scottish Qualifications Authority examinations. There used to be national assessments of young people from the age of five to the age of 14. I hasten to add that I am not arguing for a return to national assessments but something is needed. Standardised tests in East Renfrewshire serve a very strong purpose there. There is a whole range of different types of assessments out there.

Our staff gather a range of assessment information in primary schools and we have worked very closely with the schools to ensure that they have data on each and every child, that we are raising children's expectations and that children are making the appropriate progress. However, I do not have data that I can gather to look at how Glasgow is performing compared with East Renfrewshire by the end of P4 or the end of P6 or whatever. That data does not exist just now and that is an issue that needs to be debated.

The Convener: Ms Shaw made a point—I will bring you back in soon, Ms Shaw—about classroom teachers having access to the data. You mentioned headteachers and you said that central staff go in to schools and that headteachers, as senior managers, have managed the data. What access do the classroom teachers have to the data?

Maureen McKenna: That data comes from classroom teachers and the headteacher will have

the overall responsibility for it. The senior management team at the school will link with individual departments and then it goes right down to classroom teachers looking at their young people's performance.

I was, in a previous life, a principal teacher of mathematics in a secondary school. We used a lot of data in partnership with classroom teachers, who took the responsibility for it in their classrooms. It is the same in primary schools, where there will be regular meetings between the depute, the head and classroom teachers to look at and drill down on the progress of individual children. That is part and parcel of life in a primary school or a secondary school nowadays.

The Convener: One of the failings that there always is in this life is when there is not sufficient data transfer. As kids move from year to year, from teacher to teacher, and possibly even from school to school, which is often the case, how does that data follow them to ensure that we are getting it right for those children?

Maureen McKenna: In primary schools, there is always transition. I was also, in a previous life, a schools inspector. I looked at a lot of schools and at a lot of the processes that they use. Transition is a key part of the process—you are right. When a child goes from P3 into P4, it is a critical transition for them. Equally, it is a critical transition when a young person goes from P7 to S1. Therefore, over the years, a massive amount of effort has gone in to ensuring that information about each child is transferred. What is the most important information to be transferred? Schools need to know about a child's progress in particular key curricular areas but they also need to know about how that young person is as a learner. Some of the work through the new curricular reform on personal learning plans is going a long way towards improving the level of information that is being transferred and held in schools.

The Convener: Ms Shaw, you were desperate to come back in.

Mhairi Shaw: I was remiss in not pointing out that, to overcome the year-on-year comparison with different cohorts of children, we set three-year targets. The targets set are based on what has been achieved in the previous three years. That helps to smooth out what otherwise might be annual spikes.

To return to Maureen McKenna's point, we do not have opportunities in the curriculum for excellence to benchmark before S4. However, we are trying to build teachers' professional judgment skills across sectors and schools. There is an opportunity to do that between local authorities; indeed, some local authorities have started to do that, although I am not sure that, as a country, we

can rely on those assessments yet. On top of that work is the annual Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy, which gives a national picture. Maureen McKenna is right to point out that, as an education authority, we do not get the information from that survey that would allow us to say how well we are performing against the national results.

Councillor Curran: I will touch a little bit more on Mark McDonald's question. The important point is what happens after young people leave school. The positive destination figures that Skills Development Scotland works on are critical, because they are broken down not only to local authority level, but to school level. Therefore, we can compare and contrast and share best practice on the challenges that we face.

When looking at individual young people, the onus is very much on the secondary level. We need greater focus—it perhaps needs to be a national focus—on collecting information in primary, and perhaps the early years, too, in order to tackle some of the most disadvantaged. However, for the young person individually, some of our schools are doing exceptional work. We are sharing that practice and lifting expectations. More important, however, is that although you can be on track for individuals, you need to be on target, too. Furthermore, that target must be, as far as possible, more ambitious than just simply being on track.

I have seen very good examples in some of our secondary schools where data is drilled down to subject level for individual pupils. We have looked at the issue from an elected member perspective as well as the professional focus to consider what works in a particular environment and how to get that young person to achieve better results, even in one subject compared with other subjects. That individual approach that the staff lead on and the information that they collate is critical in that process.

Councillor Green: Mark McDonald asked about achievement. East Renfrewshire celebrates that in a big way. We have conveners' awards for outstanding achievement for young people. That is not all about educational attainment; it is also about the rounded child and the learning experience. The pupils are often invited to come along to the committee and their achievements are celebrated with the elected members.

Alex Rowley: I will come at the issue from a different angle. The Accounts Commission's "School Education" report says:

"Councils' spending on education fell by five per cent in real terms between 2010/11 and 2012/13".

You are operating in a fairly difficult financial environment and all the signs are that matters will

not get any easier. How does the benchmarking information influence policy makers? What other information should be brought together to influence policy makers? How will that affect the direction of funding? What should the funding be used for? What should councillors and local authorities be prioritising? How do we use the information? It is difficult for me to consider how to do that and I commend both authorities for the progress that they are making.

I know Glasgow better than East Renfrewshire. In Glasgow's case, great progress is being made on deprivation and poverty levels. However, we need to do better in education right across Scotland. What is it that we need to do? How can we use the benchmarking? For example, I was a member of Fife Council when we got advice that meant that we shifted significant amounts of money into the early years. The advice that we got was that by the time a child goes to primary school at the age of four or five their future could be set out for them, so we must get in there much earlier. How do we prioritise that? How do we use all the benchmarking information to make the case for where we should be directing resources?

12:00

Councillor Green: Resources must be targeted to where they are needed most. Benchmarking certainly helps us see where there is room for improvement, and we can then put extra resources in there. In East Renfrewshire we are investing a substantial amount of money in early years provision in the Auchenbach area because it is seen as an area of deprivation. We are working with the community health and care partnership and Sir Harry Burns on getting in as early as possible to do prevention rather than intervention. We are targeting lots of resources at that.

Across the board, though, we must spend money where it is needed. It is very difficult in the current financial climate, because we are all having to pull in our horns. However, in my opinion, the money must always go to where the most need is.

Councillor Curran: A good example of that would be the focus on early years that Mr Rowley mentioned. Glasgow City Council and East Renfrewshire Council were the only councils that were delivering 575 hours of free nursery places. We were way ahead of other local authorities in Scotland on that because our two local authorities prioritised that provision. It was obviously a Scottish Government objective and a wish that people had, but the resource was not necessarily there. However, Glasgow City Council and Renfrewshire Council made a conscious effort to prioritise that provision. We can see that in the measures that the Improvement Service outlines

in terms of expenditure on each nursery place. That is largely around having better qualified staff. Sometimes in our situation it is about having standalone establishments in particular areas of deprivation because we know that that is what is needed in that area for pre-five education to be delivered in a quality environment for young people facing the most difficult circumstances.

There is pressure on finance, but we have made a political commitment to early years provision. We know that there is national good will around focusing on the early years at the moment. To some extent we are ahead of the curve because we always saw the early years as an important place for putting our money where our mouth is.

Having worked with colleagues in councils around the country, I know that from a national perspective the Improvement Service benchmarking support that the committee can see in the information that it has before it today is an important aspect for councils. It allows us to ask what we do and how we do it. How do we adapt to the pressure on resource? The blunt question is: how can we make savings in order to continue to deliver that service when there are growing expectations around provision for two-year-olds? We have met what is required for the first year of expectations around vulnerable two-year-olds but we will need to find extra resource to meet the growing pressure in that regard. As Mr Rowley said, resources will not rise overall over the next few years and we expect that to be a more difficult situation for us.

What is important is political commitment that is followed up by the evidence that you are putting your money where your mouth is.

The Convener: It is in some regards about putting your money where your mouth is. Also, however, Glasgow City Council gave evidence on early intervention to the Finance Committee not so long ago. The Finance Committee said in its subsequent report:

"The statements from Glasgow city council about the lack of existing evidence raise serious questions about why such key delivery agents are not familiar with the available wealth of information on early intervention that is discussed throughout this report."

Have there been improvements in terms of the evidence gathering that Glasgow City Council is now doing?

Maureen McKenna: I am not sure what you mean.

The Convener: I am quoting one of the conclusions of a report that the Finance Committee produced not long ago.

Maureen McKenna: I cannot comment on it as I have not read it.

The Convener: We can allow you to come back and comment on that later.

Councillor Curran: It is worth commenting briefly. It depends what the early intervention point was about. If it was about the early years specifically, then all local authorities, the NHS and other partners, including the third sector, work on early years and early intervention through the early years collaborative, which is a new way of working. In terms of some of the work that has been going on, that is quite a new way of measuring the process and the outcomes. It could be that because of the infancy of the early years collaborative and the work around that, we all need to get to grips with how that makes a dramatic difference.

The Convener: The evidence was part of a 2011 inquiry on preventative spend and was basically about your early intervention programme. I believe that Ms McKenna may have been a witness.

Maureen McKenna: I am not sure.

The Convener: We can come back to that because it is a trickier question. However, it is important that we manage to evidence these things.

Alex Rowley: I am puzzled about where you pulled that out from, convener.

The Convener: It is just a question in relation to early intervention and gathering evidence to ensure that the resource that is going in is getting the outcome that we require.

Alex Rowley: To return to the point about how we influence policy, I favour a debate in Scotland on where we go with education, the importance, or not, of early intervention and the evidence for that. I am interested from an educationist point of view in how to direct that. I see that in terms of how we use evidence. What have we got there? What else do we need? Some people say that if we are going to put major investment into early years, it will be 10 or 15 years before we can prove that it worked; others say that that is not the case. I am interested in it from that point of view.

My final question is how we go forward in education, training and skills, which are absolutely key to employment. I am thinking about the links between the vocational and the academic, and the links with colleges. Aircraft carriers, parts of which are built in Glasgow, are assembled in my constituency. What I am finding with those employers is that they are recruiting all over Europe because they cannot recruit the skilled labour in the local area. How do we measure the links with businesses? How much is education working with business to ensure that kids get the qualifications that allow them to develop the skills?

As policy makers, how do we use this information to direct priority in future spend?

The Convener: Shall we go to the education professionals first and then the politicians?

Mhairi Shaw: I come back to the school leaver destinations and the links to employers. That is an area that we can strengthen in East Renfrewshire.

On our ability to measure the impact of early intervention, Councillor Curran is right to point out the work of the early years collaborative. The fact that youngsters' progress with developmental milestones will be measured at the 27 to 30-month assessment, on entry to primary school and again in primary 4 gives us an opportunity to gather evidence to show the impact of early intervention.

However, early intervention is more about working with families. I know that Glasgow is working hard, as we are in East Renfrewshire, to ensure that we make a difference at as early a stage as we can. We are working with our colleagues in East Renfrewshire's community health and care partnership to ensure that we identify those youngsters before they reach nursery age and before they turn three.

There is a way to go to ensure that the measures that we gather are robust. I am not sure that we have a coherent set of assessments that is consistent across the country. Even within East Renfrewshire, assessments are not consistent. However, we will be able to see results from that. We gathered a baseline last year, in line with the national target. I am sure that we will see some impact of that this year because of the family-friendly approaches that we have been taking in our pre-five centres.

Maureen McKenna: I am busy racking my brains on the 2011 inquiry. I have been to the Parliament a few times. It was three years ago and we have moved forward since then. As Ms Shaw and Mr Rowley say, the evidence to support preventative spend is long term and there is still a lack—I do not think that Glasgow is different from anywhere else on this—of a coherent set of indicators that would allow us to be able to ask whether we are making a difference. Our work is very much focused on third sector, families and nurseries. We work very closely with our health colleagues, so there is shared learning there, because NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde goes across the council boundaries. That is how I know that East Renfrewshire is working along the same lines as us in terms of looking at family centres and the support that councils provide there.

In Glasgow, because of the scale of the challenge that we face, we work very much with the third sector, looking to see where we can maximise the support from the third sector, because it is much better placed than the statutory

services to make an impact in local communities. It is more than just what happens inside the nursery—the work goes beyond the nursery doors. The nursery can be a catalyst and can pull partners together, but if we are going to achieve systemic long-term change, we need to look at how our communities function, how families are working and how we can support those families.

Although there is no coherent agreement, in the past three years we have undertaken a significant amount of research in partnership with the Glasgow Centre for Population Health, to look at longitudinal evidence of the differences that our interventions are making. As long ago as 2011, we started stretching the age range from the early years collaborative, which when it started was very focused on under-fives; we said from the outset in Glasgow that we needed to keep the age range as zero to eight, because our children continue to experience difficulties and families take time to build their capacity.

In terms of policy making, one of the challenges that Glasgow city faces—with our college partners—is that we build families' resilience and confidence, help them with their literacy levels and signpost them on to employment and further training, but we are unable to get them to access college places because the funding focuses on 18 to 24-year-olds and some of our vulnerable parents are 25-plus. That has been particularly challenging. I sit on the Regional Board for Glasgow Colleges and that is an issue that we are looking at to see how we can assist.

I will go on to the business partnerships that Mr Rowley mentioned. Vocational education is a critical area for us. We have been making slow, steady progress in terms of positive destinations. The gains have been hard fought: we are taking little steps every year to improve and to close the gap on the national picture. In particular we have focused on raising expectations and aspirations and so our biggest gains have been around higher education, delivered in both colleges and universities: in 2013 we increased that by 2.5 per cent, when nationally it dropped by 0.6 per cent. That is significant for Glasgow and I was particularly proud of that.

We recognise that our business partnerships are absolutely critical. As an education service, we have spent a lot of time getting young people ready for businesses—looking at employability skills and so on. What we have not done well is get businesses ready for young people. In particular, we need to work with small and medium-sized enterprises—the majority of employers in Scotland—because it is a big decision for a small business to take on a young person and to understand and respond to that young person's needs. This year's challenge is to work in partnership with the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce to look at how we can work better with our small and medium-sized businesses as well as at the senior phase programmes to see whether we can build better pathways. That might be done not through traditional attainment measures such as highers, but through national certificate and higher national certificate pathways that would be delivered between schools, colleges and businesses so that young people start to get business experience—perhaps a day a week and moving forward—from a younger age.

12:15

The Convener: I am aware that we are now straying into various realms of education policy and I do not want to upset the Education and Culture Committee in that regard, so I ask that we try to stick to benchmarking in the main and temper the questions to that.

Councillor Curran: The important point is that the benchmarking would have to sit alongside the Wood commission on developing Scotland's young workforce. The points that Mr Rowley made on that show where we have to sit. The work that Ms McKenna outlined on business partnerships and the relationship with the college sector are important.

The critical issue for me is that, as a council, we sign up to a single outcome agreement and the benchmarking is based on the perspective of the council and partners. However, the colleges and universities are in a slightly different environment—indeed, they are under the remit of a different committee—so it is important for us to answer the specific points on how we make young people ready for the existing job market and how we measure that against our colleagues in other parts of the country.

The Convener: Thank you for that—I am impressed that you got back to benchmarking. You did it very well.

Councillor Green: Most of the points that I would make have already been covered.

As far as vocational education is concerned, we welcomed the Wood commission recommendations. We certainly need to link more with business.

Ms McKenna covered early years and early intervention well. We need to get to the communities, work with families and ask what they need of us, not impose what we think they need. It is all about communication.

Cameron Buchanan: I will focus on positive destinations. What do the witnesses mean by that? It is surely dependent on where somebody is. Mr Rowley mentioned that, in Fife, engineers

and shipbuilders are sought. The witnesses, particularly Ms McKenna, focused a lot on positive destinations and the rates from Glasgow schools. What exactly do they mean by positive destinations? Are they directing the pupils and giving them vocational guidance? How do they monitor it?

The Convener: Can we temper that slightly and ask how we benchmark positive destinations?

Cameron Buchanan: That is what I really meant. Thank you.

Mhairi Shaw: Positive destinations are when youngsters go on to school, further or higher education, employment or training. Those are the measures that are shared, in terms of the work of Skills Development Scotland, and they are published annually. That information is shared to the family groups.

We have worked on the LGBF pilot on positive destinations or the school leaver destination return. In my view, positive destinations are the fairest measure of a school, regardless of where it is. For instance, many schools in Glasgow outperform schools in East Renfrewshire in terms of youngsters going on to positive destinations. They will not be going on to the same destinations—a large cohort of our youngsters goes on to higher education—but that is irrelevant as long as the youngsters go to the correct destinations and those destinations are sustained.

The measure that is followed up in March is often a better indication of how successful we have been in getting youngsters on to the right pathway. However, the way forward to ensure that we seek and secure improvement is to share information through the family group with which we are already working, share best practice and look behind the published statistics.

Councillor Curran: An important set of examples would be the number of pupils who gain level 5 or level 6 qualifications. If we look at East Renfrewshire Council's statistics, it would appear to be streets ahead—rightly so, given the focus on that. In Glasgow City Council, we want to improve measurably against the work that has been done against other comparators, but that specific figure is vital for us to show that we have lifted the expectation.

Those are two important benchmarks, but, to go back to Cameron Buchanan's point about positive destinations, we need more of our young people to see higher and further education as where they would expect to be, and we are very much focused on that. Last year we saw a particular improvement when there was a growth in the number of people who went into higher education, compared with a slight dip in the Scottish figure. That led to a warm feeling across Glasgow as all

the schools saw that they had made a dramatic difference.

Cameron Buchanan: Do you monitor people after they have left school? Do you benchmark—to use that word—after they have left school, or do you just do it when they leave school?

Councillor Curran: Skills Development Scotland contacts people a year after they have left, to ensure that the destination remains roughly the same. However, we can look at more work on that. The bigger picture of the whole process of education is vital and benchmarking should be part of that.

John Wilson: I would like to drill down into the benchmarking framework, particularly for Glasgow. There may also be issues relating to East Renfrewshire.

In the area that I live in, in part of the region that I represent, every day approximately 450 secondary school pupils are bused in from the east end of Glasgow to a high school in Coatbridge. How are achievement levels and positive destinations measured, in relation to the benchmarking framework? Those pupils are being educated not by Glasgow City Council but by North Lanarkshire Council. How are the figures for those pupils measured? My question relates particularly to Glasgow City Council's benchmark figures, because those pupils are not being educated in Glasgow.

The Convener: There are cross-boundary issues.

Maureen McKenna: Those pupils are part of North Lanarkshire Council's secondary school system. The young people who travel into the school in Coatbridge attend it by right, because their primary schools are associated with that secondary school, in the same way that one primary school that sits in Glasgow is historically associated with West Dunbartonshire. Until recently we had the same situation in East Renfrewshire, which had to change because of pressures due to growth in house building down in the south-west of the city.

Although the children to whom John Wilson referred are educated in Glasgow at primary level, North Lanarkshire has responsibility for secondary education. However, we work closely with North Lanarkshire and we would not consider removing those pupils or seeing them as Glasgow City Council children.

John Wilson: I think that Ms McKenna has picked me up wrongly. I am trying to drill down to find out in which benchmark framework they are measured. Are they measured in North Lanarkshire's framework? Some of those children come from the most deprived areas of Glasgow,

so some of the Glasgow framework figures might be skewed, because they do not accurately measure Glasgow residents and children who live in Glasgow who are being educated in a neighbouring authority.

Is there any way in which we can address that issue, to ensure adequate resources and adequate measuring? You have talked about attainment, achievement and positive destinations. The measurements of those 450 children who live in Glasgow are being set aside another authority, rather than Glasgow City Council. Are we adequately measuring things for the benchmarking framework in a way that takes full account of potential long-term problems—I am talking not just about education, but beyond the years that people are in education—for Glasgow city?

Maureen McKenna: Some parents use placing requests to put their children into different authorities all over. The challenge would be how we would unpick that, because a number of our children are mobile and families choose for their children to go to different schools. I confess that I have not thought about the issue in such terms and that I am not sure how the statistics would be unpicked or unpacked. We must work in partnership to have the assurance that young people are getting the best possible opportunity. Our psychological services work closely with North Lanarkshire Council when any young person transfers. However, I am struggling with how to think about that in terms of the benchmarking tool.

The Convener: When kids have gone to primary school in one local authority area and suddenly go into another local authority area, I am sure that that skews the yearly tracking if those kids came from more deprived areas that have traditionally had lower attainment levels. The figures might be skewed in the other way in some areas and might show that folks are doing better in secondary school if kids from affluent areas go to secondary schools in poorer areas.

Mhairi Shaw: It is fair to say that the LGBF sits out of kilter on that aspect. We always use information to help our schools to improve, as in Glasgow, but in such circumstances, it is more difficult to do that and to use that information as a measure of an authority that is educating a child or one that is not educating a child, as Maureen McKenna suggests. There is an opportunity to bring the LGBF into line with other measures by measuring the attainment of youngsters by where they attend schools rather than by where they reside.

We always take responsibility for any children who are in our schools. Regardless of where they stay, they are East Renfrewshire pupils. We teach pupils from outside the area and we hope that they will learn and achieve in the same way as children who live in East Renfrewshire do.

Councillor Curran: Mr Wilson has raised an important question. There are two aspects. We can plan for the young people in a school's catchment area in the anticipation that they will go to the school, although there is parental choice about going to a denominational or non-denominational school and about placing requests outwith the catchment area. In Glasgow every year, we have about 3,000 placing requests for primary 1 and S1. That number is almost entirely within Glasgow. Planning is sometimes difficult and we need to know the young people very well. Benchmarking is important at a high level, but drilling down is significant.

Another important point for Glasgow—it applies to other cities across Scotland—is that a number of young people come to the city from outwith Scotland. In Glasgow, about 15 to 20 per cent of young people have English as an additional language and about 15 per cent are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Every year in Glasgow, 2,000 new pupils present at school with a range of language needs. How is that measured for benchmarking and how is the meeting of their needs fairly assessed? That is easy to do in a school, but it is significant to understand the wider picture.

Understanding the community that is being served is important. That is easier in a Scottish context, but Mr Wilson is right that we need to have a better and clearer picture to explain who is where and how that has an impact on service delivery.

Anne McTaggart: My question is aimed at Glasgow City Council. Your submission highlights the interesting point that it is important that Glasgow continues to benchmark actively against other suitable authorities in the wider national and UK contexts. I have asked other witnesses today about their UK connections. What are Glasgow's UK connections?

Maureen McKenna: We look at Manchester and London, because of the scale and the numbers. As Councillor Curran said, 42 per cent of our children and young people—about 27,000 of them—live in postcode areas that are among the most deprived 10 per cent. No other authority is close to that percentage and scale, so it is important to keep that outward look.

We have linked with Manchester for a bit of work on the Commonwealth games and on synergies between the two councils. More recently, I have looked closely at some of the London challenge work and the impact that the initiative had on raising young people's attainment

and their aspirations, given the level of deprivation there.

12:30

Councillor Curran: One important point is that it is not a one-way process. For example, yesterday, we had a headteacher up from a London school to look at the dramatic improvements that we have made in increasing attendance at school and reducing the level of exclusion. If we want to raise attainment, the most important and fundamental thing is to ensure that young people are at school and can continue there. We have a good understanding and close partnership with London and Manchester, because of the challenge work that the UK Government has conducted. That is similar to our raising attainment agenda, which we share with the Scottish Government and other colleagues across Scotland. A lot of resource went into that, but we know that the resource is not there now. The relationship that we have with colleagues elsewhere in the islands is an important aspect of measuring.

The Convener: Do you look at any other European or world cities that are comparable to Glasgow?

Councillor Curran: Very much so. The programme for international student assessment— PISA—results apply nationally, but we consider what they mean for us in Glasgow.

The Commonwealth games was a fantastic opportunity for us to have international education. There was a big focus in our schools on the Commonwealth family of nations and we had a partnership with UNICEF on children's rights. We have some good development work going on. For example, we have looked at work that is being done in Canadian cities, where there is a different approach to the early years, with perhaps more focus on full-time places for four-year-olds than there is on places for two and three-year-olds. We are developing a lot of relationships outwith the Scottish picture, but the benchmarking is our bread and butter, because that is how we will be measured and assessed in our communities.

Anne McTaggart: Mr Curran has just answered my next question, which was on how that work has impacted on the budget settlement. You have just given a fine example of that, Mr Curran.

The Convener: I am sure that the witnesses heard me ask the earlier panels about the fact that everybody thought that there would be pelters when the framework came into play—some folk talked about the possible press headlines—but that has not happened. Is that because your authorities are managing the process particularly well and giving explanations for the differences that exist?

Maureen McKenna: Although journalists like the headlines, a number of them recognise that benchmarking is important and that the context of a local authority is critical. It is important that we realise that statistics and benchmarking do not provide answers and that all they really do is raise questions, which allows as many people as possible to engage. Actually, it is that dialogue, not the benchmarking in itself, that brings about the improvements.

Councillor Curran: An important aspect of benchmarking for Glasgow is that there needs to be a recognition that deprivation is a significant factor in determining outcomes for young people. From my perspective, if there is political leadership and direction that sees benchmarking as important as well as professional commitment, particularly from the staff in our schools, and if there is openness and confidence in explaining why a council is in a particular place or why it is not perhaps where people would expect it to be—for good or bad reasons—that sharing of information is obviously good for accountability to the people whom we represent.

Councillor Green: We are comfortable with comparison; as I said earlier, East Renfrewshire Council has been doing that since its inception. Elected members appreciate it, as do parents. The information is out there, so parents can see exactly where the authority is going and, if they did not like it, they would certainly let us know.

The Convener: It's aye easier tae dae it fin you are right at the top o the tree on so many aspects.

Mhairi Shaw: I have nothing to add to what my convener has said.

The Convener: I thank our witnesses very much for their evidence.

I suspend the meeting briefly to allow the witnesses to leave.

12:34

Meeting suspended.

12:35

On resuming—

Public Petition

Wind Turbine Applications (Neighbour Notification Distances) (PE1469)

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is consideration of petition PE1469, by Aileen Jackson, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to consider a change in planning regulations to enable an increase in the current neighbour notification distance of 20m in relation to wind turbine planning applications. As members will recall, we have taken evidence on the petition as part of our scrutiny of the third national planning framework. We have a paper before us that sets out the actions that we have taken on the petition since it was referred to us in December last year.

During our evidence taking on the petition, the Scottish Government indicated that it does not think it necessary to change the current neighbour notification distance, but Minister Mackay informed us that the Government would look at issuing new best practice guidance on the notification system for wind farm applications. We have now received correspondence from the Scottish Government confirming that and setting out a timetable for the development of, consultation on and publication of such guidance. That is attached to the paper.

If members have no comments on the issue or the petition, do we agree to write to the Scottish Government to acknowledge the actions that have been taken on PE1469 in drawing up the aforementioned guidance; to request that the Government ensures that the petitioner is specifically consulted on the proposed draft guidance and that any views that she expresses are taken into account by the Government before it finalises such guidance; to ask that a copy of the finalised guidance be provided directly to the petitioner and that we be notified of that by the Government when the guidance is published in spring 2015; and to request that the Government ensures that the finalised guidance is properly publicised and brought to the attention of all planning authorities in Scotland, as well as all those making applications for the development of onshore wind farms and any other relevant persons or organisations whom the Scottish Government considers it appropriate to notify?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: In light of the Government's decision to issue guidance on neighbour notification as a result of PE1469, there appears to be no further reasonable action that we can take in relation to the petition. Therefore, do members agree to close petition PE1469 with immediate effect and ask the clerks to write to the petitioner and the Public Petitions Committee to notify them of the decision?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Before we finish, I take this opportunity to thank the petitioner, Ms Aileen Jackson, on the record for her petition. It is an excellent example of how an individual can use the Parliament's petitions system to effect meaningful change in important areas of public policy such as the planning system. I also thank the Public Petitions Committee for the work that it undertook on the petition before it was referred to us.

As agreed, we now move into private session.

12:38

Meeting continued in private until 12:51.

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice to SPICe.