



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## Official Report

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Wednesday 12 March 2014

Session 4

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**Wednesday 12 March 2014**

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**LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE**  
**8<sup>th</sup> 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:**

Ian Cooke (Development Trusts Association Scotland)  
Stuart Hashagen (Scottish Community Development Centre Community Health Exchange)  
Sandra Holmes (Highlands and Islands Enterprise)  
Rachael McCormack (Highlands and Islands Enterprise)  
Assistant Chief Constable Mike McCormick (Police Scotland)  
Andy Milne (SURF)  
Eric Samuel (Big Lottery Fund)  
Martin Sime (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

David Cullum

**LOCATION**

Committee Room 6



## Scottish Parliament

### Local Government and Regeneration Committee

*Wednesday 12 March 2014*

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:00*]

#### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Kevin Stewart):** Good morning and welcome to the eighth meeting in 2014 of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee. I ask everyone, including people in the public gallery, to ensure that they have switched off their mobile phones and other electronic equipment.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take items 6 and 7 in private. Are we agreed?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Subordinate Legislation

### Non-Domestic Rating (Unoccupied Property) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2014 (SSI 2014/31)

### Council Tax (Discounts) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2014 (SSI 2014/37)

10:00

**The Convener:** Agenda item 2 is consideration of two negative Scottish statutory instruments. Members will have received a paper from the clerk that sets out the purpose of the instruments, and I should tell the committee that the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee has considered the instruments and has made no comment on them.

If members have no comments to make, are we agreed not to make any recommendations to the Parliament on the instruments?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill (Draft)

10:01

**The Convener:** Our main item of business is agenda item 3, which is two oral evidence-taking sessions on the draft community empowerment (Scotland) bill and consultation. I welcome our first panel of witnesses: Stuart Hashagen, senior community development adviser at the Scottish Community Development Centre community health exchange; Ian Cooke, director of Development Trusts Association Scotland; Martin Sime, chief executive of the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations; and Andy Milne, chief executive of SURF.

Gentlemen, would you like to make brief opening statements?

**Ian Cooke (Development Trusts Association Scotland):** Good morning. We generally welcome the bill's aims and ambitions and support its general direction of travel. We also recognise the commitment of the minister, who seems to be genuinely trying to transfer power to local communities.

However, the key question is whether the bill lives up to that ambition. We have a number of concerns and think that the bill needs to be clarified or strengthened in parts, and there are a number of omissions from it that it would be good to touch on at some point.

**The Convener:** Can you give us an idea of what those omissions are? During last week's evidence taking, some folk said that the bill was perhaps too complex, and others had concerns about common good asset registers.

**Ian Cooke:** I agree that asset registers are a must if we are going to have an asset transfer process. The idea that communities should just guess who owns the assets and what their status is seems to be a big weakness in the plan process.

Moreover, the complete lack of any reference to community councils seems a bit of an omission in a community empowerment bill. Our written submission mentions a number of specific issues, but I appreciate that some of them might be picked up in the detail of the secondary legislation and the statutory guidance. That said, the lack of reference to community councils seems a fairly big omission.

**The Convener:** Just to play devil's advocate, I note that a point that is often raised with the committee is that many community councils are not representative because they are self-selecting.

Indeed, in many places, there have been no elections to community councils for some years now. In the evidence that we have taken in various parts of the country, some folk have told us that community forums, housing groups and other bodies are more representative than community councils. Do you have anything to say about that?

**Ian Cooke:** I share those concerns. It is not my job to come here and defend community councils. I am simply making the observation that, given that we have community councils and that we are discussing community empowerment, not including them in that discussion seems a bit of an omission. Not doing anything with community councils is not an option—we have either to strengthen them or to take a bolder decision with regard to the kinds of concerns that you have raised, say that community councils are fulfilling no purpose and look at putting something else in place.

**The Convener:** Community councils already have a place in legislation. Is it really necessary to add to that by putting further provisions about them in the bill?

**Ian Cooke:** It comes down to doing something or doing nothing. I am quite attracted by some of the provisions in the Localism Act 2011 down south. If, for instance, you gave neighbourhood planning provision to community councils, they could begin to play a more proactive and holistic planning role instead of simply responding to individual applications. There are more creative ways of strengthening the role of community councils and making them more interesting to ensure that they attract a broader, more representative set of people. That, in turn, will result in more elections.

Given that we have had a review, I find the fact that the bill makes no mention of the community council situation a bit of an omission. I am not here to defend community councils; I am just making an observation on the scope of the bill.

**The Convener:** That is interesting. Community councils already have a legislative place, while many other bodies do not. We will take account of what you said.

Mr Milne, you seemed very interested in Mr Cooke's comments. What is your opinion on community councils?

**Andy Milne (SURF):** I am always interested when Ian Cooke speaks, because he always has interesting things to say.

Community councils cannot be ignored. You are right to point out that they are part of the landscape and have a statutory basis, but the question is whether they have the resources to do the job that we expect of them. We often set up

structures without supplying the resources to ensure that the job gets done. If community councils had more support to ensure that they and their democratic process were more robust, it might be feasible to allocate them higher levels of responsibility, and we would then have statutory underpinning of a system of community representation that currently does not exist. The major omission from the present structure is a system of adequately supported, accountable and independent community representation.

Can I make a couple of other brief points?

**The Convener:** I think that we will wait for the questioning, but you might be able to add something later. We have only a very short time and a lot to get through.

**John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP):** Good morning, panel. Community councils' boundaries are usually drawn by local authorities, not communities themselves, therefore many people do not feel an affinity with their community council because they do not recognise its boundaries as fitting their community. That is a difficulty if we rely on community councils in many urban areas to determine what should be done in relation to community asset transfer. Will panel members comment on that?

**Martin Sime (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations):** Frankly, this conversation about community councils illustrates the big faultline in the bill. Is the discussion about community engagement with public bodies? If so, the bill should be called the community engagement with public bodies bill. Should the discussion be about community empowerment? If so, we would be talking about a whole lot of other things.

The community councils issue came up with the Christie commission, which recognised that community councils work quite effectively in some parts of the country, within the limited remit that they have, and absolutely do not work in other parts of the country. One framework for community representation will not fit all. There are all kinds of other ways in which communities represent themselves to public authorities, some of which have been inserted into the bill in a way that detracts from its original intention.

The bill has always been an exciting title in search of content. It is not really about community empowerment.

**The Convener:** As I said last week, we do not have a bill; we have a draft bill and we need to take cognisance of that. Your input might improve the bill when it is published.

Do others want to respond to John Wilson's question about boundaries and other things being

imposed by others rather than communities themselves?

**Andy Milne:** Mr Wilson's point is absolutely correct. I was simply trying to say that community councils are one of the tools in the box—to use that cliché—that we should make better use of. Clearly, and spectacularly, community councils in disadvantaged urban areas do not play the role that they play in the leafier suburbs.

In general, community councils tend to be models of resisting change and preserving the status quo. What is required in disadvantaged areas is radical change and regeneration.

**Ian Cooke:** I support that view.

**Stuart Hashagen (Scottish Community Development Centre Community Health Exchange):** I support it, too.

**John Wilson:** I should have made a declaration to the effect that I have participated in DTAS training because of my membership of a community organisation. Four weeks ago, on a Friday, I spent a whole day with two DTAS staff going through the competence training for a committee that is about to take over a community asset.

The main headline of the bill is about communities controlling and delivering services in their areas. The issue for me, however, comes down to how communities take ownership of the facilities and deliver those services. At present, there are various models of how community asset transfer can take place. There can be a partial transfer or a full transfer. How would the panel members prefer community asset transfers to be controlled?

**Stuart Hashagen:** To the extent that the draft bill is about empowerment at all, it is about the things that communities that are already empowered might be able to do. Taking over community or public assets and exercising the right to request participation in the process can be done only by communities and community organisations that are already quite well resourced and quite clear about where they want to go and what they want to do. For a lot of communities in the more disadvantaged parts of Scotland—whether or not they have community councils—that is simply not an option or, indeed, something that they want to do.

On the particular point about community asset transfers, we have spent the past year working with 25 communities in Ayrshire, producing community action plans. Many of the communities say that the assets in their area have deteriorated and that they wish them to be improved. None of them says that they want to do that by taking over the assets themselves. We need to be clear—

**The Convener:** Can I stop you there? The committee recently visited South Ayrshire, and our experience was somewhat different. One community in particular definitely wanted to take over an asset, and that did not seem to be atypical.

**Stuart Hashagen:** I think that you are referring to Maybole.

**The Convener:** That was one of them.

**Stuart Hashagen:** That is one of the few communities where there is an advanced structure and a great degree of interest. We were focusing on the communities that had not had a great deal of involvement in the past, so their infrastructure was fairly weak. That is why the project was established.

My point is that not every community wants to take over buildings, land and assets. Some do and some do not, and one position is not more radically progressive than the other. People basically want services and support that are relevant to them and their needs. Sometimes, that involves taking over assets that do not meet their needs and, in other cases, it involves negotiating with whoever manages those assets to make them more relevant.

Community asset transfer is not necessarily the solution to a community's problems. It is a solution only where the community already has the capacity, the support, the authority and the accountability to enable it to take that step.

**The Convener:** Do you not think that we should be building up that capacity to ensure that communities that might want to follow the example of Maybole and others can do so?

**Stuart Hashagen:** Absolutely. In our submission, we say that capacity building and community development are essential to equalise the power relationships of communities across Scotland and to increase communities' level of power and influence in relation to local authorities and others. There is absolutely a need for capacity building and support for communities that wish to take over assets and improve local conditions.

**Ian Cooke:** I take issue with that position. We have 200 members in communities across Scotland, and a good number of those communities are disadvantaged. A lot of people in disadvantaged communities own their housing, which is probably the biggest asset that communities can have. There is a danger that we could end up patronising disadvantaged communities.

I do not deny that there are issues within disadvantaged communities. There is probably a high level of grant dependency and a higher

reliance on public sector delivery and so on, so there are challenges. However, I do not really—

10:15

**The Convener:** Can I stop you there? Evidence that we have taken as we have gone round the country shows that, with a small amount of support, communities can go out and find money not from the public sector but from the private sector. A good example of that, which we have seen on our travels of late, is the Seaton backies project.

I am keen not to talk in generalisations but to look at all aspects of what communities are doing. We can sometimes be guilty of making sweeping statements about various communities and, as somebody who comes from a socially excluded community and has lived there for a long time, I get frustrated when we make those sweeping generalisations.

**Ian Cooke:** Absolutely. That is the point that I was trying to make—obviously not particularly well.

In looking at public sector assets, it is difficult to generalise because there are different sorts of assets. Some are liabilities, some are assets, some need quite a lot of work, some are heritage assets and so on. We almost have to look at each asset on its merits. That is why we need a coherent framework to allow communities and the public sector to engage in this agenda.

What we are trying to achieve, collectively, is sustainable asset transfer. It is in everybody's interests—the community's and the public sector's—to ensure that if assets are transferred they do not come bouncing back in a couple of years. For me, achieving that sustainable transfer is about ensuring that communities are engaging in the process critically. They will then be making good decisions about what the potential is and, particularly, about whether they have the capacity and the business plan to be able to deliver on the asset. They need to build in the capacity building, if it is required, and the post-acquisition support, which is crucial in ensuring that asset transfers work. There are a lot of examples across the country of groups doing that very effectively. That is what we are trying to build on, widen out and make available to more communities.

**Andy Milne:** I am going to risk disagreeing with you on this point, convener. I know that you have been round the country and have seen lots of examples. However, the main problem with the bill as it is framed at the moment is that it does not set itself in the current context of poverty and inequality generally. It does not set itself in the context of welfare reform, hugely rising levels of inequality and dropping wages. Individuals and

communities are trying to hold their families and neighbourhoods together. People are just trying to pay the rent and feed their families. The proliferation of food banks across the country is, frankly, scandalous.

In some cases, communities will want to take over the park and they should be supported to do that. The important point that you make, convener, is about how we build the capacity for that. How do we provide the resource for communities, first, to be stabilised enough to consider their options and, second, to make sensible decisions and then perhaps get involved in taking over assets?

The draft bill starts at one end, enhancing community engagement in community planning. Frankly, that should have been dealt with more effectively about 10 years ago. It then shifts gear tremendously, accelerating from 0mph to 60mph, and goes right up to communities owning swimming pools, parks and power generation centres. However, the real business is in the middle, which is where most disadvantaged communities are. It is about greater levels of involvement and participation, and it is about management. It is also about community development over time to build confidence and resources in order to get communities into a position where they can sensibly negotiate with the local authority which assets might be available. They then need to develop a viable business plan in the middle of the worst recession that any of us has lived through and make that sustainable over time so that the asset remains available not just to the members of the community who are involved in the planning, but to the community more widely.

At the heart of the bill is a great gap on the issue of poverty and inequality, which will be filled only if we manage to link the bill with the discussion that is taking place elsewhere in the Parliament about large-scale procurement. You have heard me make that point before.

**The Convener:** I do not want to go down that line because we have heard you before on that subject, Mr Milne. I want to deal with this draft bill rather than the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Bill.

**Martin Sime:** I agree with Andy Milne about the context being important. On the provisions in the draft bill, it is perfectly reasonable that there should be facilities and processes for communities to take over public assets if all the circumstances are right, but that is a marginal additional power in the context of the issues that those communities are confronting. The problem that I have is this: what is the draft bill trying to achieve that cannot be achieved without legislation? The same question arises on a number of issues that the draft bill deals with. Is it designed simply to raise the profile of issues and make marginal

improvements at one end of the spectrum or is it fundamentally about addressing the need to support, empower and enable communities to take more control of and responsibility for their circumstances? I have come to the conclusion that it is the former.

**The Convener:** Mr Milne said that a lot of this should just have been gotten on with 10 years or so ago. However, it was not and in such situations we sometimes have to legislate. Do you agree?

**Martin Sime:** Many of the issues that are confronted in the draft bill—I am not entirely sure that “confronted” is the right word—could have been dealt with outwith legislation and have been among the public policy options for ministers since the Parliament was created. There have definitely been opportunities. I noticed the recent reflections on the people and communities fund, which is another example of a resource that could have been deployed for useful purposes being diverted for other purposes. Such issues come up all the time. They are issues of practice and how ministers discharge their responsibilities.

**John Wilson:** I think that the reason why we have a draft bill before us is the failure of many local authorities and public agencies to engage in community asset transfer. However, that is a debate for another day.

The issue that I want to discuss now is whether we are raising communities’ expectations. Mr Cooke referred to communities deciding to take over, improve and run for themselves deteriorating buildings and facilities that are being closed by local authorities and others. Do we have the correct funding mechanisms in place to allow communities—particularly the deprived communities with which Mr Milne works—to provide meaningful service delivery?

**Ian Cooke:** Some of the funding is in place, but we certainly need more of it. Funding takes various forms and different resources are required at different points in the process. Some of it is there, but some could be delivered more effectively by refining other support programmes, particularly via the Scottish Government.

A key part of the resource argument is the question of asset transfer at less than market value. There is a huge issue about the valuation of public sector assets and what communities are asked to pay. The development trust movement works with a different form of public ownership—a modern version of it. However, communities are being asked to pay market prices although, clearly, they are not actual market prices—they are book market prices, which help local authorities in the public sector but do not particularly help community organisations. The

approach is not being seen as a creative form of investment.

There is more work to be done on the resourcing of the process. Parts of that are in place and parts are quite strong, but the situation varies throughout the country. There is a bit of a postcode lottery on the issue, particularly in relation to the support that communities can get in the Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise areas. There is further work to be done. For me, a big issue is the valuation of assets within asset transfer.

**Martin Sime:** We seem to be talking about two different things: asset transfer and communities delivering services. On the latter front, one of the great unexplored areas is the extent to which the self-directed support legislation will have an impact on communities' ability to organise services in a more mutual way than happens under the current arrangements. A local authority is only one of a wide number of agencies that make resources available to support communities to realise their ambitions. In the next panel discussion, the committee will hear from the Big Lottery Fund about its work in the field.

A number of other agencies are involved and we are hopeful that the new European programmes might be brought to bear in the area as well. A raft of resources are available to communities if we can get the support infrastructure and the culture right. We need to do most work on the culture of enabling communities to realise their own ambitions instead of public agencies having ambitions for communities, but the draft bill is silent on that.

**Alex Rowley (Cowdenbeath) (Lab):** My own experience is not that local authorities are reluctant to hand over buildings. Indeed, many local authorities would give them away tomorrow to save on rates, running costs and so on, but communities need the capacity to take over those buildings.

Am I right that a register was produced a few years ago? I certainly saw one. Throughout Scotland, the buildings that were in the worst condition were in community ownership. I would like you to pick up on that point.

I really want to talk about capacity building and community planning partnerships. Is there the capacity within community learning and development to deliver the right type of support? A question that was asked earlier was whether we should have been doing this 10 years ago. You have seen community education, as it was, become community learning and development; it has become a Cinderella service because of the cuts in local authority budgets. Is there a conflict between the delivery of CLD through local

authorities that are under massive pressure and local authorities' ability to deliver community capacity building in situations in which communities might be challenging the council? If we are serious about all this, are we saying that a service needs to be developed across Scotland, perhaps provided by the third sector, that can support communities?

I know that I have asked quite broad questions, but I would like to hear your comments on the role of community planning partnerships.

**The Convener:** There were a lot of questions there. Mr Hashagen first, please.

**Stuart Hashagen:** I agree with just about everything that Mr Rowley said. It is an omission that the draft bill says very little about community capacity building or the role of community learning and development. As Mr Rowley said, there is a contradiction between the movement towards communities having more influence and control over assets and decisions and the lack of support for communities from local authorities and others. When community learning and development was part of Communities Scotland, we got to a point at which there was reasonably clear recognition of the need for both approaches. However, things have changed, with Communities Scotland disbanding and community learning and development moving back into education.

Some useful work is being done, but community development is much broader than the remit of the education authorities. Something should be done to ensure that community learning and development is much more fully engaged with the capacity building support that communities need if they are to develop—and we should remember that the community development that we are talking about makes up only a third of community learning and development work.

**The Convener:** I will take Mr Sime now. I am interested in the third sector's role in capacity building. My own experience is that the third sector does quite a lot, certainly in the areas that I represent.

**Martin Sime:** People realise their ambitions through the creation of voluntary organisations—that is the starting point—and they have a huge number of different ways and opportunities of doing that. Four new charities are formed every working day in Scotland. They are not all in areas of multiple deprivation, but many are.

I absolutely understand where the question has come from, but a fork in the road has been evident to me in all the discussions that we have had on the subject during the past 15 years or so, and the draft bill does not resolve the issue. Is this an agenda that is about helping communities to organise and to engage with community planning

and public authorities, or is it an agenda that is about enabling and supporting communities to realise their own ambitions? The two agendas have become hopelessly conflated.

At the root of the problem are the engagement of CLD services in community capacity building and the direction taken in those agendas towards enabling communities to influence their local authority. In the third sector, we have been seeking from the statutory agencies a process of engagement and support to enable communities to develop their own priorities and address their own agendas. Of course, asset transfer is one of a number of ways in which communities might realise their own ambitions, but it is only one.

10:30

**Andy Milne:** I think that Mr Rowley hit several nails on the head. Specific resourcing for communities to take their own time to do their own research and make their own decisions, and then to be able to engage more effectively as partners in regeneration, has been wholly missing for many decades now. It is a mistake to run down community development budgets and shift community development into the idea that what communities need is to be educated, so that it becomes about education and community learning and development. That leaves genuine independent community development devoid of the resources that are necessary to do the job.

However, I think that there are, perversely, some positive things happening in this very complex world that we all live in. From discussions that I have had with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and people from the Scottish Government, my sense is that many local authorities now recognise the event horizon of rising demand and reduced resources reaching the point at which the present situation is just not sustainable. I think that, as a result of fiscal necessity rather than a philosophical shift, they are increasingly looking at the possibilities for engaging with communities, voluntary sector organisations, housing associations, social enterprises and so on much more seriously than was previously the case.

Through the practice of successful relationships in better, more progressive forms of procurement and through public service partnership models and so on, I think that local authorities will learn and will shift their culture so that they become more symbiotic with the communities and organisations around them. I am hopeful on that front.

However, that relates to the question of where the big resources are, which is an issue that we do not want to talk about this morning. Independent resources used to be available through urban aid

and, many decades ago, even through the Manpower Services Commission and the community programme so that communities could use their own assets to do their own work, out of which came important examples. Those resources have been removed, and we now have very small amounts of money. However, we also have a crisis that, of necessity, is precipitating some actions that are beginning to allow us to make some of the connections—at least, they are allowing us to understand where some of the connections might be—that could take the situation forward in a more collaborative way than has been the case over the past 15 or 20 years.

**Ian Cooke:** As I said earlier, achieving sustainable asset transfers is in everybody's interest. We included in our written submission the proposal that a community right to try be introduced. Working with local authorities and communities where there is a question mark about the capacity of an organisation or where the business plan needs to be tested, we could give the community a licence to run the asset for a couple of years, with both parties then reviewing the situation to see whether it is a goer. That would be a useful mechanism where there was a bit of doubt about whether a proposition was viable.

Support is critical. As we go around the country, we find that support for the level of activity that we are talking about is incredibly patchy in both the public sector and the voluntary sector. That is partly because, as a profession, community development is a bit off the pace, to be honest. Ten years ago, we were not talking about enterprise business plans and asset transfers; we were talking about a different set of skills. Although those skills are still useful, we have moved on a bit and I am not sure that the profession and the services have kept up to date with the agenda.

Our members tell us that they are looking for direct investment in their organisations. We can do so much through voluntary effort, but at some point we need to have our own staff to begin to do some of the things that Andy Mine talked about. Alongside that is the notion of having a critical friend who is prepared to ask the difficult questions. That was our approach to our involvement in the process in Glenboig to which Mr Wilson referred. We are not mollycoddling communities but encouraging them to make hard business decisions about whether something is viable. Injecting such precision is really important to the process.

We are receiving funding for the strengthening communities programme pilot that the Scottish Government has just launched, which is very much about testing the proposition that, if we want

community-led regeneration to evolve, direct investment in communities is needed. HIE, which will be on the next panel, has pursued for some years a policy of directly investing in community organisations to try to achieve that development.

**Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con):** Good morning. Mr Cooke, in your response to the consultation, you mention

“The problem with postcodes and other boundary markers”.

Where is the line drawn for community councils? How can we empower them if their boundaries are different?

**Ian Cooke:** I operate in the development trust world, where communities define their own boundaries. They set big or small areas depending on what they see as relevant to what they are trying to achieve, and that works well. That brings me back to Mr Wilson’s point. If we are serious about community-led regeneration, at the basic level we have to allow communities the opportunity to define what their community is.

There is certainly a problem when community councils are part of a top-down, imposed structure. My experience of working in urban communities is that the boundaries cut right across natural communities and almost inhibit the activity that we want to encourage. However, I think that we are looking at two different processes. I am not sure that community councils have a role within community-led regeneration, because that has to be built around natural communities. We need to give communities some space to define things for themselves.

**Cameron Buchanan:** Often, community councils do not work because they are self-appointed. You talked earlier about empowerment. How would you empower them? Is it necessary to give them resources, which you also mentioned?

**Ian Cooke:** I think that it was Mr Milne who talked about resources, but they are certainly an issue. If we see community councils as the lowest form of governance within the overall framework, we have to consider the possibility of them taking over some budgets, resources and service delivery and having some greater control, rather than just commenting on individual planning applications, which seems to be largely what they do.

It is also about trying to encourage community councils to take a proactive role. As somebody said, they tend to be populated by older people who do not want change. We are trying to create change, so renewal is important.

**Cameron Buchanan:** I have been to lots of community council meetings and their one thing seems to be saying no to planning applications and other things. They are negative, but that is

partly because they are self-appointed. If they are empowered and given resources, will that change things? I do not think that it will, but what do you think?

**Andy Milne:** May I come in on that? There is a chicken-and-egg thing here. It would be different if there was a task to be done and responsibility was allocated. The reason why I would not join a community council is that there is nothing for community councils to do except to object to planning processes. If I thought that the community council in my area was going to make real, meaningful decisions about local planning issues in a proactive way and was going to allocate resources that I thought were important for my area, I would make damn sure that I got involved.

**The Convener:** What about community councils that have had significant resources and the ability to make spending decisions given over to them?

**Andy Milne:** What about them?

**The Convener:** What has happened with them? Have they been a different kettle of fish compared with run-of-the-mill community councils?

**Andy Milne:** I am not aware of specific examples, but surely, whether it is community councils or other organisations, people will get involved only if there is something substantial to do. That is the process by which more people will become involved, which might create a level of competition and selection.

To be frank, I believe that the same goes for local authorities, to a degree. When local authorities were consistently being stripped of power and status, we saw that the number of people who were willing to put themselves up for the difficult job of being, essentially, a voluntary councillor fell away. When local authorities’ levels of responsibility, resources and decision making are rebalanced, the situation becomes competitive again. That model applies not just to community councils but to all kinds of organisations.

**Stuart Hashagen:** There are quite a few things that I want to fit in. I know that the committee will be looking at local democracy and public engagement in the future, and I hope that some of the issues will be addressed then.

**The Convener:** I hope you can see all the interlinking that is going on here between the bill, regeneration, procurement and the autonomy, flexibility and constitutional place of local government. It all fits in.

**Stuart Hashagen:** It surely does.

With regard to community councils, there is a very mixed picture. Some are completely moribund; some do not exist; some struggle on;

some are very boring; and some—along with development trusts and other vehicles—do some useful development work. We must recognise that there is a mixed picture in terms of the resources for community empowerment and development throughout Scotland, and that communities will gravitate towards the resources that they see as most active and effective.

I am not sure whether community council boundaries are a major issue—the rules might be different now. If community councils are part of the democratic system, the boundaries will presumably be set by the Boundary Commission for Scotland and not by the communities themselves.

**The Convener:** The boundaries are set by councils.

**Stuart Hashagen:** Okay—let us just say that the boundaries are set by a higher authority. The state defines where the boundaries lie, and any changes would presumably be pursued through that means.

To go back to my point, community councils may or may not be the best or the most appropriate vehicle for progressing development locally. In certain cases, different vehicles may be needed.

I have one final point—

**The Convener:** Very briefly, please.

**Stuart Hashagen:** I was up north in the Highlands at the invitation of a community council a couple of weeks ago. One outcome of that conversation was a decision that the community would probably benefit from establishing either a community association or a development trust—the community has neither—in order to progress the projects that it wants to undertake.

**Martin Sime:** Stuart Hashagen has ended up at the point that I was going to make, which is that people vote with their feet and get involved where they think that they can make a difference and in areas that reflect their energy and enthusiasm. That may not be the community council, not because it is not elected, but because people have found better ways in which to express themselves.

It would be helpful to establish an indicator of community involvement and to measure whether successive policies are successful in generating more community involvement. For example, the emergence of development trusts is an indicator of successful community involvement in the projects that a community wants to do and the aims that it wants to achieve.

There are many ways in which individuals and communities can engage with the public sector; it is not just about community planning, the local

authority or community councils. For example, issues around community engagement on health and the organisation of health services seem to be entirely absent from the debate. We are still talking about the different silos in public sector organisations and public authorities when we should be talking about bottom-up community engagement and the things that matter to communities.

**Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** Moving on slightly from community councils, I want to go back to the capacity that exists in communities. Even in my own constituency, involvement varies among different communities. There are some very active community councils—they probably fall into the self-selecting bracket—whereas in other areas there is no community council for what those areas would define as their specific community, although a range of other organisations, such as residents associations or regeneration groups, may be operating there.

Who is best placed to assist those communities to develop capacity? In some communities, the relationship of trust with the local authority may have broken down. For example, if a local authority takes particular spending decisions that involve the closure or mothballing of local facilities, and then comes in and says, “We’d like to help build up your capacity so you can take over the facility in your community that we shut,” that trust is not necessarily there. What is the best way to develop capacity in those communities?

**Martin Sime:** There is no best way; what is important is that there is a plurality of ways in which communities can seek support to realise their ambitions. We must not create a structured pipeline process to deliver particular services that leads from public authorities to communities. It is important that communities have access to independent support and resources, but there are never enough of those things. We need to keep working to ensure that various resources are prioritised—the people and communities fund could be reconfigured to play that role, for example. The Big Lottery Fund already plays a role and should be encouraged to extend it, and European structural funds, as well as local authorities and other players, could contribute to that agenda.

10:45

It is important not to conflate all the different sources—that issue came up in last week’s evidence session—into one process for communities. That would be ill advised, because a diversity of sources, purposes and processes will serve communities well in that regard.

**Andy Milne:** That point is well made; it is a complex and diverse world. One of the best things to come out of the bill has been the discussion. It is a bit like the referendum: we do not know what the outcome will be and the discussion is full of uncertainties and disagreements, but we all agree that it is important, and that the balance in resources and decision-making processes needs to be shifted. That is the case in this context, too. We should resist a one-size-fits-all approach that says that a certain model needs to be followed and that communities need to fit in with it in a certain way.

I return to the importance of connecting the bill's aspirations with the other things that are happening around us. There is something wrong with the way in which we connect things up given that we have food banks in what is the seventh richest nation in the world.

We continue to have areas of concentrated disadvantage—some have existed for nearly more than half a century—where we have not managed to make the connections. SURF is doing some work through the alliance for action to bring those elements together and to connect local projects, initiatives and knowledge with larger-scale resources through councils, the Big Lottery Fund, the Heritage Lottery Fund and others.

However, the terrain that underlies all that work is a difficult economic situation for the most disadvantaged communities. If we miss that out of the discussion and talk only—or largely—about asset transfer and the role of community councils, we will miss the most important challenge that we face.

Yesterday, I spoke at an arts project called the portal, which has won a SURF award. Across the road is a project called platform, which is for people with mental health issues. It has been running for seven years and is a great project, and there is a great symbiosis between those two initiatives. However, the local authority has decided to take out the two social workers who provide capacity-building support for the mental health project, and it has told the project, "It's up to you to run your own committee." Is that a form of empowerment? No. The whole project is beginning to implode and collapse, and people with mental health issues are going across the road to the portal to seek help. The issue is not always asset transfer or development trusts; there is a need for underlying good-quality basic services and a need to make the best of the connections that should be there.

**Ian Cooke:** That is one reason why I find it disappointing that the word "renewal" has been dropped from the bill's title. For me, that was the context: the bill was about how we promote community-led regeneration. Having had a

significant change in policy, which we fully support, the next question was how to implement that, and the bill had—and still has—the potential to offer a framework in that respect.

We must be clear about what type of capacity we are trying to build and for what purpose, but there is a real danger that we will make all sorts of assumptions in doing so. When we start talking about enterprise, people immediately jump to the assumption that we need businesspeople on the committee, but we do not. It is about how we think about things. Some of the most problematic development trusts have lawyers on the board who create all sorts of problems for the group—you might think that that is a great resource to have, but it can be an absolute nightmare.

**The Convener:** You are opening a can of worms there, Mr Cooke. We will get a lot of views on both sides about lawyers. On you go.

**Ian Cooke:** I am talking about assumptions about who is good for a board and who is bad. We need to consider how we can build the capacity of community organisations to become the strong community anchors that will drive community-led regeneration.

I make a plea. What has happened in Scotland in the past 15 years has been quite exciting, and a lot of it has been quite organic and bottom up, but we need to listen to the communities that are doing that work and find out what support they require at different points in the process and where they may be able to get that support within the current structures.

For instance, the Scottish Government has really supported social enterprise over the past few years, which I applaud, but we could probably nuance that support a bit more by looking at how that resource could be delivered to provide better support for community-led regeneration.

**Stuart Hashagen:** That goes back to engagement. Some communities can and do find their own capacity-building supports, but for those that do not, it should be the responsibility of public bodies in engaging with them to find out what capacity support they might need and where they might get it from. That may become part of the reformed community learning and development service. I understand that, in future, community learning and development partnerships will be required to produce plans for capacity building in their areas to last 50 years. With luck, they will investigate the resources that are available, how well those resources are co-ordinated, what the gaps are and how they can try to address those gaps. If that works, it might help communities to get access to the most appropriate form of resource to support them in the direction in which they are going.

That leads me to make a point that I hoped to be able to make earlier about the long-term viability and sustainability of the resources that are in the hands of the community; it also relates to community planning.

I am on the executive committee of a long-standing organisation that has its own youth centre. It has several staff, but its problem is that it is always trying to find funding to keep the staff in post and the service going, despite the fact that it fits entirely within the priorities of the single outcome agreement and community planning in the area. Community organisations end up in competition with one another for the limited resources that are available and spend a disproportionate amount of their time trying to chase down relatively small bits of funding to try to keep the skeleton structure going in the hope that more funds may be available in the future.

**Mark McDonald:** I recognise many of the points that have been made. One of the communities that I represent is one of the most deprived in Scotland. Have we got the balance wrong in the statutory focus on community councils? There is a range of community groups and organisations, many of which are probably more representative than community councils are, but they do not have statutory recognition and underpinning and a statutory footing, and are therefore often missed out in wider consultations on what will happen in communities.

**Andy Milne:** Yes, we have got the balance completely wrong, just as we have got the balance wrong in where we put regeneration funding investment. The funds that used to go to disadvantaged areas now go into much more business-oriented models. Members will remember the Scottish partnership for regeneration in urban centres—SPRUCE—model. Where has that £50 million gone? Some £9 million-worth of it has gone to redo a building in Queen Street in the middle of Glasgow, and another £9 million has gone to build an office and hotel development in Haymarket. Developers said on BBC Scotland that they were delighted with that site because it was right next to the fourth-busiest railway station in the country and next to where the trams would go through and the main economic centre of the capital city of this country. That £50 million was obtained by the Scottish Government. There was £24 million from the Scottish Government and £26 million from the European Investment Bank to be invested in disadvantaged areas. If Queen Street and Haymarket are the most disadvantaged areas in Scotland, we are in real trouble.

I think that we have got our priorities wrong.

**Martin Sime:** Yes. I want to distinguish between bodies such as community councils that were

established by statute and have a remit and accountability in that context and community organisations that set their own priorities. One should not expect any community organisation to represent the totality of the community's interests, ambitions and views on any subject. It is important that there are a plurality of community organisations and different ways in which people can express their interests and get involved in the things that matter to them.

It is important in the statutory world that public authorities learn to deal with diversity and pluralism in a way that they currently find rather uncomfortable. I am always struck that people come to me and ask what the voluntary sector thinks about such and such. There are many different views in the voluntary sector about any subject under the sun. We are not corporate or part of the public sector, and we come at issues with many different communities of place and interest, which is healthy. The voluntary sector is not to be confused with public authorities and public agencies.

**The Convener:** I will stop you there, because we have to move on. Before we end this session, we must deal with the issue of outcomes and how communities get involved in the process to ensure that the outcomes that we want are delivered. Are we giving enough credence to communities when we are developing plans to create good outcomes? Have we got the bones in this draft bill to improve that situation?

**Stuart Hashagen:** The sections of the draft bill that talk about the right to request participation in the process to deliver outcomes are potentially a step forward. That provision gives communities some power to set the agenda in a way that perhaps has been missing, despite the best efforts of community engagement and community planning, although that right seems to be conditional on quite a complicated process of approval that might actually be a barrier to participation taking place. However, the spirit of the legislation is such that communities might be in a position to define the outcomes that they wish. That is progress, even if the means by which that progress is achieved end up being different.

There are a lot of unresolved issues around the definition of community bodies. Part of the reason for that is that the draft bill has two different definitions, in different sections, of what a community body is, and both are somewhat unsatisfactory. There is a danger, particularly with regard to the taking over of community assets, that we may end up in a situation in which one section of the community has access to the assets but other people in the community are excluded. There is a danger of a lack of equality and participation.

I was sent the briefing from the Scottish Refugee Council, which says that

“equality, participation, inclusion, accountability, and representation”

should be factors that any body that purports to be a community body should be able to demonstrate. I am not sure that every body that does that demonstrates those attributes.

**Ian Cooke:** The Scottish Government’s strategic objectives provide a good, overarching framework. For me, the issue is how community regeneration delivers in that regard, and I think that it does so in a number of ways.

Clearly, implicit in the process of community regeneration is the idea that, at the outset of the process, there will be consultation and the community will develop a plan or vision of where it is trying to get to. It is important that we help and support communities to evaluate how much progress they are making against the objectives that the community has set. There is a danger that we might overcomplicate the process or make it too technical for communities. We should make it easy. If the community’s ambition is to reverse depopulation, it is not too difficult to assess how much progress has been made against that and what measures are contributing towards that.

As well as generating money themselves, a lot of development trusts and similar community anchor organisations receive funding from up to five or six different funders, all of which demand different outputs and outcomes. That process can be incredibly complicated. There is a requirement for some of the funders to think about how they could bring their accounting processes in line to support community-led regeneration.

**Andy Milne:** I agree with Ian Cooke that there is a danger of the process being overcomplicated. It is reasonable to engage with communities to get broad ideas of the kind of outcomes that they would like to see. To create a structure in order to ensure that that process is sufficiently representative and accountable in itself would require the kind of investment over time that we have talked about but which has not been made in community development over the years.

**The Convener:** Are you thinking about events conducted in line with the planning for real model, where communities have that feed-in to begin with?

**Andy Milne:** Absolutely. There are lots of useful models that can be used in a patchwork or mosaic way in order to send ideas to the service providers about the outcomes that we should be aiming for. Whether we can achieve that, given the other, much stronger, currents and forces that affect the

outputs, which result in different outcomes, is another question.

If I can briefly—

**The Convener:** Very, very briefly. We have only a couple of minutes left.

**Andy Milne:** Okay, I will channel a community representative whom I was talking to about coming here today. Speaking about community empowerment in general, he said:

“It’s like being invited back into your own house by well-off people who have kept you out on the street for ten years while they made a complete mess of it. They had all their pals in and had a huge party. They ate all the food, drank all the beer, spent all the money and they sold off the best bits of furniture. Only now that the house is completely wrecked have they decided to invite you back in. Even then they are telling you that you have to stay on the ground floor where the biggest mess is. They want you to help clear it up but they don’t want you going upstairs because it’s still quite nice up there and they’ve still got their pals in planning their next big party.”

**The Convener:** Very good. I thank the person who said that for that piece of evidence, which is useful in terms of summing up some of what has been said.

**Martin Sime:** It tells a powerful story.

Your question brings me back to my central problem, which is that you are conflating the issue of public sector outcomes and the debate in the public sector about how to set outcomes with the issue of community empowerment. Community empowerment may or may not include some consideration of outcomes that have been set by public authorities. Is this a bill about helping communities to engage in public sector structures and outcomes, or is it a bill about community empowerment? I know that it is not going to happen, but my advice would be to ditch all the references to community planning so that we are clear that this is a bill about empowering communities rather than a bill about making community planning work or about community engagement, which is a different subject.

**The Convener:** I thank our witnesses for giving evidence. We will suspend for a couple of minutes to allow the panels to change over.

11:01

*Meeting suspended.*

11:06

*On resuming—*

**The Convener:** We move on to this morning’s second panel of witnesses on the draft community empowerment bill. I welcome Eric Samuel, senior policy and learning manager for the Big Lottery Fund; Assistant Chief Constable Mike McCormick,

local policing east, Police Scotland; Rachael McCormack, director of strengthening communities, Highlands and Islands Enterprise; and Sandra Holmes, head of community assets, Highlands and Islands Enterprise. Would anyone like to make opening remarks?

**Eric Samuel (Big Lottery Fund):** Yes, convener. Thank you for inviting me to give evidence on the draft bill on behalf of the Big Lottery Fund.

The Big Lottery Fund is the biggest of the lottery distributors in Scotland and the UK. We are responsible for distributing 40 per cent of the money raised for good causes by the national lottery. We are committed to our mission of bringing real improvements to communities and to the lives of people most in need, so every year we give out millions of pounds to community groups and to projects that improve health, education and the environment.

As you will have seen from the evidence that we submitted to the latest consultation on the draft bill, our main interest is in the provision in the draft bill in relation to the community right to request rights in relation to property, or simply community asset transfer. That is because the Big Lottery Fund has been an enthusiastic supporter of the community ownership of land and other assets for 13 years, providing communities all over Scotland with a total of around £76 million to help them acquire and/or develop a truly diverse range of local assets that are important and matter to them.

That work started with the £15 million of lottery money that we invested in the original Scottish land fund in 2001 to support rural communities with a population of 10,000 or fewer to acquire, manage and develop rural land. Having seen and evaluated the transformative impact that the land fund had on rural communities, in 2006 we extended that sort of support to urban communities too, and to other forms of assets, in the shape of our growing community assets—GCA—investment area.

To date, GCA has invested a total of £52 million in 148 projects throughout urban and rural Scotland. Since 2012, we have been working with Highlands and Islands Enterprise to deliver for the Scottish Government a new Scottish land fund, funded by the Government, that is aimed at supporting rural communities to become more resilient and sustainable through the ownership and management of land and land assets.

The independent evaluations that we had undertaken for the original Scottish land fund and the first round of GCA have demonstrated the difference or outcomes that the projects that we have funded are bringing about on the ground in communities, and they have convinced us that

community asset ownership is an extremely strong and powerful vehicle for empowering and revitalising local communities. As I said, that accounts for our interest in the draft bill.

**The Convener:** Does anyone else want to make opening remarks?

**Assistant Chief Constable Mike McCormick (Police Scotland):** Police Scotland is really interested in and motivated by the agenda of empowering communities. We are perhaps slightly at odds with one of the previous witnesses in that we seek opportunities to do some of that work through the community planning structure. I am interested in talking about that dimension and its relationship to the Scottish Government's focus on outcomes.

**Rachael McCormack (Highlands and Islands Enterprise):** Highlands and Islands Enterprise has had a dual remit for social and economic development over five decades. Absolutely central to the role of the organisation are empowered communities driving forward community-led regeneration. We are delighted to be here this morning to give evidence to support the committee's considerations.

**The Convener:** Thank you. I will start the questioning with Mr Samuel, who talked about the interests of the Big Lottery Fund.

We have had evidence in the past that the Big Lottery Fund has been helpful in securing capital moneys for various projects but that communities have often failed to secure revenue funding for the projects. How will you strike the balance? It is all very well providing capital moneys, but if communities use that to acquire a building or an asset that they cannot afford to run because there is no revenue funding for it, that seems to be a waste of everybody's time and effort. Beyond that, it leads to many folk in communities giving up in their attempts to drive things forward in their local areas.

**Eric Samuel:** If you looked at GCA, I think that you would find that we actually provide both—not just capital funding but revenue funding. The maximum time that we can give the revenue funding for is five years, but we certainly supply both capital and revenue funding through GCA. The evaluation of the investment area has proved that it is vital to provide both types of funding, so we would certainly not consider not doing that.

**The Convener:** Five years is a very short time period. How do you ensure that your initial investment of five-year revenue funding will lead to a sustained project after that period is over?

**Eric Samuel:** We provide grant holders with support through a social enterprise that we have engaged called Social Investment Business, which

works with the projects. We talk about ourselves more as an investor nowadays; we do not think of ourselves just as a grant giver who gives a grant and walks away. We provide on-going support through the social enterprise, which will help projects' business and financial planning—that side of things.

We provide help with self-evaluation through another contract. We think that, as was said during the previous evidence session, it is very important that projects know where they are at and whether they are succeeding or failing to meet outcomes. We provide them with support through a company to help them to evaluate.

**The Convener:** I am going to bring in Mr Wilson briefly on this point.

**John Wilson:** I want to ask about transfers in relation to communities. The Big Lottery Fund previously gave grant funding to community organisations if they took a 25-year lease on a building.

**Eric Samuel:** No.

**John Wilson:** Never? Well, there might be a misconception out there about that, because an issue has arisen about the transfer of a building or land.

I know that the Scottish land fund is different and that one or two of the written submissions have referred to including a clear mention of buildings in the proposed bill, which is what I argued for at last week's meeting. Therefore, the Big Lottery Fund is quite clear that it would give capital grant funding only to community organisations where they were taking on the ownership of the building.

**Eric Samuel:** Yes—if it is through growing community assets. We have another two major investment areas: life transitions and supporting 21st century life. Should there be some property interest in those investment areas when a group is operating out of a particular facility, we might pay for leasing that. However, I am talking here about growing community assets, the aim of which is to see the transfer of assets to communities.

**The Convener:** We want to look at the entire gamut of the funds that you have available, though. We do not want just to look at asset transfer per se and ownership; we want to look at your role in providing funding from other sources for long-term leasing.

**Eric Samuel:** I lead on growing community assets, convener, so I cannot talk authoritatively on the other two investment areas. However, I do not think that we would provide long-term funding for 25-year leases under those other investments, either. We certainly do not do that through growing community assets.

**The Convener:** It would be very useful for the committee if your colleagues could write to us to clarify the situation in terms of Mr Wilson's line of questioning.

**Eric Samuel:** Sure.

**The Convener:** Do you have anything else, John?

**John Wilson:** That is all at the present moment, convener.

**The Convener:** Mr Samuel talked about the Big Lottery Fund co-operating with Highlands and Islands Enterprise in strengthening communities. Can you give us examples of what has happened there in terms of outcomes and say how much community involvement there has been in the projects? Ms McCormack can start.

**Rachael McCormack:** Specifically, we have been collaborating with the Big Lottery Fund since the opening of the Scottish land fund in 2012. There are three parties involved in that: the Scottish Government, which is providing the funding and the framework; the Big Lottery Fund; and Highlands and Islands Enterprise. We are joint partners in delivering the funding. Sandra Holmes leads on the Scottish land fund for HIE, so perhaps she can give a couple of examples of the nature of the projects and community involvement.

11:15

**Sandra Holmes (Highlands and Islands Enterprise):** Through our partnership with the Big Lottery Fund, we have identified the respective strengths of our organisations. We have complementary roles in delivering the programme on the Scottish Government's behalf.

The land fund pertains to rural Scotland. For the whole of rural Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise provides dedicated support to help groups move from the initial idea to working up a competent and robust project that focuses on the outcomes that the Government is keen to see achieved through the funding. Our colleagues in the Big Lottery Fund deal with the administration and assessment of the grant processes.

We work closely and have constant dialogue among all the staff who deliver the programme. We see ourselves as a wider team. In the two years in which the land fund has operated, £3 million has been invested in projects and 19 awards have been made, which have involved capital funding and some revenue funding.

**The Convener:** Will you give us an example of a project and of the community's role in driving a project forward?

**Sandra Holmes:** One of the first projects to be supported was in the community of Colintrave and

Glendaruel in Argyll. That was a big and ambitious project to purchase a public asset—a forestry plantation with a value of £1.5 million that the Forestry Commission managed. It involved working with the community through an established organisation that looks at the wider regeneration of its locality. From the fund, £300,000 of capital funding and £50,000 of revenue funding went into the project, and the balance of funding came from private investment.

The community is driving the project forward. Through the project, the community is seeking to create more economic opportunities. One full-time equivalent post has been created and the community is looking at developing woodland crofts.

**The Convener:** Is the community leading the project's governance?

**Sandra Holmes:** Yes. The applicant body is a company that is limited by guarantee and which has membership open to a defined geography in its locality. The membership elects directors to form the board, so the body is 100 per cent community led and community controlled.

**The Convener:** We often find that folks in communities are a bit feart—a bit scared—to get involved in a board. How do we encourage people to take on those responsibilities and ensure that they have the backing to do that? What is HIE doing on that?

**Rachael McCormack:** We have a range of support programmes and a basket of products and services. About 60 resources are at the disposal of HIE staff to draw down for specialist advice and support. If a community told us that it had a particular issue with decision making, succession planning, governance structures or the competency, roles and responsibilities of directors, we could within a few days bring to bear specialist advice, which might involve internal staff or an external expert—that would depend on the advice that was needed. We might provide a member of staff; the approach would depend on the support need.

We have internal programmes, such as the maximising community assets programme, that have a quick turnaround. If a community said that it had a specific need on an obstacle that was preventing it from progressing, we could invest quickly and shift the confidence back to the community. We would say, "You can do this," and provide the resources for it to progress.

**The Convener:** So you are spending quite a lot of time and effort on empowering communities that are taking over and running assets.

**Rachael McCormack:** We are putting in a terrific amount of time. We are extremely pleased

to do that, on the basis of the impact that we recognise and can evidence from community-led initiatives and community-led regeneration.

When I previously spoke to the committee, I distanced myself from the phrase "bottom up". The gents on the previous panel talked about not being arrogant or patronising with communities. There is nothing more patronising than talking about a bottom-up approach. The reality is that community-led regeneration often achieves things that we might not be able to achieve and which we categorically could not achieve in some areas if the communities did not identify what they wanted to do and how they wanted to go about that and if they did not take control of decision making locally.

Community-led regeneration is phenomenally powerful, so I believe—as does our leadership team and board—that we are right to invest in providing intensive support. We have eight area teams across the Highlands and Islands and a number of other local offices. We have strengthening communities staff and heads of strengthening communities in all those teams. In the Highlands and Islands area, we have more than 40 local development officers who are employed by communities within communities that are supported by HIE.

Those are critical resources. In the grand scheme of things, they are not wildly expensive proportionately, but they deliver absolutely phenomenal resources. I know that the committee likes numbers, so I will give one. In the past couple of years, we have been supporting community asset acquisition, although not for its own sake. Community acquisition is part of a journey and is a means by which communities are more empowered and enabled to deliver services, generate income and strengthen their balance sheets. In the past couple of years—that is just the period for which I have looked at the numbers—community-owned assets that have transferred have generated £4.4 million-worth of turnover in the social economy. That is from a relatively small number of assets—a couple of dozen.

Such facts challenge us to look again at the value judgments that we make about the order and quantum of investment that we put into the community-led approach and perhaps to turn on its head the value equation on the value of an asset and what happens when it transfers into the hands of a community. If in real terms a community, as a result of having an asset in its hands, ploughs back even more money into the community, surely we need to consider whether that can feature in the transactional asset transfer equation.

**The Convener:** So would you say that, basically, you are the funders and the facilitators, and the process is truly community led.

**Rachael McCormack:** Absolutely. We are an enabler and a part funder, because we—

**The Convener:** Have there been any failures in the projects that you have taken on?

**Rachael McCormack:** To respond like a politician, I would say that that probably depends on how we define failure. A failure could be a community not getting to the point that it planned to reach within a particular time period, but it—

**The Convener:** So nothing has completely and utterly fallen apart.

**Rachael McCormack:** I would say that that is the case. Sandra Holmes has headed up our community assets team for a number of years and has been involved in that team for more than a decade but—

**The Convener:** Before I bring in Ms McTaggart, I want to raise one more issue that I am interested in. Obviously, a lot of your work is very rural. Are any of the projects in urban areas in the Highland region?

**Rachael McCormack:** We currently support about 47 account-managed communities, which are predominantly, although not exclusively, mapped over areas where there is the greatest social and economic challenge and fragility, and remote rural areas. We are working with Highland Council on an opportunity to transpose the principles of community account management into more urban areas in our region in the likes of Inverness, Fort William, Thurso and Wick.

Sandra Holmes can give some examples of where community assets in what we might call pseudo-urban areas are in the control of communities. Perhaps the burgh hall in Dunoon, which is one of our largest settlements, is a good example.

**Sandra Holmes:** The majority of the larger landholding assets are in rural areas. There are aspirations in more urban areas, which are mainly centred on built assets and buildings. There are a number of examples, but the majority of the community-owned asset portfolio is rural based.

**The Convener:** I will ask a final question before I come to Ms McTaggart.

All this sounds like particularly good practice, as it did when Ms McCormack was in front of the committee previously. How are we exporting that good practice to other parts of Scotland to ensure that communities get the same kind of direction that you provide in the Highlands and so that they are empowered and can move on with asset

acquisitions—if that is what they require in their area, of course?

**Rachael McCormack:** We are privileged and delighted to be leading on two national programmes for the Scottish Government. One of those is the Scottish land fund, which we have talked about, and the other is community broadband Scotland. Both programmes have required us to stretch our wings in terms of the support that we provide to communities beyond the Highlands and Islands. Therefore, at the moment, we have staff—albeit only a handful—in the rest of Scotland working specifically on those programmes that the Government has given us a mandate to undertake.

Over and above those, some of the support, resources and expertise that we have in the HIE area are transferring to the rest of Scotland. A good example of how we are sharing the learning was a joint learning event that we ran yesterday together with DTAS—Ian Cooke was there—SCDC and colleagues within the Scottish Government.

We focused on the Scottish Government's strengthening communities programme, which HIE is involved in, with a view to finding out how that programme can act as a catalyst for agencies and organisations coming together to better share information, expertise and—to the extent that we are able—resources to maximise the impact not just of that programme. In speaking to the group of 40 or so staff that amassed yesterday, I was keen to say that it is about not an investment of £2 million in this little pocket over here, but how we collaborate across Scotland for the benefit of Scotland's communities. We are keen to do that.

I was also pleased recently to be invited to a discussion with Scottish Borders Council along the lines of, "Tell us more. What are you doing? How might we emulate it?" We looked at how the approach might transfer or map over in terms of the relationship between the Scottish Borders' geography and the nature of the rural areas in the Highlands and Islands.

We are taking steps to share knowledge at every opportunity but, doubtless, we can do more and we are very open to that.

**Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab):** An omission that has not been spoken about this morning, although it is the greatest resource in our communities, is our young people. We spoke to the earlier panel about community councils, community planning partnerships, the structures that those involve, how they are created, how difficult that is and how representative they are of people in our communities. How can we make our young people want to become involved? Throughout Glasgow, we have shadow boards for

young people and we encourage young people to come through, but we cannot get representatives to attend the community councils and other structures that already exist. How have you been involved with young people, who are our greatest resource?

**Assistant Chief Constable McCormick:** Our most recent initiative is Scottish police youth volunteers, which we are currently rolling out in Scotland's four largest cities with the intention of taking it into the other 10 division areas, as well. We form a group of people who would be interested in becoming involved in volunteering, which is linked to the police, although the volunteer leaders come from outwith the police. We discuss and agree an agenda around good citizenship, engagement, contribution and leadership in implementing that programme. That is probably how we are most active, but we are also involved in other youth work and the Prince's Trust—colleagues may have been at its event last week, as were we. We are promoting engagement among young people in that way as well as through our work in schools and colleges around the good citizenship agenda.

**Eric Samuel:** Anne McTaggart is absolutely right. We know, from evaluation of the GCA, that one of the problems is in succession planning. We have one programme for young people—I cannot remember exactly where it is, but I can get the detail for you—that has won awards for its shadow board, which is trying to accommodate succession, so that young people from that shadow board will come through to join the main board eventually.

11:30

**Rachael McCormack:** In terms of the community asset transfer process and community land ownership, it is probably fair to say that a relatively limited number of young people are involved in the community organisations that take forward those acquisitions—notwithstanding that community organisations are always keen to come to us and ask for someone for a summer placement or a graduate to support what they do. We are always able to secure interest in such placements and opportunities for graduates, which we promote in some of our most remote rural areas. We also have a scheme that offers non-graduate placements, which specifically supports Gaelic community social enterprises and business enterprises.

For the Highlands and Islands region, the challenge of getting young people to choose to stay in the region and participate is an interesting, and certainly multifaceted, one. We recognise that we have a series of opportunities around digital, the creative industries and the attractiveness of

the region that results from things such as adventure tourism and adventure activities generally, which are significant hooks for young people.

One project that we have taken forward through our policy called ambitious for culture is the collaborative creative communities pilot, which we are hoping to roll out more widely. It supports creative social enterprises but has a specific emphasis on the social enterprise and, perhaps, its theme—dance, arts or whatever. The enterprise might, within its geography, identify opportunities to engage young people and to bring into an organisation their dynamism and energy, which will enable us to think about succession planning and innovation, and ensure that the offer that we have in the region is pertinent and relevant to young people.

Digital participation is another area in which community broadband Scotland, which sits within my directorate, is looking at ways in which young people can be ambassadors for the digital opportunity that communities have ahead of them in some of our most rural areas where that opportunity will perhaps not be realised in the short term through the market. A community has to be inspired to want the service before it can think about organising itself to seek investment and to plan the service. What better ambassadors can there be than young people? I heard the story yesterday about a digital connect-up having—

**The Convener:** I do not want to go too much into digital. I realise that you have some exciting things to talk about, but the question is focused on young people.

**Mark McDonald:** Failure was mentioned and what can be done to augment and support community initiatives. An initiative springs to mind from my area, where a number of sports groups came together with a view to taking on ownership of a patch of land to develop and run a multisports facility. It was a very ambitious project—perhaps it was too ambitious.

There were difficulties around access to funding, but one of the key problems related to provision of advice and support for the group—who were essentially volunteers—in order to assist them to make good decisions and good choices relating to their approach to the local authority, with which they got into partnership, and in sourcing funding. As a result, the project stalled and did not move forward. As far as I am aware, it has now ceased to be an active project. How can we ensure that groups that come together to take positive initiatives get good advice and good support on accessing funding and so on, so that barriers are not put in their way and they do not feel that they have to align themselves with private

organisations rather than look at other ways to get hold of funding?

**Eric Samuel:** The Big Lottery Fund can provide support, but that tends to be once people have contacted us. We have an outreach team that goes out and promotes all the programmes and tries to get people to make contact with us.

However, a lot of support is available before people reach us. There is the third sector interface—people in the voluntary sector who can help, have experience and know where to go. Local authorities also have external funding officers who help groups to find funding and to talk through projects. We have a lot of contact with them.

We have a fund called investing in ideas, which provides groups with up to £10,000. It is quite light touch; it allows groups to think about what they want to do, to work through feasibility studies and to visit other projects to get a better idea of what they want to do. Once they are in our system, we can provide quite a lot of support.

**The Convener:** One of the stumbling blocks that Mr McDonald rightly identified is that, at early stages, when folk go to external funding officers and others, the first thing that they are told is to come back with a business plan. For many people the challenge is first to define what a business plan is. In my constituency, some folk are trying to resurrect the Bon Accord baths, but the business plan is an issue. Would the Big Lottery Fund provide funding and expertise to help folk along the path of formulating a business plan?

**Eric Samuel:** We would not do so at that early stage. We have a two-stage process. The first stage is to build up the idea and get a sense of what the project is about; investing in ideas funding of up to £10,000 would be available to do that basic stuff and we would not look for a business plan from an organisation at stage 1. Should the proposal clear stage 1, there would be support from the Social Investment Business to help it with its business planning, but we can also provide development funding of up to £50,000 for more feasibility studies, for the more technical stuff and for legal advice so that, when it comes to stage 2, the application is much better.

Once an organisation is in our system, we can provide quite a lot of practical and financial advice and support.

**Assistant Chief Constable McCormick:** I appreciate that this might be more ad hoc than the structured way in which we would all like support for community activity to be provided, but in particular for smaller schemes, community officers in many areas become involved with groups of young people, older people or whomever, if dimensions of their activity promote community

safety or diversionary activity. I have written some successful—and some unsuccessful—applications to the Big Lottery Fund in previous lives, as have many of my colleagues. In some communities, it may be the youth development worker, but networks exist. The trick is to make those networks as skilled and accessible as we all want them to be, rather than their being ad hoc.

**The Convener:** The difficulty for community groups is in getting over the first hurdle—it is difficult for us as well, and many of us have a lot of experience of it. That first hurdle is normally the business plan. Does HIE help folks to formulate business plans so that they can access more funding?

**Rachael McCormack:** Yes, we do. Prior to that, the single most significant investment that we make is probably our commitment to give community organisations that come to us a point of contact in our organisation. HIE does not have all the answers and we do not have terrific budgets of the order of those that the Big Lottery Fund has, but we have experienced and capable staff who can provide advice, expertise and support and can do some signposting. That point of contact is important and it stays with the community. Communities have fed back to us that that account-management relationship or direct relationship with HIE is the single most important and valuable thing for them.

Over and above that, at an early stage of a community coming together and wanting to draw together a plan or undertake a community consultation, we provide small amounts of funding with a quick turnaround so that the community can have autonomy, feel empowered and have a small amount of resources at its disposal so that it can make decisions. That might involve covering the costs of printing, photocopying and getting flyers out to raise awareness of a community event. Believe it or not, those are the sorts of barriers that community organisations sometimes fail at—right at the first hurdle. We would support feasibility studies, business planning and those formal pieces of work.

**Mark McDonald:** One difficulty that many community groups and organisations face with where they can go for advice is that there is a cluttered landscape. Some people who can be gone to for advice are very good, but there are other people who say that they can give great advice to communities to help them along the way, but whom we would not send to get our messages. If we are going to say that more communities will be empowered to do more things and to take on more responsibilities, there is a danger that there are individuals out there who will see that as an opportunity to attach themselves to a community group or organisation and say, “I can

help you. I can get you this, that and the other,” although they have a track record of not being able to do that or are not capable of doing it. How can we ensure that community groups and organisations are protected from falling into the trap of getting advice from people who should not give them advice?

**The Convener:** Can we have brief answers? We will start with Assistant Chief Constable McCormick. Some of those folks may have been reported to you in the past.

**Assistant Chief Constable McCormick:** Yes. The fraud question quite often sits in the back of my mind.

Obviously, we are not directly in that business, but if people told us about people who were taking the messages—never mind not buying them correctly—we would provide support. Local officers may have some experience of that from the people whom they have seen and worked with well in communities, but we are probably not well placed to provide any formal structure or support for that. I would not like to say.

**The Convener:** Mr Samuel mentioned third sector interfaces earlier.

**Eric Samuel:** Yes. I think that third sector bodies would be quite a good source of information. We are very conscious of the matter; the stuff that we see coming through from consultants varies in quality, which we will look at, going forward.

I have mentioned to the committee before that the Big Lottery Fund operates a single front door. The applicant does not have to worry about what they are applying for—they can just phone and get advice about whether they fit with our funding or, indeed, any other form of funding. That is a useful resource.

I agree that quality of advice is a problem, and we will look at it.

**Rachael McCormack:** With HIE’s specific remit, we have directly employed staff who have decades of experience, in some instances, proven track records and relationships with communities that involve trust. It is very difficult to build up trust if the advice that is given is poor; indeed, it is very difficult for a person to maintain their employment in our organisation if the advice that they give is poor.

Notwithstanding that, there are many other providers around HIE that provide support in community organisations. We are absolutely rigorous in our selection and procurement of consultants, and we would certainly not continue to use advisers whose advice we thought was not robust.

Crucially, some of the best advice that our communities get, apart from HIE’s advice—I would say that—is given by other communities about where they have received good advice, support and service. We regularly bring together groups of communities around particular areas of interest—digital issues, renewable energy, asset acquisition, general community activities or growth planning—so that they can talk to one another and share expertise and good contacts. That networking is key.

**Cameron Buchanan:** In my experience, business plans are often very aspirational and mostly financial, but nobody can really quantify them. I was interested in the £10,000 that Eric Samuel said could be given to people. Does that include people who do not necessarily have a business plan? Can people get advice and the money before they write a plan? I will not say that a lot of business plans are not worth the paper that they are written on, but my colleague Mark McDonald said that he would not trust some people to get the messages. They come in on those business plans because they think that they are a way of making money, but the plans often do not work and are not carefully thought through. What is your experience of that?

**Eric Samuel:** We would not require a business plan at stage 1. The £10,000 is for things such as feasibility studies and community consultations. One thing that we want to ensure through the GCA is that the project has the community behind it, so community consultation is very important to us.

We require a business plan when a group comes in to stage 2 of the process, but that is where the support from the Social Investment Business comes in. It works with groups to develop business plans, so it should be more robust in relation to what the group is trying to do and where it hopes to be in four or five years’ time.

Of course, we realise that things change. The Big Lottery Fund is known for being flexible with applicants and particularly with grant holders, once they get the money. As the previous panel mentioned, we have been through the biggest recession in living memory, so we appreciate that things change, and we have to be flexible as well.

11:45

**Mark McDonald:** Following on from the question about business plans is the question of expectation management for communities. In the example that I referenced earlier, expectations were allowed to get a little out of control and more was bitten off than could be chewed. At what stage do the people in your organisations who are involved with community groups or organisations that are looking to develop something step in and

say, “Look, you might be going a bit too fast on this; maybe you need to do it on an incremental basis”? Is that kind of advice offered? Is it simply a question of saying, “We can’t fund this because it’s too big,” or do you advise people that they should work in stages?

**The Convener:** We cannot legislate for common sense, of course, but is there any way in which we can give good tips—perhaps behind the bill, in guidance—to ensure that there is such good practice? As Mr McDonald pointed out, it is frustrating if a community thinks that it is well on its way when the reality is that the project has not gone far. A project can sometimes be doomed to failure at the very beginning, but nobody has the guts to tell people that.

**Eric Samuel:** We have upped the stage 1 process. Sandra Holmes was involved in the early stages of GCA1, as we call it, and we realised that we were being too generous. We let through a lot of projects that then spent a lot of time developing complicated stage 2 applications that were refused when they reached committee. That was not acceptable for the applicants and it was certainly not acceptable for our staff, who had to spend time assessing the applications.

We have now raised the bar for stage 1 and we are a lot more honest with groups. If something is not looking like a goer, we tell them that at stage 1 so that neither they nor we waste time. In doing that, we provide support, saying for example, “This is why we don’t think this is worth while. Maybe you should go away and get an investing in ideas award to do consultation or seek some support.”

**Mark McDonald:** You have answered my supplementary question, which was going to be about whether you just say no at stage 1 or whether you say, “No, but if you come back with something a bit more honest, we might be able to look at it.”

**Eric Samuel:** Absolutely. I would hate you to go away with the impression that a lot of groups are overenthusiastic. Some of them think that they have a better chance of getting money if they keep it down. In some cases we say, “That’s not realistic—you’ll need more money,” and we will ask them to increase the amount that they are applying for.

**Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP):** My first question is for Ms McCormack. A few moments ago, you spoke about HIE’s remit, which is different from that of Scottish Enterprise. Does your remit help and facilitate the role that you play in rural communities?

**Rachael McCormack:** Yes, it does. The combination of social development and economic development in HIE’s remit is extremely powerful and very liberating. In a presentation that I gave to

my group recently, I talked about the act that established HIE in the 1990s, which basically says that we can do stuff that is good in the Highlands and Islands as long as it works for the Highlands and Islands. That legislation, which was extremely bold for its time, gives us the autonomy to support both the social and the economic impacts that we are looking for and, wherever possible, an absolute integration of the two.

**Stuart McMillan:** Thank you for that answer. My second question is to all the witnesses. One of the final comments that we heard from the previous panel was on the issue of community planning. The individual in question stated that, although he realised that community planning would not be removed from the draft bill, he felt that it would be useful if it were. I am keen to gauge the opinion of the witnesses as to whether they think that removing community planning from the bill would be a good thing or whether they think that improved community planning has a role to play in community empowerment.

**Assistant Chief Constable McCormick:** This is an area of the bill that I and my service feel particularly strongly about. The question is about whether community planning belongs in the bill. I think that there is real scope and potential in community planning. It almost feels a godlike thing—if it was not there, we would need to invent it.

There are massive opportunities within community planning. There are tensions for the organisations that participate as their obligations to their boards and authorities can at times conflict with the requirements of the mutual effort of the partnership coming together. It is a potentially tense, difficult situation, but it is one that we absolutely need to work through. That is the real way forward at a local level.

I appreciate from many of the comments that we have heard this morning that community planning is about even more local levels and even more front-facing involvement. However, if we can get ourselves to a point, as suggested in the bill, in which we oblige people to participate—we oblige partnerships to prepare a single outcome agreement and there is some obligation on the agencies involved to deliver on their parts of the agreement, as agreed through the process, in order to meet the SOA—that will be the right way forward.

My experience of the CPPs and SOAs is that there is a strong underpinning consultation around the priority setting—it may not be as strong as we would all wish, but it is definitely the right approach. Whether it is through this bill or another way, I urge the committee to think about pushing through on many of the measures that exist. The committee should recognise that there needs to be

some flexibility to allow those organisations to discharge their respective obligations to their own boards, but nevertheless we need to obligate the organisations to come together and deliver on outcomes for communities through the consultation process that has been identified.

**The Convener:** Mr Samuel, do you have any comments on that?

**Eric Samuel:** I can be very brief—this is the area of the draft bill that we did not make many comments on.

**The Convener:** I thought that that would be the case. Do the HIE representatives have anything to say at this point?

**Rachael McCormack:** In terms of the inclusion of community planning in the draft community empowerment bill as it stands, the one thing that we would advocate quite strongly is the balance between the things that we need to legislate for and the things that we can increase the momentum of through powerful partnership, which exists in some places, and through encouraging and enabling CPPs to do them of their own accord.

The question is what we include in legislation, whether that then becomes the baseline and the absolute, and whether that removes the potential for CPPs to think creatively and innovatively and above that baseline. We would advocate a balance.

**John Wilson:** I will go back to a point that was raised earlier by Ms Holmes and Ms McCormack regarding the example of the piece of Forestry Commission Scotland land that was transferred over to the community.

Ms Holmes, you mentioned significant private investment in that project. Could you give any examples of where you feel the private sector or investment of private finance in projects has been beneficial? Many of the community asset transfers that we may be talking about are in urban areas in deprived communities, and the inclusion of private finance may actually worry some funders as well as some communities.

**Sandra Holmes:** In the example given, the inclusion of private financing came very much from the community group itself. It was looking at purchasing an asset with a net worth of £1.5 million—give or take—which clearly would be a big ask of any public funder, irrespective of where the moneys are coming from.

The group took a very pragmatic look at the project and it was keen to realise its objectives. In doing its business planning, it recognised that it could forward sell some of the timber to a private operator. The group retains the solum, so it owns and controls the overall asset, but the timber on

part of it has been forward sold to generate the capital receipt to go towards the overall purchase.

The deal was on the group's terms and it enabled it to take forward a large land asset acquisition while still delivering very powerful outcomes for the community group.

**John Wilson:** I wanted to examine that example because it is interesting that the community group is forward selling timber to draw down some funding. I am assuming that the land was transferred from the Forestry Commission and not a private owner.

**Sandra Holmes:** Yes. It was from the Forestry Commission and at market value.

**John Wilson:** My next question is a complete quantum leap from that one. I want to ask the panel about the legal structures that would be advisable for communities that want to take on community asset transfers. A number of different structures are now being proposed, such as companies limited by guarantee, the basic committee, and Scottish charitable incorporated organisations at level 1 and level 2. What would be the best advice to give to any community organisation that wishes to engage in community asset transfer future management? What would be the best structure for those communities?

**Rachael McCormack:** It very much depends on the intentions of the community organisation and what it is looking to do. In our response to the consultation on the draft bill, we suggested that there should be a focus on the characteristics of the community organisation rather than an identification of what type of governance structure should be used. That approach also recognises that there is something to be said for longevity in legislation: if we are prescriptive and identify particular entities that are appropriate for community asset transfer, there is a chance that a new one would come along and the legislation would need to be amended to accommodate that. We therefore focused on the key characteristics of the entity rather than on the entity itself.

**Eric Samuel:** I agree with that. The structure depends on what the project aims to do. We are much more concerned that the project has the backing of the community and can display that. Historically, we have found that most were companies limited by guarantee, but more interest is being shown in SCIOs nowadays.

**The Convener:** I think that ACC McCormick may give this one a miss.

**Assistant Chief Constable McCormick:** Thank you.

**The Convener:** I want to change the subject slightly. We have talked a lot about community asset transfer and buildings today. Allotments

featured last week, and the Allotments (Scotland) Act 1892 leaves a lot to be desired in terms of asset transfer. Has Big Lottery had experience of that? What advice would you give about the formulation of the draft bill in trying to improve the 1892 act?

**Eric Samuel:** I think that we did submit some evidence. Allotments have not featured under growing community assets because the idea behind that, as Rachael McCormack mentioned, is that the project should be sustainable and we have not found growing projects to be sustainable. I cannot recall growing projects coming in to take ownership.

We have another programme called community spaces Scotland. It is not about ownership—it can involve leasing—and some more growing projects have come through it. I do not therefore have any advice to give on ownership.

**The Convener:** Okay—thank you.

Finally, we have had discussion about common good and how there is often difficulty with asset registers. Has HIE or the Big Lottery had difficulties with any of those aspects? If so, do you have any advice about what is contained in the draft bill?

**Eric Samuel:** As we have said, we think that a register would be a good idea, but we think registers across the board as far as local authorities are concerned would be a good idea. We have had a project that took years to conclude because it turned out that the local authority found out that it did not own the asset that it was transferring. If those issues can be resolved sooner rather than later, it helps the projects that come to us for money.

**The Convener:** Ms McCormack, has HIE had any experience with common good assets?

**Rachael McCormack:** Although the issue is perhaps more prevalent in the rest of Scotland than it is in the Highlands and Islands, we come into contact with projects that have a common good aspect from time to time. Essentially, our aspirations for the bill are around increased transparency and communities having a position at the table so that they can participate in decisions about common good assets in future. The online register approach that Eric Samuel referred to is key.

**The Convener:** I thank you all for your evidence today; we will now move into private.

12:00

*Meeting continued in private until 12:31.*

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