



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 5 October 2021

Session 6



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EQUALITIES, HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL JUSTICE COMMITTEE
6th Meeting 2021, Session 6

CONVENER

*Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)

*Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con)

*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Paul Bradley (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations)

Councillor Alison Evison (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Emma Harvey (Scottish Government)

Nick Hawthorne (Scottish Parliament)

Nina Munday (Fife Centre for Equalities)

Trevor Owen (Scottish Government)

Shona Robison (Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Katrina Venters

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament
Equalities, Human Rights and
Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 5 October 2021

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:45]

Decision on Taking Business in
Private

The Convener (Joe FitzPatrick): Welcome to the sixth meeting in session 6 of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. We have no apologies. We are joined remotely by Pam Gosal and Fulton MacGregor; Fulton will join us in person shortly.

Item 1 is a decision on whether to take items 4 and 5 in private. Item 4 is consideration of today's evidence and item 5 is consideration of our work programme. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Proposed Right to Food
(Scotland) Bill

09:45

The Convener: Item 2 is evidence on the proposed right to food (Scotland) bill. I welcome Rhoda Grant MSP and Nick Hawthorne, who is a senior assistant clerk in the Parliament's non-Government bills unit.

I refer members to papers 1 and 2. We have correspondence from four individuals, who ask that the proposal be allowed to proceed to the next stage, and we have a letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government, which sets out the Scottish Government's position.

I invite Rhoda Grant to make brief opening remarks before we move to questions.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Thank you for inviting me to appear before the committee to discuss the statement of reasons that accompanies my draft proposal for a right to food (Scotland) bill. It is quite fitting that we are talking about this in challenge poverty week.

The committee is being asked to determine whether it is content with the statement of reasons, which sets out why I consider it unnecessary to carry out a consultation on my proposal.

My proposal is, in effect, the same as the proposal that Elaine Smith lodged in the previous parliamentary session, that is, to incorporate the right to food into Scots law. Elaine Smith obtained the right to introduce a bill, but there was not enough time left in the session to do so. A consultation on her proposal ran for 12 weeks and received responses from a wide range of individuals and organisations from different sectors and backgrounds. The individual responses, and a summary of the responses, are publicly available online—the committee has probably seen them.

The variety of responses to the consultation from the public and other stakeholders across Scotland remain relevant to my proposal, as do many of the studies and papers that have been published on the right to food.

To repeat the consultation process for what is, in effect, the same bill proposal that Elaine Smith originally consulted on and lodged would be an unnecessary duplication of work, particularly given that the consultation closed only a little over a year ago, in September 2020, and such a timeframe fits with that of other bills.

Therefore, I hope that the committee agrees that further consultation is not required in this instance. I will be happy to answer any questions that committee members have.

The Convener: That is great—thank you. The committee is aware that our role today is not to consider whether we agree with the proposal; it is to consider the statement of reasons. We have to be satisfied with two things before we agree to set aside the normal process that members follow in consulting before they lodge a bill proposal: first, that the previous consultation was robust; and secondly, that the previous consultation remains relevant.

Let me ask about the robustness of the consultation. First, I have seen a lot of stuff about percentages flying around, but the overall number of responses was quite low. Why was that? The number certainly seems low in comparison with other consultations, especially given that the issue seems relevant. Secondly, in your statement of reasons, you said that 225 organisations were contacted; will you give us a breakdown of those organisations?

Rhoda Grant: I do not think that the number of responses was particularly low—71 people responded on behalf of organisations and 181 individuals responded, which is a reasonable level of response—but it should be borne in mind that this consultation followed on from the consultation on the proposed good food nation bill. A number of the people who responded to that—about a third of them, I think—recommended that there should be a right to food, so people had already responded clearly to one consultation on the issue. With a consultation on a Government bill, people expect the Government to introduce the bill whereas, with a member's bill, they are not so sure that that will happen. I think that that accounts for the level of response.

I understand that Elaine Smith sent her consultation to a number of public bodies, such as local authorities and health boards, as well as the trade union movement and interested stakeholders. She made sure that it was out there, and it was well received. Although not every health board or council would respond to such a consultation, some did, and they responded very positively.

The Convener: Two thirds of the bodies that were targeted did not respond. Do you want to comment on the fact that two thirds of the organisations that were highlighted as being particularly interested in such a proposal did not respond?

Rhoda Grant: As I said, a number of those organisations were statutory bodies, such as health boards, which might not have seen the

proposal as their number 1 priority. They might have expected others to respond on their behalf.

The Convener: Do you not think that the fact that the consultation was carried out at the height of the pandemic would have made it difficult for some of those organisations to respond, because they were working in a different way?

Rhoda Grant: Not necessarily. I think that policy people would have been working from home, as many of us were, and might have had more time to look at the proposal. However, given that there had already been a consultation on the good food nation bill, to which they might well have responded, they might have felt that they had put their views on the record, so there was no need to repeat the process.

The Convener: Thank you. Maggie Chapman is next.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Thank you for coming along to talk to us.

Following on from the convener's questions, I am interested to explore the relationship between your proposed bill and other things that we know are happening in the coming year. The Government has made a commitment to introduce the good food nation bill this year. In addition, later in the session, treaties that include the right to food will be incorporated into Scots law as part of the human rights bill. Do you have any comments on that?

Rhoda Grant: I am aware that those pieces of legislation have been promised. It was promised that the good food nation bill would be introduced in the previous session, but its introduction has been held across to this session.

The Government has said that it does not plan to incorporate a right to food in the good food nation bill. It has made it clear that it is looking at the issue more in the context of its proposed human rights bill. However, it is not clear to me whether, as part of the human rights bill, it would have the vehicle for delivery that forms part of my proposed bill. If the committee decides that I can proceed with my bill, based on the previous consultation, the Government will have the opportunity, once I have introduced it, to take it over, should it decide to legislate in that way. Therefore, nothing will be lost—it will be able to go ahead and do that. However, if the Government did not want to have such a vehicle for implementation, I could proceed with the bill, and the Government could comment on it at that stage.

The Convener: We move to Pam Gosal. Can you hear us, Pam?

We will go back to Pam after we have heard from Karen Adam.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Good morning, Rhoda. You touched on the Scottish Government's intentions. Have you had discussions with the Government about its policy intentions?

Rhoda Grant: In the previous parliamentary session, I had discussions with the previous Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Connectivity about the proposed good food nation bill, because I was interested in whether the bill would include commitments such as those that I am seeking. I have not had formal discussions in this session, although I have been lodging questions and trying to get more information.

I am happy to work with the Government on my proposal and would look forward to doing that; I would like to see what it is doing and how we can work together. I think that most people would agree that in a country that is as rich as ours and that has the food supply that we have—we are so proud of the food that we produce—no one should be going without food. I think that we can all sign up to that aim, and I would be happy to work with the Government to try to realise it.

Karen Adam: Thank you.

The Convener: We can come back to Pam Gosal now.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Thank you, convener, and good morning, Rhoda.

We hope that we are getting over Covid, and we are in a very different place. Rhoda, you said that no further consultation is needed, but would there be a benefit in talking again to organisations, given that they were consulted more than a year ago?

Rhoda Grant: I do not think so. We have had a Government consultation and Elaine Smith's consultation, and a fair amount of discussion has taken place—the statement of reasons goes over that ground. Other proposals, including for good legislation, have come forward with much less consultation and far fewer consultation responses. The issue has been well consulted on and another consultation would simply delay action.

If the pandemic has shown us anything, it is the need for a right to food in Scotland. We have seen people going hungry. When people were self-isolating due to Covid, they needed things in place that ensured that they were able to eat. In the past fortnight, we have heard about the very sad case of a pensioner in Scotland who starved to death. I do not think that we can afford to delay action on an issue that is costing lives—it is also costing life chances, because we know that young people who grow up without having an adequate diet end up having huge health issues, for which we all pay, down the line. We see malnutrition and we see obesity—there are huge problems that we

need to deal with, right now. The pandemic has, if anything, delayed legislation in the area. We cannot afford to delay further.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning, Rhoda. The statement of reasons highlights the extensive consultation that was carried out in the previous session—both the official consultation and the Co-operative Party's email campaign—with 93 per cent of respondents in favour of the proposal. Do you think that that majority support still reflects public opinion? If there has been a change, what do you think that it is? What would be the effect of a delay?

Rhoda Grant: I should say that I am a member of the Co-op Party—that is in my entry in the register of members' interests. The party is very keen on the proposal.

I am working with the Co-operative Party and with stakeholders; I have had meetings, reasonably regularly, with people who responded to the consultation on the previous bill proposal. A number of those people wanted to become much more involved, so we have set up a steering committee with organisations and individuals who are keen for the proposal to go forward and I am working closely with them.

10:00

I have been in touch with the respondents to the consultation and they are still incredibly keen. One of them—I should remember this—consulted recently and did some polling. The overwhelming support in the public for the introduction of a bill was there for all to see.

We all take food for granted, in a way. During the pandemic, many people realised that it could not be taken for granted. There were times when people were afraid to be tested because they were afraid that they would have to isolate and would not have food. Suddenly, people began to realise and live other people's day-to-day experience of wondering where they would get their next meal. If anything, that has moved the right to food up in the public consciousness. Therefore, it is still as important, if not more important, to have a right to food.

The effect of consulting again would just be delay. We should have introduced a right to food in the previous parliamentary session. That is what people expected but the pandemic slowed the process down and stopped it happening. If we owe anything to the people who were hungry during the pandemic, it is to put the right processes in place to ensure that people are fed.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Thank you for coming. We need to pay

tribute to Elaine Smith for what she did. Thank you for taking on the role.

We have heard that, in your opinion, it is enough that the previous consultation went out to a large number of individuals and organisations. We have also heard about the human rights bill and the good food nation bill that the Scottish Government proposes to introduce. How do you see the process moving? Will there be resource implications depending on how matters develop, because other organisations and other bills will be involved? How does that fit in the process?

Rhoda Grant: I am not entirely clear about how the Scottish Government intends to introduce its human rights bill, so I am not clear whether there will be a vehicle for delivery in it. People could argue that human rights are all our rights and that they already exist. However, we still have people who do not have a right to food in Scotland. My proposed bill is designed not only to enshrine the human right to food in Scottish legislation but to provide a vehicle for its delivery, because that is hugely important.

If you were to push me, I would say that I would have liked to have seen the right to food at the heart of a good food nation bill. That is why I spoke to the Scottish Government in the previous session. We already invest £100 million—huge amounts of public money—in our food system. I hear from workers in that system that the front-line producers of food are the people who are going hungry. They produce the food but still do not have a right to food.

I would have wanted to see a right to food at the heart of a good food nation bill. However, my proposed bill, which would have a vehicle for delivery, would work alongside that. It is not one thing; it is not about ticking a box. It will take some time to implement a right to food and to change the system, because our food system is so disjointed. That is why everyone has been calling for a good food nation bill, which would not only highlight our natural resource but ensure that the way that we produce food does not leave people behind. My proposal is part of that.

Including the right in a good food nation bill would be my preference, but it does not look like that is possible. I hope that, if we have a right to food bill, it will work alongside a good food nation bill and changes to our food system to ensure that everybody has a right to food.

I am sorry—that was a bit of a long way round to a short answer.

The Convener: I will follow on from the points that you have made. We received a letter from the cabinet secretary making it clear that, in her view, the right to food is central to the wider human rights work. I note that a number of respondents to

Elaine Smith's consultation made the point that, rather than the issue being taken forward in isolation, it should be part of a wider human rights approach and wider legislation.

We now have a manifesto commitment, which is in the agreement between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Green Party and is re-emphasised in the letter that we received from the cabinet secretary. Does that not make a significant difference to what was consulted on more than a year ago, when none of that was in place? We now have certainty that the Government will take the matter forward.

Rhoda Grant: I will come on to the process points.

If the Government wishes to introduce the bill in another form, I do not think that anything that I propose today—that is, approving the right to go forward without another consultation—would interfere with that. I would certainly make sure that the bill's aims were met through the Government's human rights bill.

I will get Nick Hawthorne to cover the process.

Nick Hawthorne (Scottish Parliament): Good morning. Nothing affects what the Scottish Government can or will decide to do, in that sense. Should the committee approve the statement today, Rhoda Grant would have the right to introduce a final proposal in the one-month period in which she would have to seek support from 18 other members from at least two parties to earn the right to introduce a bill. At that stage, the Government has a formal right to indicate that it will legislate within two years to deliver the terms of that final proposal.

The Convener: That was not, in fact, my question. My question was whether the fact that the Government has made a commitment in such clear terms, in the agreement between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Green Party and in the cabinet secretary's letter, changes things. It was about whether, in light of that knowledge of the Government's proposal, folk should be able to say whether Rhoda Grant's bill should go ahead.

Rhoda Grant: As Nick Hawthorne said, approving the statement of reasons and allowing the proposal to go forward today would not interfere with that in any way whatsoever.

I think that the convener is asking me why I am pursuing the matter, because he believes that the Scottish Government will do that. I am pursuing it because, although I know that the Scottish Government has said that it will enshrine human rights in Scottish law, I am not clear about whether it will provide a vehicle to ensure that those human rights are implemented. My bill would do both—it

would not only enshrine in Scottish law the human right to food but provide a vehicle to oversee the implementation of that. That is the bit that I am not entirely clear about in relation to the Government. However, as Nick Hawthorne said, if the Government is clear that it wants to do that, it can take over the bill. Approving the statement of reasons would not affect that.

Given the complexity of the food system, it would—in a way—be better if the Government did take over the bill, because it could make it move in ways that I, as a member, probably could not. It could tie it up much better and produce much more complex legislation. I am pursuing the matter not to try to beat the Government to it but to make sure that that happens. If the Government decides to take over the bill, I will cheer it on and happily hand over the proposal.

The Convener: One would hope that the Parliament could work together on the matter. My point was not really the one that Rhoda Grant picked up on. It was more about the relevance of the consultation that took place and whether anything has changed—my point was that what has changed is that commitments have been made. However, Rhoda Grant might have said as much as she wants to in that area.

As nobody wants to contribute further, I thank Rhoda Grant for her evidence. I hope that we were not too challenging in our questioning. I know that being on the other side of the table is a hugely different experience.

We are required to make a decision on whether we are satisfied by the statement of reasons. I remind members that our decision should be based on whether we agree that the member's statement of reasons means that no further consultation on the proposal is necessary. We are not deliberating on whether we agree or disagree with the principle of the bill. That would be for a later stage, depending on the outcome today.

Given that Fulton MacGregor will be joining us remotely, I propose to call each member in turn and ask them to indicate whether they are satisfied. For clarity, if members are satisfied, I ask them to vote yes; if they are not satisfied, I ask them to vote no; or they can abstain. I will go around the room, starting with the deputy convener.

Maggie Chapman: I am not satisfied, no.

Karen Adam: No, I am not satisfied.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I realise that I have just come in, but I have been following proceedings on BlueJeans. Am I able to make a comment?

The Convener: Yes, you can make a comment prior to voting.

Fulton MacGregor: I thank Rhoda Grant for taking the bill forward. I, too, pay tribute to Elaine Smith for the work that she did in the previous session of Parliament. As a declaration of interest, I note that I signed up to support the bill and am still very supportive of its aims. I followed what was said today, so I know that the Government has written to the committee to say that it is keen to bring forward such proposals, as part of an overall human rights bill, as well as the good food nation bill. That is a pretty significant change in circumstances. I also feel that the co-operation deal between the Scottish National Party and the Green Party has propelled the matter forward.

However, with a degree of reluctance, at this stage, I am inclined to vote that I am not satisfied.

Pam Gosal: I vote yes.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I am satisfied that the consultation was comprehensive and did not ask organisations that were consulted previously, which would have put more pressure on them by asking them to comment again. I am satisfied with the statement of reasons and vote yes.

Alexander Stewart: I am also satisfied with the statement of reasons and vote yes.

The Convener: Thank you. On balance, that gives us three votes for satisfied and four votes for not satisfied with the statement of reasons. The committee is therefore not satisfied with—*[Interruption.]*

I am sorry—I have not voted. I, too, am not satisfied. However, there is a good piece of work to go ahead with, and the committee will have a particular interest in that area. I encourage Rhoda Grant to engage with the Government, but that is up to her. If she sees fit, she could consult further and bring back another proposal. That would be within the rules.

However, as my vote is for not satisfied, so there are four votes for not satisfied and three for satisfied. The committee is therefore not satisfied with the statement of reasons.

That concludes consideration of this item. I thank Rhoda Grant and Nick Hawthorne for attending.

10:14

Meeting suspended.

10:17

On resuming—

Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2022-23

The Convener: Under the next agenda item, we will take evidence as part of our pre-budget scrutiny. We will hear from two panels of witnesses. I welcome our first witnesses. I give a virtual welcome to Councillor Alison Evison, the president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and I welcome, in person, Nina Munday, the chief executive of the Fife Centre for Equalities and Paul Bradley from the policy and public affairs team at the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.

I refer members to papers 3 and 4. I thank all the witnesses for their helpful written submissions. I invite each witness to make a short opening statement.

Councillor Alison Evison (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Thank you for inviting me to speak to the committee.

Local government is the anchor in our communities and for our most vulnerable groups. It supports children and young people, families, the elderly and those needing support. Local government cares for our most marginalised communities and the people we welcome in, for local businesses, for those needing help with housing and for the services that protect and improve our physical and emotional wellbeing and our environment.

Every day, we work with diverse communities and local organisations to bring about change, to respect human rights and equalities, to embed local democracy and to enable people's voices to be heard. Local government is the key partner in achieving rights realisation across Scotland.

It is therefore critical that local government is given a fair settlement to support human rights realisation. Since 2013-14, local government's revenue budget has been reduced by 2.1 per cent in real terms, while the Scottish Government's budget has increased by 2.3 per cent over the same period.

Although local government has protected areas of its budget such as social work and education as much as possible, that means that cuts to other areas, such as culture and leisure, have been bigger. That has had an impact on rights realisation and on the wellbeing of our communities.

We need a holistic approach to the services delivered by local government—those relating to social care, education, housing, employability, leisure, transport and the local environment—as,

together, they support the rights of the individual. There should be clear links between the budget, the programme for government and the national performance framework to support rights realisation.

In addition to providing a fair settlement, the Scottish Government should empower local government to raise revenue to ensure that local authorities have the maximum resources available to support our communities. In particular, the council tax freeze should be dropped, as it does not help the people who need help most. Other areas that can be explored include introducing a tourist tax and setting planning and building control fees locally to enable full cost recovery.

We should continue to work together on the three empowerments of the local governance review: fiscal, functional and community empowerment. Therefore, the Scottish Government should use the opportunities of human rights budgeting to enable and empower the public sector to support rights realisation and avoid the regression of rights.

Paul Bradley (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations): Good morning. Thank you very much for inviting me along.

I think that it has been two years since I was last in front of the predecessor committee as part of its pre-budget inquiry. Back then, the committee recognised

“a clear need to investigate how the third sector is coping under tougher financial conditions”

and the vital role that voluntary organisations play in the delivery of equalities and human rights outcomes. Not one of us who is sitting round the table—there are some new faces now—knew then what was to unfold in the months and years ahead.

Even today, following the pandemic, that committee report from 2019 still rings true. The sector still longs to see much of what was in it, from longer-term funding models, simplified application and bidding processes, a reduction in the competitive nature of procurement models and greater participation in the budget process to stronger partnerships between the public sector and the voluntary sector across the board.

On the one hand, two years on, there is much to learn and build on from what the pandemic has unearthed. It has shone a light on how invaluable the voluntary sector is. The sector stepped up to provide vital services and support that the public sector would not have been able to provide alone. Although it has not been universal, we have seen some fantastic examples of partnership working between the voluntary and public sectors, and the public sector has leveraged the skills, knowledge

and experience of voluntary organisations in many cases.

There has also been far greater flexibility in existing and new funding arrangements. Many public sector funders and independent funders flexed their models and worked with and encouraged the sector to get money to where it was needed the most. The Scottish Government also co-designed emergency funding models with the SCVO and many others. There was clear trust in the sector to get money and support to where it was needed most.

On the other hand, the pandemic has served only to exacerbate the challenges that voluntary organisations have faced for many years. The predecessor committee heard about those challenges back in 2019. In particular, the sustainability of voluntary sector funding has been highlighted for many years—most recently by the advisory group on economic recovery and Scotland’s social renewal advisory board. The emergency funding for the sector during the pandemic has been a lifeline. It has kept many organisations afloat. There is no doubt about that, but such one-off payments are not a substitute for longer-term, sustainable funding models for the sector.

Over the coming years, the committee will hear about the challenges that voluntary organisations face with their funding. I want to be clear that, although those might have been worsened by the pandemic, the pandemic is not the root cause. They are challenges that voluntary organisations have faced for many years.

The sector has been clear, both before the pandemic and now, on what changes would be the most useful next steps in relation to funding and partnership working. It has also been clear on some of the big social and economic policy changes that are needed. That is neatly captured in the social renewal advisory board’s report. For progress to be made on all those areas, it is vital that Governments alone do not orchestrate those changes. The voluntary sector must be welcomed to play a crucial role in attempts to make positive change to its operating environment and in the design and delivery of national and local outcomes for the delivery of equalities and human rights.

I hope that, through its work on pre-budget scrutiny and the rest of its work programme, the committee will play its role in ensuring not only that policy change takes place but that there is clear and obvious involvement of the sector in how those changes are designed and implemented.

Nina Munday (Fife Centre for Equalities): Thank you for inviting me here today. This is the first time I have spoken at committee, so please tell me if I am not following the rules.

The other witnesses have said some of what we submitted, so I will keep my statement short. I will probably echo some of what you have heard from Councillor Evison and the SCVO.

Our main focus is on decentralising funding for equality initiatives. We believe that ring-fenced funding should be allocated to local authorities for local distribution. Currently, the equality and human rights grants are administered by the Scottish Government, and the majority of the recipients are national organisations that are based in the central belt or the main cities. Equality is a matter that needs to be addressed in every corner of Scotland: everybody should have their human rights guaranteed.

I echo what was said earlier about human rights in relation to food—providing the same food for everyone is not delivering people’s human rights. During the pandemic, Fife Centre for Equalities used funding from the SCVO and others to distribute culturally sensitive food parcels to older people, who were able to choose the food themselves. If we are talking about human rights, we also need to think about how they work at that kind of level.

It is important that people with protected characteristics feel that they can thrive and have good quality of life where they live, rather than feeling that they need to move or travel to the cities to access more appropriate services.

The second thing that we propose is investment for local preventative projects that foster good relations between people with different protected characteristics, and which assist those groups to access their rights. Fife Centre for Equalities is a good example of a local initiative that brings together communities that have various protected characteristics. Although we have the Equality Act 2010, people are still constantly segregated into boxes. Fife Centre for Equalities challenges that; we bring people together. We facilitate the Fife equalities forum, which includes representatives from various organisations that work with, for example, people with disabilities, people who are transgender and people from minority ethnic communities, and with organisations that focus on women’s issues and so on. There is a wide range of bodies.

Once a month, the organisations come together in the forum to look at their common issues. The committee can use Fife Centre for Equalities as a good example of local investment by a local authority—Fife Council, in this case—to create an umbrella organisation that helps to deliver equality and helps public bodies in Fife to deliver their public sector equality duties. It is also important to state that we help to build bridges on equality issues between the public sector partners and

people who feel that they have been disadvantaged.

It is important to ensure that investment is local, so allocation of investment needs to be fairer. The assumption is that initiatives that are based in the cities are somehow worth more than projects that are based in the regions. We employ the same amount of staff as other organisations and we need to be put in a position in which we are equally competitive. Investment in local regions is important or we will not have fairer distribution. People need to be able to access education, employment, transport, health services and everything else where they live.

10:30

The Convener: On your first appearance at a committee, I thank you for your passion, in particular. The committee is keen to ensure that, as well as hearing from well-kent folk such as Alison Evison, we hear from new voices. Paul Bradley has been to committees before, but I thank him for his evidence, too.

We will now move to questions. The committee is on a bit of a journey; this is the first year in which an equalities committee has sought to look at the budget through a human rights lens. We are keen to ensure that this year is not the end of that and that we learn to do it better, going forward.

This question is for Paul Bradley and Alison Evison. Are the organisations that you represent managing to take a human rights approach and, if not, what more would they need in order to do that? I would like Nina Munday to tell us about the experience of her organisation with regard to whether the partners that it works with—the local authority and third sector bodies—are taking a human rights approach.

Paul Bradley: It goes without saying that voluntary organisations are key partners in delivery of equalities and human rights outcomes. The SCVO looks at the challenges that voluntary organisations face across the board. We look at the patterns and trends and try to identify potential solutions.

Voluntary organisations want to do what their mission says they are meant to do, which is to work with people and communities to deliver the best possible outcomes. One of the biggest challenges that has come up in the recent interviews that I have conducted with charity chief executive officers and senior leaders concerns the constant cycle of trying to find replacement funding year to year. Organisations use a lot of their capacity in finding funding, which is a year-round process. They get funding through the door and into the bank account, then, because of concerns that that funding will dry up the following

year, they have to start looking for funding for the next year.

It is not easy for large organisations to manage that, even if they have funding officers who are skilled and are able to identify new sources of funding and create the best applications, but it is easier for them than it is for smaller organisations. However, large organisations are not the majority in the voluntary sector. Four out of five registered charities in Scotland have an income of less than £100,000 and only about 3 per cent to 4 per cent of Scotland-registered charities have an income of more than £1 million. The majority of voluntary organisations are small and do not have in their teams a funding officer or anyone with those skills. Many equality organisations are specialists and work with small budgets, so they do not have the capacity to chase funding all year round.

The time that is spent looking for funding is time that is not spent working on the services for whose delivery the public sector has invested money in the voluntary sector. If there is no funding officer in an organisation, a person who should be delivering the services is also writing applications to new sources of funding. That is not sustainable and it does not work.

There is another challenge, which comes down to equalities being pitted against each other, because that annual cycle of funding also rubs up against the changing priorities of the day. As things move up and down the agenda, organisations can find that their well-established services have to be stripped back slightly or cut altogether. That leads to people who are still in need in communities not being able to access the services that were set up to help them. That can cause more harm than good, when it takes much longer than an annual cycle of funding to work with people to overcome some of the biggest challenges in their lives.

That is the key point, but I will just say quickly that even organisations that are fortunate enough to get their hands on longer-term funding, or on an indicative agreement for longer-term funding, often do not see an inflationary uplift in the years for which they receive funds. Recently, I spoke to an organisation that had not had an inflationary uplift from its local authority for 13 years. I am not sure how anyone can expect an organisation to deliver the same scale of services now for the same money as it was given in 2008.

Nina Munday: Given the recent example of the preparations in Fife for Afghan refugees, I think that all the local partners have a good understanding of human rights and equalities, especially when it comes to a crisis such as that or the roll-out of Covid vaccinations. A range of partners worked together to ensure that

communities received the message and came forward for vaccination.

The day-to-day process often lacks the voice of the smaller groups that Paul Bradley spoke about, which do not have dedicated staff. They do their best for their user groups. Every day, more and more national and local consultations come out, which requires local groups to help people to respond. Without those groups, people's voices remain unheard, because many consultations still depend on how well people understand or write in English. We must consider the number of people who have communication needs—people with learning difficulties, people for whom English is not their first language and people who have difficulty writing or understanding the written form.

Before the meeting, we talked to Paul Bradley about how the funding application process still depends on how well people can write and tell their story. Smaller communities or groups that rely on volunteers who have various other commitments are not able to participate in that process. Organisations such as Fife Centre for Equalities are needed in between, to give individuals a voice in vital consultations.

I will give an example. We recently helped Fife Council with its equality outcomes consultation. To my amazement, we received 275 responses. That was during the pandemic. People are passionate about equality. We used various tools so that people could respond on WhatsApp or speak in their own language. We have to be much more creative if we are really to understand how people feel about things. To do that, we must have local groups.

Fife Centre for Equalities works with a range of partners; we cannot possibly understand every community's needs, so we need the groups that work directly with people on the ground to be well supported financially. For them to compete with national organisations is difficult; it is an unfair system. If investment needs to be made in equalities and human rights, we need to look at how that is done at local authority level.

Councillor Evison: I recognise many of the challenges that the previous speakers have talked about, and I share their concerns. I very much welcome the journey that the committee is on. It is really important to be on that journey. We have argued in previous years that the budget-setting process needs to be based on the national performance framework and its sustainable development goals. This is a step beyond that; involving the committee in budget setting is welcome work, so I thank you for that.

Equalities and human rights are fundamental to what we do in local government. In "Blueprint for Local Government"—if you have not come across

that document, I refer you to it—you will see that human rights and equalities are central to our vision for the future of local government around Scotland, in all its diversity. It is important to think about the experience of the individual person in all this, because the combination of services that a council provides is so important to individuals achieving their rights and equalities. If we are to support equalities and human rights as we want to, it is not just about housing, welfare payments, education or transport; it is about everything across the piece together meeting the needs of the individual.

That raises the issue of local government funding not being adequate and councils across Scotland having to make choices about allocating money. If, because of the funding settlement, a council is forced to make such choices and deal with the lack of flexibility, that will impact on equalities and human rights. It is important that councils have that responsibility locally, because the needs and experiences of communities in our urban areas, our villages and our islands are all different. That needs to be responded to in any settlement.

In trying to embed equalities and human rights in our communities, we need, as other witnesses have said, to think carefully about how funding is made available. If we are going to be effective, we need to be able to do the strategic long-term thinking that cannot be done with single-year budgets. Multiyear budgeting is crucial to taking a strategic approach. Allocating individual pots of money to individual projects can be effective in the short term, but it neither addresses the needs that really need to be addressed nor helps councils to plan or move forward, especially when those sometimes very small pots of money are associated with huge administrative burdens that take council officers away from delivering services to filling in and handing back forms on outcomes.

Nina Munday referred to problems with bidding for money. Who benefits from bid funds? Do bid funds put money where it is needed and address equalities and human rights in the best way, or do they simply ensure that instead of addressing need the money goes to those who can fill in the form in the most timely and articulate manner?

I note the common issues and experiences that have been highlighted by others—the SCVO and our voluntary partners—whom we have worked with tremendously during the pandemic. The local partnerships that have been developed between the third sector and councils have been tremendous, too, and have had good effect. However, I recognise the problems that they are experiencing, because we have experienced them, too. We need flexibility in funding, long-term funding settlements and an end to small pots of

money and, indeed, to bid funding, which does not ensure that money goes to the right places.

The Convener: The question was really wide ranging; I thank the witnesses for their responses. However, we will need to be a bit sharper on both sides—although I take part of the blame for asking such a wide question in the first place.

I call Pam Gosal.

Pam Gosal: I thank the witnesses for their helpful opening statements. I know that you have all touched on this, but does increased participation deliver better budgets, and what needs to be in place for it to be successful? What is your experience of creating and delivering opportunities for participation?

Nina Munday: Participatory budgeting, if that is what you are referring to, sounds good in theory, but a lot of the communities that we work with have been marginalised and have had their needs ignored, because they do not have that articulate way of speaking that was mentioned earlier. They do not tend to complain about the lack of services, so when you approach them and ask what they think would be the best thing to spend money on, they are unable to tell you straight away. Engagement needs to go on all the time, and the Fife Centre for Equalities and Fife Council have already agreed to work on that issue together over the next four years. People want to participate in decision making, but they do not necessarily want to be on committees or attend public meetings. They just want somebody to explain to them in a simple way how the money is being used and allocated. That kind of on-going dialogue is sometimes missing.

10:45

A lot of policy makers, nationally or locally, develop a plan first and then consult. Very seldom do they encourage communities to identify needs first and then consult on those. Changing that dynamic requires a lot more work, because it needs people on the ground to help communities to feel that they have a voice. It is not simply about inviting people into a meeting room. It needs more than that.

Paul Bradley: It is a really important question. As I said at the end of my opening remarks, it is important that it is not Governments alone that orchestrate this kind of work. The convener will know from his involvement with the open government work as a minister that it is important to have transparency and accountability around the budget, and that participation is really important.

The third sector's role in shaping the Scottish budget is extremely limited. Our opportunities are

those that we have today, right now, in this committee room. That is why we keep coming back when we are invited. We have no discussion with the Scottish Government about what should be the priorities for the Scottish budget before it is set. That needs to be worked at.

Going back to the point about how to get voluntary organisations and others participating in spending decisions and saying what is needed most, our policy may indicate that voluntary organisations should play a key role and that voluntary groups and communities should participate in setting the budget, but the biggest challenge is the implementation of policy relating to third sector involvement in partnerships and seeing that translate into practice across Scotland.

We hear from organisations all the time that, although there are policies on engaging with voluntary organisations and ensuring that they are part of shaping decisions, there is a disconnect between policy and what happens in practice. It is important that we look at that and ensure that, whatever we do to ensure greater participation in things such as the Scottish budget, we look at mechanisms that hold the Government to account on how it is involving the third sector in shaping those decisions.

The Convener: Thank you for the reference to open government. That is one of the areas on which I have worked previously with Councillor Evison.

Councillor Evison: Yes, we have worked closely on many things in the past. It is good to see you again, in this role. There are two levels of answer to the question about participation. First, in terms of local government as a whole working with the Scottish Government, there is a need to make sure that the local government voice is there right at the beginning of the budget-setting process, as policies and ideas are being developed. We have seen the positive impact on policy when that is the case. For instance, the successful development of early learning and childcare was very much done in partnership. The voice of local government was heard at the beginning and we got a good policy outcome as a result.

It is crucial that when the Scottish Government is setting the budget it looks carefully at how things will be delivered, so that any pitfalls and issues can be ironed out, we can get that lens on equalities and human rights and we can make sure that the delivery will work in the most effective way. Like other speakers, I would argue for greater transparency around budget setting and ask that we are involved at the beginning, so that we can help to develop the best outcomes across Scotland from the money that is available.

The second level of the answer is around how we involve our communities. We are totally committed to that 1 per cent of participatory budgeting. We would like to see that across the whole public sector, not just for local government. Everyone should be delivering that and empowering communities to get involved. That is the best way to understand what people want and how they want their services delivered.

I totally understand the issues that Nina Munday is raising. We have to make sure that our marginalised communities can take part, too. That is our function as local government. We have to take responsibility for that role, ensuring that voices are heard from across our communities and that people can be involved. We need to empower those who do not necessarily have the same tools as others to participate in the spending of money and in developing local services. Councils carry out that role through citizens panels, through listening to lived experience groups and, increasingly, through the way in which they listen to and work with communities at a local level.

We want to see wider commitment to participatory budgeting across Scotland, and for other bodies to be involved in that. We want it to be understood that our role is to help empower communities to have a voice, and to participate in how money is spent and how services are delivered in their area.

The Convener: Thus far, it has been really important to hear from all three witnesses. With the coming questions, that might not be the case. I ask that members direct questions to a particular witness. That way, I hope to be able to get through all the themes we want to ask about.

Karen Adam: It is nice to see well-kent faces. I direct my question to Alison Evison. I will build on an issue that has been mentioned. The pandemic has made more stark some of the inequalities of which we were already aware. There are numerous examples relating to local authorities, including increasing requirements for social care, housing services, school meals, council tax relief funds, and even for domestic waste, as more people have been working from home.

Virtually every local authority service has been impacted by the pandemic. In the context of what was known before and what the post-lockdown world has exposed, how do you prioritise matters, or at least focus on them, when looking through that equalities lens? I ask that you go into a bit more detail about what you have already mentioned. What does that look like practically when it comes to pre-budget planning?

Councillor Evison: It is good to see you, too, Karen. You are absolutely right: inequalities have been exacerbated during the pandemic. We have

seen things through a closer lens—the inequalities already existed, but they have come to light. We must respond to the inequalities as we see them. We must ensure that we address human rights and the needs of people across our communities. That requires different thinking.

There is not one answer to that question, because every authority is different and sees needs in a different way. Authorities will need to respond differently depending on the issue. In one area, housing might be a particular need, but, in another area, leisure facilities for the mental health and wellbeing of the communities might be a particular need. There is not one answer about how best to deliver.

I suppose that it comes down to the importance of giving the funding to local government so that councils can address the needs in their communities. Finding out about those needs is the on-going work of local government, through carrying out community impact assessments and engaging people with lived experience, which is increasingly happening across our communities. I am aware that engagement is taking place in wards across Scotland—those can be really small areas—and councils are working with partners and the third sector to understand the needs of and get to grips with what is going on at that level.

Processes will have to change as a result of that. To enable councils to change, the focus on the local is increasingly important. The emphasis on giving flexibility to local councils on how to spend money is increasingly important, too, so that they can recognise the needs and really address inequalities in their area.

The Convener: I will bring in Maggie Chapman, after which I will bring in Pam Duncan-Glancy, who has some supplementary questions on this general area.

Maggie Chapman: I thank the witnesses for what they have told us so far. I want to explore some of the progress and barriers a little bit more. I would like to ask this of all of you, but I heard what the convener had to say about time, so I will focus on Paul Bradley's response. You spoke about the restrictions and the barriers around long-term funding, and about the bureaucracy around funding applications and so on. In a previous life—I am going back to the Scottish compact framework days of the 2000s—I was well aware of all that.

I will link those challenges and barriers to something on which we can all agree we have not made enough progress: prevention. Ten years on from the Christie commission, we are still not seeing the necessary level of investment in prevention, never mind the sustaining of current services or full cost recovery. What do you and

your members need so that we can ensure that we can have preventative spend as well as sustaining current services using the full cost recovery model that is so important?

Paul Bradley: Voluntary organisations need to be funded and given the time to come up with innovative ways of doing things. We hear about long-term funding all the time. That is absolutely essential, but one of the biggest challenges that voluntary organisations face is a lack of unrestricted funding.

Unrestricted funding is vital in supporting organisations to be able to flex and change their services and to adapt what they do based on needs at the time. Through the pandemic, a lot of funding has been flexible. That has worked really well and we hope that we can keep hold of that. When organisations apply for funding, they do so based on the need at that time but needs change. The pandemic is a good example of that. When needs change, organisations need to be able to flex and adapt.

To build voluntary organisations' capacity to plan long term and to contribute meaningfully in partnerships and to discussions such as the one that we are having, it is essential that they be supported through core costs. They need to be fully supported in the delivery of the services and projects that they run. I have heard funders—I will mention no names—refer to core costs as dead costs but they are not. They are absolutely essential.

There has been a move towards projectisation of funding. Public sector or independent funders want to fund specific projects with specific outcomes, but voluntary organisations need to have the infrastructure not only to deliver those but to consider the long term and find replacement funding to sustain those services.

That takes us back to the point that I made about causing more harm than good when we set up a project or service for a year. A year is not long enough to meet the needs of the people whom we are trying to support, and that can cause problems when the service is then yanked away. That not only has an impact on the staff of the organisation and the service that the individual receives but probably has a broader impact on those people's view of Scottish society and what their Governments are doing for them.

Core costs cover things such as information technology, fundraising and human resources. The fundraising is really important—we touched on that earlier.

It is necessary to invest in voluntary organisations' capacity to plan and contribute to long-term development and delivery of Scottish national priorities and local priorities. If you fund

organisations on an annual cycle and for specific projects, they cannot contribute to long-term strategic discussions about how policies could be changed and implemented to be more preventative. One of the challenges that the committee, other committees and other groups will find is that they will not hear from the organisations that they need to hear from. You will hear from bodies such as SCVO. I am pleased that you do, but the organisations that you really need to hear from are ones that are not able to contribute because they are funded simply to deliver a service and cannot take any time away from doing that. If you want voluntary organisations to offer their skills, knowledge and expertise to shape policy and implementation, you have to invest in their capacity to do that.

I am sorry that that was a long answer.

Maggie Chapman: No, that is helpful.

The Convener: Would you be willing to come back in later, Maggie? It might be possible for members to pick up on other points after other members have asked their questions.

Maggie Chapman: That is fine. I am happy to hand over to Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you.

Good morning. Thanks for joining us. I will ask a question about the rights of three groups of people in two spending areas. It is quite specific and is probably directed at Councillor Evison and Paul Bradley.

11:00

First, we have seen in recent weeks extreme shortages of social care staff, which have resulted in some services having to be stopped, some people not getting the services they need and some unpaid carers having to pick up the slack. At the very basic level, it has meant that a large number of people in Scotland today have not had the minimum core of their basic human rights. I just want to understand, particularly from Councillor Evison, the impact of the local government funding settlement and the funding for social care on the recruitment crisis; the impact of increasing wages in the sector to address that, particularly the £15 an hour minimum wage proposal; and the impact on the equalities and human rights of disabled people and women.

Secondly, I wonder whether Paul Bradley can tell us about the ways in which the third sector has had to step in at times not just over the past year but over many years to provide essential services. What is your assessment of the funding settlement? What could we be doing not only to improve the human rights of the people whom I have mentioned but to ensure not only that these

people get not just the minimum core of basic human rights but that we progress things and realise their right to an adequate standard of living and an independent life?

Councillor Evison: I very much recognise the scenario that Pam Duncan-Glancy has described, and I thank her for doing so. The underfunding of local government over many years has had a huge impact on social care and other services. I should also point out that local government has, proportionately speaking, put more of its budget into social care and, to recognise that this is a crucial area of local delivery, has given added value to the money that has come from the Scottish Government to support such care. Of course, that has happened at the cost of other services such as culture and leisure, which, in a wider sense, also have an impact on the needs of those who receive social care. It is important that we see such needs holistically.

Underfunding has certainly been a key issue, and it has resulted in fundamental workforce planning issues that need to be redressed right across Scotland. How do we look at the workforce to ensure that it is supported and valued and can be trained and developed in an appropriate way? We would welcome some joined-up thinking and local government and the Scottish Government working in partnership on the best way of taking workforce planning forward. Other strands of work on that issue are going on at the moment.

We acknowledge that particular needs arose during the pandemic, and some services were unable to be delivered as they had been before, despite the fact that councils were being so flexible and agile in their response. That, again, shows the importance of local delivery. For example, we had people who normally worked in sports centres helping to deliver social care, and we needed that local agility to ensure that important things could be delivered as much as possible in areas where staff had to be available. The key thing to remember is that local government staff are not immune to the pandemic; they, too, will have to socially distance or self-isolate and they will also have family issues to deal with. That context is important.

We have argued for a long time for the need to value our workforce in general. We see the local government workforce as one, and we would like to be able to value and support that one workforce across the piece, because that parity is important to us. However, as you will appreciate, it is difficult, with the funding for local government, to do that sort of thing, and I come back to the issue of local government funding and how it helps build the communities that we want to be built. If we are talking about having a human rights approach and equalities and saying that those who work for local

government are crucial to their delivery, the fact is that we have to respond to that when we set budgets to ensure that people can be valued and given the training, development and support that they need through their terms and conditions and other aspects of employment. We have to deliver on the fair work agenda, but that, too, will require funding.

I very much recognise the situation that you are talking about. Local government is there to support people and meet need across all our communities, and the funding for doing that is really important. We have talked so far about how that can be done through the Scottish Government budget, but I also suggest that another way of addressing this issue is to give local government the flexibility to raise its own finance.

There are various ways to do that. We have talked about a tourist tax. That is one example in an area where it might be appropriate. However, we need to consider the whole fiscal framework and how local government could be supported to raise its own money to help to provide services such as social care because the basic problem in social care is chronic underfunding, which also prevents us from implementing the preventative agenda, for instance.

That must be the key to answering your question, but I will also praise everybody across local government who has done so much during the pandemic and throughout to support people across our communities to have their basic needs addressed.

Paul Bradley: I know that I have to be quick with this answer. In SCVO, we work with a range of intermediaries who are more specialised in health and social care. However, it would be wrong to focus on this discussion and not bring up procurement issues in social care. It is an issue across the board but, time and again, we hear about the shift towards tendering as a way to cut the cost of services. It is understandable in that money has to be saved somewhere, but we have heard at previous committee meetings that local government and others look to the voluntary sector, where funding is not ring fenced, to make those savings.

In the shift towards contracts, the contracts are by and large not favourable for voluntary organisations on inflationary uplift and full cost recovery, for example. The tendering process also pits voluntary organisations against one another. It drives down the quality of services in favour of cost savings. Some people would refer to it as a price war. Although there is competition between voluntary organisations in social care and other areas, there is also great competition between voluntary sector providers who are trying to deliver services not for profit to improve people's lives and

communities and private sector providers whose bids are able to undercut voluntary organisations by, for example, not paying the real living wage.

Those are big issues. Others are more qualified to give a more detailed answer on what can be done, but we need to ensure that procurement works and enables local voluntary organisations. That applies particularly to the smaller, specialist organisations that have a key role to play but are currently excluded from the tendering process because the contracts are too large or because it is a time and resource-heavy process. Contracts need to have fair work principles, inflationary uplift and full cost recovery.

A key solution to support the development of contracts that work for the public sector and voluntary sector providers is ensuring that voluntary organisations are part of designing the contracts and what is needed to deliver them in a way that will help people to live a good life. That not only connects with social care but is across the board in the voluntary sector.

I hope that that is a somewhat useful answer to your question.

Nina Munday: Although I was not invited to answer the question, I really want to answer it. It is not just about providing the basic care. For all the issues that have been discussed, the approach seems to be to create a priority group and meet the basic needs—that is, have carers go in to check on the person—but we have been hearing that many of the disability groups in Fife are worried about the closure of day care services.

When we talk about procurement, we need to think beyond just personal care. People thrive by building social relationships with one another but, if that is lacking and they are not seeing anybody else, they might have somebody coming in to check whether they are okay but they will not be having that natural relationship with someone. We must not take away the spaces where people bond with one another. Jobs are also created by those day care services.

The local groups in Fife will be really annoyed with me if I do not stress that point. We need to think beyond personal care, think about the preventative work that has been going on for a long time and think about people being able to live their lives fully, as has been mentioned many times.

The Convener: Thanks very much for that, Nina. I thought that you would want to come in, particularly when you heard the answers, but Pam Duncan-Glancy was trying to appease me.

Alexander Stewart: In your statements, you talked about the challenges that you face. Councillor Evison talked about fair funding

packages, the idea of involving the community and ring fencing. You see all of that as potential opportunities for your organisations and for individuals.

What are some specific and focused asks that you would like the Scottish Government to look at? Are there budget areas that are real priorities for you? It could be about charging and the revenue that you can obtain, or about how your budgets are processed and the timing of that. You have touched on those issues already.

If I could get a short answer from each witness, that would be helpful.

Nina Munday: I said that funding needs to be ring fenced for equality and human rights in particular because local authorities and key national services have to understand that certain money needs to be spent on equality and human rights, otherwise they will just use the money for other things. I am always worried when people say that money will be spent “depending on the needs of the community”, because then we are talking about who has the louder voices. At Fife Centre for Equalities, the communities that we deal with are people with disabilities and a whole range of other people who have been marginalised from society. They will not have a voice that is heard by those who are talking about community needs. Whenever funding is made available—whether to local authorities or to national services—a requirement to demonstrate the commitment needs to be tied to it.

We asked many individuals in Fife to name one thing that they desperately need, and the response, which came from all kinds of rural and semi-urban areas, was investment in transport. There is a real lack of investment in transport that takes people to jobs and to where they want to study. People in Fife say that it is easier for them to get from Kirkcaldy to Edinburgh than it is to get from Kirkcaldy to Keltie. We do not seem to be designing a transport system that helps people live their lives. If we got that right, that would be good—but that transport system also needs to be accessible for many different groups.

Paul Bradley: I will keep it short. There was a lot in the question, but I will stick to the timing aspect.

I recently met with about 20 chief executive officers from different charities for in-depth interviews to discuss their organisations. One key thing that the Scottish Government could do in terms of funding for voluntary organisations—even if it cannot go near multiyear funding, although that is what it should do—is make sure that timely decisions are made on funding and timely payments are made into those organisations’ accounts.

The number of organisations that I spoke to that are still waiting in March, April and sometimes May to find out whether they will be funded for the financial year, or which have not received their funding in their bank account until, maybe, October, is unbelievable. I cannot understand how organisations can play a key role in delivering services that will impact on people's lives in positive ways without that stability.

Another example is the children and families fund—I might not have got the name spot-on. Voluntary organisations are still waiting two years after they made applications to that fund to find out what is happening with it. They have been told that they will hear something in the autumn, and that is it. I do not know whether they have heard anything yet, and it is well into autumn. Organisations in that situation will need to take some tough decisions if a decision on the fund is not forthcoming soon. They will have to give staff redundancy notices and think about potential closure, according to one organisation that I spoke to.

The committee could take a good step forward by asking the Scottish Government to adhere to a clear timeline for making funding decisions and ensuring that organisations receive payments.

11:15

Councillor Evison: I would take issue with what Nina Munday said, because I do not support ring-fenced funding. Ring-fenced funding does not allow for local needs to be addressed appropriately. The problem has been that, until now, local government has not been empowered to spend the money flexibly to address local needs. Removing ring fencing and trusting and empowering local government to spend the money appropriately to meet needs in an area and to engage with its citizens and residents across the piece—particularly those who are underrepresented—is a key part of the answer. Therefore, I would not support ring fencing any more; I would instead support greater empowerment of local government and flexibility in how it spends the money.

On specific asks, we again ask you to end the council tax freeze, which benefits higher earners rather than those with the greatest needs in our communities, whom we should be supporting. Again, I emphasise the need for multiyear funding so that councils can do long-term planning. Councils should be allowed to make decisions on things such as setting planning and building standards fees, to ensure full cost recovery and that the money that is available locally is really supporting the people who need that support.

We have not yet mentioned capital funding, which can also make a huge difference to our communities. Councils can organise assets across an area to help meet the equalities and human rights agendas. Capital budgets have a crucial impact, and we should look at giving that funding to councils.

It is important to remember that, in many areas of Scotland, the council is the biggest local employer. It has a huge influence in creating jobs and helping employability. In that way, the council can get more money into the system locally to help address human rights and equalities issues. Those are the key issues that I would raise.

I would also argue against having pots of money mid-year to fund particular policy priorities. That does not help strategic planning. We need to take a longer-term view. We need the budget settlement, whenever it comes, and to be able to make plans for that money.

That probably—very quickly—answers the question.

Fulton MacGregor: Most of the areas that I am interested in have been covered. I was particularly interested in the home care aspect that Pam Duncan-Glancy raised. I will not ask the panel to go over that again, because clear answers were given, but the number of home care queries that I have received as a constituency MSP over the past few months has been quite telling. I therefore welcome the thoughts and suggestions that we have heard today about how we might be able to improve those services to meet people's human rights.

I have a brief question for Paul Bradley. An organisation that started up in my constituency in response to the Covid-19 pandemic undertook a lot of work delivering food parcels and providing support to vulnerable people across the area—indeed, it crossed boundaries into other constituencies as well. The work was done by a group of volunteers. The amount of work that it took on—in a way, it saved the local authority having to do it—was quite significant. It had thousands and thousands of contacts. I found out from people in the organisation that it was not receiving any funding, although it was not particularly looking for any. It was not connected to other voluntary organisations—a network was in place, but it found it difficult to get into that network.

That is just one example from one constituency. Have you seen similar examples during the pandemic? I suppose my question takes us back to ring fencing, which might result in established organisations getting funding, whereas, as Alison Evison said, a local authority might be able to

pinpoint an organisation such as the one in my constituency. I ask for comments on that.

Paul Bradley: During the pandemic, we have seen a whole host of organisations closing their doors and not surfacing again—they have completely finished up. At the same time, we have also seen a whole range of community groups and organisations being set up to meet need. That is one positive.

Organisations were able to access a range of emergency funding during the pandemic, and working with the Government, local authorities and others, we tried to make it as simple as possible to access that money. However, the challenge now is that a lot of organisations and groups were set up based on need, and if they are to find and sustain their funding—as we have been saying, getting funding is pretty much a profession in itself—they will need to be supported as they develop their constitutions and secure that money. We need to hold their hands on that journey to ensure that this organisation or that group does not slip away in the struggle to access further funding and support.

To ensure that organisations can access funding, we need investment in infrastructure bodies and third sector interfaces in local authority areas. They are crucial, because they provide the link to local authorities and the funding that is available to voluntary organisations. I would point members to the third sector interface network manifesto, which was published ahead of the most recent election, as a really good source of information.

Fulton MacGregor: Something that has been raised several times by our witnesses this morning, particularly Paul Bradley—as I am sure my colleagues will agree, we hear about it all the time—is that the application process itself is a full-time job. Indeed, I hear that all the time from organisations. Is that a specific issue that needs to be addressed? I know that you have touched on this already, but the main argument seems to be that the funding process needs to be made simpler. Could another way of addressing the issue be for Government and local authorities to provide support for organisations—or, I should say, more support, because I know that some support is already available—in making funding applications?

Paul Bradley: We need to look at the experience of the pandemic. What your predecessor committee heard back in 2019 about the challenges that organisations face with regard to applications is still relevant—indeed, we have touched on some of that today—but we need to look at what happened during the pandemic. It was not perfect—nothing ever is—but we should be looking at the way in which public and voluntary sector bodies and independent funders came

together to set up, for example, a shared funding platform to share data and information about where money was flowing and to provide a single point of entry for organisations to access funding.

We need to make this as simple and easy as possible for organisations by getting others to do the hard work of navigating them through their applications and towards specific funds. Things should be made easier for the person or organisation looking for funding. As I have said, we can look at examples from the pandemic and build on experiences with independent funders, the voluntary sector and the Government to ensure that we build something that is easier to navigate for organisations—not only those that are starting up, but those that have been in the sector for a long time.

I do not know whether Nina Munday wants to say anything. We were chatting about the issue before the meeting.

Nina Munday: There is a process that has to happen before you apply for funding that presents a lot of groups with quite a lot of difficulty. In order to access funding, you need to be constituted, to decide what kind of body you are going to be and to be registered with the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator. A lot of groups do not have the capacity to get through that stage.

As I was telling Paul Bradley earlier, we have been given a small pot of money from the National Lottery Community Fund to distribute to small groups that started up during Covid, as we have been discussing. They might not be constituted or OSCR registered; they just need a tiny bit of money to continue some of their work. I know of a local group in Fife that wanted to organise meet-up groups, but it was told that it needed public liability insurance, which it did not have and which costs a lot of money. Who can pay for that? Well, there is the Fife Centre for Equalities. I hope that my board does not hear this, but wearing my chief executive hat, I will say that if the sum of money required is quite small, we might be able to help. After all, we do not want to give that group a few hundred pounds that it cannot use, simply because it does not have public liability insurance.

As I said, I am afraid that that stage before funding can even be applied highlights the difficulty of the whole system for groups that rely on a bunch of well-meaning volunteers.

The Convener: I feel that Fulton MacGregor might well press that area of questioning in our other evidence sessions.

I thank all three witnesses for taking the time to join us and for their really helpful evidence. We could have spent the whole afternoon chatting with you. There are a lot of issues to discuss, and the

evidence from all three of you has been really complementary.

I suspend the meeting briefly for a changeover of witnesses.

11:26

Meeting suspended.

11:32

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back. We move to our second panel of witnesses. I am pleased to welcome Shona Robison MSP, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government. I also welcome two Scottish Government officials: Trevor Owen, the head of the mainstreaming and strategy unit, and Emma Harvey, the head of the finance and business support unit, who are both from the directorate of equality, inclusion and human rights.

Cabinet secretary, do you want to make a brief opening statement?

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): Good morning, everyone, and thanks for the invitation to give evidence on the equality, inclusion and human rights budget as part of your pre-budget scrutiny.

As you are aware, Covid-19 has highlighted the deep-rooted inequalities that exist in our society. It is vital that, as we move to the next stages of our renewal and recovery work, we use the opportunity to make fundamental and lasting changes to address those inequalities.

Equality, inclusion and human rights continue to lie at the heart of our approach to budgeting. In forming spending plans, ministers must take into account the impact that their decisions will have on equality considerations. The Minister for Equalities and Older People and I will continue to work closely with ministerial colleagues to support those considerations.

I am also pleased to note that the committee has written to subject committees encouraging them

“to consider the implications for equalities and human rights on their own subjects, as part of their pre-budget scrutiny.”

That is a genuinely cross-cutting issue, which remains everyone’s business.

In the 2021-22 budget, the equality, inclusion and human rights budget lines increased to £36.6 million. That was a significant increase of around 35 per cent from the 2019-20 budget position, which signals the Scottish Government’s commitment to that work.

Since May, we have started the development of a new five-year £10 million plan to tackle social isolation and loneliness, with £1 million in funding for organisations this year and the remainder over the parliamentary session. We have also delivered the new equality and human rights fund, thereby increasing the funding that is available by more than £1 million a year to £7 million per annum over the next three years and supporting 48 projects across Scotland.

Although I recognise that this is outwith the committee’s remit, my portfolio also provides significant investment to tackle violence against women and girls and to support refugees and asylum seekers. I am happy to go into detail about that during the meeting.

The new streamlined funding streams will more closely align our funding with the national performance framework outcomes and will encourage and support partnership working to tackle some of the more entrenched issues of inequality across our society.

I also welcome the committee’s focus on human rights budgeting in its evidence-taking sessions to date. In our programme for government, we committed to

“further embed equality and human rights within all stages of the Scottish Government’s Budget process, taking account of the Equality Budget Advisory Group’s recommendations”.

The equality budget advisory group presented ministers and Scottish Government with a set of recommendations on equality and human rights budgeting earlier in 2021. Those are being considered as part of our on-going work around budgeting.

I look forward to working with the committee and to members’ questions.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Good morning to you all. Thank you for coming and speaking with us.

We heard from Councillor Evison from COSLA and from the SCVO about two areas on which I will ask questions.

A number of social care services are being pulled due to pressures that are a result of the pandemic, but it is fair to say that some of those pressures existed long before the pandemic. Will you outline what percentage increase in investment in social care would be needed not just to reach the minimum core of human rights of disabled people but to progressively realise those rights and, in doing so, address some of the inequalities that women face?

On your budget line, is the Scottish Government doing all that it can with the powers that it holds to lift disabled people, unpaid carers and women out of poverty? When do you intend to take full control

of devolved benefits to ensure that those groups are not left behind at the hands of the Department for Work and Pensions?

I recognise that there is a lot in there but, being short of time, I wanted to get it all in.

Shona Robison: If I do not manage to cover every single aspect, I will write to the committee to capture everything.

Social care funding is an area of responsibility for Humza Yousaf and Kevin Stewart. As you will be aware, Humza Yousaf will make a statement that will outline some of the Government's thinking in that regard. The Scottish Government has been clear that one of the benefits of a national care service would be improving the terms and conditions of the workforce which, as you pointed out, is predominantly female. That will help to address the inequalities and improve the fair work agenda in that workforce.

You talked about the disability benefits. You are right that that is the next big area of responsibility for Social Security Scotland. The child disability payment scheme is being piloted and will be rolled out from 22 November. Work continues apace on the adult disability payments.

There are a lot of detailed considerations going on. The Scottish Commission on Social Security has been considering the detail of the benefits as well. We want to ensure not only that the transition of those benefits is safe and secure but that we quickly review them once the case transfer is under way. We will work with the committee and other stakeholders to ensure that we can make improvements to those benefits.

I do not know whether I have managed to give a top response to the issues that you raised.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The disability benefits will be key. You will be aware of the report on the experience of poverty in Scotland that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published yesterday. It tells us that 100,000 of the families that are living in poverty have a disabled person in them. Therefore, there is a more pressing need than ever to assess the adequacy of disability assistance, as well as eligibility. Is there any scope to move that forward, particularly given the number of staff who were added to Social Security Scotland last week? Have you considered introducing a supplement for the Scottish child payment to lift those the families out of poverty?

Shona Robison: We should distinguish between the two things. The disability benefits will have to transfer essentially using similar criteria, albeit that they will have to be delivered in a very different way, for all the reasons that were laid out to the Social Security Committee in the previous parliamentary session. Otherwise, we would not

be able to transfer the benefits in the timeframe allowed, and it would create a confusing landscape if we had two different benefits working to two different sets of criteria. We need to get the benefits transferred and then review the eligibility criteria, payments and so on.

However, you mentioned the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and you are absolutely right to say that the focus was very much on the six priority family types. We know that 80 per cent of children who live in poverty are located within the six priority family types and, of course, one of those types is families that have a person with a disability living in them. I said yesterday at a session with the JRF that the Government's focus is on other areas and game-changing policies that we can bring to the table alongside the Scottish child payment. Part of that is getting alongside the six priority family types and identifying bespoke solutions for them. What are the barriers faced by the family with the disabled person in the family that prevent them from getting access to work or to other services and support that could improve their lives?

The Government is focusing on that area at the moment. Once we have identified how we are going to do that, I will be happy to come back to the committee with that information. Those policies are very much our focus, because we know that they can have a huge impact on child poverty if we get them right.

Maggie Chapman: I want to touch on a couple of areas. In your opening remarks, you talked about the equality budget advisory group report's recommendations. How is the work of progressing those recommendations going? How are those recommendations allowing us to hear the often ignored or easy to ignore, more marginalised community voices in discussions on the budget and in the setting of priorities? I will come back with a couple of other issues.

Shona Robison: The EBAG recommendations that were made earlier this year are important. In the programme for government, which was published last month, we made a clear commitment to further embed equalities and human rights in all stages of the Scottish Government's budget process, taking into account those recommendations.

The EBAG recommendations were shared with me when I came into my post back in May and they were published just a couple of months after that. We have been giving them careful consideration, including as part of the forthcoming budgetary cycle, and of our longer-term budget improvement and equality and human rights mainstreaming work. I have agreed to renew EBAG's mandate for another year to allow further development of our collective thinking, and I plan to meet Professor Angela O'Hagan, the chair, in

early November to discuss EBAG's work and its recommendations further. Thereafter, we will seek to set out our thinking on the next steps in spring next year. I would be happy to update the committee at that time.

Members will be aware that the recommendations were presented under the four themes of improving processes, communications, organisation and culture, and knowledge and understanding. There is a lot to consider, but I am happy to come back to the committee with further detail.

Maggie Chapman: One of the reasons why participation and engagement are so crucial is that they help us to better understand budget priorities as we look ahead. We heard from the earlier panel today about the importance of long-term prioritising so that people understood what was coming and could plan effectively for beyond the annual cycle instead of using three months to set the project up, six months to do the project, and then three months to scabble around and find money for the next year.

How can equalities allow us to get at some of the issues in that planning and strategic work? Do we need to take more seriously the significant asks from local government, the third sector and elsewhere around understanding the core costs that are very much part of sustaining the work that local government and the third sector do to deliver services across various ministers' remits, and not only yours?

11:45

Shona Robison: I understand the very real point that third sector organisations make that they want multiyear funding to allow them to plan their work over the long term. I have a lot of sympathy for that. When the Scottish Government is working with a one-year budget because the United Kingdom Government is working with a one-year spending review and budget, that makes it very difficult to give certainty, because we do not have certainty. However, we have made a commitment that we want to try to work towards that over a number of years, because it allows longer-term planning. I absolutely understand and agree with that point.

On the strategic work, the process of embedding equality and looking at everything that we do through an equality lens and a human rights lens is a work in progress. We have got a lot better at doing that, and we now have a lot of expertise, although there is work to be done. EBAG has really shown where the weaknesses are that need to be worked on. We will constantly try to improve. In March next year, we hope to be able to say

more about further improvements that we can make.

Karen Adam: My question is on data and analysis for human rights budgeting. I highlight that we are at the beginning of black history month and that, throughout the pandemic, black, Asian and minority ethnic people have been acutely affected by pre-existing inequalities across a huge range of areas. As the pandemic has progressed, many of those underlying inequalities have made its impact far more severe for BAME people. What are your views on the quality of data on the equality characteristics? What improvements are planned in the light of forthcoming human rights obligations? For example, will you increase sample sizes of data for specific groups such as particularly vulnerable and minority groups?

Shona Robison: You make a good point. The Scottish Government and the agencies across Scotland for which we have responsibility collect, analyse and publish evidence and analysis by equality characteristic across a wide range of policy areas. There are many barriers and challenges to collecting, analysing and reporting equality data. Despite improvements in recent years, there are still gaps in the equality evidence base. In April this year, we launched the first phase of our equality data improvement programme in order to take action to make equality evidence more wide ranging and robust. A stronger and more complete equality evidence base will help to support the collective effort across the public sector and ensure that the requirements of the public sector equality duty are fulfilled.

The programme will be undertaken over the next 18 months, and I am hopeful that major improvements will flow from it. You mentioned the issue of sample size. The first phase of the improvement programme comprises a series of projects that will focus on the process elements of equality data collection, including sample size. The programme is in the early phase, but I am happy to ensure that we keep the committee abreast of developments.

On data gaps regarding ethnicity, our "Race Equality Immediate Priorities Plan", which was published on 14 September, has at its heart the data improvement and systemic change recommendations that have been made to us by the expert reference group on Covid-19 and ethnicity. We absolutely recognise that issue.

A lot of improvement work is going on, and we are happy to keep the committee updated on it.

Alexander Stewart: Organisations such as COSLA and many from the third sector have raised issues with the budget process. What changes to the process are being considered to

reflect the points from COSLA and the third sector? With the new human rights landscape, what changes will there be to handling the budget process? Will things need to be revised in the budget process in the context of the national performance framework?

Shona Robison: I will take the last two points first. We are constantly evolving and looking at ways of improving. Obviously, human rights budgeting is a strong focus at the moment. It is early days, but we very much have a commitment to getting it right.

As you will imagine, I spend a lot of time speaking to COSLA, and I cannot think of a meeting at which the budget and finance generally were not among the issues that we discussed. COSLA would probably want as early engagement as possible and as much joint working on priority areas as possible. For example, discussions have been going on with COSLA for months around having what is, in essence, a joint approach to Covid recovery, which will obviously be at the heart of the budget. COSLA has been involved in all the discussions, as is right and proper. I am not sure whether that is different from other budget-setting processes, but I would say that, this time, because of the focus on Covid recovery, COSLA has been at the centre in all the discussions on strategic priorities and therefore the funding of them, as you would expect.

Alexander Stewart: What about the involvement of the third sector?

Shona Robison: We could probably get better at trying to involve the third sector. It is a big sector that ranges from big strategic national organisations through to very small local organisations and, given the nature of the budget process, our engagement on the budget is more likely to be with those larger strategic organisations. Over the years, we have simplified the budget process and made the budget more accessible, which helps third sector organisations to see what it looks like, how it works and how it hangs together.

I ask Trevor Owen whether he would like to add anything about the third sector involvement.

Trevor Owen (Scottish Government): I do not have anything in particular to add. I echo the cabinet secretary's point that we always seek to engage with the third sector. As we work on the equality and fairer Scotland budget statement, which involves working across portfolios, we encourage such engagement, and we will seek to reflect that in the statement when it is published. I hope that the statement will set out some of that thinking.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: We heard earlier this morning from a representative of the SCVO. You

will be aware that in its evidence to the committee, the SCVO said that it had asked our predecessor committee in 2019 for there to be significant changes to decision making and the way that the Government funds organisations, including giving much more notice and certainty. The SCVO said that, so far, the response from the Government has been "underwhelming" and there have been "insignificant advances". Can you provide an update on the consideration that you have given those requests from 2019?

Also, I was quite surprised to hear that a sector with more than 100,000 staff and a £6 billion turnover does not feature in the Scottish Government's economic strategy. Can you undertake to make a representation to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy to address that?

Shona Robison: The point about the third sector having a seat at the table with regard to the economic strategy has been raised with me directly. That remains under discussion. The role of the third sector, not least in Covid recovery, is fundamental, and in my discussions with third sector organisations, I have made the point that the Government recognises that.

On the requests from 2019, I might have to write to the committee. That was before my time in this role, but I am happy to write to update committee members on what has been done since then.

Emma Harvey (Scottish Government): On what we have done within this portfolio in response to those requests, the new equality and human rights funding streams are committed to a three-year period of funding, in an attempt to give that level of continuity for organisations. We also opened up the funding to ensure that we were providing organisations with core support, not just funding for projects, and giving them the flex to choose what they bid for and how they use the money that comes to them. We recognised that project funding without core support is not particularly helpful for organisations.

That was done as a direct result of the evidence that the predecessor committee took. There are a few more bits and pieces that we did, and I can write to the committee with a fuller answer on that, but that evidence definitely played in strongly to the development of the equality and human rights funding streams. We also held a number of sessions with organisations that we funded to get their feedback on what was helpful for them, and our attempt to add flexibility was done on the back of what we heard from them.

On knowing how well that works, it is early days. As we go through this period of funding, we will be looking to see whether they were the right

adaptations and whether we can be doing more for the next round, and we will feed that through.

Fulton MacGregor: I have a few questions that follow on from the earlier session this morning—I do not know whether you had a chance to see that—and from the last line of questioning, about the funding streams that are open to voluntary organisations.

We heard quite clearly from Paul Bradley that during Covid, funding was streamlined, and that was found to be helpful. Going back further, we all recognise that accessing funding has been difficult for organisations that have not had somebody to do the job of applying for it. Is that something that you are considering in the budget processes? What impact might it have if more smaller organisations are able to access funding?

Shona Robison: The first thing to say is that there was a lot of interest in the equality and human rights funding, and it was more interest than could have ever been funded—we have to be honest about that.

We have an independent process for assessing applications. There has been a shift to try to ensure that the national funding, if you like, is going to organisations that are quite strategic in nature. I guess that your question would then be, “What about the local, smaller organisations?” I think that there is a tension here. I think that we would see very small, local organisations perhaps being funded in a different way, and we would deliver the Scottish Government funding to more strategic organisations. That is obviously going to be a challenge. I do not know whether Emma Harvey wants to add anything.

12:00

Emma Harvey: We have attempted to align the equality and human rights funding more closely with the national performance outcomes in order to try to get a bigger shift in what we achieve with it. An unintended consequence of that has perhaps been that some of the smaller organisations have found it more difficult. We put in support for organisations through our funding partners and they ran a number of workshops to talk organisations through how to apply and so on. However, as we move into more of a delivery phase, we will definitely look at how well that worked, how the support was received by organisations and whether it was the right kind of support. We will look to see what lessons we can learn for our funding in future.

As the cabinet secretary said, there is always a tension between focusing budget on organisations and projects that can shift the dial and provide the outcomes that we want and providing support for more local organisations.

Maggie Chapman: I want to extend Fulton MacGregor’s questions and draw in a couple of other areas that I am interested in exploring. I suppose the first thing is to recognise—you have already done this, cabinet secretary—that the committee, never mind the Parliament as a whole, is at the beginning of trying to understand how we can do equalities and human rights budgeting better across the board.

The Scottish Human Rights Commission has asked whether the budget is as big as it could be, and I think that we have an obligation to maximise it so that we can deliver the things that we want to deliver. I suppose my question is about the Scottish Government’s approach to tax and the other revenue-raising powers that we have. A consultation is open on tax and budget policy, but are you in a position to say a little about how we can ensure that the budget is as big as possible using taxation and other revenue-raising powers? How are we doing on that work, especially through a human rights lens?

Returning to the NPF, how can we use long-term outcomes rather than annual or even three-yearly ones in order to address something on which I think we all recognise, even if it has not been a failing, we have not gone as far as we would have liked over the past 10 years, since the Christie recommendations on prevention?

Shona Robison: There is definitely more work to be done as per the Christie recommendations to focus more resources upstream for prevention. I absolutely agree with that, but it is not the easiest thing to do. We need to find ways, not least through Covid recovery, to work with organisations and local government to look at how that can be done, because we know that spend is more effective in that space.

You asked a number of questions about the size of the budget. In essence, decisions about the balance of the budget are for Government. Decisions about taxation in Scotland, at least to the extent that such powers are within devolved competence, need to be informed by an understanding of the resources needed to address areas of human rights deficiency or a weakness. Taxation is one of the principal means of ensuring that those resources are available, but, with regard to Covid recovery, there is a balance to be struck between revenue raising and supporting businesses, communities and families to recover.

In our spend over the Covid period, you will see expenditure of £2.5 billion on supporting low-income households. Obviously, it was a deliberate policy decision to recognise that the impact of Covid has not been equally felt. Recognising that means that we then have to act in a particular way in following through our policy and budget decisions. Through the Covid recovery strategy,

which will be closely aligned to the budget, you would expect to see more of that cohesive thinking across decisions making. Government always has to make tough decisions, particularly on budgets, because there is never enough money to do absolutely everything that we want to do—there never has been. Therefore, decisions have to be made and we have to be more strategic. The task that the Cabinet has set itself is to see what more we can do to tackle child poverty. If everything is a priority, nothing is a priority, so we have had to be very clear about the priorities for Government and, therefore, the budget. I hope that that will be clear, once the budget process is properly under way.

Alexander Stewart: There is a lot of discussion in the programme for government about participation and ensuring that we get democratic participation across the country. What will the Scottish Government do to ensure that it increases the level and the quality of participation in the budget process?

Shona Robison: You will be aware that the EBAG recommendations state that public participation in formulating budget commitments and ensuring the integration of lived experience and policy decisions are essential. Key aspects of equality and human rights budgeting are transparency of the budget process and documentation and the ability for people to engage and understand the budget, because it is quite a complex set of processes. It is complex for ministers, let alone folk who have not been through the process before. We recognise that there is work to do to improve transparency and participation in the budgeting process.

As part of our response to those recommendations, we will consider how best that is achieved and through what routes. As part of the wider objective to make Scottish fiscal information more accessible and understandable, the financial transparency programme is intended to help with the timely publication of accessible information, such as by using more data visualisations, infographics and open data, with clear explanations of the context. That approach is intended to support an improved understanding of how the Scottish Government's budget is allocated and spent, thereby improving scrutiny by external and internal stakeholders.

It is work in progress, but we recognise that there is more to do. We have been looking at examples of good practice from elsewhere in the world. We need to keep the improvement work going.

The Convener: Thanks very much, cabinet secretary. I think that committee members are content for now. We have other business to cover in private session. Thank you for making it through the session without having a coughing fit. You said

that you would write to the committee with one or two pieces of information, so we look forward to receiving those and being kept up to date on the other matters that you talked about.

We will now move into private session.

12:09

Meeting continued in private until 12:48.

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