OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

COVID-19 Recovery Committee

Thursday 24 March 2022

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Thursday 24 March 2022

CONTENTS

COVID-19 RECOVERY COMMITTEE
10th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
*Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
*Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Fiona Blair (Association of Registrars of Scotland)
Douglas Hendry (Argyll and Bute Council)
David McNeill (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations)
Mairi Millar (Glasgow City Council)
Adam Stachura (Age Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Sigrid Robinson

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

COVID-19 Recovery Committee

Thursday 24 March 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Coronavirus (Recovery and Reform) (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Convener (Siobhian Brown): Good morning, and welcome to the 10th meeting in 2022 of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee.

As this week marks the two-year anniversary of the first Covid-19 lockdown, I will take a moment to acknowledge those who have sadly lost a loved one to Covid-19 and to reflect on the many challenges that individuals and wider society have faced over the past two years in dealing with the pandemic.

Although we banged our pots and clapped on our doorsteps in appreciation of the national health service, it is important to acknowledge that, this week, our NHS has never been under so much pressure. Yesterday, there were more than 2,257 people with Covid in hospital and more than 5,000 NHS staff absences. We all appreciate how difficult that situation is for our NHS and, on behalf of the committee, I offer our heartfelt thanks for the health service's on-going work in such challenging circumstances.

This morning, the committee will continue to take evidence on the Coronavirus (Recovery and Reform) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1. I welcome to the meeting Adam Stachura, head of policy and communications at Age Scotland; Douglas Hendry, executive director at Argyll and Bute Council; Fiona Blair, president of the Association of Registrars of Scotland; Mairi Millar, head of licensing and democratic services at Glasgow City Council; and David McNeill, director of development at the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations. Thank you for giving us your time this morning.

The focus of today's meeting is the remote delivery of public services, where that is enabled under part 3 of the bill. Each member of the committee will have approximately 12 minutes to ask questions of the panel. We should be okay for time this morning, but I apologise in advance if, in the interests of keeping us to time, I have to interrupt members or witnesses.

I will start the questioning by asking about digital exclusion. The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations has noted that

"1.5 million more people have started using the internet in the UK since 2020".

A recent Scottish household survey report has shown that, at the moment, 93 per cent of households have access to the internet and 92 per cent of adults use it. However, deprivation is a significant factor, with only 87 per cent of households in our most deprived areas having access to the internet.

I am concerned about how the cost of living crisis will hit households. With extra costs averaging at about £3,000 a year, people will start to decide to spend their money on, say, heating and food instead and, as a result, more people might become digitally excluded. What other risks might arise with the move to the digital delivery of public services? That question is for Adam Stachura, first of all.

Adam Stachura (Age Scotland): Over the past two years, in particular, Age Scotland has heard a lot from older people over 50 and their families and carers about how inaccessible public services are. People who have come to rely on and desperately need access to important services such as banking and healthcare have been finding them inaccessible, and that is not just as a result of the pandemic—it was happening before that.

Convener, you mentioned digital exclusion in areas of deprivation. In the most deprived parts of Scotland, 50 per cent of older people do not use the internet, and they are often the people who most rely on public services for healthcare or any other kind of support. That challenge is very difficult to address, and it is also important to remember that not everyone will be able to get online, because of disability, poverty or, quite frankly, choice. There are people who have never used these things and, as they get older, they might be living with different health conditions that preclude their doing so.

We are not suggesting in any way, or in some Luddite fashion, that older people should not be getting online. There has been a great adoption of going online in order to get necessities and to connect with other people through video calls or whatever, but the fact is that some folks face profound challenges in that respect. Some of the platforms used by local authorities, the NHS and general practices can be hard to navigate to, and just because someone can get there does not mean that they can find what they are looking for or do what they were intending to do.

The Convener: I put the same question to David McNeill.

David McNeill (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations): Most people expect to interact via digital public services, because they are faster, more convenient and, if done right,

cheaper to deliver. This is not just about putting our existing services online; it is about redesigning those services to meet people's expectations of how they want to interact with them, while recognising that a proportion of people do not want to or cannot engage in that way and ensuring that we do not leave those people behind.

For us, digital exclusion has three components, the first of which is having the confidence and motivation to go online. There are lots of people who are not online or do not want to go online. We know that, pre-pandemic, around half of that group wanted to engage online, but they just needed some support to do so. There is also a group of resisters who just do not want to engage, and it is pretty important that there are alternative methods of providing them with public services.

The other components of digital exclusion relate to wider groups. The second—and key—component is access; it is about having the right device and the affordability of not just that device but the connection itself. During the pandemic, lots of people were cut off from the safety net of libraries and from being able to go in to use those devices and internet connections. We heard stories of people hiding in the toilets in Tesco so that they could use the wi-fi on their phone. We need to think about the group who live in poverty and cannot afford a connection and how we enable them to access connectivity.

The third and final component of this picture is having the skills and ability to interact with online services confidently and effectively. That issue affects a much wider group. Just because someone is a confident user of social media and can use Facebook or send emails, that does not mean that they are confident about filling out forms online.

Those three components need to be considered in the online delivery of public services to ensure that we do not to leave people behind.

The Convener: Thank you for those answers.

I want to bring in the other witnesses with my next question, which is on the connecting Scotland programme, the joint digital strategy between the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that seeks to ensure that nobody is left behind and that people have access to the internet.

Let me give you an example. Several months ago, a constituent got in touch with me about digital exclusion. Unfortunately, she suffered a stroke seven years ago and is now registered blind. She likes to be self-reliant and pays privately for care, but she was becoming increasingly frustrated by being told to do everything online. When she wanted to do some shopping, when she tried to phone the council or when she wanted to book something, she was told to do it online instead, but, when she got in touch with me, she had no access to a computer or the internet. We have since been able to get her a talking laptop.

How do we ensure that people such as my constituent, who might not be on the radar of the council or social services, are not excluded and left behind? What can local authorities and other public bodies do to counter digital exclusion in the move to digital delivery? Are the affected bodies organised in the best way to achieve that, and do they have the necessary capacity and skills?

I know that that is a lot of questions in one. I will bring in Mairi Millar first.

Mairi Millar (Glasgow City Council): As a result of my experience over the past two years, primarily in licensing, I am hugely encouraged by how well people have adapted to the move to online services, including for our licensing committee or licensing board meetings, which people are able to join via the online platform.

However, there have been a small number of cases of people experiencing difficulty in that respect, and we have taken steps to assist them. With online application forms, we had to move at considerable pace to respond quickly to the Covid situation, so those might not have been developed as well as they could have been. A considerable piece of work has still to be done to make the online capability for application forms and other processes much more accessible, and a significant resource will be required to do that. We can build on the experience that we have gained over the past two years in having to respond to an emergency situation and use it to improve the digital accessibility of our systems. There is a need for services to take a more hybrid approach in recognition of those people who are not able to engage exclusively with online services.

Douglas Hendry (Argyll and Bute Council): I broadly agree with the comments of the three previous speakers and the different ways in which they have come at these questions.

The amount of accessibility to the internet and the number of people doing their business digitally have increased significantly, and that has been driven by Covid. However, it would be a mistake to equate access to the internet with ability to use digital services. Some people might well be able to access the internet and digital services but, for a number of reasons that other witnesses have highlighted, they might choose not to or might be unable to use the facilities that are available.

As for how we might improve things further, I would point out that, in rural areas, including parts of Argyll and Bute, broadband capability and the speed of connection are a mile away from those which people in more built-up areas and certainly

our cities can generally access. That is a limiting factor for people who reside in more rural and remote areas and, in some cases, islands. Local authorities and others can contribute to solutions but, ultimately, the issue has to be taken forward on a wider front, which, obviously, the Scottish Government has in hand. However, I think that the issue goes beyond even what the Scottish Government might wish to do. We need to do more with service providers to increase the roll-out of broadband in remote and rural areas and to expand the quality and speed of people's connection to the internet.

The Convener: David McNeill, do you have any guidance for local authorities and other public bodies on countering digital exclusion as we move towards digital delivery?

David McNeill: The really important thing about any move to digital services is that all services take some responsibility for supporting people who are not confident about using them. People who cannot engage with services online must not be passed on to, for example, libraries or some other service.

I remember what happened when farmers' claims moved online six or seven years ago—I cannot remember the specific year. Although we would not necessarily think of farmers as a traditionally digitally excluded group, it turned out that a lot of them did not have access to the internet and were not familiar with technology. I know that, in the transition, plans were put in place so that someone could go into a local office to receive support and build their skills by being taken through the online claims system. They were then able to self-serve and make their claims themselves. That not only benefited them in making claims in future years, but there were reports that they were more confident with using technology, which, in turn, benefited their business as they were able to buy things online cheaper and interact in that way.

Of course, I am going back almost a decade now, when digital exclusion was slightly different, but the example shows that, if a public service supports people who are not confident online or who need support with skills, such an approach can benefit its own service and have wider benefits for the individual.

10:15

The Convener: Thank you. There are some very good points in there.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning, panel. I want to follow up on some of the points about digital exclusion that the convener raised. When reading the submissions, I was taken by the fact that there is a clear difference between the approach of professional organisations and bodies, which are, in the main, very relaxed—indeed, enthusiastic—about a move towards more digital engagement and that of members of the public, some of whom will have concerns. We have already talked about how that might widen inequalities in society.

I want to pick up the last point that David McNeill made, which was about the need to try to provide support for people who might already be digitally excluded. I put my question to Fiona Blair, who is here on behalf of the Association of Registrars of Scotland. What thinking has your organisation done about how a move towards online working will impact on people who are digitally excluded? What specific measures can you put in place to try to assist those who might have some difficulty?

Fiona Blair (Association of Registrars of Scotland): My experience in the pandemic has been that it has been mainly older people who have been digitally excluded. Before the pandemic, we in registration did everything in person, but when the pandemic hit, we moved to the remote registration of deaths, and we found that people were quite happy to speak to us on the phone. Although doing that is quite impersonal for some people, some people really like it.

The issue for older people has mainly been emailing. They are not digitally savvy, and they did not have access to emails. It was about finding a workaround, posting documents out to them and taking time to explain things. We would not necessarily ask people to fill in forms online, and everybody has a phone these days.

I found things difficult in one registration, in which the person was deaf. Unfortunately, she also had mobility issues, which meant that she could not go to an office. Luckily, however, she was tech savvy and we did the registration back and forward via email. Although that took a long time, the two of us got there in the end.

Murdo Fraser: Sections 18 and 20 of the bill give registration officers quite a degree of discretion in how they offer the remote registration of births and deaths. Do you have any thoughts about how they are drafted? Do they strike the right approach?

Fiona Blair: I think that it is the right approach and that bringing in the remote registration of births is a policy progression. However, there are occasions when in-person registration is far better than remote registration for some people. There are pros and cons on each side.

People who are vulnerable or have disabilities and need in-person registration should never be denied it. However, remote registration has benefits for people who do not live close to a

registration office. People in rural areas may have to travel long distances to carry out an in-person registration. I am from the Scottish Borders, and there are people who live in England who have babies in the Borders. A remote registration would save them from travelling back to Scotland to register. As you will know, an event that occurs in Scotland must be registered in Scotland.

Murdo Fraser: I ask Douglas Hendry for a local authority perspective on that.

Douglas Hendry: I will first make a comment about our experience. We have found that remote registration of deaths, which came in more than 18 months ago and is perhaps further along the road than remote registration of births, has been a success. In general, the benefits that were perceived to come from that have been fully realised. We have carried out customer satisfaction surveys that indicate that the majority of people who have been using the service appreciate the process being done remotely and find it less stressful generally. In the context of a rural area such as Argyll and Bute, where we had a presence—[*Inaudible*.]

The Convener: We have lost you. We have a bit of a technical issue.

Douglas Hendry: [*Inaudible*.]—home working, as they are more remote and rural areas. The introduction of being able to do things remotely has been positive.

The current position on birth registration is that, as people will be aware, we have a hybrid approach in place, but there is still a general requirement for physical attendance at a registration office. We think that moving beyond that would be positive. In Argyll and Bute, we do not see any rural negatives to doing so. We are informed by our experience of how we have dealt with the registration of deaths, and coming out of that, as councils move to whatever new arrangements they will have in place for the delivery of services, it is clear that there will not be a replication of what was in place before Covid, so there is a clear opportunity to do things differently, make better use of the technology and make fuller use of the people who currently work in the field.

To sum up, there are no real fears about the position on live birth registration if the model moves on as is envisaged.

Murdo Fraser: I go back to Adam Stachura from Age Scotland. We have had positive feedback there on what is being proposed. Are you generally satisfied with what is in the bill around the issue, or do additional measures need to be put in?

Adam Stachura: The bill is pretty satisfactory in relation to which provisions and services will require to be—or can be—expanded to include the digital option. There is a very slight concern about what the next phase is. What comes next? What else will become primarily digital? Where will the provision for non-digital communication and routes into services be disregarded, so that the citizen is not afforded that option? That is where the trickiness might be.

The way that the bill is written and the type of things that it covers are broadly fine, but the issue is about how people apply it, how it is used and what the easiest thing to do might be. Hearing from other people on the panel about their particular areas, I have a feeling that things are working well, which is good, but the one caveat is that we often do not hear from the people who have not been successful at communicating digitally. If councils' phone lines and face-to-face services are shut down, we will not hear from those people. That is part of the future.

There is also a caveat regarding the methodology of the most recent Scottish household survey and whether it gives the truest picture of Scotland. If we look at the previous year, we see that half a million over-60s in Scotland did not use the internet and 600,000 over-60s did not have a smartphone.

We are starting from quite a high level of digital exclusion, and we are not anywhere near cutting that to a level at which primarily digital service provision is acceptable. There are already lots of reasons—if English is not your first language, if you have sight loss, if you have arthritis and so on—why people can find it tricky to interact with public services.

Murdo Fraser: Thank you. That is helpful.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I will pick up where Murdo Fraser left off with Adam Stachura. From what I am picking up, it seems as though the witnesses broadly welcome part 3 of the bill and see it as a positive. However, given the concerns that exist, should there be something in the bill that says that the public can access services face to face? Should some kind of protections be built in? If so, what should they be?

Adam Stachura: There are better experts on delivery than me on the panel, but you make a good point about the need, perhaps, for stronger provision for accessing services offline. As I said to Mr Fraser, we have seen challenges when folks just cannot interact online.

I will give you an example, although it does not relate to part 3 of the bill. People trying to apply for a blue badge from their local authorities have to do so all online. Disability is a big driver of digital exclusion, but disabled people are having to go through many fiery hoops to apply.

The slight caveat that I mentioned earlier is making sure that the person's right to access a service in a non-digital way is clear and that they are empowered to do so. That is the challenge. There very well could be enough in the bill, but it is about how public services will enact it and what kind of scrutiny is given to their use of it.

The challenge for a lot of things, such as digital communications and notifications, is that, even if they are on the website somewhere, or if there is some stuff on Twitter, all that might not quite cut it for many people who want to be engaged. Again, we have had really good answers from folks about how their experiences of services are working, but we want to be sure that we hear from those from whom we would not normally hear.

Alex Rowley: Mairi Millar, you said that the systems that were brought in were brought in out of necessity. Has any local authority carried out an evaluation of the experience so far? You said that there was room for improvement in systems, so has there been an evaluation? For example, do local authorities know where those improvements are needed? What are the barriers to that?

Mairi Millar: With regard to licensing, we have been engaging with some of our main trade group representatives, such as the taxi operators and private hire companies, on their experience of online application processes, and we recognise that we engage with several people who do not have English as a first language, which has been a particular difficulty with some of our online systems. We need to work on improving engagement and the experience of moving online.

An example of the difficulties that we have been having is that we have not been able to fully resource the phone lines that we used before Covid so that people can pick up the phone. We are moving in the direction of channelling people towards the online systems, but we need to recognise that that must be done in a way that ensures that everyone can properly engage with the process, and we need to evaluate that further.

Having more general meetings online has allowed people to engage with meetings that they might not have been able to go to before because of the time that they would need to take to attend in person. We want to take forward that experience so that people are able to join remotely, even if we move back to face-to-face meetings. We should build in the capability for holding hybrid meetings, because that will allow people who might have chosen not to engage in the process in the past to do so. That applies particularly to people who object to licence applications.

We need to take a lot of experience from the past couple of years, so we need to carry out the evaluation process.

10:30

Alex Rowley: My next question is for Douglas Hendry. Under sections 18 and 20 of the bill, local registration offices are given quite a lot of discretion on the extent to which they offer remote registrations of births, deaths and so on, and on the methods. Is there a danger that we will end up with 32 different set-ups, with only some local authorities providing face-to-face services? Should clearer guidance be given to local authorities, so that we do not exclude people, but encourage greater take-up of online tools?

Douglas Hendry: There was a slight glitch in the broadcasting, so I missed the first part of the question, but I think that I got the gist of it. However, if I miss anything, please feel free to pick me up on that.

I recognise the comments that were made by my colleague from Glasgow a couple of minutes ago. The future is hybrid for licensing hearings relating to liquor, civic government and so on. It would be wise, sensible and appropriate for councils to have discretion on such hearings.

It might be possible and desirable to have general guidance that applies across all 32 local authorities, if the guidance is a statement of a set of principles. However, the 32 councils are so disparate in nature that I suggest that it would be impossible to produce detailed guidance that all councils had to follow—[*Inaudible*.]

The Convener: We have a technical issue.

Douglas Hendry: [*Inaudible*.]—a reasonable manner. As I said, a one-size-fits-all approach will not do.

Alex Rowley: I will come to David McNeill next. When universal credit was being rolled out, I visited a number of third sector and local authority projects that put in place a lot of intensive support because, as you know, people had to use online tools to register, search and so on. That was difficult for a lot of people but, among the local authorities and third sector organisations that I met, there was a real attempt to provide support. Does such support need to accompany the bill? Does there need to be recognition that greater support will be needed at community level? Should funding be made available for that?

David McNeill: On the universal credit example, we and others spent a lot of time working with the Department for Work and Pensions and touring the country to help people to understand how to support people through the application process. It is a big system. In a trial, it took me around 45

minutes to go through the process, so it represents a big ask for someone who is digitally excluded. One of the key pieces of learning around universal credit concerned the fact that digitally excluded people had to pay to call a phone number and complete the application that way. That charge was subsequently removed, because it further excluded people who were digitally excluded.

Of course, the universal credit process raises a high risk of digital exclusion, because universal credit is for people who are already facing poverty and other forms of exclusion. We say that the best way to support such people is through embedded approaches to digital exclusion. People who are working with the most excluded people need to consider how they can support people to get online and be confident. For example, in the delivery of the connecting Scotland programme, we have given a digital device, an internet connection and digital champion support to people so that they can pass on those skills to their service users. The challenge that we are seeing now is that, as we go back to more normal modes of service delivery, the capacity of those front-line staff to take on that digital champion role and support people is limited.

There is a need for support for people, but, rather than necessarily seeing digital exclusion as something on its own, that support needs to be targeted at the organisations and teams that are already working with people who are likely to face digital exclusion as well as poverty and other forms of exclusion. They are resourced to support the people with whom they already work. Having said that, some strategic interventions are needed to help people to access the support infrastructure around skills and affordable connectivity.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I would like to move on from the issue of access to the issue of the accuracy of the information that comes through to whoever is registering births, deaths, marriages and so on. Ms Millar, if everything is done remotely, is there a risk that it might be harder to pick up on, for example, a sham marriage that is not a real relationship but is to do with, say, immigration?

Mairi Millar: I have been speaking to our registrar colleagues, and there is a concern about the potential for those types of situations if such things are handled remotely, although, of course, checks and balances are built into the system.

The experience has been that being able to do things remotely does not always mean that the registrar services can do them more quickly. Often, if something is done face to face, errors can be quickly corrected whereas, if it is done online, there can sometimes be a back and forth. In the registration of deaths, that can cause distress and prolong the registration process. We need to consider the impact of delivering services remotely in that regard.

Fiona Blair might be able to comment more on the issue of sham marriages that you mentioned.

John Mason: I will ask Ms Blair to comment on that in a moment, but I want to pursue something with you first. The registrars raised the point that they might get wrong information about someone's death and that that would have to be corrected. Is that a complex process?

Mairi Millar: It is just more time consuming when it is done remotely than it is when we are doing it face to face and can check things there and then. Making corrections remotely involves sending emails back and forth and so on. It just takes longer to complete the registration remotely. Often, if we are waiting for information to come to us, there can be a perception that the local authority is holding up the registration process, although the reality is that we are waiting for information to come that could have been given to us more quickly in a face-to-face situation.

John Mason: Ms Blair, do you have thoughts on this area or concerns about information around deaths?

Fiona Blair: On the question of sham marriages, the bill is not going to change anything with regard to marriages. People will still submit their notices, and it is at that point that things are picked up and dealt with if something seems not quite right—we have a list of things to look out for. A marriage schedule will still be given out and a signature will be required, but it will be done remotely and will be in a digital form when it comes back to the office. It is really more like a background function, and that will not change.

As far as changes to death certificates are concerned, I am not going to lie—it is harder over the telephone to get the right information and to tease things out of people. For example, when you ask about the marital status of the deceased person, they might say, "Oh, they were single." When that happens, I always qualify that by asking, "So they never married?"—and that is when you find out that they were, say, divorced. It is all about having the experience to question people properly.

As far as the remote registration of deaths is concerned, it can be quite time consuming for the registrar to make changes and quite intrusive for the informant. After a registration has been sealed, you need evidence to make a change, and that evidence needs, in some though not all circumstances, to be sent to the National Records of Scotland, where the change is made through what we call a register of corrected entries, or RCE. That can be quite time consuming. You then

have to reissue new extracts of the corrected documents to the informants.

John Mason: You mentioned funeral directors, who obviously do not know all the facts and depend on the family giving them the right information. When my mother died, just a year ago, I was very dependent on the funeral directors and really appreciated their support in guiding me through the whole process. After all, it is not something that individuals have to go through very often. Will doing things digitally or online make any difference in that respect, or is it inevitable that there will always be a problem with getting information through?

Fiona Blair: What we will be offering people is the choice of in-person or remote registration. It is not that local authorities will be moving wholly to remote registration—at least, that is not my understanding. My understanding is that the National Records of Scotland will be engaging with local authorities shortly to find out the best method for them, but in-person registrations will come back, because they are important for people who have disabilities, who are vulnerable and who need support.

Funeral directors can register deaths at the moment. In fact, they are the last qualified informant who has knowledge of the particulars of the death. For example, there was a person who came on holiday to Scotland and had a diving accident off Eyemouth. During the pandemic, it was not appropriate for their family to travel up to Scotland to register the death; in that case, a funeral director came in on their behalf to register the death, and the family was on the telephone during that appointment in case I needed to know anything further. We are not talking about having an online form for someone to fill in. My problem is that funeral directors will be relaying information from the informant to the registrar, but that is something that can easily be covered through remote registration.

It is about giving people a choice. Do they want the funeral director to do this, or would they prefer to do it directly with the registrar? I would hate to think that a funeral director would charge someone for such a service, given that death registration is free and the only thing that you need to pay for is an extract at the time of registration.

John Mason: My experience was that the funeral director was not cheap but they did everything as a package. I cannot even remember exactly what they did and what I did.

You said that it is sometimes easier to pick up mistakes—about whether someone was single or divorced, for example—if the person giving the information is there and you see them face to face, because you can read them. That is true for me

and my colleagues, too—things are better face to face. Is there a problem in that respect with going more online? Another issue would be births and the question whether one parent or two are named on the birth certificate. Again, is that not something that it would be easier to deal with face to face?

10:45

Fiona Blair: Obviously, it is younger people who have babies. As one of the other witnesses suggested, we are working in a hybrid way. We are taking information over the telephone and then making an appointment for people to come in to check and sign the register page.

We have very successfully run services remotely and it has been a natural progression to providing services remotely first. People in cities find it easier to make an in-person appointment to pop into the registration office, whereas people in rural areas might have to travel a long distance to a registration office. In the Borders, someone might have to travel 18 miles to their nearest office. That might be difficult for someone who has had a caesarean section, because they would need to get someone to drive them and the dad might be back at work.

There are occasions when it will be beneficial to provide the service remotely, but we also need to offer people the choice of doing the registration in person. That will not change; I think that local authorities need to offer that service.

John Mason: That is very helpful. I realise that I have focused on Ms Blair quite a lot. I do not know whether any of the other witnesses wants to come in with any point. It would appear not. That is me, then, convener.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): When listening to David McNeill's testimony, I was very struck by his suggestion that having access to the internet does not mean that a person is confident or knowledgeable enough to navigate form filling or applications. My concern is that, for those who are furthest removed from mainstream society, that was an issue before the pandemic, which has now been exacerbated. Are we in danger of forgetting about and leaving behind a section of society?

David McNeill: The key theme that has come through is around choice. Digital services cannot necessarily be the only option; there must be back-ups for people, so that no one is left behind. The point was made about how filling in forms online can be difficult. Creating a really good digital public service is a complex job, which involves understanding user needs, engaging with users and doing lots of testing. That bit falls down.

Even if I were to set aside the issues around people being unable to access the internet or not being confident in doing so, the average reading age of the United Kingdom population is nine. Therefore, for online forms to be an effective tool, forms have to be designed that can be completed by a nine-year-old. However, lots of our public services probably make things much more complicated than that. Designing digital public services that keep that in mind, include the right things and do not leave people confused is a real skill.

Giving people choice and having back-ups to online is an issue. The reality is that 80 per cent of the population will want to engage with an online service. The issue is how we support those who want to do that but will struggle in doing so and those who do not want to or cannot access an online service.

Brian Whittle: That is helpful. I will take that a little bit further. The third sector tends to be the main interface between such communities and services and councils. What is the third sector's role in ensuring that those issues are brought to the attention of MSPs and people in the councils? How, as part of the strategy of moving to digital, do we ensure that there is improved communication between council services and the third sector?

David McNeill: We have seen that done strongly in places such as Renfrewshire. Before the pandemic, the council there put digital inclusion right at the heart of its digital public services transformation strategy. Before embarking on a service change, the council considered the needs of users. It has established a strong partnership with the local third sector interface, housing associations and others, which all came together to discuss how they collectively solve the issues of digital exclusion so that they could be confident in developing their digital public services.

We have been working closely with that partnership in Renfrewshire to look at place-based approaches and how to support people. It is about developing the service in tandem with digital exclusion support, with the third sector and the public sector working together—and, indeed, the private sector in terms of connectivity. We are beginning to see other councils adopt similar partnership planning and co-ordination approaches, which is to be welcomed.

Brian Whittle: Can Douglas Hendry give us the council perspective?

Douglas Hendry: To reiterate a comment that I made in a different context earlier, there is no one-size-fits-all approach across Scotland. I agree with the previous speaker about the general approach.

From a local authority perspective, digital exclusion links to a number of key core themes that authorities should be pursuing, such as poverty in the widest sense—there are all sorts of poverty, not just financial, and other types of exclusion that are part of the overall picture. However, it is clear that there will be no alternative to developing joined-up arrangements that go well beyond the remit of local authorities. That is there at a wider level in terms of community planning and factors like that, but the role of the third sector, voluntary organisations—[*Inaudible*.]

The Convener: We seem to have lost the connection to Douglas Hendry.

Douglas Hendry: —the nature of—

Brian Whittle: You are back. We can hear you.

Douglas Hendry: The nature of the country is such that delivery in remote rural areas such as Argyll and Bute—[*Inaudible*.]—to work across the widest possible base, it would not be appropriate, sensible or possible for local authorities to be trying to do this on their own.

Joined-up working across all interests is key, looking to target the people we need to target through a range of mechanisms that could be quite different in Tiree and Glasgow. Ultimately, it is about local solutions for local people.

Brian Whittle: To segue to Mairi Millar, some local authorities expressed some concern that holding remote meetings and hearings might limit public attendance. Is that your experience? Is there support to amend the bill to make sure that licence applicants can be present and have input into the format that a hearing should take?

Mairi Millar: When we first launched our fully online meetings in 2020, I was nervous about how our applicants and objectors and members of the public would engage with those services. We have been surprised by how well people have managed the online meetings. Even those who were apprehensive have had a fairly positive experience of dealing with the online systems. We have had to contact some people and provide additional guidance on how to join the meetings and we have had people who have not been able to use the system so we have made alternative arrangements—for example, people have been able to phone in to meetings.

The experience has generally been positive, but we would not choose to hold meetings exclusively online in future. From speaking with my elected members, I do not think that they get the full experience from having meetings fully online, certainly as regards being able to take advice from me and other officers. Licensing is quite a dynamic meeting situation and they are able to get advice more quickly at face-to-face meetings. I have

spoken to a number of licensing agents, and they prefer the face-to-face meetings because, in an online meeting, they lose some of the nuance of facial expressions and other indicators of where their submissions are going.

However, my experience over the past two years is that more members of the public have engaged when the meetings have been online. Because of the length of time that meetings take, they might have had to take a full day to come along to a meeting in person, but at an online meeting they have been able to continue working in the background and join at the appropriate time.

We need to find the right balance, and having the ability to hold hybrid meetings is an important amendment to licensing legislation. It allows local authorities choice about the best format. That decision should be made through engagement with our various stakeholders.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I will go back to some points that John Mason raised and will direct my question to Fiona Blair. It concerns the guarantee of in-person registration. The Scottish Government's position is that the effect of sections 18 and 20 is that a local registration office must offer in-person registration to any individual who desires it. Is that your reading of the bill?

Fiona Blair: My understanding is that registration offices will offer customers the choice of a remote registration or an in-person registration. The bill will not take in-person registration away, because that is important. As the bill is drafted, in-person registration does not need to be guaranteed in prescribed circumstances; it should be offered as a choice to people.

Jim Fairlie: As more people take up the digital option, will there be problems further down the line with smaller and smaller numbers of people who want to have an in-person meeting being able to be accommodated?

Fiona Blair: From a Borders perspective, I do not see that being a problem. We will still have to have registration offices. People will still need to come in with marriage notice forms and collect marriage schedules. I cannot see that changing. People collect certificates if they do not want them posted out because they need them quickly and I do not see that changing—not in the near future, anyway.

Jim Fairlie: An awful lot of discretion is given to local authorities in the bill. Is there a concern that they have too much discretion and that people who make applications for licences will not have a say in how the meeting will be held? Perhaps Mairi Millar would be the best person to answer that.

Mairi Millar: As Douglas Hendry said, one size will not fit all local authorities. The nature of the geographical area is important in making the decision. However, you are absolutely right. It is important for a licensing authority, in choosing which format to move forward with, to engage with its stakeholders, whether trade groups, community council representatives or licensing agents. It is important to understand what the experience has been over the past two years and what the best format is moving forward.

It is important to have the option to deliver fully face-to-face meetings, fully remote meetings or a hybrid model. However, it is also important to take account of everyone who is involved in the process.

11:00

Jim Fairlie: There is nothing in the bill that says that the local authority must provide the in-person option. Do you think that that should be added to the bill?

Mairi Millar: It is important that we engage. That is a difficult point, because of the differences across local authorities. It is important that local authorities retain discretion but, in deciding what the best format is, there should be an obligation to fully engage with various stakeholders, whether through a formal consultation or through more informal processes. The bill should perhaps reflect that.

Jim Fairlie: I will press you a wee bit on that. You say that the local authority should still have discretion. That is regardless of whether someone lives in a remote area—I live in a remote area myself. I may be dissatisfied, for instance, with the decision that a local authority has taken on how a meeting or application is going to be conducted, as there is nothing more frustrating than not being able to speak to someone face to face. If the local authority has the final say on that discretion, where does that leave the person who feels dissatisfied with the fact that they cannot have a sit-down, face-to-face conversation? Surely there should be some provision in the bill that allows people to say, "Sorry, but I'm not happy with that. I want to sit down with somebody." Is that not something that you would consider?

Mairi Millar: If we are talking about application forms, for example, and whether there should be the ability for them to be done face to face, it is a matter of the resource that would be required. If we are moving more towards a digital model, what resource would be required to deal with people who contact us and want to meet face to face? That is certainly something that we would hope to be able to do, but it is difficult, given the

circumstances across all the different local authorities, to know how that would be facilitated.

Jim Fairlie: It is easier for the registration of births, deaths and marriages to be able to hold appointments, as those departments will always have the requirement for an office, but that is not the case for local authorities when people are trying to deal with licensing.

Mairi Millar: We have not reopened our service desk in Glasgow; we have extended our phone lines. That service was diminished during the lockdown period, when staff were exclusively working remotely. We are bringing back our services, but a decision will need to be taken as to whether we reopen our face-to-face service desk. That has not been raised with us as a particular issue. I think that the majority of people applying for licences are now very familiar with the online processes. I agree, however, that we must allow for the fact that some people will want to retain the ability to lodge something face to face and have that interaction with a member of staff.

The Convener: I have a quick question, going back to a point that my colleagues Alex Rowley and Brian Whittle raised, regarding digital exclusion and community support for people who do not have access to the internet for filling in forms. You mentioned Renfrewshire, David. It was interesting to note that

"The Digital Champion Co-ordinator will be crucial in 'building a digital ecosystem' for Renfrewshire."

Has that been put in place in Renfrewshire?

David McNeill: I believe that that is now in place. The partnership in Renfrewshire has been around for quite a while, so the area has been at the cutting edge of tackling digital exclusion. There are lots of good organisations in the voluntary sector there, as well as teams within the council, which are doing good work to support people around digital exclusion. I know that the challenges that the council faced involved capacity and the ability to provide that support, as well as knowledge about what was going on. The co-ordinating role was to help people access the additional support that is available in the local authority and to share resources. That co-ordinating role is key to alleviating some of the pressure on capacity and finding extra people to provide support, whether it be for physical accessibility, connectivity or whatever, that a direct organisation might not be able to provide.

The Convener: I think that Renfrewshire has been very proactive on this, and perhaps other local authorities can learn lessons from it.

Alex Rowley: My question is for Adam Stachura. Has good practice been developed on the digital agenda for older people? Could any amendments be made to that part of the bill to improve access to digital services, particularly for older people?

Adam Stachura: As has been mentioned, there is a lot of this happening in the third sector. However, I think that public services could be overreliant on it—it is as if they are saying, "We can rely on the third sector to take care of that and we'll forge our own path." I am thinking of organisations in different parts of the country such as the Community Led Action and Support Project—CLASP—in Ayrshire, which helps people get online and, as much as anything, helps build their confidence. Instead of their being shown how to do something by someone a lot younger than them, they work with their peers—people of a similar age—to understand what is involved and the tools that are available to make their lives easier or more fun. I recall a study from a few years ago that found that, when people in care homes had free wi-fi access, usage went through the roof, because they were playing online games. Nobody expected that kind of thing, but it shows that, when the opportunities are available, people make the most of them.

The provisions in the bill that involve more use of digital routes seem fairly fine, but, as has been mentioned, there is a concern about local authority discretion in this matter and the precedent that the bill might set with regard to more services moving online or being primarily accessed online in future. For lots and lots of reasons, people should and must have the option of a non-digital route. We are never going to reach a situation in which 100 per cent of our citizens are online—or are online in a confident way. With the connecting Scotland programme, which I recall has received £40 million of investment—it might be more than that; David McNeill will know more—the last impact report that I read said that it had supported about 40,000 people. I do not know how many of them were older people—I think that they were one of the first tranches to be supported in the early part of the programme—but the question is whether that investment is going to be made again in two or three years' time, just to top things up with regard to access. Whether there is the will or the finances to do so, I do not know. It is a great initiative, but it is just the tip of the iceberg of what is required.

As far as amendments are concerned, Mr Fairlie makes a good point about the discretion of local authorities, because this kind of approach might not be putting the citizen at the heart of things. It might seem easier to deliver a service online and remotely, but does such an approach actually make the most of things? Does it address what a person needs? Does it fulfil their right to access without, as I have said, making them jump through too many hoops?

Alex Rowley: Thank you.

The Convener: As members have no more questions, I thank the witnesses for their evidence and their time this morning. If you want to provide the committee with any further evidence, you can do so in writing. The clerks will be happy to liaise with you on that.

At the committee's next meeting, on 31 March, we will conclude our evidence taking on the Coronavirus (Recovery and Reform) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 with the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery. We will also consider the outcome of the next ministerial statement on Covid-19.

That concludes the public part of this morning's meeting. We now move in private for the next agenda item.

11:09

Meeting continued in private until 11:16.

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