



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 1 November 2022

Session 6



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LOCAL GOVERNMENT, HOUSING AND PLANNING COMMITTEE
26th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)

*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP)

*Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

*Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Tom Arthur (Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth)

Alexis Camble (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Cara Davidson (Scottish Government)

Jessie Duncan (Engender)

Councillor Shona Morrison (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Liz Pringle (Scottish Government)

Hannah Stevens (Elect Her)

Talat Yaqoob (Women 50:50)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Euan Donald

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 1 November 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:17]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Ariane Burgess): Good morning and welcome to the 26th meeting in 2022 of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. Annie Wells is joining us remotely today, and Mark Griffin will be with us shortly.

I remind members and witnesses to ensure that their mobile devices are in silent mode and that all notifications are turned off during the meeting.

The first item on our agenda today is to decide whether to take in private items 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill

09:18

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is an evidence session with Tom Arthur, Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth, on the planning data parts of the legislative consent memorandum on the United Kingdom's Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. Mr Arthur is accompanied today by Scottish Government officials Cara Davidson, head of environment and energy, and Liz Pringle, head of digital planning services. I welcome Mr Arthur to the meeting. Before I open the session to questions from members, I invite him to make a short opening statement.

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): Good morning. Thank you, convener, for the invitation and opportunity to address the committee on the UK Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. This morning, we will talk about the planning data provisions in chapter 1 of part 3 of the bill. I am conscious that the committee has recently heard evidence from key stakeholders.

Before I turn to part 3 in detail, I reiterate the Scottish Government's fundamental concerns about the bill. As members will know, we have recommended that the Scottish Parliament not provide legislative consent for the bill as drafted, given that it absolutely poses a threat to a wide range of devolved responsibilities and fails to respect the role of this Parliament and the Scottish Government in legislating for devolved powers. We remain concerned that the Westminster Government will ignore our collective role and simply legislate without our consent.

Turning to part 3, I am not surprised that evidence has pointed to a lack of available information on how the planning data provisions in the bill will operate in practice. I would like to set out on the record my frustration that we received little advance sight of the draft bill before its introduction. That lack of meaningful prior engagement from the UK is sadly all too typical of the current Westminster Government's approach to legislation. It contrasts with our own work in Scotland on the digital planning strategy and transformation programme, and on our collaborative approach to planning reform as a whole. Therefore, although I recognise and support the need for planning data standards in principle, the lack of detail on how the provisions will be implemented leaves unanswered questions.

With so many unknowns, there is also the potential for conflict with the work that is being undertaken already in Scotland as part of our digital planning transformation programme, with a £35 million capital investment initiative already under way. That is an ambitious programme that is led by the Scottish Government, working in partnership across the public sector. It will put data and new digital technologies at the heart of Scotland's planning system, thereby helping to achieve the wider planning reform aim of delivering an open, streamlined and inclusive planning system that is fit for the future. Our work on the programme is making real progress, with the first new digital services expected to be rolled out next year. We are building those new digital services and products on solid data and technical foundations, working in collaboration with our partners.

At last week's evidence session, members heard stakeholders give strong support to the direction and approach that we are taking in collaborating across the sector, rather than mandating a way forward. In Scotland, we are taking a comprehensive approach to improving planning data. Our data strategy will set out a road map to provide easy access to high-quality data for use across planning and place-based work.

Therefore, I have real concerns about the UK Government's intention to legislate in areas of devolved and executive devolved competence without any real knowledge of what we are doing in Scotland, nor any interest in accommodating that in the bill. We could find ourselves in the unhelpful situation of having Scottish planning authorities being subjected to conflicting measures, with one imposed on them through a UK bill and the other agreed through mutual collaboration in order to improve our planning system in line with our own domestic legislation and priorities.

As currently drafted, part 3 provides one of many reasons why the Scottish Government cannot recommend that the Scottish Parliament consent to the provisions as they stand.

Thank you, convener.

The Convener: Thanks very much for those comments. It was good to hear about the Scottish digital transformation project last week, and it is good to hear from you right now that it will be rolled out next year.

I will open up the session to questions. I will start. What, if any, engagement did your officials or Scottish Government planning officials have with the UK Government on planning data prior to the introduction of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill in the UK Parliament? You have indicated that there was a lack of consultation and

collaboration in a way, but I am also interested to know whether any work was done before consideration of the bill.

Tom Arthur: As I said, obviously there has been dialogue between relevant officials in the two Governments on provisions in the bill. However, as with other aspects of the bill, there remains a lack of detail on how the planning data provisions will be implemented. The reality is that clauses in the bill as introduced give UK ministers unlimited scope to regulate areas of devolved and executive devolved competence for Scotland. The crucial point is that the requirement is that there be consultation only—not consent and not agreement, but consultation. Over recent years, we have seen what that means in practice, given how willing the UK Government has been to ride roughshod over the Sewel convention.

The reality is that the bill poses a threat. There has been no detailed consultation. There is a lack of clarity on the details. At the very minimum—this is just a starting point—we have to move from consultation to consent and to a position that does not impact on the competences of the Scottish ministers or this Parliament.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning, minister, and good morning to your officials, too. In the limited time that we have had to take evidence from planning stakeholders in Scotland on the matter, we have heard that they are unclear about the term "planning data". What do you think planning data is, and do you think that that demonstrates that there are gaps in data in our planning system in Scotland?

Tom Arthur: I will ask Liz Pringle to come in a moment. First, data is one of the key missions in our digital strategy for planning. I think that we all recognise the wider importance of data. For example, this morning, Audit Scotland put out a release on the importance of data in policy design.

The bill sets out the definition of planning data in clause 75(2). Planning data is said to include

"any information which is provided to, or processed by,"

the planning authority

"for the purposes of a function under a relevant planning enactment".

A relevant planning enactment would include any enactment made by the secretary of state under part 5 of the bill, which applies UK-wide and contains provisions on environmental outcome report regulations. There is also a lack of information about how provisions on environmental outcomes reports would operate.

That, combined with the lack of detail on implementation and practice in relation to the planning data provisions, means that it is unclear

what the wider implications would be for the handling of planning data in Scotland. That speaks to the point that I am making about the uncertainty and vagueness that comes with the bill.

It is important that we give some examples of what we are doing more broadly around planning data. I ask Liz Pringle to come in on that.

Liz Pringle (Scottish Government): Thank you, minister. I agree that there is a lack of detail around the definition of planning data. As we have been developing the digital strategy, we have heard about the vast amount of data that could be used within the planning system and the impact on our planning authority stakeholders of not having it in a high-quality and well-managed fashion—for example, in relation to the time and effort that are needed to find and access data for preparing local development plans. That is one area where lack of consistency and poor data quality impact on the planning system. In our work, we are looking across the planning system at planning data needs: what they are, and how we make sure that we reach a sustainable model for managing data in a comprehensive way.

Miles Briggs: That is helpful. Thank you.

I cannot remember who gave us this evidence, but last week we heard about an information technology platform on which the data would be hosted. That might present an opportunity for data to be shared and accessed across the UK and Scottish Governments, with all local authorities being able to share it.

On potential benefits, would you agree that planning data would benefit from being processed at a Great Britain level, and that the data could be compatible?

Tom Arthur: It is important to recognise that the approach that we are taking in Scotland is one of genuine collaboration. I think that such an approach is vital if we are to get the most out of planning and fully realise planning's potential to deliver across many areas.

The risk, and our concern, relates to conflict. Planning has always been a devolved competence. In 75 years of the town and country planning legislation, there has always been distinct Scottish planning legislation. The one time an attempt was made to combine those acts, in the 1950s, it became a bit of a mess, I think, and they had to be separated again. That has always been the nature of planning. It is a devolved competence and it is for this Parliament to take an approach.

If the UK Government wants to engage constructively, recognise the competence of this Parliament and not stick to acting in a way that means that it can legislate without the agreement

of this Parliament, of course we are very happy to engage, recognising the value of a consistent approach being taken across Scotland. We are working towards that through our broader work on digital transformation in planning.

However, the key issue is that that cannot be mandated by the UK Government, and that the approach is somewhat distant from the reality of the work that we are doing in planning in Scotland. We have to have the space to continue what we are doing, which is developing an approach in collaboration with planning authorities and other partners.

09:30

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Good morning, minister. This is potentially a dog's breakfast. The Scottish Government has already embarked on its digital strategy and has given us an indication of progress so far. My experience of East Ayrshire Council's digital planning system is that it is very good and is robust. Members of the public can access it and can see decision processes, documents, maps and drawings—everything. It is well advanced and I hope that our system will take that further. However, if the UK legislates in the area, is it possible that our authorities could be acting illegally in doing what they are doing?

Tom Arthur: I cannot comment on that specifically. However, in my opening remarks I touched on the risk of confusion when we are developing an approach in collaboration with planning authorities in Scotland and the UK Government then mandates something UK-wide. That is, as you described it, a recipe for a dog's breakfast. At the very least, it can create confusion and it is not an efficient way to do things.

One of the benefits of devolution—as we all know from our experience as constituency and regional representatives—is that we can be far more responsive and attuned to the circumstances of the places and localities that we represent; so it is with the Government and how we design our devolved public services. We take a collaborative approach to planning, built on deep and sustained engagement. That has informed the range of work that we are taking forward in planning reform. Equally, it informs how we are taking forward our approach to digital.

Liz Pringle can talk about partnership work and how we engage with others in development of our approach to digital planning.

Liz Pringle: The digital strategy itself was a collaborative strategy. We spent a significant amount of time working with our stakeholders to agree the priorities in the strategy, so we knew that we had their support when it was published.

Subsequently, delivery of the transformation programme is done very much in partnership between us and our public sector colleagues. Through the working groups and the projects that are being delivered, we are working in collaboration with all the stakeholders to make sure that what is being delivered fits the needs of each stakeholder group and that we are not developing things that are contrary to their needs.

Tom Arthur: I highlight the difference between the approach that Liz Pringle has very elegantly articulated and our having a provision bounced on us in a bill by the UK Government. The UK Government's approach is not consistent with that collaborative spirit. It ignores the reality of devolution and has the potential to cause confusion at the very least, and ultimately to significantly undermine and frustrate the shared ambition that we are working towards collaboratively.

Willie Coffey: Has the UK Government even sought to find out what the Scottish Government is doing in this area—for example in the digital strategy—so that that can shape what it is planning to do? Has there been any engagement at least in order to understand what we are doing?

Tom Arthur: There certainly has not been direct engagement at ministerial level.

Liz Pringle: We have dialogue with our counterparts on the broader digital programmes that are taking place, but not on the detail of the planning data provisions.

Willie Coffey: Minister, you mentioned that there is no consent process, and that the bill provides just for a consultative process—the UK Government is not even asking this Parliament for consent for the proposal. What are your views on the principle of consent not being sought?

Tom Arthur: The Scottish Government's position is very clear: we are completely opposed to consent not being sought. If you remember, for the UK Government, the word “consent” took on a perverse meaning in the context of the legislation pertaining to Brexit and the definition that was applied to consent decisions.

The reality is that we have clear devolved competencies and relevant clauses of the bill—from memory, clause 80 in particular—recognise that. Ministers are happy to engage with the UK Government to discuss any areas of shared interest. There are forums in which I engage with ministerial counterparts on a range of issues. For example, through the British-Irish Council, I took part in discussions on spatial planning and I have had discussions about social enterprise and such like. That is productive collaborative engagement in which we share experiences, and it is based on mutual respect.

What we have here is the UK Government seeking through legislation in effect to undermine and go against the spirit of devolution. We are now 25 years on from the referendum that established this Parliament and, as the Scottish social attitudes survey data that was published recently shows, a clear majority of people in Scotland trust the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government as institutions and want the Parliament to have the lion's share of the decision making that impacts on their daily lives. There is no popular support and no mandate, political or otherwise, for those powers to be undermined or removed from the Scottish Parliament.

The UK Government talks about having a respect agenda but that needs to be shown in action, and not just in words. In reality, there are areas in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill that clearly fall within devolved competence. UK ministers should not be seeking to grant themselves powers to start legislating in devolved areas without the express agreement of the Scottish Parliament, which they do not have.

Willie Coffey: Does that mean that the process that we are in at the moment does not even reach the dizzy heights of a consent decision?

Tom Arthur: No, it does not. It is consultation, which can encompass a broad spectrum from something that is very deep and meaningful to a superficial tick-box exercise. The lack of consultation and detail in advance of the bill does not bode well for how UK ministers intend to consult if the bill becomes an act.

Willie Coffey: Thank you, minister. I am sure that other members will have questions on that.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): It was very noticeable from last week's evidence that stakeholders are not sure what the bill is about.

Another thing that came through in last week's evidence was that the UK minister wrote to the Scottish Parliament's Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee on 25 October, indicating that constructive discussions had taken place with Scottish Government officials and committing to tabling amendments to the bill to ensure that it reflects what had been agreed with the Scottish Government. That does not seem to be the case from what you have just said. Can you elaborate or touch on that? It does not seem to be coming through in what we have been hearing.

Cara Davidson (Scottish Government): We have on-going dialogue with UK Government officials. We have heard at that level, and from UK ministers, that there is a commitment to amending the devolution-related clauses that are currently in the bill. However, so far, we have not seen any proposals about what the replacement clauses would look like; we have not had sight of any

drafts, which is a concern. As you know, the timetable for the bill remains unknown, although it continues to make its way through the UK Parliament.

Paul McLennan: I share Willie Coffey's concern that a bill that stakeholders do not know about is passing through the UK Parliament, and that the Scottish Government does not seem to know about the amendments. Minister, do you want to say anything else about that? The evidence that we have heard so far has said plenty about it being a bill that is passing through Westminster without consultation of the Scottish Government or other stakeholders. You have already indicated what the Scottish Government is doing about planning data and digital planning.

Tom Arthur: Our approach to planning, regeneration and building community wealth is about collaboration and engagement, in recognition of the fact that in trying to achieve the outcomes that we want, no one agency or body can do it all alone. We need to work together—that is very important when we are designing policy. The UK Government's approach does not seem to be like that. The levelling-up agenda seems to be more a soundbite that it is now chasing to invent a policy programme to justify it.

If the UK Government genuinely desires to engage seriously on these issues and with respect for the competence of the Scottish Parliament and Scottish ministers, we would, of course, be happy to engage. That is the responsible thing to do. However, as has been said this morning and as you will have inferred from the contributions of stakeholders last week, the UK Government has not taken that approach.

The Convener: Cara Davidson mentioned amendments, but what they will be and when they will come seems to be a mystery. What role will the Scottish Parliament have in scrutinising outputs from the discussions that you have been having?

Cara Davidson: It is fair to say that discussions at official level have not brought forward any more information than we have in the bill. At the moment, it is possible for us to comment only on what is in the bill as it is before the UK Parliament. The process itself remains unknown and the timetable for further meaningful proposals to come forward is also unknown.

You will be aware that Mr Matheson wrote to the UK Government on 14 October; we await a response to that letter.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I apologise for arriving late, convener, and to you, minister, if you covered this point in your opening statement.

The committee understands that the revised draft of national planning framework 4 is due out shortly. Has there been an analysis of any impact that the bill might have on NPF4 and on the timeframe for approval?

Tom Arthur: There is nothing, at this stage. I come back to the point about the degree of uncertainty that makes it difficult to come to a rounded judgment. I do not think that there would be any direct impact on NPF4 and certainly not on the timescale for Parliament to consider it.

Looking beyond that to implementation and delivery, we are, of course, discussing an exceptionally important part of the planning process, so an impact on data could have an indirect impact on delivery of NPF4. However, I do not want to indulge too much in speculation; ultimately, we do not have enough clarity from the UK Government to come to a fully informed view.

Mark Griffin: Similarly, can you speculate on whether the bill would have any impact on the local authority local development plans that will follow on from NPF4?

Tom Arthur: We touched on the matter earlier. We are taking a collaborative approach and are working together on digital planning. However, if the UK Government mandates something else, that will create the possibility—or even the likelihood—of the conflict and confusion that characterise much of the levelling-up agenda, because it trespasses on devolved competencies. There is a potential risk, but we do not have clarity—first, on the UK Government's intentions around planning data and, secondly, about amendments and how they would impact on Scotland—so it is too early to be able properly to quantify the risk.

The Convener: That concludes our questions. Thank you very much for giving evidence today along with your officials.

09:44

Meeting suspended.

09:50

On resuming—

Barriers to Local Elected Office

The Convener: The third item on our agenda is to take evidence on understanding barriers to local elected office. We have two panels of witnesses joining us. For our first session, we are joined remotely by Jessie Duncan, development officer from Engender; Hannah Stevens, chief executive of Elect Her; and Talat Yaqoob, consultant with and co-founder of Women 50:50. I warmly welcome you all to our meeting. We will direct questions to specific witnesses where possible, but if any of you wishes to contribute, please type an R in the chat function and the clerks will let me know.

I will open the session by asking a few questions. I would like to begin by taking a broader look over the past 10 years, and I will direct my question initially to Hannah Stevens. Given the effort and will that have been evident over the past 10 years, do you have a sense of why there is such a slow pace of improvement in the number of female councillors in Scotland?

Hannah Stevens (Elect Her): At this point, we can say that there are effort and will, but we have not seen enough action from all the players that have the power to make fundamental change in the area. Women face many challenges to getting involved, from the very early stages of their political journeys right through to getting more engaged and choosing to stand for elected office. There are barriers at every stage of that pipeline.

As we have seen more recently, once women are elected, we do not have the conditions in which they can thrive, and we are starting to understand that there is a retention issue at the other end of the pipeline. We need to put in place mechanisms at every stage of the process, which comes down to councils, authorities, political parties and the Government—they all have a role in shifting the culture and creating the conditions in which women can thrive in the roles.

The Convener: Does anyone else want to come in on that?

Jessie Duncan (Engender): The three organisations that are represented on the panel have come together recently to launch our “Making it happen for 2027” campaign, the key aim of which is to put the perennially low levels of women in local government in the spotlight. We have déjà vu after every local election. The rate of increase in the number of women in local government is climbing very slowly.

As Hannah Stevens rightly said, there is a combination of factors and there are complex and

interlinked issues. We need structural and cultural changes. There are concrete issues on which there has been little movement, such as the very low level of pay compared to the increasing pressures and duties that are involved in the role. Given the increasing visibility of women councillors, there are concerns about safeguarding, inadequate processes to safeguard against abuse and inadequate complaints procedures within parties, councils and other structures.

The consistently low level of women in councils means that the system does not have, or has not had, the impetus to change, so the problem is cyclical. It is important to view the issue holistically and in the round. We should not wait for women to enter these spaces to bring about that change; we should create the conditions that will enable them to enter the role and to thrive, as Hannah Stevens said.

I am sure that we will get into some of those issues in a bit more detail.

Talat Yaqoob (Women 50:50): I endorse what Hannah Stevens and Jessie Duncan have said. It is no surprise that we all agree on those points but there are a few things—[*Inaudible.*]

The Convener: Talat, your audio is intermittent, so we will pause for a moment. We will move to audio only for you, to ensure that we can hear everything that you say.

Would you like to start again, Talat?

Talat Yaqoob: No problem. Sorry about that.

The Convener: No—it is the technology, not you.

Talat Yaqoob: I hope that it is working okay now. [*Inaudible.*]—and is pursuing candidate quotas. We find that the reason for that is a lack of accountability. There is perhaps some political will, but we see a scramble for numbers to show diversity among candidates a matter of months before an election takes place, rather than the long-term investment in development and working with communities that politics should be focused on.

The accountability mechanisms are not there in political parties or council structures, or in democratic measures within the system or political parties. We see a scramble for numbers and diverse candidates. The focus is on numbers and the reputational damage if there is no diversity, but not on the culture that allows candidates to thrive and want to participate in politics.

The second area where we have not seen enough action is on candidates from the most marginalised communities. In relation to the intersecting inequalities of sexism, racism, ableism

and classism, we do not make enough effort to understand that those who experience multiple discriminations do not participate in politics. Until we do that, we will not see fair representation of our diverse communities within Scotland's local councils.

The Convener: To pick up on the point about representation, do you think that young women and young people in general face further barriers to standing for office?

Talat Yaqoob: Yes, and part of the reason for that is because our politics, certainly in local government, is not working at community level. We need outreach work on participation in politics and local democracy to encourage young people to see candidacy for local government as something to which they might aspire. That requires outreach engagement and community participation that is beyond simply elections. We need politics to be closer to people and to communities, so that people feel that they have a stake in decision making. The more we have of that, the more marginalised communities and young people, including young women, will feel that local government is relevant to them.

The Convener: I will move on to a question about the future, which I will address to Jessie Duncan initially, although everybody is welcome to contribute.

What would you like to happen over the next few years? We are taking evidence and trying to address the issue. What would you like to happen in the next few years to ensure that we do not have the same conversation in the lead-up to 2027?

Jessie Duncan: There are a number of factors. The most important thing is to look at the issue methodically and at the different actors, and break it down into specific actions that are focused on specific actors. There are a number of gatekeepers in the system and different structures that control who ends up having access to local councils and elected office. Political parties have a huge role, as candidate selection is one of the major ways in which those organisations control who ends up having the opportunity to even get on to the ballot paper. There is a huge role, too, for councils in improving their structures and processes to create an environment that supports a more diverse range of people to make it into those spaces. There is also a role at Government and parliamentary levels.

10:00

To go back to what political parties can do, selection has to be the number 1 issue. A lot more research needs to be done to understand exactly where the successes are. The parties use many

different approaches to selection, ostensibly with the goal of improving the number of women councillors who are elected. However, those approaches are applied fairly inconsistently. Talat Yaqoob mentioned quotas. Our preference would be for quotas to be introduced at national level, so that parties would have to use them, but that is not possible at the moment. We therefore encourage political parties to enshrine voluntary quotas or to adopt mechanisms in their election by-laws for the way in which they select candidates. We want the parties to codify that approach in their operating documents and to hold themselves to account for the number of women candidates and the diversity in the candidates that they put forward for election.

That is the biggest thing that parties can do, but progress on that is different in different parts of the country. There are pockets of progress where selection procedures may have been applied well, but that is not consistent from election to election and progress can backslide.

Parties also need to be vocal about their interest in and support for the welfare of all councillors, but particularly women councillors. For example, that applies to support for improved parental leave. Councillors do not have guaranteed access to parental leave, which will be a huge deterrent for many people, and particularly women. The salary is also a huge issue. Parties should take the issue seriously and be more vocal about their support for the welfare of the people whom they put forward for those positions.

Councils need to work on the parental leave issue. In the previous session, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities produced its voluntary guidance on parental leave policy, but we know that that has not been taken up consistently across council areas. We want all councils in Scotland to have provision for things such as parental leave.

Councils also need to take action on working practices that have gendered impacts. They need to think about hours of business and the duties that are contingent on the roles. They need to ensure that council business takes place at various times of day that suit people with various schedules and with different lives and responsibilities, such as caring or family responsibilities. Such responsibilities disproportionately impact on women, so councils need to ensure that that is taken into account when designing meeting times and considering when business takes place.

There are all kinds of issues. We go into those in some detail in the material that we shared with the committee before this session.

We are pleased that COSLA's barriers to elected office group will continue, as it has been a

great focal point. Many of the female councillors to whom we have spoken have spoken highly of the group and of the value of having a focal point for issues that affect women councillors.

Remuneration is another important issue. Pay has to increase if we hope to see more women put themselves forward for election and make it a more viable option for people from across the community.

The Convener: Thank you for that very thorough response. I appreciate the work of Engender, Elect Her and Women 50:50. Last week, a couple of MSP colleagues and I participated in a wonderful event on raising confidence and inspiring women to consider stepping forward for Parliament.

I will move on now, because we have a range of questions about issues that you have touched on. The first of those questions is from Annie Wells, who joins us online.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Good morning, panel, and thank you for coming along.

We all want to see more women in politics. I have certainly campaigned for that for the past seven years, and I want to make sure that all parties are making the effort to bring more women into front-line politics.

My first question is for Jessie Duncan. Research by Engender shows significant variation in the rates of women candidates across Scotland. I know that you have already touched on this, but what are the reasons for such variation? I note, for example, that the rates are 16 per cent in the Western Isles, 22 per cent in South Ayrshire and 44 per cent in East Lothian. Can you give us some background on your research in that respect?

Jessie Duncan: Are you asking about the rates of retention?

The Convener: I think that Annie Wells is asking about the rates for women candidates across Scotland.

Jessie Duncan: It is a really interesting question that definitely warrants further investigation. There are areas where things are working well and there are pockets of success, and our initial analysis found that some of that has translated into the final numbers of women councillors across the country. However, although one or two council areas are forging ahead in terms of women's representation, others are lagging behind. I would suggest from anecdotal evidence that part of the reason is the culture, and part of it is a cyclical thing. For areas that historically have had especially low representation of women, those low numbers have meant that there has been no impetus to change.

It would be interesting to investigate that further and find out whether those areas have been slower to take up and adopt policies such as voluntary parental leave and, therefore, to be proactive in showing that these are workplaces and spaces where women are welcome and where their interests have been taken into account. A huge part of this will also be the internal party politics across the country, which is something that we need more information on to be able to understand.

A quick note that I would make on the data is that this is our initial analysis and, as such, it is based on assumptions. I realise that that is imperfect—it is not the ideal way to be collecting data and will not necessarily be 100 per cent accurate—but it is the best that we have at the moment. There will be certain dynamics to take into account, and it would therefore be interesting to do more analysis at party level to understand whether, if a particular party is doing particularly well on women's representation, that maps on to the geographic spread. That might be something that we need to dig into.

We know that there are commonalities across the country. I would also say that, although one area might be doing well, nowhere is getting this absolutely right, and a lot of the measures that we have recommended will result in improvements in many council areas. However, it would be interesting to do more digging into particular parties.

Annie Wells: Thank you for that, Jessie.

The Convener: Thank you for that response. It is good to hear about the work that you are doing to gather what data can be gathered. Hopefully we will be able to get better data down the line.

I call Marie McNair, who has a couple of questions.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Good morning, panel. As a former councillor, I understand many of the reasons for women standing down. For a start, a council meeting can sometimes be seven hours long; when I first stood as a councillor back in 2003, council meetings were still going on until 1 o'clock in the morning. It is hardly a family-friendly environment. Do you have other evidence on why women decide to stand down after maybe just one or two terms? Can you explain why that happens?

Hannah Stevens: Research has not really been done into that. Anecdotally speaking, though, I can tell you that, in May, our organisations—we all work very closely alongside each other—started to hear women in our communities who had previously been elected saying informally, "I'm not going to stand again." In response to that, a researcher working with Engender interviewed

eight female councillors who were standing down. However, that is the only documentation that we have with regard to the narrative around that.

We found that they were facing challenges, with remuneration being a massive factor. We are going to keep saying this: people are not paid enough money to do this incredible job. I hope that you will be able to explore that with the second panel.

Another thing that came up time and again was the toxic culture in local government. There is still a very masculine, archaic, patriarchal and misogynistic culture across councils, even in party groups; it is just an unpleasant space to be in. It does not have to be like that.

For the women to whom we spoke anecdotally and who participated in the qualitative research, those were some of the key issues with regard to why they did not want to put themselves through another term. It is such a shame. We are putting all this energy into encouraging women into this pipeline, but then they get burnt and do not want to continue. There is such a lot that people have to learn when they become councillors, and many of them said that they had only just got their feet under the table with regard to how to do the job well and how they wanted to do the job, but it was still time to step down. As a result, we have to work to encourage another generation to do this.

That said, I think that we need to be working on both ends; we need to create the conditions for women to thrive while also creating a pipeline. At the moment, we are creating the pipeline and encouraging women into it; they give it one term and then step down, primarily because of the culture, the finances and also, as you have mentioned, incompatibility with caring responsibilities. So much more could be done to improve conditions once women are in; indeed, our written submission contains a lot of recommendations in that respect.

Marie McNair: One of the reasons that I chose to stay in was to change the culture. Talat, could you respond to the same question?

Talat Yaqoob: Certainly—and I hope you can still hear me.

Again this is anecdotal, but a combination of issues has been highlighted to Women 50:50 in the messages and emails in which people's first-hand experience has been written up and sent to us ahead of the two council elections that we have had since we and our campaign existed. First, there is the lack of compatibility with women's caring responsibilities. The disproportionate level of care that is expected from women who might not even have equality in the home becomes incompatible with having to attend council

meetings from 6 pm until 10 pm. That sort of thing is still very normal within the council setting.

Secondly, there is the issue of maternity and paternity leave. It is interesting that COSLA has created guidance on this and that women councillors, in particular, are taking on the work of advocating for better cultures and yet such policies are neither standard nor a requirement. We should be looking to our politics, particularly our local democracy, to lead by example in such areas of fairness and access. I still find it quite extraordinary that maternity and paternity leave is neither standard nor of high quality.

Thirdly, there is the toxic culture that Hannah Stevens mentioned. Even with those who make their way into politics, who get through an election and who then get to be a councillor, we see a revolving door, with a disproportionate number of women standing for only one term and then leaving because they have been put off. That will serve only to create a negative image and to prevent women from wanting to be councillors.

I have too often heard the existence of the issue being denied when I have conversations with councils and when we make presentations on what Women 50:50 believes needs to happen. We are still working with and focusing on this deficit model of the skills that women do not have, the things that they do not know and the things that they need to learn and achieve instead of focusing on what needs to change in the culture and the system.

10:15

Elect Her does a lot of work on the pipeline, but that is only half of what needs to be done. For this to be successful, we need self-reflection and action in the cultures and systems in councils and we need to stop abdicating responsibility and simply focusing on the deficit of potential candidates or on diverse communities lacking the skills or confidence to participate. Lack of confidence is part of the issue, but it is the culture that creates it. We need more activity with regard to accepting the reality of the inequalities, the toxic culture, the sexism, the discrimination and the racism that might be happening in councils. We have anecdotal evidence of all that, and we need a reality check with regard to what councils can do and how the systems, not the women or the marginalised communities, need to change.

Marie McNair: I know from experience that the role of a councillor has changed over the last 19 years, and I know that they deserve a pay rise. There have been many other changes. Can you, for the committee's benefit, expand on how the roles have changed? Moreover, given the pressures on Scottish Government and local

government funding, how should pay rises be funded? Hannah, can you take that question?

Hannah Stevens: To be honest, I do not think that I am the best person to respond. COSLA has done a huge amount of exploring and research around remuneration, so I would rather step back and let the experts respond to that question.

Marie McNair: Can you answer that, Talat? If not, we can wait until we hear from the next panel.

Talat Yaqoob: COSLA is best placed to answer those questions, but on the question of how roles have changed, we must recognise that more has been devolved down to local government. When Scotland gets more powers, it means that more happens in local government.

Moreover, the reality of social media, in particular, means that participation in politics as an elected official is not a part-time role. The expectation is that you will be available all the time, and I think that remuneration needs to reflect that, too.

COSLA will be able to explain where the funding might come from—I do think that local government needs to be funded to enable that to happen—but the fact is that we cannot expect candidates to put themselves forward to do these critical jobs and to make decisions on behalf of their communities and constituencies and to put themselves in financial deficit and to lose money doing so.

The role has changed—it has become more demanding. More is expected of local councillors. That they will be available and visible is much more expected now than it was 10 or 15 years ago, and remuneration needs to reflect how involved they are now and the high expectations with regard to their participation and availability.

Mark Griffin: I agree with the points that have been made so far about how important remuneration is to improving diversity. Is there any evidence out there that we could use to support that view? I am thinking particularly of international evidence. Is there any international evidence that remuneration levels for councillors being set higher leads to increased diversity among candidates and elected councillors?

Hannah Stevens: There is not, that I am aware of. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities might be able to talk to you about the international context in the light of its research.

I am aware, though, of the hundreds of conversations that we have had with women who are vaguely interested in standing for local government and have come to us to learn what that would mean. We run workshops and webinars and have conversations to demystify the process. We need to do more to encourage women to stand and we need to provide more information

about the work and the impact of being a councillor.

When we tell them the stories and they listen to councillors, many women are shocked to learn that it is not a structured job with an agreed time commitment and appropriate remuneration. That is a surprise to people outside the system who are interested and are peering inside. We are honest and we speak authentically; we want to encourage women and we are optimistic, but we are honest about the challenges that they would face in relation to remuneration and the expectations of the role. Lots of women say, “That’s interesting, but it’s not for me. I couldn’t possibly do that alongside my day job”. I do not know about the international context or the wider research base but I do know that a lot of women say, “Oh, that’s a shame. It’s not for me, thanks very much”, and then they carry on with their lives and contribute to their communities in other ways.

We are missing out on some fantastic talent because, with the structure as it is, it is not possible to run a family or pay a mortgage on the amount of money that is paid, and the hours that are required are too many to balance with other employment.

Talat Yaqoob: There is not Scotland-specific data on this, but a review of council remuneration and local government participation was done in Wales. I am quite sure that it includes examples from Wales, Germany, New Zealand and the Republic of Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland, councillors’ pay is aligned with that of senior public servants. I understand that, in New Zealand, councillors’ remuneration is based on the size of the council, the size of the population and how much is expected of that council. I am not saying that either of those arrangements would necessarily be the right way forward for us—it would depend on what funding is available—but I am happy to share with the clerk to the committee the research that was conducted by the Welsh Government.

Mark Griffin: Thank you. That would be welcome.

I also want to talk about legal disqualification from standing for a council. Employees of a local authority, for example, are legally disqualified from standing as candidates for that council. Given that the predominant proportion of employees in local authorities is female, is that disqualification a bigger barrier to female candidates? They will have good knowledge of the inner workings of the organisation and would bring so much to an elected role.

Jessie Duncan: That is an excellent point. I agree. Based on numerical size of local councils as employers, that represents a huge number of

women. Women tend to be employed in disproportionately large numbers in the social care sector and education, which are huge areas of local government employment. I agree that women would have excellent inside knowledge and experience and a lot to contribute to many discussions around service delivery. That is something to review and, I hope, change.

Hannah Stevens: The three islands local authorities approached us about running workshops for women in their communities in advance of the May elections this year. At the end of 2021 and in early 2022, we ran three online workshops. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar had not a single female councillor on it before May. It was the only authority, I believe, in the United Kingdom in which that was the case. We delivered a workshop with that council. The disqualification was a huge issue in the Western Isles in particular, because a large number of people on the islands are employed in local services and so are unable to stand for elected office. Therefore, in communities where the council itself is a large employer, that is a huge barrier.

Again, we came back to the question about people needing to resign from their jobs and losing the security of their salary in order to take the risk of standing for election and then to receive lower remuneration. In those conversations in that one geographical area, that was a fundamental barrier for many people. That came across very loudly.

The Convener: Thank you. That was very interesting. I participated in that workshop, which was very useful. It is concerning that people cannot come forward.

I will move on to questions from Miles Briggs.

Miles Briggs: Good morning, and thank you for joining us this morning.

I want to talk in more detail about the culture within councils, and specifically to look at the past five or six months when we have had new councillors in place. Do you have any information about training being provided and councils making their newly elected members feel welcome and part of the organisation? Obviously, we have councils with very different numbers of elected members. Do you have evidence about the introductory phase for new councillors?

Hannah Stevens: We have only had a few small conversations. Just last month we ran an online gathering for women who had been elected in May and who were new to the job. They had been in the role for four months. Again, all my information is anecdotal and is based on conversations. COSLA would be better placed to give you a more structured answer.

There is no consistency. From what women say, the situation is very hit and miss in terms of support and welcome in councils. There is a huge amount of information to take on board. The women who were given training and were welcomed and supported by the older cohort of councillors felt that they were eased and transitioned into the role very well, but many others found themselves just standing there, not knowing what questions to ask despite being in the position of having to ask questions. They found it to be quite an overwhelming experience. Only four months in—I will be honest—they were already feeling tired and exhausted. They had been on a very difficult journey in terms of getting their feet under the table and understanding the role and how to navigate their responsibilities and work in the community.

There is a real opportunity for peer support, which is why we held that online gathering. There is an opportunity to bring women together to share their experiences, which could be helpful in creating a safe space in which women can thrive and where they have people to turn to whom they can ask questions of. Training needs to be much more structured, with an orientation process to make them feel secure and welcomed, and as though they have the ability to achieve well in the role.

Miles Briggs: Thank you. Does anyone else want to come in?

Jessie Duncan: Training is obviously a huge thing. Hannah Stevens gave some insight on the needs of women coming in as councillors; training is certainly a big part of that. All councillors need a lot more training on issues such as sexism, discrimination and how to conduct themselves in the council chamber. They need training in how to avoid perpetuating the toxic culture and style of debate—the overall toxic atmosphere that many women have talked about experiencing in council chambers. We need to talk about training for all councillors. Obviously, councillors receive a huge amount of information when they start, as Hannah Stevens said.

The code of conduct for councillors has been mentioned in a couple of conversations that I have had. Although it exists, it is not adequate for addressing the specific things that enable a very combative and aggressive environment to thrive in council chambers. That is often cited by women councillors to whom we speak as a motivating factor in their decisions to stand down, not to run or to stand for fewer terms.

10:30

It is interesting—this, too, is anecdotal—that some councillors to whom we have spoken are

aware of that and think that there needs to be a code of conduct that is very specific to council business. The current code of conduct is very broad-brush and talks about the need to behave with respect and about standards, but there is very little specific information on how to conduct oneself in a debate—for example, in terms of language that is not permitted.

Something that is more specific about how councillors relate to each other, and which tries to address and dismantle the attitudes and cultural issues that we have talked about should be considered. That should not be done on a patchy basis, but should be applied across the country. All councils should be looking to adopt something that supports and enables all their councillors to do their jobs better.

Miles Briggs: Thank you. There might be something to learn from the Scottish Parliament. The Presiding Officer might not agree with me in relation to the chamber, but there is probably learning from our code of conduct that could be applied to other people who are in elected office.

There was a concerning story in the *Edinburgh Evening News* after the last election about a newly elected disabled member of the City of Edinburgh Council. No assessment of her needs was done. I hope that newly elected members coming to Parliament feel that assessment is made of whether they have additional needs. Is that something that you have had feedback on from newly elected members?

Talat Yaqoob: The issue of intersecting inequalities becomes really important when we are pursuing councils about work for women. If we do not think about intersecting inequalities—for example, mobility issues, disability, race, having English as a second language and so on—we are likely to create access to politics only for those who have some form of political power and engagement, and not for those who are furthest from access to opportunity, power and wealth.

That is why it is crucial that we think about inequalities as a whole. We need to think about experiences of sexism, but we also need to think about how that intersects with marginalisation that is a consequence of disability, mobility issues and racism. I have been told numerous times about the intersectional experience of racism and sexism, and of ableism and sexism happening within councils. The matter needs to be taken seriously, because if we do not think about multiple marginalisation we are, as I said, likely to benefit the people who are the lowest-hanging fruit, rather than benefiting the people who are furthest away from access to political participation.

Many of our councils are operating in inaccessible ways—inaccessible in terms of

neurodiversity, in terms of modernisation in use of technology and in terms of their physical location and their use of old buildings that have not been made physically accessible. All that needs to be thought about if we are to tackle the democratic deficit and create councils that reflect the communities that they are meant to represent.

The Convener: Thank you for that response. Before your next question, Miles, I would like to bring in Paul McLennan with a supplementary question on that issue.

Paul McLennan: I was going to ask this question later, but it is an extension to the question that was just asked. The access to elected office fund is meant to have an impact on the number of councillors with disabilities. What more can be done to ensure that more people with disabilities feel that they can put themselves forward for election? I wonder whether anybody wants to come in on that broader aspect of what Miles Briggs has said. The committee has heard about the issue before. I do not know whether anybody wants to pick that up or add anything.

The Convener: Talat Yaqoob, do you know about the access to elected office fund and whether that is having an impact?

Talat Yaqoob: Yes. Inclusion Scotland and Glasgow Disability Alliance have both done work on local government participation. Inclusion Scotland is the strategic partner when it comes to the fund, so engaging with it as the national expert on that would be particularly beneficial.

At Women 50:50, women talk to us about the intersection of disability discrimination and sexism, the experience of marginalisation and being left to figure it out on their own. We have talked about training, induction and inclusiveness at the beginning of having council participation. Again, that needs to go beyond looking at people in silos—whether they are women or disabled—because it is about all those things. In particular, it is about how other people respond to access needs and ensuring that the infrastructure around council activities and expectations about taking part in them are not an afterthought. In fact, council activities about public participation and wider participation should not be allowed if they are done in an inaccessible way.

The Convener: Jessie Duncan wants to come in on the issue.

Jessie Duncan: Talat Yaqoob has covered it.

The Convener: Okay—super. Miles Briggs, do you have more questions?

Miles Briggs: My final question is on the fact that the vast majority of councillors in Scotland represent a political party and come through a party political network. What more can be done?

My party established the Women2Win campaign, for example, which has provided the peer support network that was missing. Are there also lessons from other political parties that could help to turn the situation around?

Hannah Stevens: Political parties have a huge role to play. In some sense, it is almost unfortunate that they do, because there is so much opportunity when they are not involved. As we see in the island communities where, predominantly, people stand independently, it becomes about community engagement, with people who are active in the community being encouraged to step forward and consider local authority roles. However, as you have said, political parties are involved in the majority of local authorities, which is an additional level of gatekeeping.

In response to your question about disabled people's access, the journey to standing as a councillor is through the political parties, so, first, before you can even consider standing, you have to be welcomed by a political party. For disabled people, that means that party meetings have to be in accessible venues. During the pandemic, there was a rise in the number of online meetings, and there was a huge increase in disabled people's participation in political activity, which was a really positive thing. Unfortunately, there has been quite a rushed return to in-person meetings, which means that disabled people find it harder to participate.

Political parties have so much to do. Lots of parties have different mechanisms for selecting candidates—not all, but some of them do. However, we need to go back earlier in the process. Are party meetings welcoming places for people with intersecting identities? Do women of colour feel welcome to go to a party meeting on a Tuesday evening, for example, to get involved in a party?

In many political parties, you have to hold membership for 12 months before you can be considered as a candidate. There is a really long run-up. You also need access to information, but political parties do not provide transparent information about their selection mechanisms. That is yet another space in which there is a slightly toxic culture. It is done behind closed doors, and you have to get in with the right people to find the right information in order to understand what the journey ahead is.

There is so much to be said and parties have to do so much. Different parties are trying different mechanisms but none of them has got it right.

Talat Yaqoob: There are a few things to say on this, and I will come back to my point about the deficit model.

There is a place for provision of training for potential women candidates from marginalised communities. Miles Briggs has talked about the network that the Conservative Party participates in, and most parties have some kind of network, but that cannot be the only mechanism that exists. Our evidence shows again and again that, when the focus is on women upskilling but not on the culture and system being transformed to tackle the inequalities that are inherent in their fabric, all that happens is that women take on the work of tackling the sexism and discrimination that they face. Although there is a place for that, it would be wrong for us to focus only on women and upskilling and not to look at the system.

Political parties use all-women shortlists. Women 50:50 advocates for candidate quotas, because, when there are quotas, there is infrastructure and system change within political parties; impetus to do something about the lack of women candidates and candidates from diverse and marginalised backgrounds is created and there is the creation of some form of accountability. Although there are lots of myths about quotas, it is important to say that quotas promote people with merit, and whenever quotas have been implemented, we have seen the average level of merit increase and the promotion of merit to be more likely. We do not exist within a meritocracy in our political space.

A range of things need to be done by political parties. One part of that is networks and training for women, but for systemic change, parties must take forward culture change, accountability reporting mechanisms and quota mechanisms.

Jessie Duncan: I completely agree with what Hannah Stevens and Talat Yaqoob have said so far. On what parties can do to change their structures and culture from within without putting the onus on women or others who experience discrimination and underrepresentation, we—along with Elect Her, Women 50:50, Inclusion Scotland, CEMVO Scotland, BEMIS, Stonewall Scotland and organisations from across the equality sector—have produced the equal representation in politics toolkit as a solution. It is an online tool. It is an off-the-shelf set of self-assessment resources that cover a spectrum of party life, such as selection processes, how to hold inclusive meetings, cultural issues and how to handle complaints, bullying and harassment—all the types of issues that might typically come up. It is available online and it is a very quick self-assessment tool.

We offer training on the toolkit and how to get the most out of it. As with all this, it needs to be used consistently. We know that it is working well where it is being used at the moment. It is encouraging people at the grass roots in parties—

those who control who decides to come along to a meeting and who decides to come back. That is crucial: getting people involved is important, but getting them to stay involved is often the challenge. The approach goes from the ground up, and asks parties to consider how to change, how to accommodate people and how to show that they are serious about improving representation of women and others who are underrepresented.

Parties have a duty of care to their members, which, again, varies hugely from party to party and in different localities. We have heard from councillors and council candidates that they often find themselves falling through the gaps of various support or welfare processes. Technically, they are not employees of their party, but there is a duty of care—or there should be—to support them and, as in any workplace, to improve the conditions in which they work.

Parties need to take the issue seriously; there is an off-the-shelf solution that can help them in that. We encourage them to adopt it and to formally require—through whatever party mechanisms—their members, local branches and so on to use it and to make the most of it, as a starting point. However, that needs to happen in tandem with all the other mechanisms. As with anything, one method will only get us so far.

The Convener: We will now move to questions from Willie Coffey.

Willie Coffey: Good morning to everyone on the panel.

I want to stick with the theme of support for elected councillors who are currently in office and to ask each of you for one or two suggestions about how we can improve that. I think that all of you have mentioned that the opportunities for training for new councillors when they are in the post are particularly beneficial. What other support might be needed?

10:45

I am thinking back to our experience during Covid. One of the few good things that came out of Covid was the digital hybrid model becoming available to elected members. I saw the benefit of that in the Scottish Parliament. I also know that that was a huge benefit to elected councillors throughout Scotland in giving them greater ability to participate in council business. That approach respected family issues, as well. It was a great boost to many councillors.

I invite each of you to offer a suggestion or two about possible better support mechanisms. I will start with Talat Yaqoob, if that is okay.

Talat Yaqoob: Yes, of course.

As you said, modernisation was one of the few good things to come out of the Covid period. A lot of women have talked to us about the fact that that made things more accessible. Modernisation and access to technology to prevent presenteeism in council chambers and to make business more accessible is one issue.

My second suggestion relates to the expectation of councillors to participate in meetings late into the evening. The expectation of the level of work, while the role continues to be seen as part-time, needs to be reviewed, and the remuneration needs to be reviewed to bring it into line with the level of work that is required.

Finally, more robust and transparent reporting mechanisms are needed, which everybody is made aware of in order to create a sense of safety and security for women in marginalised communities, so that they can report issues related to sexism, discrimination and any kind of bigotry or inequality. Things need to be transparent, open and robustly investigated, and action needs to be taken. Such reporting mechanisms and transparency in local government would give people a feeling of safety and trust and would prevent issues from occurring, because people would see that there would be consequences of such behaviour.

The modernisation of technology, a review of timings, and the expectation of the level of work, if it is to remain part-time, are issues. Remuneration is linked to that. Finally, there should be better reporting, transparency and accountability models.

Hannah Stevens: Talat Yaqoob has covered matters very well.

An additional issue is that there is often a members support department in local authorities, but we have heard time and again that there is simply not enough support.

When MSPs and MPs are elected, there is a budget to enable them to hire staff to support them in case work and parliamentary preparation. The dearth of that type of administrative support means that local authorities are not able to support members in the way that they would truly like to. A little bit more administrative support to allow them to fulfil their roles is another thing that could be considered.

Jessie Duncan: [*Inaudible.*—been said. Everything goes back to remuneration and the need for recognition of the work. That is the biggest form of support. Councillors need to know that they are being fairly compensated for their work.

From speaking to councillors, I know that there is patchy application of remote working nationwide. Councillors in some areas say that

there is a real push to try to phase out remote working. Obviously, that is hugely concerning, because the experience of Covid has shown us that a hybrid model is the ideal way to ensure that people have different options to participate. That is crucial. It is crucial that that model be retained and is understood to be best practice. That applies particularly to rural areas in which commuting distances are huge.

From the initial numbers that we have looked at, we know that some rural areas—although this does not apply exclusively rural areas—have particularly low levels of women’s representation. Whatever can be done to help women to participate in those areas in particular needs to be taken seriously.

There absolutely needs to be an impartial complaints procedure. We referred to a report in the resources that we have published. That was one of the major recommendations in a huge piece of work that the Fawcett Society did in England and Wales. One of the main mechanisms that it recommended to improve women’s representation in the long term was improvement in terms of complaints and instances of discrimination being handled sensitively and completely impartially.

Issues around improving the councillors’ code of conduct—perhaps production of a new code of conduct or terms of reference for debate and activity that happens in council chambers—need to be looked at.

I do not know whether councils might want to look at an example that has been given. Three women councillors in Glasgow who were stepping down at the end of the previous session put together a model policy. They published that and put forward a motion in councils that outlined what they felt needed to happen in order to address the issues that had motivated them not to run again. Lots of complaints are a big part of that.

There are issues around debates in council chambers within hours of work. Maybe individual councils could look at those in the short term. Obviously, in an ideal world, we would want an approach that can be applied consistently so that there is not so much variation in the experiences of women across the country.

I think that that is everything.

Willie Coffey: I thank all three witnesses for their contributions. It was very important to make those points.

My only other question is about numbers. Is data available that shows the number of female councillors from ethnic backgrounds in Scotland’s councils? Do any of you have that data? If you have it, could you share it with the committee?

Jessie Duncan: Unfortunately, I do not have that data. We are awaiting publication of the results of the candidate diversity survey that has been run for the first time. I understand that the results are to be published soon. Maybe that will help to improve the picture that we have.

One of the greatest challenges is that all the data on the number of women councillors is gathered by organisations such as Engender, and we do not have information available publicly to be able to carry out an intersectional analysis. We do not have any accurate data on that.

I do not know whether any of the other panellists have any data.

The Convener: Talat Yaqoob would like to say something, but I think that her audio has gone. Maybe we will have to move on. We were doing so well.

Actually, we now have Talat Yaqoob’s picture. It is nice to see you.

Talat Yaqoob: I am not sure whether you can hear me now.

The Convener: Yes, we can. That is great.

Talat Yaqoob: I apologise—I am not sure what is happening.

On numbers, Women 50:50 does its own check of who has been elected. We are a voluntary organisation—we are run by volunteers—and we do that as much as we can. More than 1,200 councillors are elected, and we try to get the numbers. The issue is that we do not have data on how people identify themselves according to their ethnicity, nationality and sexuality. If we are to do things accurately, sensitively and robustly, it is up to councils to publish that data and to invest in finding it, or it is up to COSLA and others to get the data and publish it.

We do not have the intersecting data to tell us about ethnic minorities. Anecdotally, we know that there is not fair representation of ethnic minorities in our councils and that there never has been a relative population sample of ethnic minorities over the years. We would expect between 6 and 10 per cent of councillors to be from ethnic minorities, but we have not seen that. We know that 35 per cent of councillors who were elected in 2022 were women. That is an increase of 6 per cent from 2017. However, 85 multimember wards remain all-male-councillor wards, compared with only 12 multimember wards in which all the councillors are women. We have that data.

We do not think that it is appropriate for us to determine the data about ethnicity and sexuality and to look at pictures or names online to tell us that information. That information should come from the councils directly.

Willie Coffey: Thanks very much for that. The committee will probably want to pursue that issue.

The Convener: I think that Paul McLennan has a question about data.

Paul McLennan: This issue has been touched on. I do not know whether anybody wants to add to what has been said.

Historically, surveys of candidates and councillors have had low return rates. All of you have touched on your interactions with candidates and councillors. Could more be done to ensure higher and more representative rates of return in such surveys?

Jessie Duncan: It will be interesting to see what the return rate is. As you said, return rates have been fairly low historically. Our preference would be a mandatory system for gathering that data. Obviously, things are to be done sensitively and designed in a way that does not demand the data from anyone, but a survey could be a mandatory part of nomination forms.

It is certainly time to get creative in our thinking about how response numbers could be maximised. There could be a longer-term communications strategy to encourage parties to encourage their candidates to respond. The survey was rolled out earlier this year. It will be really interesting to see whether there is a geographical or party breakdown of where the message got out to candidates on the ground and where they saw value from providing information and completing the survey. The issue is about how the survey is pitched and about being able to demonstrate that providing the data enables everything to work a lot better, and enables people to understand where the gaps are in representation and where work needs to be undertaken at all levels to improve representation next time round.

Obviously, continuing to work with parties is really important. I wonder whether working with parties on their internal mechanisms and candidate agreements or such documentation is an option, so that, when people stand for election, they are made aware of the survey and agree to complete it. Maybe that needs to be looked at more. We have worked on that in the campaign, and there is a five-year challenge—it is coming up to being a four-year challenge, now. If the survey is to be run again and we want a higher response rate next time, the groundwork needs to happen now to make people and parties aware of it.

That leaves a challenge in capturing the data for independent candidates, because they cannot go through the parties and use those structures. I wonder whether there is anything that could be done through working directly with councils in

areas that have high proportions of independent candidates to help to get the message out.

It is key that those conversations do not come at the last minute. They should begin now and continue for the next four years, to allow maximum time to make everyone aware of the survey and be prepared for it.

Paul McLennan: Does anybody else want to come in?

The Convener: It does not look like anybody does.

I thank all the witnesses very much for joining us and giving us thorough responses. I have pages of notes on things that we can follow up.

I suspend the meeting for five minutes to allow a change of witnesses.

10:59

Meeting suspended.

11:04

On resuming—

The Convener: We are now joined virtually by our second panel of witnesses, to continue our evidence taking on understanding barriers to people seeking local elected office. I welcome Councillor Shona Morrison, who is the president of COSLA. This is the first time that you have joined the committee in your new role, Shona, so I give you a big warm welcome. Councillor Morrison is joined by Alexis Camble, who is policy and participation officer for equalities at COSLA.

Before I open the session to questions from members, I invite Councillor Morrison to make a short opening statement.

Councillor Shona Morrison (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Thank you, convener, and good morning, everybody. You are right that this is my first time giving evidence, which is another part of the diverse and wide-ranging role of a councillor.

I thank the convener and committee members for the invitation to give evidence and contribute to the committee's on-going work on barriers to local elected office. This area of work has been a key priority for COSLA for a number of years. I acknowledge the hard work of my predecessor as COSLA president, Councillor Alison Evison, in driving forward the work in that role.

It is clear that there is still much to be done to remove barriers for sections of our community that are currently underrepresented in Scottish local elected office. We cannot consider local democracy to be representative until our

councillors truly reflect the diversity of the communities that they serve. The voices and lived experience from across our communities are needed at the decision-making tables at all levels of the political system, and local government is no exception.

I particularly welcome the opportunity to speak about financial barriers to elected office resulting from the current rate of councillor remuneration. Many potential candidates are priced out by the low rate of pay that local elected members currently receive. For individuals who decide to stand and are ultimately elected, the financial pressures that result from the rate of remuneration lead to many councillors having to balance their responsibilities as an elected member with a second paid job and, in many cases, with caring responsibilities.

That has a significant impact on female members in particular. This year, we heard of many examples of women councillors deciding not to seek re-election simply because they could not afford to remain as councillors. Things must change to ensure that financial and, indeed, all other barriers to elected office are removed. I welcome the committee's continued focus on the issue, and I am very happy to be here to answer questions.

The Convener: Thank you. You have touched a little on some of the issues that we are going to cover, but it is good that we have an opportunity to get into a bit more detail. I will begin by focusing on the slow progress towards increasingly equal gender representation among councillors. Given the steps that various organisations have taken over the past 10 years, what are the barriers? You pointed to remuneration as one, but do you have a sense of other things that might be barriers that contribute to the slow pace of improvement in the number of female councillors in Scotland?

Councillor Morrison: I really appreciated listening to the previous panel and the contributions from the representatives of Engender and Women 50:50. I might cover the same issues with regards to barriers for women.

In responses to surveys in local authorities, remuneration is absolutely right up at the top as a major barrier to elected office. Women in particular also experience real struggles in trying to balance the working day as a councillor. In my previous role as a senior councillor in my authority, my day began in the early hours of the morning and often finished very late at night. I had to balance several roles—I was the chair of several committees and had other responsibilities in the council's strategic boards, as well as spending time in our communities, which is where we need to be seen and to listen, so that we accurately represent those who elected us to office.

That pressure of workload is significant. Anecdotally, having spoken to colleagues who chose not to stand again in the election earlier this year, I know that the issue of balancing was a contributing factor, especially for women councillors with childcare responsibilities. There is, in the committee, a lot of experience among members who have been local councillors in the past, so you will be aware that many councils still meet in the evenings. That might work for many people, but it certainly does not work for others. The hours are absolutely a factor that deters women and other marginalised groups from standing for office.

I also suggest that there are significant culture issues in councils. In the previous evidence session, colleagues made absolutely correct representations about some of those difficulties. It is about having systems in place specifically to support in those roles women who are perhaps faced with difficult and fairly toxic working environments. Again, anecdotally, my experience is that colleagues have said that that is another significant contributing factor in decisions not to stand for re-election.

The Convener: It is great that you were able to listen to our previous panel. You will have heard me asking for thoughts about representation of young women in local authorities. Do you have anything more to say about the even greater challenges that young women face to being elected?

Councillor Morrison: My local authority has identified encouraging younger people to engage in local politics as an issue. We have certainly advocated the presence in our council of representatives from local high schools. Many of our primary schools encourage elected members to go in to speak to the children about local democracy and why it matters. I have participated in that and have really welcomed it. The earlier we can get the message across to young people about the importance of young women standing for office, the better.

That is great but, to go back to what I highlighted earlier, it is difficult for the sort of anecdotal stories that I mentioned not to become part of elected members' stories about their experience, which influences decisions that our young people make about standing for office. Again, I reflect on the toxicity in many of our councils that women specifically face in their day-to-day work.

The Convener: Thank you. I have been inspired by the point about needing to interact more with high schools. Maybe we can do something about that.

Looking to the future—this is a question that I asked in the previous session—what is COSLA doing to ensure that we do not have the same conversation in 2027?

Councillor Morrison: During the break, I was reflecting on the comment by, I think, Jessie Duncan that the work needs to be on-going. We cannot wait until we are on the precipice of another election and then take a reactive approach. I have had a very busy first few months in my new role, and I was absolutely delighted to confirm that our special interest group on barriers to elected office has been reconvened. I hope that a paper will go to our council leaders this month in order to get their agreement to reconvene the group. That will bring in a different conversation.

We are now in a very different landscape, with a lot of new members, so it will be interesting to see what that group looks like and what the priorities are, given that local authorities are facing massive challenges—we are living and breathing that narrative every day. Potentially, in the next round of local elections councils will have a bigger challenge in attracting candidates, because it is an incredibly challenging role to fill. Given the pressures on people's finances and in their everyday lives, along with the factors that I have covered of remuneration and the pressure of hours and workload, for most people, it will be very difficult to make that decision to commit to the role.

The Convener: I am heartened to hear that the barriers to elected office group has reconvened. I look forward to hearing what it comes up with.

We will move on to questions from Mark Griffin.

11:15

Mark Griffin: Good morning. Does COSLA have any information or data nationally on the issue of female councillors voluntarily standing down after one or perhaps two terms? In my local authority area, five female councillors voluntarily stood down at the last election, and two of them were elected in by-elections, so they did not even have a full five-year term. That is a huge number for just one local authority. Do you have any data on the position nationally?

Councillor Morrison: I do not, but I will defer to Alexis Camble in a moment to see whether she can give accurate data. This year, the percentage of women in councils has increased from 29 to 35 per cent. However, like you, I know of colleagues who had masses of experience and talent to offer who decided not to return in the elections earlier this year, which is hugely disappointing.

One of the previous witnesses spoke about the breadth of the role of councillor, and how often you begin, just when you come to the end of the five-

year term, to feel that you understand completely what is expected in the role and start to get into your stride. It is disappointing that women who have previously stood for council and who I am sure have been incredibly successful in their roles have decided not to stand.

I would reiterate the pressures that people are facing. There are issues of remuneration, particularly given the current crisis that is affecting everybody's life; issues of workload, the hours and balancing that with childcare; and culture issues. All that creates a perfect storm, and so certain women decide not to stand for local authority elections.

I will check with Alexis, to see whether she has any more data.

Alexis Camble (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Good morning. I reiterate what Councillor Morrison said on the financial pressures that female councillors in particular face, and which impact on their decision not to seek re-election. That came out strongly in the survey of councillors that we undertook last year on workload, which had an open-text question asking for councillors' views on financial barriers. There was an overwhelming response from female councillors saying that the pressure of the low pay that councillors receive and of having to balance a second job with childcare led to their deciding not to stand again. That survey was undertaken before the 2022 elections. All but one of the comments were from women stating that they were not standing for re-election because of remuneration. The other was from a male councillor talking about a female councillor colleague of his who had already stood down before the election, citing financial pressures as the reason for not being able to continue in the role.

Mark Griffin: Councillor Morrison touched briefly on how the role of a councillor and the responsibilities and burdens on councillors have changed over the past 15 years. Will you expand on that and, given that context of changes, reflect on whether it is even remotely sustainable for councillors to continue on the current levels of pay?

Councillor Morrison: That is a massive challenge. Our written evidence highlights that many councillors hold two jobs, because the remuneration is not adequate to meet the current standard of living. In my previous term, out of necessity I balanced two jobs, but with great difficulty. As I said, there will be lots of experience of this round the table, so members will know that the role in a local authority administration is incredibly demanding, and it will continue to be incredibly demanding.

During the intense period of the pandemic, reactive practice was needed just to ensure that services continued to deliver as they should for our communities. The incredibly fast-paced way of working was hugely demanding for officers and for local elected members. Senior members of councils often do 50-plus hours a week. As I said, that time is spent on the strategic responsibilities as well as our work in communities. That is absolutely where we need to be visible so that we can ensure that we represent our communities as best we can.

That is often challenging. The late hours, finding childcare and balancing all the responsibilities that you have at home with ensuring that your community is represented as well as it can be are all extremely demanding, and there is no sign of the responsibilities diminishing in any way. In fact, it feels as if we are going into a very intense time and that the workload of local councillors will only increase.

I feel that the remuneration is not adequate. We should allow councillors to focus on being local elected members in their own right, and they should not need to have a second job.

Mark Griffin: We have talked about cultural and financial barriers, and I want to touch on legal barriers as well. Those who work for a local authority are disqualified from standing for election, and there are disqualifications around bankruptcy and other things. Are the disqualifications appropriate? Given the context of the cost of living crisis and interest rates shooting through the roof, councillors could become bankrupt because of the levels of remuneration. Why should someone who has that lived experience be disqualified from becoming a councillor? Why should someone who has the experience of working in, say, a social care setting be disqualified from becoming a councillor, when someone who provides care in the independent sector and is contracted by a council can stand for election?

Particularly in the central belt, some councillors work for local authorities that are right next door, but that is much more difficult to do in island or more rural communities. What are your views on some of the legal disqualifications from standing to be a councillor? Are they appropriate, given that the legislation on that was set out in the 1970s?

Councillor Morrison: I will comment on the ability of local authority staff to stand for local election. Given that Moray Council, for example, is a major employer in the area and has a high percentage of female employees, it is disappointing that employees of the council are unable to stand for local election. As you say, that lived experience is absolutely vital when it comes

to fulfilling the role as an elected member and representing our communities.

We also face a challenge when we ask people who hold a job in a local authority whether they would like to stand for election, because those people would potentially have to give up their job for what would perhaps be lower pay. That is a huge commitment and a huge leap for people to make. People still do it, but it is a huge risk, because there is no assurance that they will be elected to office. That poses significant challenges.

Marie McNair: The culture and working environment in local councils was cited as the reason why some female councillors decided to stand down. Having experienced sexual harassment as a young female councillor and having received no help when I called out my male group leader, I get why some women feel unsupported in that misogynistic environment. That can be a reason why women choose to stand down. What more can the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government do to improve that situation?

Councillor Morrison: I am sorry to hear about your experiences, which reflect my anecdotal experience from talking to my colleagues and hearing what they are going through within councils. Those are incredibly challenging situations and, unfortunately, there is not a particularly helpful reporting mechanism for the majority of such experiences. We should ensure that, when women in elected office experience any sort of behaviour such as you have described, a safe reporting mechanism is in place through which they can gain assurance and safety.

At present, more often than not, the reporting mechanism that is referred to by colleagues is the one involving the Standards Commission for Scotland. Although the commission fulfils an extremely important function, the nuances of certain admissions to the commission perhaps do not capture the correct layout to allow the admissions to be responded to, so female councillors are often left feeling unrepresented and extremely vulnerable. There is a lot of work to be done in learning from one another and, fundamentally, in ensuring that we provide a safe working environment for local councillors.

Marie McNair: COSLA's submission highlights the efforts being made to improve the safety of councillors. What evidence is there that female councillors have a particular concern? What more can be done to ensure that councillors feel safe in carrying out their duties? I do not know whether Alexis Camble or Councillor Morrison wants to answer those questions.

Councillor Morrison: I can start. There have been several recent cases in which councillors have experienced quite horrific attacks and have had threats made against them, so work has been done with Police Scotland and the new cohort of councillors who were elected in May. Online sessions have been run with Police Scotland on safety, specifically in relation to lone working. Having previously been a mental health nurse, I was very aware, when I came into the role, of the need to ensure that colleagues are not left in very vulnerable positions, but it is often a case of supporting one another rather than formal mechanisms being in place.

We are certainly making good progress in ensuring that local authorities have a laser focus on that area, and the feedback from colleagues who have taken part in the online sessions shows that those sessions have been welcomed.

I will pass over to Alexis Camble.

11:30

Alexis Camble: I point to the work that COSLA has done with local government associations across the UK—local government associations for England, Wales and Northern Ireland—under the umbrella of civility in public life. That work started in 2020 with a joint statement from our then president, Councillor Evison, and her equivalents in the other three nations.

Through that work, it has been clear that it is female councillors in particular who experience online abuse and harassment. As part of the work, COSLA's barriers to elected office special interest group, with the other three nations, developed resources on digital citizenship, infographics for councillors to use on their social media to set rules of engagement, and advice on how to report and address incidents.

I will pick up on what Councillor Morrison said about physical safety. We have a very good working relationship with Police Scotland, which developed in relation to councillor safety following the tragic murder of Sir David Amess MP in October 2021. Through that on-going relationship, Police Scotland has tried to understand the nuances of the councillor role. For example, as Councillor Morrison said, the role can involve lone working, and female councillors in particular might feel vulnerable if they have surgeries late at night without staff in the way that an MSP or an MP would have at their surgeries.

The feedback that we have received from elected members following the latest round of safety briefings from Police Scotland has been incredibly positive. In each area, councillors have been provided with details for their local area command and divisional contact. Each briefing

that was delivered was aimed at a specific area of Scotland, so relevant divisional police staff could be there to ensure that the relationships with local police staff continue to develop.

The Convener: I have a question for Shona Morrison that is connected to culture and might be a simpler one to answer. You talk about the long hours that councillors must work and the lack of balance in relation to remuneration, but perhaps something could be done to change the need for long working hours. Who has the power to change the working hours for councillors? Where does that power sit?

Councillor Morrison: It depends on the role that a councillor fulfils within a council. Although opposition councillors still have the same number of committees and so on, there are slightly fewer demands on their time than there are for councillors in an administration. Along with the committees, they have regular meetings with officers and so on, which is absolutely part and parcel of the role. It is also vital that councillors are able to attend community meetings as much as possible.

The work involves long hours. Those around the table who have experience of council meetings will know that they can go on for quite a long time. It is the responsibility of the chair to ensure that councillors are concise in their questions and discussions, but that just does not happen. However, the responsibility to speak to one another as colleagues is incredibly important in order to make people aware of issues.

Some colleagues have physical issues in relation to attending long meetings, so the ability to use digital technology has been welcomed. I certainly hear that from colleagues in my local authority. Having time away from the desk to stretch your legs and be able to eat or drink something makes a huge difference.

There is a responsibility on individual councils to ensure that all business is carried out appropriately, in a way that recognises the pressure on people's time, and my council is looking at that. There are challenges in that regard and, nationally, we could all learn from one another how we ensure that business is conducted in a way that recognises the pressures on individuals' workloads.

The Convener: There is an issue with managing agendas, which I am busy doing this morning.

Willie Coffey: Good morning, panel. I do not know whether you tuned in to hear the witnesses on the previous panel, but I will continue with the same theme that I asked them about, which is support mechanisms to assist elected members, particularly females, to participate, do their job well

and, we hope, stay in councils. A couple of suggestions were made about the provision of more support for administration and casework. As you know, MSPs and MPs have a budget to allow us to do that work but, from memory, I think that the support to allow elected member councillors to do that it is very limited.

We are all aware that the hybrid working model was really beneficial to all elected members in the Parliaments and councils. I would like to hear a few thoughts from Councillor Morrison about what support mechanisms might look like and whether COSLA is intending to pursue them in the current term.

Councillor Morrison: I will touch on hybrid working first. Although we really welcome the ability to hold hybrid meetings, which became a normal way of working during the pandemic, I and my colleagues are now finding—again, this is anecdotal—that, as people become more relaxed about going back into arenas where they are in close contact with others, there is a slight push from local authorities to perhaps have an expectation that people will be there in person rather than online. That is posing quite a few difficulties, as you can imagine.

We have several disabled members in our council who feel that their experience is limited because of that. They attend meetings digitally, but they are faced with a chamber full of their colleagues. They are new members, and they are missing a lot of the softer exposure to colleagues where people build really important relationships. I have to travel for three and a half hours to get to Edinburgh, so I hugely appreciate the benefits of online meetings. However, at COSLA, we are very aware of the need to ensure that there is equity for councillors so that nobody feels that they are at a disadvantage, because that would be hugely frustrating.

I know that disabled members of my council who were elected in May really benefited from the funding to address barriers to elected office. That left a bit of a vacuum, and an emphasis is now needed on member support. That is often nobody's fault; it is just about a lack of exposure. I am aware that some very good work has been done on that in the Scottish Government and I am keen that local authorities learn from that practice.

On the culture and workload issues, I absolutely agree, having worked for an MSP, that it is a huge benefit to have the ability to draw on staff, given all the expertise that they bring and can offer to provide support. Local and national elected members have to constantly juggle multiple responsibilities. I absolutely agree that reconvening the specialist interest group on barriers to elected office is an important focus, and it will look at how we support our councillors in

local authorities to manage their casework and other responsibilities.

Willie Coffey: Have you had time to consider whether all of Scotland's authorities are still embracing the digital hybrid model? Have some retreated back to in-person meetings?

Councillor Morrison: Have we retreated back into our comfy silos? I am not entirely sure. I do not have that data to hand, but we can certainly ask the question and pull out some data.

COSLA has held one hybrid meeting so far and the rest have been online. We found that about 30 per cent of leaders attended in person and the rest were online, so there is still a nice balance. We are very aware of the issue, and the reconvened special interest group will focus on ensuring that nobody feels at a disadvantage and there is equity for all members.

Willie Coffey: I have another question that you might have heard me ask the previous panel. We are interested in the number of female councillors from ethnic minority backgrounds, but the previous panel was unable to provide any hard and fast statistics or data on that. Is that something that COSLA might take up so that you could report on the breakdown of female councillors from ethnic minority backgrounds and so on and inform the committee's work?

Councillor Morrison: That is incredibly important. I refer to the same work that the previous panel mentioned. The Scottish Government elections team has collated a survey and will be publishing it shortly. COSLA welcomes that as it will provide excellent data with regard to the elections and the shifts in demographics with our newly elected members.

The Convener: On the point about support, do you have any thoughts on whether the Scottish Government has a role in helping or encouraging councils to provide more support?

Councillor Morrison: Not that I am aware of at present. I will perhaps defer to Alexis Camble in a moment, but we meet Mr Macpherson regularly—monthly—in his role as Minister for Social Security and Local Government, which is absolutely a space where we can have those conversations.

I assume that that will also form part of the discussion in the Scottish local authorities remuneration committee. It has advertised to populate the committee and we hope that its report will be published by August 2023. COSLA sits on that committee and I assume that we will ask it to pursue the subject.

Miles Briggs: Good morning, panel, and thank you for joining us. I have a couple of questions on barriers to disabled people seeking office and what happens when they gain elected office.

I am sure that you are both aware of the quite high-profile case in Edinburgh of a newly elected disabled member who highlighted the lack of support, accessibility and, to be honest, basic workplace health and safety advice that were provided. What conversations have taken place in COSLA to ensure that that changes? I do not think that it is acceptable that the situation arose in the first place.

Following on from that, what positive impact has the access to elected office fund made?

Councillor Morrison: Again, I might ask Alexis Camble to pick up on a couple of points.

Having spoken to a few of our newly elected councillors who benefited from the fund, I think that it was of huge benefit. It allowed them to feel incredibly supported during campaigns and so on. Since then, as I highlighted, newly elected members have unfortunately experienced a cliff edge, with that support no longer being in place. I have had conversations about that with colleagues.

It is about member services having time to adapt and to gather learning experiences from other authorities and the Scottish Government. As I said, some fantastic work has been happening in the Scottish Government and I really hope that we can reflect that good practice in COSLA.

I ask Alexis Camble whether she has anything to add.

11:45

Alexis Camble: I want to pick up on Mr Briggs's first question, which was about a lack of support for a newly elected disabled member. Concerns about support and the knowledge and experience that exist in councils' member services departments to enable them to support disabled elected members were raised as part of the work of the previous barriers to elected office special interest group.

After the group disbanded at the end of the previous local government term, I undertook a piece of work that involved speaking to member services departments in councils across Scotland. A clear message that came out from my conversations was that the skills that are needed to understand how to assess what an individual might need to access their role and be fully included in it are not necessarily in place in those teams in the way that they are embedded in local authorities' human resources departments because of the responsibility to make reasonable adjustments for employees.

From COSLA's point of view, although a councillor does not have employee status, they need to be supported to be able to access what

they need to do their job from the first day, when they are elected. Work can definitely be done on that. Councillor Morrison and I can discuss future work for the special interest group, which we hope will be reconvened, on the advice and support that local authorities are given to ensure that member services departments have the necessary skills and experience and can draw on knowledge from their human resources departments to ensure that they understand how to make reasonable adjustments and where to access sources of support.

That is important because the burden sometimes falls on the elected member to know what they need to do their job as a councillor. If they have not been a councillor before, they are reliant on council staff to assess their needs and suggest adjustments that might need to be made to equipment or for access.

Over the summer, I had a conversation with staff at the Scottish Parliament about their experience of making sure that the Scottish Parliament is an accessible and inclusive place for its disabled elected members. As Councillor Morrison said, there is a lot of learning that local authorities can take. COSLA has a role in taking that learning from the Scottish Parliament to local authorities and ensuring that accessibility is not something that is fully experienced by elected members only in a particular sphere of our political system.

Miles Briggs: That is very helpful. As you say, we have a framework here in Parliament, which is available. I imagined that local authorities would be following that as well, so I am disappointed to hear that that has not been the case.

On the issue of member support groups, which you touched on, do you see different services being provided depending on the size of councils and the numbers of councillors who are being supported? Given that each council sets different rules and has different systems in place to support elected members, are national standards needed? Some of my Conservative colleagues who have joined councils have been surprised by the lack of secretarial support in some areas, whereas in other councils they have been very pleased with what has been provided. Does that need to be pursued?

Councillor Morrison: There is always a need to ensure that we have a co-ordinated approach to what we can offer members throughout Scotland. The reconvened special interest group will focus on where we see extremely good practice, what we can learn from colleagues—whether in a local authority or the Scottish Government—and what we can replicate so that we have those standards and can assure people that, whether they are in a council in Shetland, Moray, Aberdeen city or

Edinburgh, they will have the same experience and the same access as their colleagues.

The Convener: Thank you very much. We have come to the end of our questions. Your evidence has been very helpful. We really appreciate you joining us this morning and we look forward to other times when you will join us.

As we agreed at the start of the meeting to take the remaining agenda items in private, I now close the public part of the meeting.

11:51

Meeting continued in private until 12:26.

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