Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 9 November 2023

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Thursday 9 November 2023

CONTENTS

STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE
18th Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)
*Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP)
*Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Dame Susan Bruce (Electoral Commission Scotland)
Shaun McNally (Electoral Commission Scotland)
Andy O'Neill (Electoral Commission Scotland)
Craig Westwood (Electoral Commission Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Catherine Fergusson

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 9 November 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Martin Whitfield): Good morning, and welcome to the 18th meeting in 2023 of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. We have received no apologies this morning.

Our first agenda item is a decision on whether to take in private items 3 and 4. Item 3 will be consideration of the evidence session that we are about to hold with the Electoral Commission, and item 4 will be consideration of the findings of the proxy voting evaluation. Do we agree to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Electoral Commission

09:30

The Convener: Our second agenda item is evidence from the Electoral Commission. I welcome to the meeting Dame Susan Bruce, who is the electoral commissioner for Scotland; Shaun McNally, who is the chief executive of the Electoral Commission; Craig Westwood, who is the director of communications, policy and research of the Electoral Commission; and Andy O'Neill, who is the head of the Electoral Commission Scotland. I invite Dame Susan to make some opening remarks about the annual report and the position in which we now find ourselves.

Dame Susan Bruce (Electoral Commission Scotland): Thank you, convener. We welcome the scrutiny that is offered by the committee, and I am grateful for the opportunity to come and speak about the full span of the commission's work in Scotland in 2022-23.

The commission's aim is to ensure that people trust, value and take part in elections. We do that by delivering our key objectives, which include accessible registration and voting, transparent and compliant political campaigning and finance, resilient local electoral services, fair and effective electoral law, and a modern and sustainable electoral system.

We achieve our objectives in Scotland through a range of activities. As the committee will be aware, our work in early 2022-23 focused on supporting successful delivery of council elections across Scotland. That included providing advice, support and guidance to all those who were active in the polls, including electoral administrators, campaigners and the public. In September 2022, we published our statutory report on the council elections, and we were pleased to discuss our recommendations with the committee.

We have invested in our advice, support and regulatory activity in Scotland and have increased staff resource to focus on those areas. Our work has included using our performance standards framework to support and challenge returning officers at the Scottish council elections and electoral registration officers in their year-round activities to maintain accurate and complete electoral registers. We also identified new opportunities to provide support to the regulated community to help them to comply with the rules around campaign finance.

Throughout 2022-23, we continued to build on the success of our work to promote democratic education by providing learning resources for teachers and youth workers. We piloted a youth voice programme that brought together a group of

young people from across Scotland to provide feedback on our education resources and create new youth-friendly resources.

In the next year, our core activities will, of course, continue. Those include providing our advice and guidance services for electoral administrators and campaigners, setting and monitoring performance standards for electoral administrators, publishing the details of political finance, and carrying out research to better understand public attitudes to voting and democracy.

In addition, we are building on our political literacy work and establishing a long-term youth voice programme. Our new partner, Children in Scotland, will be gathering insights from a diverse group of young people from across Scotland to inform our education and engagement work. We are really keen to ensure that younger people engage in the democratic process and exercise their franchise when their time comes. We have also strengthened our provision for other underregistered groups and next year we will make funding available for organisations that support people who are disenfranchised.

We will continue to provide expert advice and challenge to the electoral reform programme in Scotland, drawing on our policy and research expertise to ensure that any reforms are evidence based and workable.

We provided a detailed response to the public consultation on reform in March this year. We will provide advice to Parliament when the reform bill is introduced, and we are developing new guidance resources to support electoral administrators and campaigners to comply with any new requirements that will arise from the proposed legislation.

Finally, we will work with the Electoral Management Board for Scotland to support returning officers and electoral registration officers, to address the significant concerns about the resilience of electoral services in Scotland, and to help them to meet the challenges that they face in delivering well-run electoral services that continue to meet voters' needs.

I am happy to answer any questions.

The Convener: I am grateful for that timely synopsis of the report, especially in a year that has been quite active from an electoral point of view, with voter identification and other matters, and certainly with the flurry that occurred only a few days ago, on 1 November, when digital imprints suddenly became the talk of all the corridors up and down the Parliament.

I am glad that you are open for questions. I will kick off in the first instance and refer back to correspondence from 13 September 2023, which highlighted the lateness of the report this year. There has been an apology for its being late and recognition of the pressure that lateness puts on the people who await such things. I am very grateful for that.

The letter said:

"Neither the Commission nor the NAO was sufficiently well-resourced to manage these processes to the timetable originally specified",

so an extension to the timetable was agreed. Then, as I said, there was an apology that is wholly accepted.

I will aim this at Sean McNally. Could you explain what you mean about the challenge with regard to resourcing? Is it an on-going problem?

Shaun McNally (Electoral Commission Scotland): I am more than happy to do so. First, I reiterate the apology that I set out in writing, because I recognise the impact that the delay had on this meeting.

There was a combination of factors in the delay. The first thing to recognise is that, technically, in law, the accounts were not laid late. I also accept that custom and practice in previous years and the scheduling of evidence sessions are based on the annual accounts being laid at the beginning of July.

The combination of factors includes our introduction of a new accounting system, which was implemented at the beginning of April 2022. When we got to the year end, it became clear that a number of complexities and issues needed to be worked through. In addition, the situation highlighted what has been, from my perspective, underinvestment in the financial team in recent years. We are seeking to correct that in the estimate that has gone before the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.

There were other issues with complexities in new accounting practices and procedures that were introduced. That meant that we were later than we otherwise would have been in engaging the National Audit Office on a fully balanced set of accounts so that it could complete its audit. That had knock-on consequences for the NAO, which has been absolutely brilliant. I commend it for the work, assistance and attention that it has given us. However, it then ran into issues with other audits that it was going to conduct; for example, people had planned holidays on the basis that the annual accounts would be produced at the beginning of July. That meant that we needed to take time to make sure that everything was accurate, that it met the accounting standards, and that we could, with confidence, lay an unqualified set of accounts before Parliament.

The reason for the delay was a combination of complexity in the accounting system, new accounting standards, capacity and capability within the team and knock-on consequences for the National Audit Office.

The Convener: I am grateful for that explanation. As you suggest, it was a set of circumstances that perhaps could not have been anticipated. I appreciate that you have put in the resource request. Are you confident that, if the request is met, there will not be the same problem this year?

Shaun McNally: We must take steps—we are taking steps—to ensure that we do not have delay in the laying of accounts in July 2024.

The Convener: Excellent. Thank you very much for that.

I now invite committee members to lead off on various sets of questions. If other members have additional questions, I will come to them when they do. I turn first to Ivan McKee.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): Good morning, panel, and welcome to the committee. I will focus on supporting voters and effective electoral administration. I will start by asking about some things that have happened, before I turn to look at your future direction and work that you might do.

I will begin with a couple of specific questions about the resources that were provided to train polling station staff to support disabled people. How were those resources received? How effective was their provision?

I would also like to know how the online tool for providing information on polling stations and candidates has been received. How well used and effective has it been? Who would like to pick up on those specifics to start with?

Craig Westwood (Electoral Commission Scotland): I can certainly pick up on the second question. The online tool is a postcode look-up facility that we have on our website. It enables a voter to enter their postcode and the tool will give them information about what elections are to take place in their area and when they are coming. We can provide all sorts of other information. At the moment, that is reliant on local authorities providing us with that information, but the vast majority of them provide it and are very supportive of the initiative. They can provide polling station data, opening times and candidate information.

We are looking to extend that activity to make sure that we can provide more data that is helpful to voters. Use of the facility is increasing year on year. It is incredibly helpful to voters. It means that we can find them where they are and, in effect, that they do not need to search for information in

places where they would not expect to have to search. They can simply look online, search for the information that they need, then have confidence in how they vote.

An innovation that we have introduced in recent years is the ability to place that postcode look-up facility on other websites. We are not protective of people having to find the Electoral Commission in order that they can get that information; if we can place that facility on other websites, that is fantastic. We need to find people where they are. Therefore, we are talking to all sorts of other partners, including the media. For example, we are working the BBC and other broadcasters and news providers to make sure that, when they provide coverage of elections, they provide access to the look-up facility alongside their coverage, so that people can access that information where they are.

Ivan McKee: Is there data on how widely used that tool is?

Craig Westwood: I do not have that information with me, but I could certainly provide it afterwards. Use of the tool is increasing year on year.

Ivan McKee: That is interesting. Does anyone want to pick up on the question about support for disabled voters?

Andy O'Neill (Electoral Commission Scotland): I will answer that one. The Elections Act 2022, which was passed by the United Kingdom Parliament, has changed the legislative framework for accessibility of voting. Recently, following wide consultation with various accessibility groups and so on, we produced some guidance for returning officers, which they will move to implement at the forthcoming UK Parliament general election, whenever that takes place.

The issue is certainly one that the Electoral Management Board for Scotland, which is the collective group that involves all 32 returning officers and 15 electoral registration officers, is very concerned about. It is very keen that everyone has a good experience, from the customer's point of view, either in polling stations or in postal voting.

When we held a conference in Dundee on 6 October, which 130-odd people attended, we held a workshop on the matter. We had a stall on lots of new things that the returning officers are being encouraged to use in elections. They are now working locally to implement the guidance, which I think they will do. Malcolm Burr, the convener of the Electoral Management Board, is certainly very keen to ensure that that comes in. In fact, the emphasis on accessibility issues was first seen in the council elections in England in May. About 30 people—deputy returning officers and returning

officers—went down from Scotland to various parts of England to observe and learn, and they have taken that learning back to Scotland.

Ivan McKee: The survey certainly seems to suggest that the satisfaction levels of disabled voters are broadly similar to those of the wider electorate, which is helpful to know.

09:45

Can you provide more background information on the cyberattack in October 2022 and say what mitigations have been put in place to reduce the likelihood of that happening in the future?

Shaun McNally: I am more than happy to do that. As a result of moving systems into the cloud and putting in additional checks, such as multifactor authentication, we identified some unusual activity on some of our servers. Following investigation, it was clear that an external actor had had access to the system since August 2021. We immediately contacted the National Cyber Security Centre and, within the required 72 hours, the Information Commissioner's Office.

However, first of all, it was important to take action to contain the attack and understand which servers had been compromised. That was done. The next stage, working with the National Cyber Security Centre and security experts, was to remove those threat actors. We then embarked upon a period and process of significantly strengthening—as a result of the move into the cloud—the firewalls around the system. We also introduced a 24/7 monitoring system on top of the network. That was implemented with the security experts and with the oversight of the National Cyber Security Centre.

Therefore, I am confident that our systems are secure. There was a detailed process to go through before a public announcement and public notifications could be made. First of all, we had to be satisfied that we had closed the door. Once the public notification went out, we identified a significant increase in the number of attempts to penetrate the system, and we know that, as a key part of the national infrastructure, we will always be the target for people who seek to undermine the democratic process.

Nobody can provide a 100 per cent guarantee that no actor will ever be able to penetrate the system, but we will constantly and continually work with the National Cyber Security Centre and our security experts, and we will adapt our systems to ensure that we take due notice and care of what intelligence and attacks against other organisations tell us.

Ivan McKee: Thank you. The voter ID requirements came into place and were operational for the Rutherglen and Hamilton West by-election. I am interested in hearing an update on how that operated and whether there were any challenges.

Craig Westwood: As you said, that was the first time that voter ID was put in place in Scotland, so we have been incredibly attentive to supporting the returning officer locally and ensuring that voters were made aware of the requirement. We are still in the process of collecting the detailed data on that, but the overwhelming impression is that it went as well as we might have expected and, particularly, that it is giving us confidence, which is in line with the experiences at the local elections in England in May.

We led all the public awareness work on voter ID, particularly ahead of those elections, and supported the process at constituency level in Rutherglen and Hamilton West. We will continue to do that in by-elections that occur for the UK Parliament, and we are thinking, in particular, about the UK general election next year. All that planning is under way. I am happy to go into more detail on that, if there are any other questions.

Ivan McKee: What was the impact on the ground? Were there issues? If so, how many and how were those resolved? Did it have any impact on turnout, for example? It is hard to know that, but has any assessment be made of that?

Craig Westwood: So far, our intelligence suggests that no significant issues arose as a result of the new requirements. On turnout, our main lesson comes from the local elections in England, as we did a full survey of, and collected data from, all local authorities that participated in those elections. The difference in turnout between that poll and the nearest comparable poll, which was back in 2019, was 0.5 per cent, which is obviously not statistically significant. It is always difficult to compare turnout because, as you will appreciate, it is affected by many factors, not least the weather as well as the political climate.

However, that evidence gives us confidence that, as the voter ID system is rolled out, there is the ability to make it successful and ensure that everybody can participate. Our specific focus is on demographics that are most at risk—those who are least likely to have ID and those who do not vote in all elections and are therefore less likely to understand the policy. We want to reach as many of them as possible so that, on polling day, the only thing that they have to think about or be concerned about is how they mark their ballot paper.

Ivan McKee: That is good.

Turning to the future, I am interested in the work that the commission is undertaking to ensure that voting practices keep pace with best practice. How

widely are you looking? Do you look at international best practice to see how things are done elsewhere?

Craig Westwood: Yes, we look at international best practice. We also look at how things are delivered differently in different parts of the UK. That is great in allowing us to see examples and to learn from how pilots have gone in different areas.

For us, the bedrock comes down to what works best for the voter. We consistently carry out voter surveys. For example, we ask the electorate the same questions each year to understand how voting behaviour is changing and how people's understanding of, acceptance of and confidence in the voting process is shifting. When we want to look at specific issues, we also carry out deep-dive research work, which might be qualitative or quantitative, so that we understand the public appetite for change, people's interest in change and the benefits that they think would be delivered by a certain change.

For example, we look at the voting process. Clearly, there is the shadow of online voting, which people often want to talk about, and we plan to look at that again in the future. At the moment, our public survey results on the idea of online voting are quite complex, which shows that members of the public have a pretty nuanced understanding of the issues. They understand the points about convenience, but they also understand the risks associated with voting into a locked box where you cannot see the process. There is a real sense that the electorate understands the tactile quality and physicality of the voting process, with people having confidence in that process as a result of seeing papers being counted. We know that that is incredibly important to candidates, but it is also really important to voters. We have taken a lot of confidence from that. We are exploring digital voting, but it is being done at a slow pace.

Of course, that is not the only area in which there could be reform. We are looking at all sorts of things, including mobile polling stations, particularly for remote areas where people live a long way away from their local polling station. Would mobile provision help us to both increase ease for voters—which is an important measure of success—and raise participation levels? Are there people who are not participating who could be encouraged to get over the line and vote by a change in tactic? The opening hours of polling stations is another issue. There are examples of practical and sensible things that could be done that could make a tangible difference, and we are exploring all those areas.

Ivan McKee: The ability to creatively spoil ballot papers would, of course, be limited with online voting. [*Laughter.*]

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I want to go back to the issue of voter ID, which Ivan McKee asked about. As a passing reference, I am interested in how much take-up there has been of voter authority certificates, which are on offer to voters who feel that they do not have the photo ID that is specified in law. Have you any data on that?

Craig Westwood: Data from the English local elections—we are still collecting data from the Rutherglen and Hamilton West by-election—shows that take-up was significantly lower than we expected. We do not set targets for that, because we do not want to drive people towards that option. It is an additional administrative process that places burdens on electoral administrators, and we are very concerned about resilience and capacity in the electoral administrator sector. We therefore do not want to actively drive people towards that option if they do not need such a certificate.

We know that, among the overall population of Great Britain, only about 4 per cent of people do not have any of the eligible forms of ID, although the figure is slightly higher in Scotland. We want to ensure that we reach the right people with that message.

Our projection for the English local elections was that around 250,000 or 300,000 people might be expected to need voter authority certificates. However, the number of applications for them that came in was around 85,000, which was significantly lower.

A particularly interesting aspect was the number of certificates that were then used to vote, which was significantly lower again. Therefore people had gone through the application process but then did not use their certificates at the polling station. We are still exploring that, to try to get under the skin of what was going on there. Was it just that people decided that they did not want to vote?

Stephen Kerr: When you say that the number was "significantly lower", do you have a metric to go with that?

Craig Westwood: I do have a number on that. If you could bear with me I will find it for you.

We want to understand whether the difference was because people just decided that they did not want to vote, or they found that they did have an eligible form of ID after all—which would be great, because they could then use it at a future election—or whether it was something else.

I am afraid that I cannot find that number.

Stephen Kerr: Perhaps they were innovative adopters who wanted to see what the process would look like, because there is curiosity about it all as well.

Craig Westwood: Yes, exactly.

Andy O'Neill: I will build on what Craig Westwood has said, and add my Scottish experience. There have not been nationwide elections in Scotland since May 2022, so the need for voter authority certificates is not there at the moment. I observed in England, and also in Rutherglen and Hamilton West, in the recall petition and the subsequent by-election. Scottish electoral registration officers who issue VACs have seen very little take-up. However, when we watch people coming into the sign-in station or the polling station, they have their ID with them. In Rutherglen, it was invariably a driving licence or a bus pass—that is, a national entitlement card. For some odd reason, in England we saw lots of passports, but not in Rutherglen. That is just one anecdote.

Craig Westwood: The commission has been very public in raising concerns about the speed at which voter ID was introduced for the elections in May this year. We worked solidly through a four-month period to ensure that we were raising public awareness and taking advantage of any potential channel.

Stephen Kerr: Do you have that metric on the take up? If you do not, you could let us know in writing.

Craig Westwood: I could let you know. I just want to ensure that I give the committee a specific figure.

Stephen Kerr: Yes, sure.

Craig Westwood: It was less than half of the 85,000 who applied.

Stephen Kerr: It is just all interesting information. It is very important that people do not feel put off voting because they have to show voter ID.

Craig Westwood: On the general election, and in relation to audiences in Scotland in particular, one of the virtues of the present situation is that we have time, which we did not have in May this year. I reassure the committee that, even though we do not know when the next general election will happen, we are working on it now, in the lead-up to it, to ensure that we collaborate with electoral registration officers. We know that they are already sending out communications to voters to raise awareness and to process voter authority certificate applications where they can be encouraged and where they are needed.

We are also working with civil society, including with charities that we know have a reach into communities that are at risk, and where we could not possibly hope to have detailed engagement. That work is to get the message into the hands of the right people, and to help them to understand the requirement and how to go through the application process if they need to.

The Convener: Evelyn Tweed, can I come to you?

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I do not have any questions on that, convener.

The Convener: Do you want to lead off on the next part or on question 6?

Evelyn Tweed: No, I want to ask question 8.

The Convener: That is fine.

We were going to look at the support that is provided to political parties. As I said, the kick-off on 1 November caused a marvellous rush all around here, with regard to indications and so on. How is your interaction going with political parties at party level and with individual candidates? Last time, we discussed the work that you do after events to reach out to candidates on their experience. Who would like to comment on that? Craig, it is going to fall to you again.

Craig Westwood: We want as much of our regulatory activity as possible to fall into the support rather than the enforcement category. If we could get to a point where we do not have to do any enforcement for infringements, that would be a very happy place to be in. We want to really lean into that work and support parties, candidates and the non-party campaign audience, to ensure that they understand, as clearly as possible, the requirements that are placed on them to comply with the rules, as the vast majority of them want to do, and to ensure they can just get on with campaigning.

The most important thing for us is to ensure that campaigning can happen, including on the doorstep, through physical events and online. A lot of people have concerns about online campaigning, but we think that online campaigning is a good thing. It is a great way of reaching voters and of having a two-way conversation with people that is not just about broadcasting political views. We want to ensure that that can happen, but, of course, that needs to happen in a way that instils confidence in everybody. We want to ensure that campaigning is done in a way that clearly communicates to voters the policies of candidates and parties, and we want to ensure that people can have confidence in the way in which it is done.

10:00

The Convener: Are you starting to identify any areas in which you might have concerns about implementation—as you say, leaning in to ensure that there are no breaches? Are you getting any indicative red lights on the dashboard about specific areas in which there might be challenges?

Craig Westwood: I will highlight two examples. One is political finance. We know that the public has significant concerns about the transparency of political finance. Actually, in this country, we have one of the most transparent regimes in the world, and we can be incredibly proud of that. However, that does not necessarily communicate through to the public. Indeed, if you survey the public and test the level of understanding, you will see that, even among people who understand the transparency that exists, their confidence does not increase.

There is something else going on, which is about the overall system and confidence in political campaigning. We know that there is a question around truth in campaigning. I stress that we are not a truth commission, and we never want to be. There needs to be space for free and frank political debate, but there is a question around parties, candidates and campaigners and how they conduct debate in order to instil confidence.

There are particular parts of political finance in which we would like to see changes. For example, there are concerns about foreign money coming into UK politics. We would like things such as know-your-donor principles around money laundering, which exist in other parts of finance law, to be introduced into political finance campaigning.

The other example that I will briefly highlight is artificial intelligence, which is the topic du jour in lots of different worlds. Electoral campaigning is quite often brought up as a key example, because people can see that it is at the bleeding edge of people's trust in what they can see and what they read. We are looking at that in significant detail. It is not new to us, in many ways, because misleading information and disinformation in campaigning happens and has happened for hundreds of years; we are just talking about a different mechanism of delivery.

Artificial intelligence can be incredibly positive in campaigning and elections in terms of, again, routes to understanding voters and targeting people with specific information that is relevant to them. Indeed, our organisation can also use it to support us in undertaking some of our processes.

The Convener: Do you have a timescale for looking at AI? I am conscious that you have mentioned the potential of a general election next year and, clearly, there will not be a finalised position on that. Do you have a timescale for it, so that we can take note and come back to you on it?

Craig Westwood: There is no fixed timescale for it, as it is a constantly evolving environment. What we are doing is ensuring that we are prepared with the right processes to support an immediate reaction if something was put out that was of significant concern. The main thing that is

of concern is a deepfake—either video or audio—of a senior politician saying something controversial immediately before a poll. In that situation, we need to ensure that we, with other regulators—we have very strong relationships with the other regulators that have linked functions across elections—can act either independently or collectively to do what we can to ensure that the public is aware of what is happening.

Of course, any campaigning material that is a deepfake will now have to have an imprint on it. That is a really important step, because, even if somebody cannot necessarily believe or understand the message that they see in campaign material, they will at least know who posted it.

Stephen Kerr: It is not necessarily the stuff that carries an imprint that is the problem, though, is it? The purveyors of deepfakery will not be in the business of putting on imprints. The concern is that AI can be used not necessarily by good actors—rather, by very bad actors. There are quite a few of them online, and they certainly are not limited to the geography of the United Kingdom.

Craig Westwood: Yes, that is absolutely right. We have been cognisant in all our discussions around AI that the target of the work, from our perspective, is unlikely to be registered parties and key candidates; it is much more likely to be people who are looking to disrupt, including internationally.

The issue with the imprint is that, because it is an absolute requirement, we can talk to social media companies about it—for example, if something does not carry an imprint, whether they take something down does not involve a subjective judgment. It is a factual thing; either it has an imprint or it does not, so it is a clear statement of whether something falls within the legal requirements.

Stephen Kerr: I am concerned that there is a disconnect in the public's mind between the election or party-political material that they receive and party finance. A lot of the electorate think that they pay for that material. Have you come across that view?

Craig Westwood: I have not come across that in our survey work as a key public concern.

Stephen Kerr: Have you asked specifically about it? A number of colleagues put "not paid for by the taxpayer" on their materials, which points to the fact that some people think that the financing of political parties is somehow part of their tax burden.

Craig Westwood: That is an interesting point, but I have not seen that come through in our survey work.

Andy O'Neill: Nothing has come through on that in our survey work, but it is true that there is public money for political party policy development. We administer a policy development grant process that gives out money for those who have groups in the UK Parliament.

Stephen Kerr: Is that in addition to Short money?

Andy O'Neill: Yes, it is in addition to Short money and Cranborne money.

Stephen Kerr: Short money should obviously not be used for that kind of party political purpose.

Andy O'Neill: Indeed, but this is specifically about parties that are not in Government being able to develop policies so that they can be a more effective part of the interactions in the democratic political discourse.

At the end of campaigns, candidates occasionally ask the returning officer, "How do I claim my expenses?"

Stephen Kerr: Good luck with that.

Andy O'Neill: Indeed—good luck with that. The point is that it is not unknown for people who are standing to think that things are paid for when they are not.

The Convener: I am doing that typical convener thing of being conscious of time, because I want to raise both the subjective and objective questions about intimidation of candidates, particularly of unsuccessful candidates. Can you give us any insight into the returns that you have had about people's experience of intimidation?

Craig Westwood: That issue is very much at the front of our minds in relation to preserving the landscape of open, transparent and fair campaigning. We know from our survey work at the most recent elections in Scotland that 44 per cent of candidates reported problems with threats, abuse or intimidation. That is an alarming and concerning figure. It is not the highest figure in the UK—the figure in Northern Ireland is much more troubling—but we do not take it lightly at all. We have only a part to play in that puzzle, but we want to play it very seriously. We have been convening discussions on the topic with parties, the police and all partners in elections to try and understand how we can all lean in to support a different, more respectful type of campaigning.

The Convener: Are we getting any closer to that understanding or are we still some distance from being able to define and comprehend the situation? Where are we on that journey?

Craig Westwood: There are an incredible number of moving parts in this issue. More widely, there is a lot of change in society and in people's ability to comment on and respond to things. A lot of that is good, because it is about debate, but we need to ensure that people understand the impact of their activity.

To go back to an earlier comment, a lot of this is not about party or candidate activity, although some of it might be, at the fringes. Mostly, it involves people who are outside politics commenting on or acting into the political process. Impacting on that problem will inevitably be a relatively long journey.

The most confidence-giving thing is that those conversations are happening, and we convene those when we can.

Evelyn Tweed: I am interested in the future work that you talked about on intimidation, specifically in relation to women. Women get more abuse—and we get more sexist abuse—whether one is a candidate or a politician. How will you look at gender in that specific way, and do you work with organisations such as Engender, Elect Her and Women 50:50?

Craig Westwood: We are not working with those organisations specifically. We are looking across the board at intimidation, whether it is based on gender, ethnic background, sexuality or any other protected characteristic, where we know that people are either prevented from participating because of intimidation or are intimidated during the process. We are working across the board to understand what the problem is and who are the partners that we need to work with—we are working with the Jo Cox Foundation at the moment, for example—to make sure that we can have an impact.

There is a limited role that we can play, but we want to make sure that we are maximising our contribution to the debate, particularly in convening the debate, because sometimes it is hard for others to draw that conversation out. As an independent and trusted body, we are often in a unique position to create a safe space for some of those conversations and to try to take the politics out of it and see something as a collective problem that we need to work to address.

Andy O'Neill: We work with Police Scotland throughout the year, and one thing that we have achieved is ensuring that it always has briefing notes for candidates in the briefing packs that they get from returning officers and suchlike. There is a point of contact locally for anyone who needs to contact Police Scotland, and Police Scotland will do briefings when asked. It is particularly aware of the issue and is proactively trying to deal with it when it comes up.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Good morning. I want to ask about how the commission looked at raising awareness among voters in certain groups. What work has been undertaken and what is

planned to assist voters to better understand the electoral system in Scotland, especially with regard to the single transferable vote?

Craig Westwood: That is an area of work that we spend huge amounts of time focusing on. We have teams in Edinburgh and London dedicated to working with voters and raising awareness, and there are a lot of different parts to that.

There is all of the work that we do in the lead-up to an election, when the hot lamp turns specifically to the topic of the election itself. We do full public awareness campaigns to raise awareness of the fact that the poll is happening and the various processes that people need to comply with in order to be able to participate, which involves deadlines for registering, the voter authority certificate and the moving parts around absent votes, for example.

Outside the poll, we do increasing amounts of education work to raise awareness, particularly among young people. We have piloted that work first in Scotland, because of the younger franchise, and we have been able to draw on the lessons experienced by our team here for our work with attainers and young voters in Wales and across the rest of the UK, to make sure that they understand the process that they are now able to participate in.

That work can take place in schools—we have education resources that citizenship teachers or any other interested educator can deliver in the classroom—and those resources can also be used in all sorts of other educational settings, including informal ones. Alternatively, young people can navigate those resources themselves. The material includes the basic bits of the process and the moving parts of who you are voting for, why it matters and the need to get registered.

It also covers the voting process itself. We are very aware that the single transferable vote is a process that offers the voter more choice and more options, which is a great thing, but it is less clear to understand, so we want to make sure that we are doing as much as we can to help voters to understand it. We have most recently created some new resources in the form of short videos that explain the voting process, which we use on social media and in the education resources, and our education partners can use them as well. They are using them with their audiences to help them to have a kind of an easy guide through the process and understand how it works.

Annie Wells: What work do you do to support specific groups who face barriers to participation in electoral events, and what further work is planned to help those individuals overcome such barriers?

Craig Westwood: The accuracy and completeness study that we do every three or four years is a key evidence base that enables us to understand the electoral register—who is on it, who is not and who we need to target. That is the starting point in understanding the demographics around who is not registered.

10:15

The study tells us whether someone is unemployed, is of lower educational attainment, is living in rented accommodation, is in certain minority groups, is a younger person and so on. Those are all demographic groups in which we need to work even harder to get people to register.

We think about registration as the first step on the ladder—you cannot pass "Go" if you are not registered—but, beyond that, we do additional research to understand where there are distinct audiences that have issues with other parts of the process.

Voter ID is where I can give you the best example of that work. Both we and the UK Government did separate research to understand the situation with the ownership of all of the eligible forms of ID, of which there is a long list, and we found that 4 per cent of people do not have some form of voter ID. That demographic overlaps by quite a margin with those who are unregistered. However, there are a couple of areas in which there is a distinct difference. For example, if a person is older, they are more likely to be registered to vote than the average, and they are more likely to vote. However, they are less likely to own ID, which is very interesting. Among members of the older generations—particularly those aged over 75 or 85—have a strong sense of civic duty with regard to voting, but those audiences do not have ID. So, we ended up partnering with organisations that we have not worked with before, such as Age UK, with whom we have been working across the country to ensure that we give information to that audience that the experts know will work with them. We want to engage with them and help them to understand.

Similarly, we have worked with charities for disabled people—particularly those with learning disabilities and visual impairments—so that we talk to that audience in the right format, whether that is easy read, Braille or British Sign Language. We use all of those formats to ensure that we are talking to people in a voice that they understand and that will benefit them in the easiest way.

Andy O'Neill: You asked a question about improving people's understanding of STV and so on. I will answer that, because it is a particularly Scottish thing. You are quite right: the levels of understanding of the single transferable vote for council elections are probably lower than the

levels of understanding of the other two electoral systems that we use. That is reflected in the rejected rates. The rejected rate last year was 1.85 per cent, which was slightly lower than the figure for 2017 but compares poorly with the 0.4 per cent rate for Scottish Parliament elections, so we are aware that people do not quite understand it. Of course, Bob Doris, who used to be the convener of this committee, has been very active in that area.

In the Canal ward in Glasgow, the rejected rate was 5.6 per cent. There are high rejected rates in quite a lot of areas of high deprivation and high unemployment—not only in Glasgow, but in other places, such as West Dunbartonshire and North Lanarkshire. It also happens in wards in which parties stand more than one candidate in the same ward. That can result in people putting in two Xs, three Xs or two 1s, which we saw back in 2022.

Looking to the 2027 election, we are working with the Electoral Management Board for Scotland and the electoral returning officers to revise all of the guidance. We will look at not only what the returning officers do, but also the voting materials, which Craig Westwood and his colleagues deliver, to ensure that they are explained.

Something happens between the script when the presiding officer says, "It is STV, so you vote by numbers" and the voting booth. Even though there is a poster in the booth that tells people what to do, something happens there, so we want to find out what it is and solve the problem.

We are also looking for parties' help in all of that, because they are the ones that need voters—not us. That could be done through scripts for their volunteers, so that they can get it right, because I have anecdotally heard some absolute car-crash descriptions of how people should vote in the STV system. That is all in the works leading to May 2027.

Annie Wells: Perfect. I am happy with those answers.

Stephen Kerr: May I ask a question, convener?

The Convener: Is it short?

Stephen Kerr: Yes, it is short. Andy O'Neill, what are you going to do about the alphabet? You know what I am talking about, right?

Andy O'Neill: Yes—you are talking about Robson rotation or whatever. The Scottish Government asked us to look at that some time ago, and we did some research into it. One thing we would always say is that, if you are going to play with the ballot paper, make sure that you check that what you are doing will not have any unintended consequences, or even that it actually does what you are trying to do.

A few years ago now, we did some work and I think that the conclusions were that—apologies for my memory—from the administrator's point of view, it was doable.

We tested it with voters and they seemed to be content with their ability to use the ballot paper. Concerns were expressed, particularly by the accessibility groups, that it would disadvantage their communities. Ultimately, the Scottish Government has chosen not to do anything at this time.

You should really address the question to George Adam rather than me.

Stephen Kerr: I have one other quick question. You said that you feel that the single transferable vote system is the one system that we have the biggest challenge with. I am not entirely sure about that, frankly, because I think that it is one thing to understand how you vote but another thing to understand what the calculation of the vote means. Frankly, I do not think that d'Hondt is understood even in this place. What more can be done to educate us all about the mysteries of d'Hondt?

Andy O'Neill: It is modified d'Hondt in Scotland. I suppose that, from the Electoral Commission's point of view, we do not choose the electoral systems. That is your job. We merely have to explain them.

There are many different levels, and Craig Westwood might want to say something about that afterwards. There is how to fill in the ballot paper. If you want to understand how modified d'Hondt works and the relationship between the constituency and the list, it is on our website, and we will direct you to it. The vast majority of people do not want or need that. We are more concerned about delivering the actual vote.

Stephen Kerr: I just think that it is important that people understand how their vote will be used to calculate how the Parliament is made up, frankly. I take your point that it is on your website, but I wonder whether we need to do a bit more to help the Scottish voting public know what it all means.

Andy O'Neill: To be fair, we provide more information than just what is on our website; I should not underplay what we do. Ever since we have existed, we have produced a household leaflet that explains the Scottish Parliament electoral system every time a vote comes around. We write to folk about that. We also do briefings for anyone who asks, but people—

Stephen Kerr: You are fundamentally blaming the politicians for choosing the system.

Andy O'Neill: In a sense, it is our job to explain stuff.

The Convener: It is a different element of the process, I think, which is good.

I want to come in on the question about young people and a phrase that is used in the annual report at page 63, in the section that talks specifically about Scotland. On on-going and future work, you say:

"We will work to further embed democratic education in schools and youth work settings by supporting youth workers, teachers of PSE (Personal and Social Education) and other subjects to use our resources".

Do you have a consideration or assessment of how well embedded democratic education is in schools?

Craig Westwood: Our drive is just to just deliver more of it. We are not making an assessment of the education system; we are just looking at driving take-up. We have found that there is an incredible appetite among teachers for the materials and to be doing more of this work in classrooms, particularly because there is a sensitivity about bringing politics into the classroom. Teachers want to be confident that they are doing it in a way that is right and that keeps them within the bounds of what they should and should not say. Having a set of resources that has the stamp of approval of the Electoral Commission as an independent body gives them the confidence that they can follow those, stay within the right rules and not have any problems with parents. For us, it is just about getting more teachers to take up the subject and our delivering more content through it. We started relatively small just by thinking about the process, but we are thinking about what more we can do within politics to provide that independent voice.

The Convener: I am sorry to cut you off, but what do you see as your role—if you see yourself as having a role—in leading the discussion on how to increase the embedding of the democratic process within education? You spoke about bringing groups together in safe spaces, although not with the same language with regard to schools. Do you see yourselves as having a role in that?

Craig Westwood: We can advocate for that being part of the curriculum. We have no expertise in balancing all the different issues that have a part to play in the curriculum. An incredible number of things can be delivered through the education system, and we cannot provide an assessment of the balance of that, but we can advocate. We advocate strongly for democratic education to be part of that, and for the value that that will add to young people as citizens for the rest of their lives.

The Convener: That is helpful. Thank you.

Susan Bruce: There was good take-up during the welcome to your vote week. We have been working with schools and other organisations such as youth groups, guides and scouts to ensure that as many avenues as possible are open to young people to get information on how to vote and exercise their franchise—without influencing them on their choices, obviously.

The Convener: Very subjectively, I can say that, particularly through girl guides and cadets, young people have wanted to talk to me about democracy in the widest sense. It is not just about schools, which is important.

Susan Bruce: Yes.

Andy O'Neill: I think the point that Craig Westwood was making is that the products that we produce and that others can use have our badge, so people feel confident about using them. That is why Catherine Heggie, who is sitting behind me, was at the Modern Studies Association conference at the weekend. We get out there and talk to people, and we then give them the tools to do the job.

The Convener: I appreciate that, and it is powerful that you are advocates for democracy education. That is a helpful role.

I will bring in Stephen Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: The biggest concern for me personally is the completeness and accuracy of the registers. There are lots of stand-out questions on that, particularly about Scotland. For context for those who are watching, I will share something on completeness. A report that you have produced shows that the major errors total in Scotland in 2022 was 18.5 per cent, which was up from 16.5 per cent in 2018. What the watching public might be interested in is the comparison with Great Britain, where the figure is at 13.4 per cent for major errors—we are at 18.5 per cent. That obviously requires explanation. On minor errors—again for context—the number in Scotland is 13.4 per cent, and across Great Britain it is 8.6 per cent.

Something different is happening in Scotland and it seems to be getting worse over time. Why?

Craig Westwood: That study highlights that up to 1 million people who could be registered are not registered in Scotland, which is in the context of an overall figure of around 8 million in the whole of the UK. That is another thing that we are very concerned about. The figure is relatively static but is obviously growing as the population grows. However, registration of voters is an on-going challenge for us and for electoral registration officers across local authorities. Fundamentally, the situation is not going to improve significantly without reform.

In terms of the detail, there are differences between different parts of the UK. The figures fluctuate. There are always lessons to be learned, so we work with all returning officers and electoral registration officers to understand the situation, particularly where best practice is delivering strong registration, so that others can learn from that. However, our main focus is on raising the case for reform of registration, because that is the only thing that will deliver systematic change and ensure that people who could have a vote can get on the electoral register. That will mean that, the day before polling day, if someone decides that there is an issue that they feel strongly about and that they want to cast their vote, they can do so.

We have done work on recommendations for the changes that need to be made. They can be made at devolved or reserved level and are around the use of public data—existing data sets that the public sector already holds—to get people on the electoral registers in ways that are fully secure and that people can have confidence in. That could be automated, which would, in effect, involve saying to the citizen, "It looks like you're not on the electoral register—would you like to be on it?" Alternatively, it could happen in an automatic way, by just putting people on the electoral register. We think that fundamental change can happen there, and that it is absolutely deliverable.

10:30

Stephen Kerr: I hear all of that loud and clear, and I appreciate it, but it does not answer my question. Why is there a lag between what is happening in the rest of Great Britain—it is a GB number that we are quoting—and what is happening in Scotland? That concerns me deeply. I do not know what the total estimated voting public is in Scotland, but it must be about 3.5 million. Are we saying that 1 million of 3.5 million are not registered? That is extraordinary.

Craig Westwood: Some of the fall is within the margin of error of the survey. We need to be cautious about looking at it too analytically. However, we take it really seriously. We are talking to electoral registration officers. We know that there is an issue in Scotland with getting returns to correspondence—from households and from voters. There is an issue about getting people just to respond to the electoral communications.

Stephen Kerr: Why do you think that is? What is your analysis? I suppose that we could draw a parallel with the census return, which was virtually catastrophic in Scotland compared with the rest of the UK.

Andy O'Neill: You make an interesting point, because there have been some difficulties in getting returns back in the canvass. We are not sure why that is. We are trying to work the problem and discover the reason. England and Wales get 10 per cent more tranche 2 returns—to use a technical term—for the canvass than we get in Scotland. We are not sure why, but we are working with colleagues in England to understand their processes, in order to see whether our colleagues in electoral registration in Scotland are doing something different.

All that Craig Westwood has said is very valid. It is important to know that the Scottish Government is very supportive of the report that we have produced. We are already talking to it, and we are going to see the minister next week. The electoral registration officers and the Electoral Management Board for Scotland are very concerned about the issue. It is on the agenda and is not going to go away.

Stephen Kerr: Do we have a particular challenge in getting any specific group to come on to the register? We have not even begun to talk about accuracy yet—we seem to have a specific challenge with that as well. I take Craig Westwood's point about not reading too much into one data set, but that is the data that we have. What groups do we have to work particularly hard with to get to the register?

Craig Westwood: When it comes to the scale of the problem in registration, the main challenge is around unemployed people, people of lower educational attainment, younger people and people who are in rented accommodation and are moving frequently, so that we are constantly chasing them and trying to get them to register.

Another challenge in this, which we find from a different piece of research, is around the reasons why people are not registered. To support our public awareness campaigns and make sure that we target them effectively, we occasionally do research to understand the barriers to registration. Over the past six or seven years since we last carried out our study, the reasons have moved from being more incidental, operational and practical—for example, people saying, "Oh, I've just moved house," or, "Oh, I didn't realise I was now eligible"—to being much more attitudinal. People are now saying, "I don't feel my vote has an impact", "I don't trust politicians," or, "Nothing is ever going to change". Those more emotive responses are much harder to tackle.

That speaks to the value and importance of our educational work but also makes us think, when we do our campaign work ahead of an election, about how to message to people to help them to understand that they need to register to vote. For the past four or five years, our registration

campaign has focused on the ease of the process. It has said to people, "It only takes five minutes." We knew that one of the drivers was people saying, "Oh, it's a bureaucratic process. It's going to take ages. I can't be bothered," so we have said, "Actually, it does only take five minutes, genuinely. Why don't you find the time to do it while the washing machine's on?"

Now, however, we are developing a new campaign, which will first be rolled out at the scheduled May elections next year, which is focused much more on the emotive message around voting—why people should vote, the importance of it and the civic pride aspect of being registered and voting. We feel that that is more likely to break down the barrier to registering.

Stephen Kerr: What is the Scottish dimension to all of that, particularly the attitudinal stuff?

Craig Westwood: There are small variations, but we do all of that testing fully across the UK so that we can be confident that we are testing in each market where we will do a campaign.

Stephen Kerr: Do you have any specific geographic insight into the Scottish national position?

Craig Westwood: I could provide that. I do not have it here, but I could provide it afterwards.

Dame Susan Bruce: In the immediacy of an electoral event, our campaigning in this respect rises along with EROs and ROs. Ahead of the council elections in Scotland in 2022, something in the region of 70,000 additional people came on to the register. It is about the relevance of the campaign ahead of an electoral event. We need to time our work to get people's peak interest, as it were. However, as Craig Westwood said, people need to remember that, if they move or something else happens, they will need to come back on to the register. It is a constant piece of work that needs to be attended to.

Stephen Kerr: Can you comment on the accuracy issue? Again, and for information purposes and context, when an individual who is on the register no longer lives at the address, accuracy is at 9.7 per cent in Scotland. That figure is pretty much the same across the United Kingdom, is it not?

Craig Westwood: The accuracy figure contains all sorts of different details. There could be a major error, such as a name being wrong, which might be because somebody has married and changed their name but has not updated it, to smaller differences around, say, a middle name being wrong or a surname being misspelled. There is quite a bit of detail in the accuracy figure. It is not that it does not matter, but it is not necessarily going to prevent somebody from casting their vote.

It is much more complex than the black or white aspect when somebody is or is not on the register, which is what is represented in the accuracy figure.

All of this is about the electoral community understanding what is working best in terms of process and best practice, and making sure that we play a role in sharing that best practice, as well as all of the other mechanisms that exist within the administrative community.

The Convener: I know that Ivan McKee would like to come in, but can you just clarify that the inaccurate register entries are a subset of those that are not correctly registered, rather than in addition to that?

Craig Westwood: Yes.

Ivan McKee: I am just trying to get my head around the numbers, so excuse me if we do a wee bit of a dive into them. First, I would like to understand how you arrive at those percentage numbers. Is that a sample survey that you do, and then you project from that? How is that survey conducted?

Craig Westwood: Yes. It is the biggest piece of research that we do, which is why we do it only every few years. The most recent one cost £0.75 million, because we take it incredibly seriously, and we have to get detailed coverage across the UK to make sure that we understand things properly.

The survey takes the December registers, particularly in the year that we are looking at—there is a point at which we press pause on the registers and all the authorities submit them to us—and compares that against census information. Effectively, the company that we employ to do the work then goes out and does telephone and house-to-house contact, where appropriate in different areas, to test that information and to find who is actually living at an address and who is eligible, relative to the data that is on the system. Within that, we make sure that we are getting full coverage geographically but also across different demographics to get as accurate a picture as we possibly can.

Ivan McKee: You are effectively comparing that with the census data to understand what the gap is and then drilling down to verify it. I suppose that, at the macro level, you kind of know what both those numbers are. You know the number of total registered voters and you know the census number, so you know what the gap is at the macro level.

Craig Westwood: Yes. The unknown in all this is, of course, the electorate figure, or a real understanding of all the people out there who might be registered. That is why, with some of the

figures that we report in the survey, you will get a boundary, because, working with statistician experts, we need to take a best guess about the changes in the electorate.

Ivan McKee: I just want to be clear on that. Do you know what the electoral roll is?

Craig Westwood: Yes. We know who is on it and who is registered. However, we do not hold the eligibility data. It is about understanding the data that comes from other sources, such as attainers, that shows the number of people who have become eligible.

Ivan McKee: Okay. We need to take that back to the macro level. I am sorry to drill into this, but it is important to do so, because that big 1 million number is really scary. Scotland's population is about 5.5 million, give or take. If you look back to the Scottish Parliament election in 2021, the electorate was just shy of 4.3 million. If you exclude under-16s—I think that that would about 900,000—you are then talking about a gap of around 200,000 to 300,000. There will be other groups in that figure that, even in a Scottish Parliament election I would imagine, would not necessarily be eligible to vote, although their numbers probably would not be significant—I do not know the numbers for that. However, that is clearly a long way from the 650,000 to 1 million-plus figure that is mentioned in your report. I am struggling to reconcile that because, if you add the number on the electoral register in 2021 and the figure of up to 1 million-plus and take account of the under-16s, you have a Scottish population that is pushing 6.5 million.

Craig Westwood: We estimate that 19 per cent of the eligible population is missing from the electoral register.

Ivan McKee: But do you understand what I am saying in terms of the big picture numbers?

Craig Westwood: Yes.

Dame Susan Bruce: Yes.

Ivan McKee: Are you able to cast any light on that?

Craig Westwood: Not here today, but we can certainly go away, discuss the issue with colleagues and come back to you.

Ivan McKee: It seems like an obvious thing to check, if you do not mind my saying so.

Dame Susan Bruce: Yes.

The Convener: Are you satisfied now?

Ivan McKee: I am not, but—

The Convener: I know, but the Electoral Commission has made an offer to come back with a better estimation, which we will need.

Ivan McKee: Stephen Kerr might want to comment as well.

Stephen Kerr: Ivan has just prompted a question in my head about—

The Convener: We are posing that the range of 650,000 to 1 million is quite broad when that is compared with the more obviously available figures—we know who is registered, for example—that we have. We have focused on the latter figure, but that is a big range. If we could get some explanation as to why that category is used or, indeed, whether steps could be taken to make the figure more accurate, that would be helpful.

Stephen Kerr: Sorry, convener, but if 20 per cent of the potential electorate is missing off the registers, what does that mean for the Boundary Commission for Scotland's work on equalising constituencies? It will use the same data set. So, straight away, there are in-built errors that, I presume, will impact both urban and rural areas.

Ivan McKee: The figures will be widely differential, because the groups that will be most impacted will be concentrated in certain areas.

Stephen Kerr: Yes, that is right.

The Convener: We will certainly consider that in our next discussion.

Stephen Kerr: That is a real concern in terms of our—

The Convener: Yes, in essence, the same data is taken when the register shuts at specific dates. It must be the fact that people who are eligible to be on the register but were not on it at that date are not part of the calculation that is made, including for other purposes such as the one that you mentioned.

Stephen Kerr: Is this the significant challenge to the resilience of our electoral system that Dame Susan Bruce referred to in her opening remarks? It is a significant challenge, to my mind. We have an electoral system in a democracy in which one in five of the potential voters is not even on the register, let alone voting. That is very alarming for Scotland's democracy.

Ivan McKee: Maybe—if those numbers are correct.

Stephen Kerr: If those numbers are correct.

The Convener: Subject to that.

Ivan McKee: We do not know—

Stephen Kerr: Yes—

The Convener: Committee, I will turn back to the panel—this is an evidence session. Would you like to comment on that, Dame Susan, or are you satisfied that you can respond to us, to assist us?

You can see where our challenge is on the figures and the statistics.

Dame Susan Bruce: Yes, absolutely. We will provide written information to you on how the figures have been arrived at. If that points to our needing to ask more questions, we will do that. We can certainly submit something in writing.

The Convener: That is very helpful.

Ivan McKee: I will move on from that issue. You expressed a desire to have a process that joins up different data sets and enables people to register at every opportunity. I think that you talked about UK legislation in that regard. Is any of that devolved? Is there anything that the Scottish Government or, indeed, local authorities, can do to assist in that process?

Craig Westwood: Absolutely. The kind of changes that we are talking about could be progressed at a devolved level. We are in more advanced discussions in Wales about the desire to reform registration, but conversations are happening here as well.

Ivan McKee: What is the Scottish Government's attitude to that, and is there anything that we, as a committee, can do to encourage progress?

10:45

Andy O'Neill: We sent the report to the convener and to the minister at the same time, before it came out. We had a very positive response from George Adam, and we are seeing him next week about it. Civil servants are talking to us, EROs, the EMB and their open Government people. They are particularly keen on trying to use data sets that the Scottish Government has control over, for want of a better phrase. Examples of opportunities to register are when you apply for a driving licence or a passport. Those are reserved matters. However, if you are applying for a national entitlement card or a bus pass, the Scottish Government has responsibility for that.

I have a national entitlement card, but I am registered. I am at the other end of the age spectrum, but you are now giving free bus passes to younger people. Generally, a lot less of that cohort is registered, so we hope that the opportunity for them to register when they apply for a bus pass can be brought on stream.

The Convener: That is a potential vehicle for the change that is coming along in the near future. Good.

As members have no further questions, I thank Dame Susan and our other guests for their contribution today. It has been incredibly helpful, as you will have noted from the discussions that have gone on. We know where you are and we might well correspond seeking further information from you. I know that we have requested specific information but, if there is anything that you would like us to be aware of in the report that we have not managed to cover, please feel free to contact us. Thank you for your attendance today.

Dame Susan Bruce: Thank you very much for the opportunity.

The Convener: I will now move the session into private.

10:46

Meeting continued in private until 11:28.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.