



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 28 May 2024

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Tuesday 28 May 2024

CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	1
COUNCILLORS' REMUNERATION AND EXPENSES (RECOMMENDATIONS)	2

LOCAL GOVERNMENT, HOUSING AND PLANNING COMMITTEE
17th Meeting 2024, Session 6

CONVENER

*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

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

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

*Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con)

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Peter Argyle (Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee)

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Rosie Docherty (Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee)

Brianna Fletcher (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Councillor Steven Heddle (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Angela Leitch (Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee)

Martin McElroy (Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee)

Councillor Shona Morrison (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Laura Simpson (Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Euan Donald

LOCATION

The Sir Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament
**Local Government, Housing and
Planning Committee**

Tuesday 28 May 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:02]

**Decision on Taking Business in
Private**

The Convener (Ariane Burgess): Good morning and welcome to the 17th meeting in 2024 of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. Please note that apologies have been received from Mark Griffin and Stephanie Callaghan. I welcome Colin Beattie, who is attending as a substitute for Stephanie. I remind all members and witnesses to ensure that their electronic devices are on silent and that all notifications are turned off during the meeting.

The first item on our agenda is to decide whether to take item 3 in private. Do members agree?

Members *indicated agreement.*

**Councillors' Remuneration and
Expenses (Recommendations)**

09:03

The Convener: The next item on our agenda is to take evidence on the Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee's recommendations for councillors' remuneration and expenses from Angela Leitch, who is the committee's convener, and from Peter Argyle, Rosie Docherty, Martin McElroy and Laura Simpson, who are all members of the committee, which is otherwise known as SLARC. I welcome the witnesses to the meeting and invite Angela Leitch to make a short opening statement.

Angela Leitch (Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee): Thank you. Good morning, everyone. We are very pleased to be here.

We are aware that the committee has previously considered barriers to elected office on a number of occasions. You will know that SLARC was reconstituted in April of last year, following work by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and this committee. We started our work very much on the basis that we wanted to make sure that we had a strong evidence base. My colleagues here all led different parts of the programme to make sure that we could respond to the questions that our remit asked us with relevant and robust evidence that would stand up to scrutiny.

To give you an idea of the process that we undertook, the three parts of the evidence were, first, to undertake a survey of all 1,200 local authority councillors. We had a return rate of 64 per cent, which was significant and statistically reliable. In addition to answering questions, the elected members also provided us with a range of comments and free text that we have relied on quite heavily in drawing our conclusions. Peter Argyle and Martin McElroy led on that part of the process with colleagues from the Improvement Service.

We took evidence from a number of different bodies. We relied on feedback from the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, the Society of Local Authority Lawyers and Administrators, directors of finance, a range of public bodies, people in civic society and academia.

We also undertook a survey of the governance arrangements in local authorities. Laura Simpson led on that part of the report. That is important evidence that we have drawn on in putting forward our conclusions.

Finally, we met councils face to face. We had about 40 meetings with different councils covering the different bandings that are applicable to councillors' pay and we drew on those in putting forward our findings.

The findings, very briefly, are that the demographic make-up of Scotland's councillors does not match the general population. There is underrepresentation particularly of women, young people and people with a disability. More than half of councillors who completed our survey reported spending more than 26 hours on formal council duties, but the variation was enormous. I am sure that we will come to that later on.

The other findings were mainly that social media create more casework—that question was particularly asked in the remit—and that two thirds of the councillors had experienced online abuse or personal criticism. Again, we took account of that in our recommendations.

For councillors who are part of the administration, particularly council leaders, the role has definitely become more complex. That was another one of the questions that our remit asked: whether, over the years, the roles of elected members have become more complex. We have concluded that, yes, they have. In that respect we drew on overview reports from Audit Scotland in particular, and a variety of other published reports to demonstrate the complexity of the work that councils and, therefore, councillors undertake.

We have set out our recommendations and they are before you in the reports that you have been given. We are happy to take any questions. My final point is, though, that the last SLARC review was in 2010-11. Some of our recommendations, particularly on banding, are similar to the contents of the 2011 report. None of that report was adopted, so it has been well over a decade since the issue of remuneration for councillors, this sphere of government, has been considered. I will pause there.

The Convener: That is super. Thanks so much for that overview. Certainly, it was helpful to hear the breadth and depth of the work that you did and where you went to find the evidence of the situation that we face. We have a number of areas that we want to explore and I will begin with councillor workload and responsibility. However, before I do, I want to declare an interest: I have a brother who is a serving councillor. I just want to get that on the record.

There is an assumption in public life that being an MP or an MSP is a full-time job. I am interested to understand why a local councillor job is not considered full time, when the demands on councillors are, at times, at least on par with demands on parliamentarians.

Angela Leitch: We looked at the differences between MPs or MSPs and elected council members, as well as the similarities. We are recommending that the remuneration that is paid to councillors should be in recognition of the role that they undertake, rather than being focused particularly on the hours that are worked. It is true to say, however—Peter and Martin may want to add to this—that both the survey and our follow-up meetings showed that the spread of hours that councillors undertake is quite considerable. That varies based on the composition of the council, whether people are in administration and the number of councillors in the multimember wards. There could be elected members who work fewer than 10 hours a week. There are others who are certainly doing what you would consider to be full-time hours. The spread was quite considerable.

The reason why we have not said that all councillors should be considered as full time is that that could be another barrier to elected office. As you can see from the survey, a considerable number of councillors—about 40 per cent—had other work or caring responsibilities. We felt that it was important that no further barriers were put in the way of attracting people to the office.

The recommendation that we are making on the amount of salary for elected members is in recognition of the role and responsibility that they undertake. There is then obviously a higher rate for those in senior positions.

The Convener: I take your point about not equating the role with hours necessarily, but I want to ask a further question. In 2005, the first SLARC report found that councillors worked 32 hours per week on average. The most recent report says that the average is now about 29 hours. I am interested to hear what evidence you found that the workloads and responsibilities of councillors have increased over the years.

Angela Leitch: I will go back to the survey that we undertook. Although we had a 64 per cent return rate, that is obviously not all elected members. It is quite difficult to pin down the exact nature of the roles that elected members undertake, particularly when we think of the diversity of the 32 local authorities that we have. There has been a change in the hours reported by individuals by way of the survey.

As far as the complexity is concerned, the overview reports, particularly from the Accounts Commission from, I think, 2018 onwards, repeatedly focus on the changes that have been made. We have a breakdown of those if the committee would like that to be submitted as further evidence. The reports cite, for example, the continued financial challenges that councils face and, therefore, the decisions that elected members have to take. They also talk about the

changing policy environment and the national policies that local authorities have been asked to implement. Some of the issues are the changing partnership arrangements and the greater reliance on councils for community planning, regional planning and the complexity of managing health and social care over two sectors.

On top of that, the reports also say that while there is a lot more work that is moving towards recognising the importance of a regional approach, elected members and councils really have to focus on local priorities. There is a balance that has to be struck.

Those are some examples of the evidence that we have drawn upon to enable us to form the conclusion that the role has become more complex. Can I just pause and ask whether my colleagues, Martin in particular, would like to say anything on that?

Martin McElroy (Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee): Yes. I am not exactly certain how the 2005 figure was achieved, but when we were doing our survey we had to delineate or be very careful when we were surveying councillors to ensure a difference was recorded between formal council business and what some councillors perceived was part of the role but that we did not want to include, for example, party business or other informal things that they did almost in addition. While some councillors might feel that that is unfair, because they think that that activity is part of their role, we had to take quite a strict view of what we thought the public purse should be remunerating people for as a role. We took the view that we should not include anything that was party political, for example. That is not to say that political groupings on councils were included and recorded in 2005.

09:15

The other point is that some people who reported fewer hours—this was not in the survey but in the engagement sessions—told us that they wanted to do more but that they could not because they had to work or had other responsibilities. People said that they had to work because of the remuneration levels. If they had had the opportunity to do it full time, I think that they definitely would have—or would have done more hours, undoubtedly. The fact that the level of remuneration did not allow councillors to do more was identified in both the survey and the engagement.

The Convener: Thank you for that clarification. It is helpful to get that. As you say, we do not have an understanding of how that was defined for 2005 and it is good to get clear what the public purse should be funding.

I am trying to frame my question. Much of what is included in the sample role outlines would have been familiar to councillors 20 or 30 years ago. I am interested to understand what councillors are doing now that they were not doing before. You have covered this to some degree, but is there anything else that you think they were not doing at the time of the last review in 2011, but are doing now? You have touched on quite a lot of things.

Angela Leitch: The only other element that I will add is that, over the years, there has been an increased focus on the importance of improved outcomes for people in local communities. At one stage, the priority in councils was the delivery of good and efficient services, but SLARC felt that that has morphed into an approach whereby it is important to see how poverty is being addressed, what the outcomes are for young people in terms of employment opportunities and what economic activity, in general, there is in a local authority.

Councils have moved away from the provision of mainstream services to look much more holistically at what is important to improve outcomes for people within their local areas. We have touched on the other aspects of increased demands and increased financial pressures. Certainly, there is a far greater identification of need within communities than perhaps was ever there before and a recognition that one sector cannot address the complexities of need within a community. There has to be an increased reliance on working with partners.

The Convener: I can certainly imagine that, because we have a greater understanding of equalities and community empowerment, we have shifted our perspective of what we want to see Scotland become.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Good morning and welcome to you and your colleagues, Angela.

I want to continue on the theme that Martin McElroy was talking about. Did you distinguish between councillors who work full time in another job and councillors who do not? What was the average number of hours for each? In my experience when I was a local councillor from 1992 to 2007, it was almost impossible to do the council job properly. I recall that I had 10 days a year—there was an issue about time off for public duties that was very much at the heart of that. I wonder how councillors who work full time in a job somewhere else can possibly squeeze in 29 hours a week to do their council duties. Did you get a strong message about that issue?

Angela Leitch: I will bring in Martin McElroy but, yes, we got a very strong indication of that as we went through the process. It is very much the case that, because of the level of remuneration,

people feel that they have to work. Unless they have another source of income, they really have to have a job to be able to live and to support their family and the like. In particular, however, people who work make many sacrifices. They quite often cited that they are not considered for promotion. If they go for another job, as soon as the employer finds out that they are also a councillor, they will not be considered for the role. It is a real juggling act.

Those are my initial comments. I will pass on to Martin McElroy.

Martin McElroy: As part of the survey, folk had the opportunity to add comments in free text, and we generated about 60 pages of comments. A recurring theme was people saying that the only way that they can do it is because they have a supportive employer or are retired or independently wealthy. A supportive employer is almost always a parliamentarian who has flexibility and an understanding of the role of a councillor. Sometimes, you get a phone call a couple of days before a committee meeting and somebody has to disappear, or there is a public meeting at night or something like that.

In the survey, parliamentarians' staffers made up about five times the number of people who work in other industries. It was very heavily represented. Our committee had a couple of debates about the quandaries that that poses and whether it compromises a local member. For example, if your employer is the local parliamentarian and they take a different view on a local issue, does that potentially compromise you in your employment or can you be objective as a local representative?

The survey threw up all sorts of interesting quandaries, but undoubtedly there is no way in which people could do it without support. We are talking about people who are actual council leaders and who, because of the remuneration, could not do the role unless they were employed by a parliamentarian or had family who were supporting them in that. It is not just about the individual councillor; it is about their families as well, which I found quite telling.

Willie Coffey: Did you make any recommendations on the issue of time off for public duties, on a reciprocal sabbatical salary when people become a councillor or anything like that, or was that outwith the scope of your work?

Martin McElroy: There is already provision on that in the Employment Rights Act 1996. We would have loved to have spent a lot more time looking at it, but we were quite constrained by time. We started to explore the issue but, before we went too far down the rabbit hole, Angela Leitch had to remind us that we had a deadline. In

the future, SLARC has to look at the issue and make recommendations.

I also think that employers have to understand better what councillors do. There has been a change in attitude and culture in the past 20 years or so around employing reservists in the Army or other people who have public duties. For example, it would be unthinkable for an employer not to let an employee away for jury duty, so why do they have such a difficult or belligerent attitude around councillors, who also perform important public functions?

Angela Leitch: One of the recommendations in the report is that there should be a campaign to promote the role of councils and the role of elected members—councillors—because we found that those roles are not understood. Quite often, they are not understood by partner organisations and they most certainly were not understood in a lot of the community discussions. One recommendation is on understanding the role of councils and elected members and the complexity and importance of what they do.

We have also made a recommendation on governance reviews. Very few local authorities automatically review their governance arrangements at the beginning of a new term of office so that the particular demands on time for councillors can be taken into account and there can be some way of adjusting timetables for committee meetings or the like. We recommend in the report that, at the start of every new term, a review of governance is undertaken to try, as far as possible, to accommodate the differences between the parties and the work patterns or commitments that elected members have.

Willie Coffey: Those were really helpful comments.

Did you find that councillors' workloads have changed because of the multimember ward arrangements? Have workloads diminished? My experience is that members find themselves even busier than they used to be, because they have to be on their toes most of the time as they now have colleagues in the same ward. Did you have findings in that area?

Angela Leitch: We did. In particular, through the comments that we received in the survey and the face-to-face interviews, the elected members reported that the multimember wards had added to their workload. Previously, when they had fewer people in a ward, they also had to attend fewer community councils, parent councils and other community meetings that inevitably go along with being a councillor. Now that they have a far bigger patch—a far bigger area to cover—that has necessitated their attending more and more meetings. Some people reported an alliance with

colleagues in the ward and that they try to split the duties where they can, but that is probably exceptional rather than the rule.

Peter Argyle might want to add to that.

Peter Argyle (Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee): There is no doubt that the multimember wards have made life more complicated for members and officers. Another element that came out through the free comments was that council officers get similar comments from three or four members or whatever the number might be. Certainly, from my experience—I was a councillor for 23 years covering the change from single-member wards to multimember wards—it completely changed the dynamic. I am not saying for a moment that it is not the right thing to do. If we want a fair electoral system, it is the only way it will work. However, there is no doubt that it makes things more complicated.

One of the imponderables or the immeasurables is, of course, the personal relationships between the members in a ward. If those relationships are good, which in my experience they have been, things can work very well. My experience has also been that, if they are not good, things can become very complicated.

Willie Coffey: My last question is whether there should be any legislative requirements for councillors in relation to the performance of their duties, for example, to attend formal committees and meetings of the council and so on. That has been an issue in the background for a wee while. Did you look at that issue and make any recommendations on it?

Angela Leitch: We did. As far as the report is concerned, we are making a recommendation that there should be some reporting of activity, although perhaps not performance. Unlike health boards, for example, where there is a performance review of board members annually, it is difficult to see how a similar process could work. Who would undertake such a review? Ultimately, it is the electorate that will hold elected members to account, but we thought that work could be done to allow the electorate to have an informed picture of how active an individual has been in their ward area.

There is an obligation to attend two committees in a year. We felt that there is probably more to consider in terms of how active individuals are in attending training on committees and other matters, but we did not have the time to go into what those elements would be. There is a review of the benchmarking framework that the Improvement Service operates, so the issue could perhaps be incorporated in that. When we have spoken to leaders, we have found that COSLA is

mindful that it could explore that area in a bit more detail. For reasons of transparency, the issue should be considered, and that is one of our recommendations.

Willie Coffey: Thank you very much for those answers.

09:30

The Convener: I will pick up the point about tracking councillors performing their duties. That is interesting because, if you measure activity, somebody might not be that active, but they might be good at connecting the dots, finding a way through and coming up with a solution. It might not take them as long or they might not need to attend to as many things in order to do that. It is a very difficult thing to measure, is it not? It is quite challenging to measure the time that people spend showing up, supporting the community and finding solutions for issues to do with equalities, community empowerment or whatever it might be.

Angela Leitch: It is, and we just did not have the time to look at that. In health boards—we looked at how things operate in health boards—the chair undertakes a review of each of the members who sit on that board. Given the political make-up of Scotland's councils, it would not be feasible to ask a leader to do that. That is where the added value that elected members bring to their office could be assessed and commented on.

It might be a blunt tool, but it is about giving an indication. Again, going back to earlier comments, we heard about elected members who worked tirelessly in their local area. We also heard about members who, for a variety of reasons, whether it was because they worked or they had family commitments or because of their position in the council, were not as active as others. We have suggested that an allowance be paid. As that would be quite a significant increase, we thought it reasonable to suggest that there should be some monitoring of activity levels.

The Convener: That makes sense.

I will introduce a new topic of pay and severance, and I will bring in Miles Briggs to cover that.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning to the panel. Thanks for joining us today. Where did the recommendation come from that the City of Edinburgh Council and Glasgow City Council leaders' salaries, given their responsibilities, be pegged to MSP salaries? What was the rationale for that? As an Edinburgh MSP, I see our leaders at most things that I attend, so I know how busy they are. Should they instead be pegged to, for example, the salary of an English mayor?

Angela Leitch: We did a fair bit of analysis on that. We compared the remuneration and expenses for MPs and MSPs with those for elected members. Rosie Docherty will certainly want to comment on that.

It is fair to say that when we looked at the role descriptor for an MSP and at the complexity of the work of a leader in Edinburgh and Glasgow—the two largest cities in the country—it seemed that a comparison could be made that would justify that level of remuneration being paid. It is not an exact science. That was not a job evaluation, and we did not break down each role into different segments. However, over the piece, by taking account of the work that those leaders do in making sure that they lead their council effectively, their large populations, the large budgets that they are managing and the complexity of some of the issues that are faced in those large cities, that seemed to be at least commensurate with an MSP's salary.

I will pause there to see whether Rosie Docherty wants to add anything to that.

Rosie Docherty (Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee): I reiterate Angela Leitch's statement that it is not an exact science and that it is about judgment. We did quite a lot of research and analysis on the salaries of MSPs and Scottish ministers, on the salaries of MPs and United Kingdom Government ministers, and on the relationship between the three different tiers of the democratic process, including the number of constituents and the size of remuneration.

On your point about English mayors, leaders are not like English mayors, so that is not a suitable comparator. We felt it appropriate to look at it within the Scottish democratic process, given the local, regional, national and international dimensions of the work of council leaders, particularly in Glasgow and Edinburgh. It seemed to us that comparing their role to that of MSPs was justified.

Angela Leitch: We also spent quite a bit of time looking at how board members across public bodies are paid and remunerated. Again, there is such variation that we really could not make any comparisons. As Rosie Docherty said, it seemed appropriate to stick to the different spheres of government and in some way link those large roles to a person in the national Government.

Miles Briggs: That is helpful—thank you. Another recommendation was to introduce severance payments for councillors losing their seats at elections. We already have a set of principles for MSPs—the payment, half of which is taxed, is up to two terms' salary, depending on the terms served. When the single transferable vote was first brought in for council wards, payments

were provided to councillors who were standing down. Will the witnesses explain how severance payments would work? What costs might be attached to that?

Angela Leitch: We could not hazard a guess as to the costs, to be perfectly honest. We have said in the report that that requires further work. I think that COSLA has undertaken to explore that further with the Parliament.

Time and again, when we met elected members, we heard that the prospect of not being re-elected and then being unemployed for a period was often a deterrent to standing for a second term. That was particularly true of female elected members. Rather than face that position, quite a few reported to us that they had stood down or would be stepping down and looking for other jobs in advance of that. That is why we have recommended that consideration should be given to a severance scheme for elected members that is modelled on the one that applies in the Parliament.

We had only nine months to pull together the report, so our time was constrained to the remuneration and expenses element. We have not given the severance element as much thought as we would have liked, but that could be taken forward outwith SLARC.

Miles Briggs: That is helpful. The principles are the same as those for MSPs in the Parliament.

On the recommendation that councillor pay be a percentage of Scottish public sector average pay from 2022, why was that time chosen instead of more recent pay points?

Angela Leitch: It is the most recent available figure.

Miles Briggs: Is it?

Angela Leitch: Yes. We looked at that.

Miles Briggs: Right. That answers that question. [*Laughter.*]

Angela Leitch: We have taken it as far as we possibly could in terms of currency. We have chosen that particular table, as we mentioned earlier, because of the enormous variation in the hours that elected members work. We have also proposed an increase of the percentage from 75 per cent of the median to 80 per cent, reflecting what was reported in the survey about hours worked and the increase up to 29 hours or thereabouts.

Miles Briggs: Finally, I have spoken to Conservative councillors across Scotland, some of whom have stood down and others who are still councillors. Did you consider a move towards evening meetings in order to give flexibility to people, for example? Did you consider the

provision of secretarial support? That is one thing that really surprised me. In Edinburgh, the council groups are very well supported, but that just is not the case in other councils. Sometimes, administrations use that support during negotiations. That is completely wrong, but it seems to take place across Scotland. MSPs are very well supported—I do not see how we would be able to do this job without that support. Did you do a deep dive into those issues as well?

Angela Leitch: We did that on both issues. On how councils operate and how they organise their governance arrangements, we are suggesting that that is reviewed term by term. That could then take account of elected members' other commitments. We have not made any particular comments on evening meetings, because we are aware that that could also disadvantage others who have caring responsibilities. I think that it is for councils to determine what is the most appropriate form of governance that will allow maximum participation from those who are returned at each election.

We noted that, in most councils, elected members are asked to serve on a number of charitable bodies and outside organisations. Some of those roles were quite significant, and we have made a recommendation that that should be reviewed as part of the governance arrangements, as the purpose of the participation in those particular groups was not always clear.

As far as admin is concerned, the governance survey flagged that up as a considerable issue. We have made a recommendation that investment is needed in that area. You are right. That area is offered up for cuts, basically. That is a false economy.

If you do not mind, convener, I will ask Laura Simpson to comment on that.

Laura Simpson (Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee): We got fairly comprehensive information back from councils. We had an 87 per cent response rate and the pattern of support was very mixed. There is already a lot of support. There is fairly robust information technology support for the induction and training of members. However, admin and clerical support for members has dropped significantly.

Quite often, the civic head and the leader of the council have dedicated support, but the remaining councillors do not have that level of support. Sometimes, two to three support staff are covering 70 councillors. The hours vary quite considerably. The feedback not just in the governance survey but in the focus groups was that some councils have significant support while others do not. The concern was also fed back to us that a lot of councillors' time was spent on admin and clerical

work that could be spent on constituency duties. That was a factor throughout.

The Convener: I will bring in Colin Beattie on another topic—information gathering by SLARC.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I was a councillor for a few years so I have some impressions from that period. Is SLARC confident that the survey results are an accurate representation of councillors' experiences, workloads, levels of commitment and so forth?

Angela Leitch: In the absence of anything else, the survey is accurate. We had more than 700 serving elected members take time to complete a fairly extensive survey. We covered a lot of different aspects of work that elected members are asked to undertake. They also spent even more time giving us much in the way of commentary, some of which is contained in the report.

On top of that, we did the analysis that I have already spoken about in which we looked at MPs and MSPs and at the complexity of the job. We spoke to SOLACE about how it viewed the role of elected members, and we spoke to the Accounts Commission. We have taken as much evidence as we can to support the survey results that we got back. It is probably the most comprehensive survey of elected members that has ever been undertaken—certainly in Scotland, if not in the United Kingdom.

Colin Beattie: One of the things that you have referenced is that the average hours worked by an ordinary councillor is 28 hours and 45 minutes, which is quite a lot. If they are expected to do a full-time job on top of that, that will be very tricky to do. At best, people might be able to work part time, which is limiting in itself in respect of future prospects. From my experience, I believe that councillors are underpaid, but I do not know what the level of pay should be. Do you think that it is fair to say that 28 hours and 45 minutes is a part-time job?

Angela Leitch: We had to draw a conclusion on that. Those hours are the average that are reported as far as the elected members are concerned. The role is not full time as most people would understand it. As I said earlier, the variation is considerable. We augmented the survey results with the conversations that we had with councils. We heard time and again from individuals that the hours varied enormously. On balance, we had to say that the councillor's role could be done part time, if we were going to define it using such a term. However, the roles of leaders and senior councillors more often than not have to be regarded as a full-time occupation.

09:45

Colin Beattie: Ordinary councillors have to take another job to top up their earnings. Does that impact negatively on the time and effort that they are able to put in to the councillor job? Obviously, if they have a full-time job, unless they have a very understanding employer, they will find it tough to get the time off to attend council meetings and do the training and everything that one would expect of them. Is that an unfair pressure to put on councillors?

Angela Leitch: Martin McElroy covered that. Going back to the remit of the committee, we were asked to look at remuneration and whether that adequately rewarded them for the roles that they were undertaking. We have said that the current remuneration does not reward them for the responsibilities that they undertake at this point. That is why we are suggesting the increase of 15 per cent on top of the sum that is payable from 1 April.

As to whether that is fair, the committee is looking to ensure that there is adequate compensation that would encourage as many people as possible in Scotland to consider doing these vital roles so that, when we get to the 2027 election, we see a far broader base of people coming forward to stand for those roles.

Colin Beattie: You talked earlier about some of the pressures on councillors and on their relationships. One problem that I got feedback on—I have been out hunting for people to stand for councils—is mortgages. Did you touch on that issue at all? Councillors in particular are often refused mortgages simply because of the unstable aspect of their employment. It is bad enough for MSPs and MPs who have similar uncertainties, albeit that they have a slightly better salary. Did you encounter that with councillors? Patching together a couple of salaries—maybe a bit from the council work and a bit from private work—will not give the cover that is needed to enable people to buy their own home. Those things have had a negative impact when it comes to people stepping up to the role.

Angela Leitch: I will bring in Peter Argyle if that is okay. It is probably the fixed-term nature of the role that is the biggest barrier. At least over that term of office, there is a guarantee of that level of remuneration. I go back to the severance point. At the end of that period, if you choose to stand again but are not re-elected, you potentially end up being unemployed. I am sure that mortgage providers would take that into account.

Peter Argyle: That issue was raised when we had discussions with the political party councillor associations. I spoke at length with most of them. There was one that I was not able to get in touch

with, but the rest were very helpful. That point was certainly raised.

The challenge that all parties have is finding candidates. It is incredibly difficult to find people who are willing to stand in an election. I know from experience how last minute it can be sometimes to drag someone kicking and screaming to stand for election and telling them, “Oh, you’re just a paper candidate. You won’t get in.” We have all experienced that, I know. That was very much part of the response that I had from the political parties on that.

That is certainly tied to there being a cliff edge that people face if they stand for a second term and do not get re-elected. It is absolutely brutal, and I am firmly of the view that that needs to be addressed.

Colin Beattie: You obviously collected a lot of information. Your paper touches on social media, the speed of communications and the desire of constituents and so on to get an immediate response—everything is immediate. I get more than 500 emails a day, so I do not know how immediate I can be. Councillors must be encountering the same thing. What specifically was your impression? It seems to me that the workload—in relation to the volume and immediacy of the things that are coming forward now—has increased hugely.

Angela Leitch: Yes, that is what we found from the survey and in the engagement sessions. Councillors reported a desire from the electorate to have immediate responses to queries. Social media were used fairly frequently to report on issues, make complaints or report faults in housing and roads and things like that. There was an expectation that the councillor would immediately respond.

That is tied to the admin support that is provided—or not provided—to elected members and how quickly they could deal with queries. Certainly, the elected members whom we spoke to reported that they could get a query at night and another query immediately after that or an hour or so afterwards to say, “Did you get my note? Did you get my message on X?”—or whatever platform the person was using.

Colin Beattie: To touch on something else, did you speak to former councillors as part of the process and hold an exit consultation with them, if you like, to understand the reasons why they stood down? It is quite important to know whether it was because of salary, just because of uncertainties of the job, or because of online abuse, which is fairly out of control at the moment.

Angela Leitch: We spoke to some MPs and MSPs who had previously been councillors and were able to gain an insight from that perspective.

Interestingly, the view from that group of individuals was that councillors are, by and large, very well known in their local area. They are seen to be available and to be people whom you can contact. That has meant that, compared to their experience as an MP or an MSP, people reach out to them more frequently. That was one of their observations.

I know that COSLA did some work previously on people who did not stand again for election. A number of females reported that they had stood down because of the workload as well as because of some of the adverse comments that they received on social media. However, we did not go out to try to discuss that with a cohort of councillors. We thought about it, but it was quite difficult for us to gain access to people like that.

Martin McElroy: Part of the issue was identifying and contacting former councillors, because there is no formal data set. We were relying on individuals' contacts and we commented on that basis. One of the most useful routes for speaking to former elected members was the barriers to elected office special interest group, which COSLA has been convening for a while now, which offered some good insights, particularly as to reasons why younger women were standing down or were only staying for one term then choosing to stand down. One of our recommendations is to have a national data set of councillors so that we can see the national picture of the make-up and demography of councillors.

Colin Beattie: Such a data set would be useful. However, it does not exist at the moment. Would the easiest thing not have been to go to the individual political parties, which would have known who their ex-councillors are and could have put you in touch?

Martin McElroy: There was an attempt at some of that. However, there was a lot of difficulty in getting individuals to engage with it. Where possible, we relied on personal contacts and we spoke to individuals whom we knew and could identify in order to seek their views. We did not have the means to take a more technical scientific approach to speaking to former councillors, unfortunately. It would have been useful if we could have done that and I would definitely have liked to have spoken to more former colleagues about why they stood down. Everybody will have their own individual reasons but there will undoubtedly be themes that emerge.

Colin Beattie: Not having that data is a huge loss because it would have been valuable in enabling us to understand the reasons behind someone stepping down. People step down for a variety of reasons, as you touched on. It is unclear whether salaries, as such, would have been the major issue in that.

Martin McElroy: What was reported in the survey was that people who were considering standing down, even though they were only one year into their term, identified the salary as an issue. We already have the next cohort of people who will be standing down who responded to the survey and I suspect there would be a very similar response. Salary or remuneration was undoubtedly one of the factors for people who were already identifying one year into their term that they would not be restanding.

Colin Beattie: I find that to be a little bit extraordinary. If you are standing for office, you know what your salary will be if you win. It sounds odd that someone would step down a year later because it was not enough.

Martin McElroy: What we found was—and political parties were quite guilty in this respect—that some candidates stood without really fully understanding what the role entailed. There might have been situations where their employer appeared to be supportive or they thought that they could do the role, but once they were in it they realised that it is not as straightforward as clocking off after eight hours a day—it is full on. You get bombarded on social media or when you are getting your messages in the supermarket.

The other thing is that people's circumstances change over the course of five years—folk get married, have children and try to get mortgages. People find that they cannot do the two things—their private or personal life and being an elected member. The variety of reasons why folk stand down stem from that. You are locking yourself into a five-year contract, and who knows what will happen in four years' time? Folk were asked whether they were restanding, and those who indicated that they were considering not restanding identified remuneration as one of the factors. I suspect that that might have been because they did not fully understand what they were signing up to. Partly that is because the political parties press-gang folk into standing.

One of our recommendations is that COSLA and the political parties have a much better process to make potential candidates understand what the role is before going for elected office. The responses that we received probably reflect the reasons that former councillors would have given; I think that the same themes would have emerged.

Colin Beattie: Did you find particular issues—

The Convener: I am sorry Colin, but I will have to ask you to wind up because we are quite tight for time with our next panel.

It has been a very interesting piece of deep questioning. I have a question about social media and boundaries and possible training for councillors to understand that they do not need to

be available 24/7. It sounds inappropriate that people are contacting councillors late at night and they feel that they have to respond. Maybe there is something there that we need to look at. Certainly, we will take note of the need for that formal data set. That could be useful for us. I can see that you have identified quite a lot of strands of work.

10:00

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Good morning, panel. Thank you so much for giving us your opening statements and letting us know about all the work that you have done.

Councillors are out and about in their local areas and are often recognised by the public for the work they do. Did the remuneration committee examine any views of the public on the value they get from their local councillors and their opinions on council pay issues?

Angela Leitch: That was not something that we did. Colin Beattie's question raised a similar issue. I point out that there were six of us, who were working on the project very much on a part-time basis—we had six days a month allocated to it. We would have loved to have gone into a lot more detail. However, we have drawn on the feedback from the published report on what people's views in general are of the proposed changes to remuneration bandings. The comments on social media and in the press have been largely positive. Although the odd one has been critical, over the piece the response has been largely positive.

Pam Gosal: Thank you for that. It is so important to understand.

Angela Leitch: It is.

Pam Gosal: We serve the public, whether we are an MSP, an MP or a councillor. It is in their hands to say whether we do a good enough job or add value to the local area on the work that we deliver. I think that there is something to look at there—maybe through asking for public opinion. I do not know whether councils do that or it could be recommended in the future.

Angela Leitch: Some of the proposals could be picked up in the activity that we talk about, but, to be honest, that was outwith our remit. Given the time constraint that we had, we could not spend any time on it.

Peter Argyle: We spent a little bit of time looking at the published data on the public's opinion of councillors and a range of other occupations. I confess that I was quite surprised at how highly councillors scored. They came well up the food chain. I do not have the figures immediately to hand, but we looked at the published data that is relevant to Scotland on the

public opinion of councillors and they scored very highly.

Pam Gosal: Thank you. My next question is around benchmarking and looking at comparisons in the United Kingdom and across Europe. Have you done any benchmarking as part of this report for the SLARC review? How do other countries calculate the pay for their local politicians?

Angela Leitch: We did a fair bit of benchmarking. We have not included international comparisons in the report, but we looked at international governing structures and how other countries remunerate their elected representatives. It varies enormously and, of course, the structures in various parts of Europe in particular are very different.

We also worked with the Local Government Information Unit to look at and draw on evidence that it had gathered on how this works in different countries. We looked at Northern Ireland and Wales and closer to home in England. Because of the way unitary local authorities in Scotland operate, it was quite difficult to draw comparisons and that is why, as Rosie Docherty said earlier, we have stuck to Scotland. The spheres of government that operate within Scotland seem to be the closest and most appropriate way of assessing the relative remuneration levels that should be paid.

Pam Gosal: Doing comparisons is something, but did you find any good practice from any authorities and the work that England, under the UK, has done?

Angela Leitch: It is difficult to say. Subsequent to the report being published, Northern Ireland and Wales contacted me and interviewed me on its contents and they feel that there is a lot that they can learn from what we have done. I cannot think of anything that immediately springs to mind from elsewhere, but others are looking at some of the recommendations that SLARC has made in Scotland.

Pam Gosal: Thank you.

The Convener: Congratulations on that acknowledgment. That is great. Given what you said earlier about the challenge with the time and the limitations, you have certainly gathered excellent information.

We will go into a new theme of understanding barriers to local elected office. I will bring in Gordon MacDonald. If you could make your declaration of interest that would be great.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Thank you and good morning, panel. I declare that my wife is a local government councillor and is also a council group leader.

As the convener has said, I want to ask you about the barriers to local elected office that some of my colleagues have already touched on. Recommendation 15 is:

“to strengthen requirements on councillors to perform the link to their duties.”

Recommendation 16 is:

“to assure themselves that councillors are able to fulfil their statutory duties.”

Recommendation 22 is:

“to provide a minimum level of Members Support Services.”

My experience of the local authority for which my wife has been an elected councillor since 2007 is that it has one support worker per more than five councillors. Do you have any thoughts on what the minimum level of member support for councillors should be—in particular, opposition councillors—and what that should include?

Angela Leitch: Thank you. We have steered away from being prescriptive on the support that is needed, but we have made quite clear in the report—certainly, when we spoke to COSLA leaders and the special interest group in COSLA we stressed this—the importance of having adequate support for elected members. We have used the term “a false economy”; it is a false economy to reduce that support because that restricts how local elected members can fulfil their duties, so we are urging councils to reconsider that.

We heard from councillors, though, that it is a really difficult area because finances are so stretched in local government that the last thing that they want to be seen to be doing is enhancing an area that has given them support. There is a bit of fear of ridicule or criticism from other political parties and, indeed, of ridicule from the electorate.

We explored the matter with elected members. It will be important for COSLA to make a statement in the future about the importance of giving councillors adequate support to enable them to fulfil their duties adequately. We recognise that finances are very difficult, but without that support there is a bigger strain and a bigger challenge on local elected members to do their work.

Gordon MacDonald: You are absolutely correct, but in many of our councils the situation is politicised and polarised. Therefore, should there be some kind of appeal mechanism for opposition members who feel that they are not getting the required support that is available in other council areas? Should there be an appeal mechanism? Have you any thoughts on who would look after that? Could it be a local government ombudsman or somebody like that?

Angela Leitch: The choices that local elected members and councils make are really up to them. Together with COSLA, we would be keen to demonstrate the value that could be added to the role of elected members by having adequate provision and all sorts of different support. There is a consensus view that it has to be depoliticised and taken out of that contentious debate. The question is, what value do we put on good governance at the local level?

Gordon MacDonald: Is there any evidence to highlight that the polarisation of politics has put people off becoming councillors?

Angela Leitch: It certainly came through in our engagement sessions that the level of debate in the chamber at times could be quite critical of individuals and that led to people telling us that they would not be standing for elected office again when their term was up. I am not sure whether any of my colleagues want to add to that. Many people—not exclusively women, but more women than men—commented on the verbal attacks, feedback and criticism that they often receive from colleagues, as well as from the electorate.

Gordon MacDonald: This is my final question on this section, and then I have a couple of other follow-ups.

Recommendation 21 is about underrepresented population groups. You have said that the Scottish Government, working alongside representatives drawn from

“under-represented groups should consider how best to enhance support for councillors in these groups”.

How would you go about that?

Angela Leitch: I am afraid that our term is finished at the end of this week, so we are now handing the work over to other trusted parties. There is a lot that members and the Government, as well as COSLA, will be able to take forward.

Martin McElroy talked a wee bit about the data set when Colin Beattie asked his question. We do not have a definitive data set that tells us the make-up of Scotland’s councillors and you cannot target adequate interventions when you do not know exactly what is happening. I cannot stress enough the importance of setting up something like that so that on-going intervention measures can be targeted more appropriately. More importantly, that would enable us to see trends changing over time—I hope.

Gordon MacDonald: I was not going to ask any questions about pay and remuneration, but I have a couple of points, following the discussions that we have had this morning, on which I am looking for clarification. Many councillors, particularly administrative councillors, get paid a responsibility allowance and also get fees from external

organisations such as health boards. Are there any thoughts on whether that should continue?

Angela Leitch: We are conscious that that relates mainly to health boards and that it is councillors who sit on the integration joint boards or the health boards who would get remuneration. It is for councils to decide. However, we noted when we met councils that when a member was paid the allowance for sitting on the health board, they frequently did not get the special responsibility allowance or the senior councillor's allowance. Instead, that pot of money was used to give allowances to somebody else. The councils used it judiciously to ensure that they had adequate provision and capacity at senior level across the council. That is something that councils would have to take into account.

Gordon MacDonald: I will just leave it at that. Thanks very much, convener.

The Convener: I will pick up another question about barriers. We touched on it earlier in the session, but I am interested to understand a bit more detail on the evidence that you found about pay being a significant barrier to potential candidates, particularly women, people with disabilities, lone parents and young people.

Angela Leitch: That evidence came through the survey in particular, then from the engagement sessions. Some of the councillors from the young people cohort commented that, having stood for office and been successfully elected, they then had to negotiate time off with their employer. In one particular case the individual demonstrated to us how that had impacted on their job prospects—they were considered not to be suitable for promotion to higher-level jobs.

We heard from some female councillors that the remuneration, combined with the antisocial hours that they had to work, meant that there was a real drain on their resources in respect of finding childcare. They often had to look for paid childcare on evenings and weekends. That is not particular to women, but it was women who reported it to us, more often than not. The increase that we have suggested would allow flexibility in compensating for those expenses.

Pam Gosal: You have touched on women, lone parents and disabled people. Did you find anybody from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds? Were there any barriers there? There are cultural barriers, especially when people have to go back to the home to look after their children and sometimes to look after extended family as well, and also have a job and do council work. It may happen to other people as well, but I am just asking that question.

Angela Leitch: It was interesting; we thought that we might find those barriers, but when the

survey results came back they showed that BAME representation among councillors was broadly in line with the demographic profile of Scotland.

Pam Gosal: Okay. Thank you.

Angela Leitch: It was a bit of a surprise to us as well.

10:15

The Convener: That is good news. It also points back to what you are underscoring here today about the data set that would tell us the make-up of Scotland's councillors. If we had that, we could really build on it.

I have a final question around next steps, which have also already touch on a little. The recommendations of the previous SLARC review were published in March 2011. They were rejected by the then finance secretary, John Swinney MSP. How confident are you that the recommendations in the 2024 review will be accepted?

Angela Leitch: There are a lot of recommendations that COSLA can take forward. I know that COSLA is very supportive of many of the recommendations that we have produced.

It is difficult for us to comment on where the work is likely to go. We know that the Government has not produced its findings as yet; we thought that, during the time that we had, we would be able to comment further and provide more evidence and information if that was possible.

In particular, we urge the Government to give serious consideration to what we have put forward. As I said at the beginning, we have based it on a lot of evidence. We have pulled together as much as we can so that it is a robust report. We have also tried to be pragmatic in our suggestions and basically, the proposal amounts to an annual increase of about £5 million, which is 0.04 per cent of the Scottish local government budget, so it is not a sizeable increase by any stretch of the imagination.

For all of those reasons, we think that the recommendations can be implemented. There is still work to be done, particularly on the severance arrangements and on the data set that we have recommended.

The Convener: It has been a very useful session and I thank all of you for the work, diligence and the robustness of the report. It is a very helpful next step. We asked the Scottish Government to join us this morning but the officials were not available; I hope that we will be able to get them along to the committee. The next panel is from COSLA. We are interested to hear what they have to say. I thank all the witnesses for joining us this morning.

I briefly suspend the meeting to allow a change of witnesses.

10:18

Meeting suspended.

10:22

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our second panel of witnesses, who are from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. We are joined online by Councillor Shona Morrison, who is the president; Councillor Steven Heddle, who is the vice-president; and Brianna Fletcher, who is the policy officer for human rights and equalities. I welcome you all to the meeting—it is good to see you. I begin by inviting Councillor Morrison to make a brief opening statement.

Councillor Shona Morrison (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Thank you, convener. It is lovely to see everybody this morning. I am sorry that we are not there in person, but you will appreciate that we have some distance to travel and busy diaries. It was heartening to hear the discussion earlier and great to hear lots of lived experience from committee members, whether it is personal or through family. Thanks very much for having Councillor Heddle and me here today. I thank Angela Leitch and the Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee on behalf of COSLA leaders for the job that they have done. The consultation and engagement have been thorough and far reaching.

I want to say how pleased I am to join the session to discuss what I think is one of the key issues of current times for local democracy. Fundamental to good, informed and inclusive decision making is a healthy system of local democracy, and we need to eliminate any barriers that get in the way of people's desire to make a difference through engagement in local politics and the democratic process. Councillors manage huge budgets, shape our infrastructure and oversee essential services such as healthcare and education. The decisions that they make have a profound impact on our daily lives.

You will no doubt be aware of the programme of work that COSLA is doing through our barriers to elected office special interest group. That includes councillor safety, tackling barriers to candidacy, working culture in council, female councillors, gender balance, support for councillors and, most importantly, terms and conditions for councillors, which of course includes remuneration. A realistic level of remuneration is an important practical factor in attracting prospective candidates to the role of councillor and retaining them, and it is one

of the starting points for our reinvigoration of local democracy.

I want to make one important observation before the committee gets into the detail of the report and it is one that Angela Leitch has made. To my understanding, none of the recommendations from the previous SLARC report, which was published in 2011, were implemented. I am keen that, despite the budgetary pressures that we are all very aware of, we secure a positive joint commitment to implementing the recommendations that are set out in the report, all of which are supported by COSLA leaders.

The Convener: Thank you very much. We will turn to questions. We will operate your mics. We will direct our questions to Shona Morrison, who can then bring in Steven Heddle or Brianna Fletcher—that is the simplest way to go about it.

I have a couple of questions to get us going. I am interested to hear COSLA's views on the role profiles and the workload calculations that are included in the SLARC report. Do you have any thoughts about the change in the role of the councillor? A point that came up in the previous session is that it has become more complex over the past 10 years.

Councillor Morrison: I am keen to say from the outset that, of course, leaders are supportive of all the recommendations from the committee. We have had good and thorough discussions at many sessions, which Angela Leitch and the committee have been part of, as well. That has been really appreciated and helpful.

We absolutely support the view that the role has become much more complex over recent years. We have found that there has been a massive increase in online working, which is reflected in the SLARC reports. Certainly during the pandemic, when we all made the shift to working online, that became a way of working that was helpful to us in establishing communication. We have continued with that way of working in a lot of councils, so it is an area that we have focused on in order to reduce barriers. Steven Heddle and I live in rural and remote authorities, and it makes accessing meetings like this far better. However, it also creates busier days, so we find ourselves rolling from one online meeting to another. It has certainly increased meetings and obligations.

The complexity of the areas that we work in in present-day society have increased. Systems such as the integration of health and social care and the need to work with our partners have brought a different element to the working life of a councillor. We have complex casework, as you as MSPs will appreciate, often with very little admin support, which is another point that was touched on in the previous session. The majority of

councils do not have Caseworker to rely on and we tend to do all of our own admin and casework.

We do not have the opportunity to do proxy votes, and that is an area that COSLA is looking into at the moment. It creates a barrier to councillors being able not to attend sessions. We have complexity in issues such as access to childcare for meetings that often run into the evening—some councils meet in the evenings—as well as our community responsibilities.

On the whole, yes, the role feels much more complex, certainly since I came into post in 2017, and I am sure that it looks very different from how it looked in decades gone by. Steven, would you like to comment further?

Councillor Steven Heddle (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Yes, thanks very much. I would like to join you complimenting SLARC and the report. It is a very thorough report and I think that the findings in it are well founded. It enjoys the confidence of council leaders, who have endorsed the report in full. The view has been expressed that it does not go far enough, but it is certainly a step in the right direction. The historical context of the 2011 report not being adopted means that there is a degree of urgency in the Scottish Government considering this and responding positively to it.

If there is a disappointment—and this is not the fault of SLARC—it is that the hope was that it could have reported in time for the 2024-25 budget cycle and any resourcing requirements could have been addressed then. Indeed, we are actively seeking to have the findings backdated at least to April this year. The point, though, is that it is not months late but 12 to 13 years late in taking the remuneration consideration forward and bringing it up to date.

10:30

You were asking about the workload and how it has changed. In addition to what Shona Morrison said, there is constant scrutiny—more so than ever before—through the many social media channels that we participate in and have to respond to, or that we do not participate in because of the pressures that come through them, which is perhaps to the detriment of availability.

There is also the context of difficulty. In new issues that the report goes into, it speaks about the integration joint boards, city deals and regional growth deals, and it makes the point very well that a councillor's job is not measured by the checks on their timesheet. There is a lot of responsibility associated with it, and that has to be recognised as well. When I say "difficulty", I mean of course the fact that we are operating in a constrained financial context and the decisions that we make

are so much harder and inevitably lead to additional casework for councillors.

On the expectations around the role, as the report notes, new members coming in constantly and consistently report that the job is more onerous and more time consuming than they had expected.

The Convener: Although I said that I would come to Shona Morrison first, I will pick up this question with Steven Heddle because it is relevant to what he was talking about. SLARC has stated that the role of a councillor should continue to be fulfilled part time, but from what Steven Heddle said—and Shona Morrison said previously—is that the appropriate description for the role?

Councillor Heddle: I agree that we are uncomfortable with the description of the role as part time. It is important that SLARC does not use the term "ordinary councillor" but instead uses the term "councillor" in a correct attempt not to diminish the role of the elected member.

On the full or part-time element, in the previous evidence session the panel mentioned that you need to consider a couple of things here. A lot of people report that they are doing the role part time. There is an element of a self-fulfilling prophecy in that because, if the remuneration for the role is not enough for a full-time job and you have commitments such as mortgage payments and having to support your family, you will need to seek additional employment. That is an issue particularly for younger elected members, who are a demographic that we are very much seeking to attract. The remuneration itself is driving people into viewing the job as a part-time job.

However, Angela Leitch made the point very well that we should resist calling it a full-time job, because that could be a barrier to elected office. Some people will come into the job as professionals and will wish to retain currency in their field, recognising that they may wish to pursue a life after the council. If you come in with a professional skill and you dedicate yourself full time to the council, you will lose your currency and find it difficult to return to your field and find work afterwards, so there are two sides to that coin.

Councillor Morrison: The point that Steven Heddle made about many of our councillors being able to maintain their other roles is very important, because that brings huge value into our councils, as people bring with them their lived experience. That is another element to it.

There are other points that I want to make in response to the initial question. This is not a matter for the Scottish Government, but our chief executive, Steven Heddle and I have been visiting all 32 of our authorities over the past six to seven months—we are just over halfway there—and we

have found that there are issues around population growth, or, the alternative, depopulation. Population growth is putting a huge amount of pressure on some of our smaller councils, such as Midlothian, which has 18 elected members for quite a sizeable population. That is an issue that we want to bring to the Boundary Commission for Scotland. There is huge pressure on small numbers of councillors to cope with the casework that that brings. Certainly, in authorities such as Steven Heddle's and mine there is no anonymity for councillors and, when it comes to whether the role is part time or full time, I would argue that it is 24 hours a day. You are very visible in your community, as you will all appreciate as MSPs. Whether you are popping into the shops or whatever, there is always somebody wanting to catch you.

It is hard to define the job as part time because, obviously, weekends and evenings are taken up with community events, but there is also a benefit to that. I like the flexibility of my job and I like being able to organise my own day to a certain extent. I appreciate the point that you made in the previous session, convener, about the long hours and boundaries. Equally, lots of councillors find it quite helpful to pop on the end of their emails that they do not work usual hours and that they may respond to something in the early hours of the morning but there is no expectation for people to reply to that, obviously. Often that works in with family caring responsibilities and other jobs. Therefore, it has its positives and its negative.

The Convener: Thanks very much for that. There is maybe something about the general public understanding that it is a unique set-up and that each councillor will be managing their time in different ways.

Willie Coffey: Good morning to our COSLA colleagues online. I want to ask your view on an issue that I should really have asked SLARC about earlier, which is the huge disparity between the salaries that senior council officials receive and those of senior elected members. There is quite a distance between the two. We know that there are several reasons for that, and there are different scales and so on, but is that an issue that has come up in conversation among the local elected members over the years? Senior elected members carry significant responsibilities when sometimes the officials who are under their direction can be earning three times as much as they are. Is that an issue that has cropped up in conversation at all over recent years?

Councillor Morrison: I could not possibly comment on that. I am here to advocate on behalf of elected members. It is not something that we have experienced during our visits to half the councils in Scotland. It has not been brought up

with me, but my focus is absolutely to advocate on remuneration for our elected members.

Willie Coffey: Steven Heddle, have you had any semblance of a discussion about that in your experience?

Councillor Heddle: Not really. There may have been some wry observations and a clear recognition that our officer colleagues have much nicer suits and shoes than we do. We recognise the context that we operate in, but the fundamental point is not that councillors are seeking to be paid the same as the officers. We are seeking to be paid a bit more to allow a wider representation and for the public to see that being a councillor is an attractive job that they can sustain longer term.

Willie Coffey: Very diplomatically answered—thanks very much for that.

Can I ask you about the different banding arrangements that we see in Scotland? Council leaders in Glasgow or Edinburgh, for example, potentially earn up to £20,000 more than council leaders in other authorities. From my experience as a local councillor for many years, there is the same number of hours in every day and every week, and I certainly know council leaders and civic heads who spend all their time on their civic duties, and that is the case in both smaller and bigger authorities. Why is that difference there and how is it justified?

Councillor Morrison: Angela Leitch phrased it well. The larger councils—Edinburgh and Glasgow—have their own unique complexities, and we all appreciate how hard the group of councillors work in both of our larger cities.

It would be remiss of me not to say that that has been challenged by some of our members in smaller authorities. You will appreciate—and you have phrased it very eloquently there—the difficulties and challenges that remote and rural authorities face every day. Even just getting to work can take several hours for councillors. In Highland Council, for example, which has a huge geographic spread, it takes three to four hours for a lot of councillors to get to Inverness to sit in a committee, although it may be easier with Teams and online working.

Although the cities have larger populations, there are certainly issues in smaller authorities, as I mentioned before. There is no anonymity at all in small communities, so there is a vast amount of casework just from going about your daily business. On balance, leaders absolutely recognise the difference between the bandings. That is not to say that those who are on a lower band would not argue that they are just as busy as the leaders in our bigger authorities.

Willie Coffey: Does Steve Heddle have a view on that—particularly the recommendation to replace the four bands with three bands? I think that that would mean moving those in the first band into the second band, if you understand my meaning. What is COSLA's view on the banding arrangement? Do you support the move to have three bands?

Councillor Heddle: We support it. As Shona Morrison said, there have been representations from some of our members about why we would still have three bands—why not just have one band, which would represent the fact that all councillors have the same legal responsibilities and the same breadth of ambition to deliver for our citizens? There is a lot of merit in that argument.

Certainly, the recommendations are a step in the right direction. The lowest band is populated by very few councils, one of which is mine. When I was a council leader, the remuneration that I received for consistently working 60 hours a week running a local authority that has the range of issues that any mainland authority has and operates seven airfields and a complex harbour—including an oil port and a 24/7 marine towage and pilotage operation—seemed anomalous, as we were being paid less rather than being paid more.

As has been mentioned, there is a view that three bands may still be too many, but certainly it would be a significant improvement on four bands. Collectively, we support SLARC's recommendation.

Willie Coffey: From your point of view, that is a step in the right direction. Many thanks for those answers.

Colin Beattie: I will ask Shona Morrison a question. If the Scottish Government accepted the recommendations of the SLARC review, what changes in legislation would be required to put them in place?

Councillor Morrison: The main one relates to severance; apart from that, I am not entirely sure. I ask Brianna Fletcher to come in quickly on that point.

Colin Beattie: Is Brianna Fletcher there?

Councillor Morrison: We are waiting for her microphone to come on.

10:45

Brianna Fletcher (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): There we go—thank you very much. I will not comment on the legislative elements, which are for the Scottish Government to determine. I understand that there were complexities in the advice to the minister and that the Government is still working out what is

required in legislation. I understand that that is largely about the severance payment, but the uplift has a legislative element, too. A few bits are still being worked out and I have not been privy to the advice to the minister.

Colin Beattie: It seems that a bit of legislation could be involved in this; I am not an expert on what bit has to come forward for legislation. Some changes can be done by agreement with the Scottish Government. How easy will the implementation be? It does not seem that it will be complicated, if agreement is reached between, for example, the Scottish Government and COSLA. Am I being too simplistic?

Councillor Morrison: I hope not, because we would like to see this. There have been delays for one reason or another over the past few months in even getting to the current position; for example, the minister would originally have joined us today. Given the changes, implementation will happen later in the year, and we are keen for it to move at pace.

It will not surprise you that, on our visits to each authority, we are having significant questions and pressure from our councillors—they are invested in the report—about where we are in the process. I really hope that we can move at pace in the coming months for the councillors who stood for election in 2022 in the belief that we would have a hard look at this and that, when the Scottish Government instructed an independent board to look at our remuneration, that would bring about change, which will happen in the coming months.

Colin Beattie: I will ask about what is perhaps a more controversial recommendation from SLARC. Does COSLA agree with the recommendation to strengthen legislation to ensure that councillors perform their duties?

Councillor Morrison: That is absolutely a question for the Government. I appreciate that Angela Leitch commented earlier on having data available. In another role, I chair the Improvement Service, and benchmarking will really help with that. I commented earlier that not all councils have the likes of Caseworker, which gives really rich data on the work that councillors do. At the moment, councillors have to attend one full council every six months. To many councillors, that would not feel acceptable. Another issue is the value that councillors bring to meetings and from their work in their communities. My answer is that the issue is fairly complex and difficult to pin down.

Colin Beattie: The previous witnesses covered a broad variety of issues that impact on councillors and on the time that they can actually allocate to the job. Mention was made that 28 hours and 45 minutes is the average time that an ordinary

councillor spends on the job. I am not sure that that sounds part time.

Councillor Morrison: It does not feel like part time. If the number is 28 hours, they are incredibly intensive—as I said, the role has all the less visible elements. Preparation takes up a massive amount of time; everybody around the table will appreciate how much reading we do as elected members. There is preparation and research, which most of us do ourselves—we have no support for that. We do the majority of press releases ourselves, apart from official press releases that go out from the council. We tend not to have support for that.

There are lots of less visible elements to the job that are really difficult to record. I live next door to a Co-op and I bump into people there. If I go for a pint of milk, it usually takes 20 minutes to come back to my house, because I am picking up casework all the time. That is about being visible and attending events—as councillors, we attend coffee mornings, sales, school events and so on, which all come with the cost of being there and spending money. We do not record all those types of activities.

At the end of the day, most councillors are grass-roots activists in one way or another in their communities. We are not very good at recording such activities as part of our official responsibilities—it is just what we do.

Colin Beattie: To come back to the original question, are you aware of any evidence that councillors are not performing their duties?

Councillor Morrison: No. If there was any issue with individual members, it would be up to an authority to highlight that.

Miles Briggs: Good morning to the online panel—it is nice to see you again. I have a couple of questions on costs and barriers to elected office. Given on-going issues, and given that unions are balloting their members on pay-related strike action, how would a 40 per cent pay rise for councillors be received by the wider local government workforce?

Councillor Morrison: Good morning—it is really nice to see you again. That is a difficult one—there is no getting away from it. We all appreciate the severe constraints that we have in local government, and the last thing that we want to do is to cut services and see that pitted against increasing remuneration as local authority priorities. Our direction from leaders is clear—that this will be funded by the Scottish Government.

The issue is incredibly difficult, and I absolutely appreciate the sensitivity around it. Angela Leitch spoke about communicating to our communities the councillor's role and its importance. There is a

huge bit of work for us and the Scottish Government.

I mentioned in my opening comments that, whatever we do, it must be hand in hand and in partnership. Whatever recommendations are agreed, we must ensure that the message comes from the Scottish Government and us about the value of the councillor. The crux is that we play an incredibly important role.

We spoke about barriers. When the barriers to elected office special interest group spoke to councillors, they said that the hardest thing was that value was not placed on the role.

Colin Beattie asked questions about exit interviews. I have spoken to former councillors who said that they left the role because of the remuneration and the lack of value that is given to the incredibly important job that councillors do, which is right up there.

Miles Briggs: You have touched on the subject of my next question. I calculate that about £5 million extra is needed for the whole package that is recommended. You believe that the Scottish Government should help to meet that cost. Are there any other options in councils to help to cover that cost, or is it purely for the Scottish Government?

Councillor Morrison: Absolutely—the responsibility sits with the Scottish Government. As I said, we face crucial cuts in some of our authorities, so the situation is really difficult. There are two things against each other. Does Steven Heddle want to add anything?

Councillor Heddle: The initial question referred to a 40 per cent rise, but it is not a 40 per cent rise. On my calculator, I have been frantically churning the numbers and, for the regular councillor, the rise would be about 22 per cent. That is not insignificant, but it would recognise that, in our local government family, councillors are probably getting to the stage of being the lowest-paid employees in the building, in many cases.

We certainly do not want to be pitting the additional cost of increasing councillors' salaries against the services that we provide. The fundamental point is that there is a cost to democracy here, which should not be weighed against the provision of services. We would definitely be looking for the Scottish Government to find the money to provide the £5 million that you refer to.

There is an additional point. The recommendation about severance arrangements is important, because SLARC members have said that the cliff edge is a severe deterrent to seeking additional office or a further term, because the

uncertainty is so great. Providing security to elected members who lose office or who choose to leave office would be an important step forward. It is also important to have renewal in local government and to have more opportunities for new and enthusiastic members, rather than weary old people such as me, who will have been doing the job for 20 years by the end of this term. I am still open to the idea of 25 years—I do not want to suggest that the fire is dimming in any way.

Miles Briggs: I will move on to my next question. We previously heard SLARC's recommendations on establishing a dynamic national data set to look at the composition of our councils and councillors. Does COSLA have views on why that has not been made available to date? How could we create that? The committee has looked at that and found that some self-reported information has not been available and that there were general data protection regulation issues in looking at councillors standing down. Do you have a view on that?

Councillor Morrison: Through our barriers group, we are identifying a need to collate such data, which will feed into all the recommendations that come out of that group. We are still in the process of doing that work and having those conversations.

Anecdotally, that work has been really helpful. In visiting many of our colleagues around the country, we hear lots of local issues that we can bring back to the Scottish Government and discuss. Previously, when we had the Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning, we managed to have many of those conversations, which we have reflected in our discussions with the committee.

I absolutely recognise that there is a piece of work to do; we are working strongly with our third sector organisations such as Elect Her and Engender. I believe that officers recently met the Electoral Commission to discuss the demographics of our councillors. There is absolutely a laser focus on that work.

Miles Briggs: Finally—we have discussed this previously—will you update the committee on COSLA's barriers to elected office special interest group and when it will report?

Councillor Morrison: We have just increased the frequency of our meetings, because we have so much work to get through. We do not have dates yet for reporting back, but the work has been hugely beneficial to do. A great cross-representation sits on that group, and each session leads to even more questions and more avenues for us to explore. Right now, we are working on proxy voting, which I mentioned previously. That is seen as a fairly large issue for

councillors—colleagues in Aberdeen brought that to us because they had what was very much a live case.

We are working on that with an eye to increasing BAME representation and women's representation in our councils. A lot of that includes collecting data on why women are leaving politics. You will appreciate that there have been difficult discussions there. There is a huge amount of work for our political parties to do to take responsibility for how we engage with our communities and ensure that our council chambers absolutely reflect the people whom we represent, but that is not easy. However, remuneration is always at the top of the list—it is the biggest barrier to everything.

11:00

Pam Gosal: I thank all the COSLA officials for their opening statements.

SLARC states:

“there is a need to promote the work of councillors and councils to improve awareness and understanding of the important role they play”.

Who is responsible for that promotion? How does COSLA see its role in such promotion?

Councillor Morrison: Good morning—it is nice to see you.

We are all responsible. The Scottish Government and all elected members, including parliamentarians and COSLA members, play a role in reminding the public of the role of councils and the value of councillors. Our communications team is keen to demonstrate any good practice that we see. As I said, during our visits around the country, we have managed to have fantastic conversations about the incredible innovation and transformation that have been driven by our fantastic elected members.

We very much use COSLA's platform to represent our councillors as best we can. Ensuring that the public realise what their councillors do daily for them is a huge and continuing piece of work for us. All elected members are responsible for talking about the virtues of the role of a councillor and what we do.

Councillor Heddle: It is absolutely COSLA's role to promote local government and the work that we do, and we do so on an on-going basis. I commend our elected members bulletin to all committee members, if you are not already avid readers of it every week.

Shona Morrison made a good point about it being everyone's responsibility to promote local government, because we are all constituent parts of the governance of the country, and it is

important to demonstrate the mutual respect and positive working between the various spheres of government.

That is underpinned by the Verity house agreement, which is about developing a productive and positive relationship between the spheres of government, particularly between local government and national Government. In local government, we extend that approach to our support for the work of community councils and our other partners. Being able to promote the work that we respectively do is indicative of a well-functioning democracy. That relates to our aspirations regarding the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which codifies some of that.

Pam Gosal: I will turn the question on its head. Do members of the public fully understand a councillor's role and the fact that they get paid a certain amount of money and that it is not a full-time role, even though, in its own way, it is? Shona Morrison mentioned that she cannot even go to the shops—I know how that feels—but it is rewarding, too, and it is nice that constituents come up to speak to us. Do members of the public understand a councillor's remit and role and how they stretch their time, in that they sometimes have their own job as well as being a councillor?

Councillor Morrison: You are absolutely right—it is a huge privilege to be a councillor and we should remind ourselves of that all the time.

People's experiences are mixed. If you are in contact with councillors and have had experience of bringing issues to an elected member, your grasp and understanding of how local democracy works will obviously be better.

At a COSLA conference years and years ago, I remember sitting listening to John Curtice talking about the spheres of government that the general public thought most influenced their lives, and I was really disappointed to hear that local government was quite far down the list, considering the services that we provide and the decisions that are made by elected members, so there is always work to do to promote the role of councillors. We have discussions with our local authorities about how best to do that work, and we have such conversations nationally, too.

We are always keen to work with our third sector partners and with any of our partners. For example, we have done a good piece of work with Police Scotland on councillor safety. That was in the public sphere, so I hope that the public have been able to see some of the not-so-nice issues that we deal with daily and some of the abuse that we get. Unfortunately, it is often the more negative stories that come into the public sphere, but we are always keen to try to turn that around to

ensure that people see their councillors as a positive addition and see local democracy working for them.

Councillor Heddle: I absolutely concur with what has been said. By and large, the public appreciate the role of councillors and the difficulties that they face, but there is no denying that there are very vocal and visible minorities who seek to lash out at councils, because we are on the front line of service delivery. Councils and councillors, as the visible representatives of councils, get it in the neck for any failings, which are largely due to not having the resources to be able to provide the services that we would like to provide.

One of the interesting things relates to the annual household satisfaction survey, which records public satisfaction with the delivery of services—now that I think about it, I am not entirely sure whether it continues to be run. That used to be very much a good news story because, when councillors saw the report, it showed that the public were, in general, very satisfied with the services that they were getting, and it cut through the noise to give a more realistic view of how the council was doing.

It is undeniable that public satisfaction is diminishing, because people see the visible effects of councils not being able to provide the services that they would like to provide, such as the decline in road quality, the inability to provide support services in schools and the difficulties that we face in recruiting staff to work in care services, particularly after Brexit. That is a corrosive element to the functioning and perception of local government and how people view their councillors, but I think that, by and large, there is a reasonable degree of understanding.

Pam Gosal: Shona Morrison mentioned women leaving the role and the need for good BAME representation. What evidence is there that pay is a significant barrier to candidates, particularly women, people with disabilities, lone parents and young people?

Councillor Morrison: I will just come back on the previous point. The committee made a really helpful recommendation on admin support in relation to the day-to-day functions of councillors and getting the story of what we are doing out to the public through newsletters and so on. Office admin support is crucial to ensuring that we get our stories out there.

On the question about representation, in our conversations with elected members, potential candidates and people who have left councils, it always comes down to remuneration. That is the biggest barrier. It is as simple as that.

Pam Gosal: Why do you think that that particularly affects women?

Councillor Morrison: Earlier, Angela Leitch mentioned issues with accessing childcare at times of the day when there might be community meetings or council meetings, and some councillors live in rural areas where transport is not so good, so they might be reliant on taxis, quite expensive bus routes and so on.

People have to take all those things into consideration, albeit that they can claim travel expenses. However, you will appreciate that, unfortunately, some councillors might not want to document all their expenses because they feel that that is part of the job. Expenses claims are published, so a massive barrier to many people standing is that they might not want it to be in the public realm that they are claiming expenses, so the money comes out of their own pockets. We have picked up such issues in the various forums in which we have those discussions.

Pam Gosal: Pay is very important to councillors, and they rightfully deserve a salary. Does anything else need to change? Should there be a transformational change in how councillors work? You mentioned childcare. Is there anything in the pipeline that COSLA is working on with local authorities in relation to working patterns, easy access and so on?

Councillor Morrison: Absolutely. When it comes to transformation, one of the biggest changes recently has been the shift to online working, which reduces barriers for many people. Unfortunately, we have seen those patterns fall back, with expectations to meet in person, which is quite disappointing. A few people feel that they often do not get the full benefit of a meeting unless they are there in person. We are keen to continue to support our elected members in that regard.

There are also issues with councillor safety. I mentioned the work that we have done with Police Scotland. It is incredibly important to ensure that our councillors feel as safe as possible in their working environments. In relation to the political discourse, lots of people, particularly women, experience very negative comments on social media. We should ensure that we protect our councillors as much as possible, and our work to address the barriers to elected office targets that. All elected members have a responsibility to ensure that we protect councillors as much as possible from negative discourse.

Pam Gosal: Thank you.

Willie Coffey: Shona, on the point that Pam Gosal raised, what is causing the drift back from online digital participation to in-person attendance? Is it the political party groupings or is it the officials? That was one of the few benefits

that saved us during Covid. Digital participation was widespread throughout workplaces in Scotland, and everywhere else for that matter. Who is causing that drift back to in person?

Councillor Morrison: I am not entirely sure; it may be that people are just more comfortable. Possibly, with the demographics of elected members across Scotland, in-person meetings are what they feel more comfortable with. Certainly, COSLA is very keen to give the option of online meeting at all times. We find that the majority of our leaders attend online these days and that is absolutely fine. That is cross-party. I would not say that that was defined through a party at all.

We often find that our members who have further to travel are those who come in person. That is a very personal choice that has to be applauded in many circumstances, because it will be elected members from the islands, who are often independent councillors, and they find real value in being in the room with one another. We absolutely should not put any barriers in the way of making that happen.

I am not entirely sure why the drift back to in-person meetings is happening and I find it slightly disappointing. In my authority, I am seeing that drift and people having to make a special request to be online. For councillors who have other responsibilities, whether that is caring or other jobs, or for whom there are cost implications such as travel and so on, it is a hugely beneficial route to be able to utilise.

Willie Coffey: Okay, thanks for that.

The Convener: Steven, do you have anything else to add?

Councillor Heddle: Yes, I will add that, in some cases, there is an incentive to go back to in-person meetings for the human interaction and getting to know your colleagues as people. In COSLA's context, we seek to have maybe one meeting in three where we encourage people to come along to the meetings in person, to facilitate cross-party dialogue, but also so that councillors from disparate geographic areas of Scotland have a chance to see what it is like. We have the great fortune that we go to every council area in Scotland and speak to the councillors directly, so we have a good overview, but in doing so we recognise that it is of benefit to everybody to know how everybody else works.

11:15

The Convener: It is important to keep that hybrid option, but it is also a good approach to encourage a meeting where people can imagine seeing most of the people on their committee or

whatever. Gordon MacDonald is joining us online and has a couple of questions.

Gordon MacDonald: A couple of points have not been touched on. Recommendation 15 of the SLARC report talks about strengthening

“requirements on councillors to perform their duties.”

Obviously, we have touched upon the fact that there is very little support in some councils for elected members, particularly opposition elected members. Do you have a view about what the minimum level of member support services should be and what it should include?

Councillor Morrison: Thanks, Gordon; it is nice to see you.

It is difficult to say, because each council is incredibly different. As you will appreciate, some operate as cabinets and some have the traditional committee structure. I will take my council as an example. We have one admin support who is the personal assistant to the council leader as well as to the civic leader, and covers every other need and requirement from all 26 councillors. You will appreciate the huge demand that that puts on that person. We have seen that area of support reduced over the years and I am sure that that is the story in many other councils around Scotland. Investment in that area would absolutely be appreciated because, rather than put onerous tasks on admin, we tend to pick those things up ourselves. That takes time away from the face-to-face contact that we have with constituents, or from other demands, such as research into whatever committee we are on and so on.

We are hugely appreciative of that recommendation. If we can support and invest in admin support, I think that we would see a massive improvement in the area that I spoke about regarding making us visible and getting our story across and so on, as well as supporting new councillors into the role. We want to build on that, as well.

I would have been completely lost if it had not been for admin support. Such investment would be greatly welcomed and part of that would be about support in the early days of being a new councillor. Steven, do you want to come in?

Councillor Heddle: Thanks very much. I think that we might have lost the connection to the committee.

Gordon, in response to your question on recommendation 15, COSLA supports the SLARC report in its entirety, but there is a degree of concern expressed by some leaders about that recommendation. There is no such parallel reporting for MSPs and it is not really the job of councils to be the policemen in this. There is perhaps a risk that the Scottish Government might

interfere in the appointment or the sustained appointment of councillors who have been democratically elected and, fundamentally, the big job interview comes every five years and you get your performance appraisal.

COSLA endorses the recommendation because we do not think that there is anything to hide. There is no evidence of this being a big problem and many councils already do such performance reporting, in the sense that they report attendance at meetings alongside the annual expenses, which has to be reported for the press. We are going through that cycle now in my council and the attendance is universally high. Whether there is a need for it remains to be seen, but the recommendation is that it be considered, so we are happy with it.

The Convener: Gordon, do you want to pick up your other questions? Steven, perhaps you cannot see us but I want to assure you that we are definitely here and listening very keenly.

Gordon MacDonald: My point in raising the question was that, if there is to be a strengthening of requirements on councillors to perform their duties, it has to go hand in hand with more support.

Is there enough training for new councillors and on-going training, in particular on dealing with the media, how to handle surgeries, how to make speeches in the chamber and cross-examine council officials? Is there enough training, because many people who might consider being a councillor will not have much experience in those areas?

Councillor Heddle: Can I come in?

Gordon MacDonald: You come in first, Steven.

Councillor Heddle: I think that that is a very good point and, if I was to be frank, the answer to your question is probably no, not yet. Training in the areas that you suggest is not widely available. Recommendations 17 and 19 of the SLARC report go into that to a certain extent and suggest that we should be looking for the areas that could be supported more and develop that. I regard that as a positive development.

Certainly, most councils will have very good induction processes for new councillors that explain the legal requirements on councillors and the governance frameworks that operate in terms of the standing orders and the scheme of delegation and similar things, as well as the committee and organisational structures of the council. That induction process can be fairly intense over maybe three weeks. Chaining skills and media responsibilities are probably quite far down the list compared with getting on board with the day-to-day business. You make a fair point

that it would be useful to explore that more, alongside what Shona Morrison was saying about general support for councillors and how that could be enhanced administratively. *[Interruption.]* I think that Shona wants to come in.

Councillor Morrison: I concur with all Steven's points. The Improvement Service does a huge amount of work on some of those induction processes and that has been increasing over the years. Again, it depends, council to council, what the uptake looks like and it is a job of work for the Improvement Service to get that message out there. COSLA is also doing regular thematic sessions online to engage councillors on all sorts of issues that may be of interest, but I absolutely agree with Steven that we fall away a bit with the media training and speech making. My council does a lot of training on scrutiny, what good scrutiny looks like and notices of motion and things like that, but we fall down when it comes to speeches and media training.

I appreciate that we have lots of independent councillors, but we believe that there may be a reliance on political parties also to ready their candidates for those responsibilities, but that should not be the case. I agree that it is absolutely upon us to ensure that councillors are comfortable and ready to attend the chambers.

Gordon MacDonald: *[Inaudible.]*

The Convener: I think that you were concluding there, Gordon. Your mic was not on.

Gordon MacDonald: Yes.

The Convener: Okay, super. We have come to the end of our questions and it has been very helpful to hear from you and your reflections on SLARC's work and their report. Thank you so much for joining us. As that is the final public item on our agenda, I now close the public part of our meeting.

11:24

Meeting continued in private until 11:37.

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.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba