



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 21 March 2023

Session 6



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LOCAL GOVERNMENT, HOUSING AND PLANNING COMMITTEE
9th Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

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

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP)

*Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

*Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Patrick Harvie (Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights)

Lionel Most (Dowanhill, Hyndland and Kelvinside Community Council)

Louise Robb (Largo Communities Together)

David Watson (Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust)

Ellen Wright (High Knightswood and Anniesland Community Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Euan Donald

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 21 March 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Ariane Burgess): Good morning and welcome to the ninth meeting in 2023 of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. I remind members and witnesses to ensure that their devices are on silent, with all notifications turned off during the meeting.

We have apologies from committee member Mark Griffin.

Item 1 is a decision on whether to take item 6 in private. Do members agree to do that?

Members indicated agreement.

Subordinate Legislation

Cost of Living (Tenant Protection) (Scotland) Act 2022 (Incidental Provision) Regulations 2023 [Draft]

10:00

The Convener: Item 2 is evidence on draft regulations. I welcome Patrick Harvie, Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights. Mr Harvie is joined by Poppy Prior, who is a lawyer in the Scottish Government, and Yvonne Gavan, who is a team leader at the housing services and rented sector reform unit in the Scottish Government.

I invite the minister to make brief opening remarks.

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): Good morning, convener, and thank you. I am happy to be here today to present the draft Cost of Living (Tenant Protection) (Scotland) Act 2022 (Incidental Provision) Regulations 2023.

As we have discussed with the committee previously, you will be aware that the emergency Cost of Living (Tenant Protection) (Scotland) Act 2022, which was passed last year, had three key aims: first, to protect tenants, stabilising their housing costs by freezing rents; secondly, to reduce the impact of eviction and homelessness, through a moratorium on evictions; and thirdly, to reduce unlawful evictions and avoid tenants being evicted from the rented sector by landlords who want to raise rents between tenancies during the operation of the temporary measures.

Last month, the committee considered and voted for regulations to extend some of those provisions beyond 31 March to the end of September this year. I was pleased that the Parliament also voted to approve the regulations, thereby ensuring that important protections for tenants continue, given the challenging and uncertain economic times.

Although it is crucial that some emergency provisions continue for the time being, the emergency 2022 act is, of course, temporary, and it is equally important that we plan for the time when the protections come to an end.

During the passage of the Cost of Living (Tenant Protection) (Scotland) Bill, we acknowledged that termination of the rent cap might lead to a large number of private landlords seeking to increase their rent all at once, which could cause significant and unmanageable rent increases for tenants. In those circumstances, the existing rent adjudication process will need to be

temporarily modified, to provide a suitable adjudication mechanism that is fit for purpose.

For that reason, the emergency 2022 act contains a regulation-making power to temporarily reform the existing rent adjudication process, which was brought in by the Private Housing Tenancies (Scotland) Act 2016. The proposed approach would support our transition out of the emergency measures and help to mitigate unintended consequences that might arise from our bringing the temporary rent cap to an end.

Schedule 3 to the emergency 2022 act provides ministers with the power in that regard. The short affirmative instrument that the committee is considering today makes a minor technical amendment to schedule 3, to put it beyond doubt that the powers that are conferred on the Scottish ministers function as intended. It does that by renaming a title and heading, renumbering a section and correcting a reference. That will ensure clarity if and when the Scottish ministers choose to exercise the powers conferred on them in schedule 3. Instruments that are made under that power will be subject to the affirmative procedure and subject to scrutiny and approval by this committee and the Parliament.

The severity of the costs crisis and the urgent need to respond quickly meant that the 2022 act had to be drafted and delivered at pace, to ensure that tenants could be offered additional protection as quickly as possible. The short technical instrument that the committee is considering today clarifies a small part of the drafting, to ensure that the important rent adjudication provisions will work as they are intended to do when the time is right to bring the emergency provisions to an end.

I thank the committee for its scrutiny of the draft regulations. I am happy to answer any questions that you have.

The Convener: Thank you for explaining the clarification in the draft regulations. Do members have questions?

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I will return to the questions that I raised in the committee's evidence session on 28 February, which were about the use of data—specifically, private landlord registration data—to measure the impact that the Scottish Government's policy and legislation are having. What assessment has the minister made of how that data is being used? How is real-life information being gathered about what is happening with the policy, given that landlord registration lasts for three years? If landlords are choosing not to let their properties, we would not necessarily know that their properties are no longer on the rental market. What wider assessment is the Government planning to do on the impact of the policy?

Patrick Harvie: Although it is not technically relevant to the instrument that we are discussing—which is a clarification of the drafting of the legislation on the introduction of rent adjudication measures, as and when the temporary measures come to an end—when we referred to the landlord registration figures, we made it clear that that is only an administrative source of data. It does not provide the rich granularity of data that all stakeholders recognise is necessary. Longer-term reforms need to be made to ensure that there is data collection in the private rented sector at the level that we need it.

Although we have an admittedly limited source of information through the landlord registration scheme, it shows that there has been no decrease, and perhaps a slight, very marginal, increase in the number of registered properties prior to the emergency measures coming into force. Mr Briggs is right that there would be a time lag between landlords seeking to make decisions about their future in the industry and any deregistrations. We acknowledge that that is the case and we have presented the information that we have available to us.

Miles Briggs: Is the Scottish Government looking at information to assess what impact the emergency legislation has had and at what rate people could potentially leave the private rental sector? If so, when is that likely to be published?

If we look at different schemes across the world, we see that there has been a cut-off point or cliff edge where landlords have left the market. The legislation prevents rent increases, but it does not necessarily prevent people from deciding that, when they can, they will withdraw private rented properties from the market. I am not clear whether the Scottish Government has any role in preventing that from happening and whether the data is actively being looked at and provided to different local authorities, which could end up facing the consequences of more people declaring themselves as homeless.

Patrick Harvie: The Scottish Government has a responsibility to ensure that temporary emergency measures are necessary and proportionate and that they are appropriate and fit with our housing objectives, and we have a responsibility to take that approach to our new housing bill so that it is consistent with what we seek to achieve in housing.

As a starting point, we recognise that the right to adequate housing is a human right. That has not been delivered by everyone, and we have a situation in which the level of regulation on a number of standards is significantly different between the private and social rented sectors. We are seeking to reduce the gap in outcomes between those types of tenures. Our experience is

that, in the long term, increasing the quality of the regulation of the private rented sector is compatible with growth and viability in that sector.

Although I have noticed that some people have sought to blame the emergency measures for decisions that have been made on the new supply of rented accommodation, the measures have no impact on initial rent setting; they impact only in-tenancy annual rent increases. I recognise that some people will argue against any form of protection for tenants or regulation in the market. I do not think that that extreme position would be appropriate, but we will seek to continue to ensure that the measures that we take strike the appropriate balance between providing safeguards for landlords, which are included in the emergency 2022 act, and continuing to expand protection for tenants.

Miles Briggs: Maybe I will ask the question in a more straightforward way. Are your officials looking at that data, in order to publish it, so that we are acutely aware of the impact of these policies coming to an end?

Patrick Harvie: As I said in response to your first question, everybody—landlord organisations, tenant organisations, housing academics and the Government—recognises that there is significant need for additional data and for depth, detail and granularity of data in the private rented sector. That is a long-term piece of work, and the Government will bring further work for the attention of the committee and Parliament to improve the collection of data in the private rented sector. For the time being, we have noted that the information that we have, limited though it is, from the landlord registration scheme does not show a drop-off in the number of properties that are available.

Miles Briggs: Thanks for that.

The Convener: I thank the minister for the evidence today and for going into a bit of detail that was beyond the scope of what the committee is looking at.

We turn to agenda item 3, which is consideration of the motion on the instrument. I invite the minister to move motion S6M-07858.

Motion moved,

That the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee recommends that the Cost of Living (Tenant Protection) (Scotland) Act 2022 (Incidental Provision) Regulations 2023 [draft] be approved.—[Patrick Harvie]

Motion agreed to.

The Convener: The committee will publish a report setting out its recommendation on the instrument in the coming days.

I now suspend the meeting to allow us to set up for the round-table discussion.

10:11

Meeting suspended.

10:27

On resuming—

Community Planning Inquiry (Post-legislative Scrutiny of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015)

The Convener: The next agenda item is a round-table discussion about community planning. This is the fourth evidence session in our post-legislative scrutiny of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. The inquiry is looking at the impact of the act on community planning and how community planning partnerships respond to significant events, such as the Covid 19 pandemic and the current cost of living crisis.

Many thanks to our panel of witnesses for joining us. We are looking forward to speaking with you about your experiences of community planning in your communities across Scotland. We are joined in the room by Ellen Wright, who is a community councillor in Glasgow; Lionel Most, who is the chair and secretary of Dowanhill, Hyndland and Kelvinside community council; and Louise Robb, who is the chair of Largo Communities Together, which is a development trust. Online, we are joined by David Watson, who is trust manager at the Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust.

Anyone who is online can let the clerks know that they would like to reply to a question or join in the conversation by typing R in the chat box. Those of you who are in the room do not need to turn your microphones on or off—we will do that for you.

I will begin our conversation by inviting everyone to briefly introduce themselves. I am Arianne Burgess, the committee convener and an MSP for the Highlands and Islands.

Ellen Wright (High Knightswood and Anniesland Community Council): I am the secretary of High Knightswood and Anniesland community council in Glasgow. I am also a member of the area partnership for ward 14 and a member of the north-west sector community planning partnership.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Hi folks. I am the deputy convener of the committee and the member for the wonderful constituency of Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley.

Lionel Most (Dowanhill, Hyndland and Kelvinside Community Council): I am the chair of Dowanhill, Hyndland and Kelvinside community council. We have 12,500 residents. I am the

representative on the area partnership and the substitute for the sector partnership within the community planning chain.

10:30

Miles Briggs: I am a Conservative MSP for Lothian region. Welcome to Edinburgh.

Louise Robb (Largo Communities Together): I am chair of Largo Communities Together, which is the area for our community development trust. We have been around since 2017, so we are quite young.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am an MSP representing Clydebank and Milngavie.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am the MSP for East Lothian. Previously, for 15 years, I was a councillor and council leader in East Lothian, and I was a community councillor on Dunbar community council for 10 years.

The Convener: David is online. Do you want to introduce yourself?

David Watson (Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust): I am the manager of the Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust, which is the development trust in the far north of Scotland. We have been established since 2011.

We also take an active role in community planning. We have employed support staff for the Sutherland community planning partnership, which is a subset of the Highland community planning partnership, for a number of years. As a result, we sit, as a community organisation, as a full partner on the Sutherland community planning partnership.

The Convener: Annie Wells is also online.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I am a regional member for Glasgow.

The Convener: During the inquiry, we have each been exploring a particular theme. I invite Annie to begin our conversation with some questions about the particular challenges that face your community. Annie, will you get the conversation going?

Annie Wells: Good morning, everyone. I am sorry that I am not there in person. I am looking at the inequalities and challenges that are faced by local communities. We have had witnesses in previous evidence sessions describe the challenges that they face, especially in relation to the firefighting responses that have been seen during recent crises. Could you kick off by saying what you believe are the main challenges faced by communities? I am a Glasgow member, so I will go to Ellen first, please.

Ellen Wright: The main challenge that we have at the moment is the cost of living. The facilities that we have in our area are unevenly spread. We have one of the thriving places, which I believe work well, but we do not have very much engagement with the community planning partnership at all, apart from through area partnerships.

I do not think that we are particularly listened to. We are a tick-box exercise at the end of the day. That does not help in my community, because if we are not in one of the thriving places we tend to be ignored, although we have problems as well. We have areas that need to be looked at. We may need to rethink whether it should be so broad based or whether we should look at smaller communities of need within a ward, rather than just in one area.

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

Lionel Most: I will follow up on that. As I said, I am the chair of the Dowanhill, Hyndland and Kelvinside community council, which has 12,500 residents. We are probably the most affluent area in the city, but we sit beside, for example, Partick, which is in our ward and is a very poor area. When community planning is thought about, our ward is looked at as a whole. We have no public buildings in our area other than the schools, and an area such as ours really does not need that—to a certain extent, we can fend for ourselves. However, when you look at us and see that we are lumped together with quite a poor area, the Scottish index of multiple deprivation statistics are dragged down. We can manage, but they really cannot.

Therefore, I think that there ought to be a more nuanced look at different areas. There are parts of Partick that are okay because it is beside the university, but there are bits of it that—unlike in our area—are really quite poor and deprived. They are not getting the benefit of the kind of facilities that the public authorities have, because they are seen in conjunction with the wealthier areas. That is one challenge.

Another challenge is that, as Ellen Wright said, our community representatives—even those who live in a kind of bubble, as I do—know that there are deprivations in the surrounding areas. Yet, in a recent programme carried out by the council, it did not engage with us properly to find out who was in the greatest need until the very last minute, when we were told that it was just looking for red flags. The council really did not want us to make any changes to what it was doing. It was only after we created a big fuss that it realised that, if it is giving money to three lots of people in one place and three lots of people in another, who are doing the same job, the question is why that is not spread

out a bit. We managed to persuade the council to change what it was doing a wee bit, but it was not too happy about it. Therefore, there needs to be much more engagement with the community, at the earliest stage.

As I understand how community planning is done in Glasgow, there is a strategic partnership at the top with absolutely no community involvement, which includes the police, the fire service and so on. The next level down is the sectors, which have only one representative from each ward, and then there are the area partnerships, with one representative from each community council. It is a matter of communication. Although the minutes of meetings are available, they are very scant. The community does not get a proper picture of what is going on at the strategic level and at the level of those other sectors. There needs to be much better and much more communication about what they are doing.

I was reading the evidence that the two council officers gave to the committee on 7 March. Both were saying that it is a learning process, but, to be honest with you, they have had eight years to learn about it. They need to get their skates on and learn a bit more. There needs to be more communication with the community, which has the local knowledge.

The Convener: Thank you. I hope that this inquiry will help to unearth some of those things.

Louise Robb, what are your experiences?

Louise Robb: Our experience might be a little different. Largo and the Largo ward has 3,000 voting residents and is a relatively well-off area. You would think that there would be no deprivation, but during the time of Covid we found that there were a lot of elderly people who were very isolated, with family scattered round the world.

With that knowledge, we are in the middle of a local place plan process; we are about halfway through it. We have been very lucky in that we have been able to employ a part-time development officer to help us run that and get it working. The planning will be on two levels. A local place plan will go up to Fife Council to become part of the Fife plan—at least, our ideas will become part of it. The rest of our work is our own action plan. We want to kick that into action ourselves, and we will.

The one thing that we struggle with at community level is that we are all volunteers. In some cases, we are trying to do with volunteers the work that would have been done at council level. A bit of capacity, so that we can continue to be board members but employ some people at an operational level would significantly change what we can do. We ran a very good Covid resilience

group that did operational work. We are also covering resilience going forward, and we have a number of other projects.

Availability of land would also help. The biggest request in our local place plan at the moment is for affordable homes. We would like to do that, perhaps by using the rural housing burden route and developing a housing trust. That is a bit down the line, but it is where we are heading.

We are pretty active—we are not saying that we cannot do things—but capacity is going to be a struggle for us. Engagement is good and people are giving a lot, but can we really ask volunteers to run toilets and all those sorts of things? We would like to be able to pay someone, so that they have a job.

That is where we are sitting, if that is any help.

The Convener: That is great, and it is tremendous that you are on the brink of considering a community-led initiative.

David, do you want to talk about the challenges facing folk in communities in Sutherland?

David Watson: Obviously, our area is very remote and rural, and that plays a bigger part in all of this. Some parts of Sutherland are two and a half hours by car from Inverness, with very few options for other transport links, and we are certainly not anywhere near the commuter belt where the well-paid jobs are.

We have been dealing with deprivation and inequalities for a number of years now. In 2019, prior to Covid and the cost of living crisis, 42 per cent of people in Sutherland were deemed to be in fuel poverty, with one in three children deemed to be in poverty, too. I shudder to think what those figures must be like now.

Therefore, deprivation and inequalities have been big issues for us. The situation is being driven by the cost of energy. In addition, slow broadband speeds, along with our not being in the commuter belt, make it harder for people to have well-paid jobs. Other issues include childcare availability and low levels of public and community transport. The cost of living is obviously a big issue, too. The high energy prices are a particular injustice that is hard for us to bear, given that we are a producer of energy.

Environmental pressures and the transition to net zero are huge concerns for our communities, but, for me, the real issue for the future of remote and rural communities is the depopulation that we are being threatened with. It is estimated that population loss in Sutherland will be 11 per cent by 2040, and the figure for Caithness will be even higher at, I think, 21 per cent. Given that there are only 12,000 people in Sutherland, we cannot

afford to lose many more, and I point out that it is an ageing population, too.

As a result, we must not be merely accepting of or trying to mitigate the fact that depopulation is coming—we need to repopulate if we want our rural communities to survive. To do that, we need to create jobs; we need superfast broadband, because that is more necessary here, outside the commuter belt, than anywhere else; we need better transport links; and we need to look at homes as a real issue. I use the word “homes” rather than “housing”, because we need homes for people to live in. The rural burden is a great way of ensuring that houses remain homes.

We talk about affordable housing, but, given the cost of building a house, I am not sure that that can be delivered to most people. Instead, what we need to think about is attainable housing. We need to allow young people, especially those with children, to live and work in our areas. I would love to be judged on primary school rolls, and we need to attack that issue, increase those rolls and put in place the conditions so that parents of primary school-age children wish to live and work in rural areas. In short, if we have what might be called the vertical target of primary school rolls as well as what I would call horizontal objectives with regard to homes, broadband, transport, childcare, well-paid jobs and skills, that will really make a difference.

From our perspective, therefore, the biggest challenge that we face is depopulation, but everything else, such as the cost of living, existing poverty and environmental pressures, feeds into that. It is a big challenge, but we are certainly willing to take it on at planning partnership level.

The Convener: Thanks very much, David. Annie, do you have another question?

Annie Wells: There are a couple of bits that I would still like to ask about. Everyone has mentioned the cost of living crisis, but do any of you have any evidence or experience of community planning reducing inequalities?

10:45

Lionel Most: Recently, we had the Glasgow communities fund, which was spread out across the city, but I would not say whole-heartedly that it improved inequalities. It helped a little bit. As I alluded to earlier, it was a bit skewed because of the lack of community knowledge. If the community had been involved much earlier, it could have been spread out more. I know that it was a limited amount and there were far more applications than there was funding but, with a bit of community input, it would have spread much more fairly across the city.

With community input and the right kind of aims in view, the answer to your question is yes, but I have no evidence that it has been completely successful.

David Watson: A good example recently was that Highland Council made some cost of living emergency funding available across Highland. As you all know, it is a huge region. If Sutherland had got the percentage of that funding that it was due on a population basis, I think that we would have been due something like £27,000. However, the funding was application based, so it was for community organisations to apply for.

The Sutherland community planning partnership works particularly effectively and we have a number of sub-groups on fuel poverty, food poverty and community resilience. Those groups were made aware of the funding and they supported each other and were supported by the agencies that are involved in the partnership to make applications that were fit for purpose and dealt with the situation that needed to be dealt with.

We speak regularly and we understand where the needs are. As a result of the applications that Sutherland organisations made, instead of the £27,000 that we would have got if the fund had been divvied up by population, we ended up securing £68,000, which is 250 per cent of what we should have got. I put that down squarely to the community planning and the support and knowledge that our community organisations get from the partners by working together well. I am convinced that that is why Sutherland does well when such funding bids open up.

Another good example is that, recently, my development trust was lucky to secure money from the investing in communities fund, which is a large fund from the Scottish Government. There is no doubt in my mind that our role in community planning in Sutherland and our ability to demonstrate it played a huge part in that, given the confidence that we are an organisation with the governance and strategic knowledge to be able to deliver.

Being involved in community planning certainly works—[*Inaudible.*]*—*at a community level. We have several sub-groups that are forging away. We have a new group on homes and we hope to deliver on its aims in a cross-community way through working together. Instead of just looking at one housing plot in Durness, for example, we will look at the whole of Sutherland and see where we are going.

We see small wins with funding. However, over the next few years, we need to move on to bigger stuff with big funding for homes, which are needed in Largo and other places. Instead of £68,000, we

want to move towards talking about, perhaps, £6.8 million for homes.

Louise Robb: Thank you for mentioning us, David. We are rural communities with real housing needs.

Through the Development Trusts Association Scotland, we were able to access quite well the funding that came during the Covid period for difficult things such as heating and the ability to help people who were struggling. We used that funding—we still have small amounts of it going into the right places—and we felt quite well resourced through that organisation.

Our next challenge is land and the bigger funding that we could use to make a difference. Our challenge is our school roll. We want young people with children to be able to come back and populate a place that has become very much a retirement area or a place for Airbnbs to be bought and leased. We are in danger of the balance tipping between being a community and a holiday park, to be blunt.

The Convener: Absolutely. That is an issue across the beautiful rural parts of Scotland that people want to visit.

We will move on to our next theme, which is usually led by Mark Griffin, on community empowerment. David, you talked about how you were able to shift the amount of money that you would receive from £27,000 to £68,000. It sounds as though that was a result of great communication, a good structure and good relationships. However, I am aware from a previous session that you attended that not all areas of the Highlands have had such a satisfactory experience. I am interested in hearing what was put in place or what evolved to make your experience so good, so that we can support other community partnerships to get to where you are.

David Watson: We had an interesting session about a month ago. I felt like an outlier, because we have had a very good experience of community planning in Sutherland, but that does not seem to be the case everywhere. That is reflected across the Highlands, as the Sutherland community partnership is held in very high regard because of how we work.

One difference in Sutherland is that the partnership's input is very much non-political. We have very few councillors, and at least a third of them are independents, so things are less political; it is more about looking at the team dynamic. In my experience—although I grew up in Sutherland, I have been involved in the partnership only for the past four and a half years—everybody pulls together, sees the bigger picture and tries to deal

with the issues that the research that we undertake shows that we need to deal with.

One of the biggest factors is that, intermittently over the past five years, we have been able to get funding through various sources that has allowed us to have staff who support the community planning partnership and the committees. They are not admin staff; they do development work. A number of our initiatives would not have happened if there had not been the support of paid staff to undertake the work. Having those staff has definitely made a massive difference to Sutherland. During periods in which we have not had funding, things have not been able to be delivered as easily, despite people's hard work. We still delivered to a high standard, but we did not do so as readily as we do when we have the staffing.

At the moment, we have funding only until the end of March 2024. After that, who knows what will happen to our ability to move things forward? However, I know that, in relation to our partners, the sub-groups that we have created and the initiatives that we undertake, it really helps to have, as staff, professional development workers who can move things forward and take them to the next level. Having those staff along with the team dynamic is important.

Another thing that makes us slightly different is that there is real community involvement. Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust is not a statutory partner—we do not have to be a partner—but we have been made a full partner because the other partners understand that we are able to contribute by making things better and moving things along for the community. We provide a community voice other than those from our third sector interface and the membership groups that represent communities. There are community groups that deal at the coalface with fuel and food poverty and with environmental issues.

Given that we have that input alongside the staff and the fact that everything really works, even the biggest, blackest clouds have silver linings. Covid was certainly one of the blackest clouds that we will ever face, but we were able to move online. We are talking about a huge geographical area and it could take a whole day for someone to get to Brora from Durness, but they can now just spend an hour and a half attending the meeting, so our meetings are much better attended. That probably takes networking away from the agenda, so we will have to address that, but we certainly have more involvement on many levels because we engage in that way.

A number of things came together and worked for Sutherland. Caithness also works relatively well. From what I have heard, it has a very good reputation, and the support from Highlands and

Islands Enterprise at the local level helps. The things that have worked well include the team dynamic, the staffing, people working together and the community involvement. We do not just have statutory partners sitting around chatting about what might work. Instead, we look to see what needs to happen and then try to deal with it.

The Convener: That is very helpful. I invite our other witnesses to comment if any of them have been sparked by that. I would be interested to hear what community empowerment looks like to them. We have heard about that from David Watson, but I would also like to hear others' perspectives.

Ellen Wright: My feeling about and experience of community empowerment in Glasgow is that we are a tick-box exercise at the end of any process. The example that Lionel Most gave is a recent one, which is probably why it sticks in our minds. We were invited along to the Glasgow funding review panel and we practically had to rewrite what was produced for the north-west sector. The third sector should be brought in at the beginning. We are left out until too late in the process.

I am glad that we are here today. The reason why I came is that I was told that the committee would listen. We do not always feel that we are listened to—well, we might be listened to, but no action is taken, or what we say is smoothed over in bland minutes that say that we met and a discussion took place. The minutes do not say what the discussion was about, but those minutes are what our participation boils down to.

The Convener: Would the first step for community empowerment be for you to be at the table when ideas, projects or funds are designed?

Ellen Wright: Yes. I heard that from one of the thriving places organisations as well. We are not involved at the beginning of anything that happens. We need to be involved and to be listened to. We could be asked what we want before people go into committee rooms and discuss what will happen. The best way to put it is that we feel that our involvement is a tick-box exercise.

The Convener: Lionel, what does community empowerment look like to you? What needs to happen if it is to work better and not be just a tick-box exercise whereby you are brought into the conversation too late in the game?

Lionel Most: What Ellen Wright said is right: rather than feeling empowered, we feel a bit impotent.

I was not aware until quite recently that local authorities' different structures mean that they have different ways of approaching community empowerment. Our local authority's design and

structure mean that its forum has no community representatives on it. It consists of organisations such as the fire service and the police, which is fine, and the health board, but there are also representatives of colleges and housing associations. We cannot see how they can possibly be part of the community when they are, in effect, private bodies.

The fact that we are not involved means that we are reliant on information trickling down, but there are invariably only stark minutes of meetings that say, "A report was produced and approved." We do not know what is going on from the minutes of meetings. Recently, we asked for more information on something, but the council said, "You're not getting that information, because it's confidential." It is a long story, but the council says that the process is robust and transparent. I feel that that is disingenuous, and I told it that.

I have another point that relates to what Ellen Wright said about our involvement being a tick-box exercise. In the evidence that Shaw Anderson gave on 7 March, he talked about the development forum getting "up close and personal" with people. What he spoke about is called the community council development forum, which—good on it—holds a meeting every quarter on a Saturday morning. However, the forum gives a presentation; it does not do a consultation. At those meetings, someone is there to tell us what is going on—for example, there was a forum recently about Glasgow's low emission zone—but they just tell us what they are doing, and they do not listen to us. I could have chipped in on the lack of electric vehicle charging points, but I was unable to do so because the council is not interested in listening; it just tells us what it is doing.

To me, community empowerment means enabling people to be at the table at an early point and having good and detailed communication around those early discussions.

11:00

The Convener: That is helpful. Louise Robb, what is your experience of community empowerment?

Louise Robb: As a small community, our experience is probably quite different. We kind of take the bull by the horns and form relationships with the bodies that are around us, such as Fife Coast and Countryside Trust. It has a pathway that comes right through our area, and we invite its chief executive officer to give talks so that we get to know the organisation and how to ask it questions.

Perhaps naively, we put our trust in the local place plan process. We know that what comes from that is what we will action systemically and

put in place as best we can. We work alongside Largo area community council, and some of its members sit on some of our sub-groups. That is how small we are, and that means that we are working in terms of human relationships, not organisations. That approach seems to be working for us.

We have a lot of councillors getting involved in the process—sometimes we keep them out but sometimes we want them in. We need to be able to make up our minds and then ask for the help that we want rather than being told what is coming our way. We might be being naive, but that is the route that we are on.

We have a year and a half with the development officer to put into place our top actions, and we will lodge the local place plan, which is the formal part of the process, next June at the latest, and probably earlier than that—we hope to have it in by the end of the year. We have to live in hope that the planning process at Fife level will take into consideration the things that our community is saying that it would like to happen. We are mostly stating things positively, as opposed to saying what we do not want to happen.

That is where we are at. As I said, our experience might be very different from the experience of people in a city, where big things are going on.

The Convener: That is a good point. Communities in cities deal with many more people and much more complex issues and have to find their way through all of that.

Lionel Most: I accept that Glasgow is a large area and that, sometimes, people are apathetic—there are some dormant community councils—while, at other times, people shout too loudly. However, the authorities should be smart enough to be able to work their way through that.

The Convener: Is there a need for skills development in communication and relationship-building processes?

Lionel Most: Yes. The authorities need to be able to interpret what is going on behind the silence or the chat.

The Convener: That is a good point—there is a need to understand what is going on behind the silence.

Ellen Wright: I would like to make a point about something that I presume is the same all over. Everything—all the necessary information—is online. However, many of our citizens—a massive amount of people—do not have the ability to get online, whether through poverty or age.

I have tried to get hard copies of documents to people. There is a consultation going on about

Glasgow city centre—I believe that what happens there is a matter for the whole of Glasgow—and, in order to discuss the issues with an elderly forum in my area, none of whose members are digitally connected, I have asked for hard copies of the information, but I have not received them. Equally, when I asked for information from the Scottish Government on community wealth building, I was sent a link and told to print out 45 pages myself. I appreciate that the days when bodies printed out thousands of copies of things are gone, but it would help if there was even a central place in Glasgow where we could pick up, say, the Glasgow housing strategy, which is 65 pages long. Hard copies of such documents should be made available for people who cannot participate online. If that is not done, massive amounts of people are excluded.

The Convener: That is a good point. How can we have community empowerment if we are missing whole sections of the population, who cannot engage in that way?

Lionel Most: To be fair, the system is quite good with people whose first language is not English. Elderly people have a voice, too.

The Convener: People know that there are systems in place that it is likely could be easily adapted.

I bring in Paul McLennan on the third sector's role in communities.

Paul McLennan: I have been focusing on the third sector in the context of community involvement. We have had feedback that the picture is mixed from area to area—we are picking that up today, too. Central to what is coming through is that there needs to be recognition of what communities do and consideration of how they can be adequately resourced.

If the witnesses could take a step back and look at the situation, as the committee is doing, how would you like to interact with your local authorities? What are local authorities not doing that they could be doing? When do you get involved in decision making, and when would you like to get involved? That is the key issue. What funding would you need to do the best job?

I will also ask about the lessons that have been learned from the Covid experience. During Covid, local authorities and local organisations had to turn round and get action plans in place overnight. Are there lessons that we have learned—or not learned? I put that to Louise Robb first.

Louise Robb: During Covid, we felt that Fife Council's resilience help was really good. I think that today is the anniversary of the lockdown. I remember that we met on this day three years ago, as a Covid group, to ask, "Okay, what can we

do, as the church, the community council and Largo Communities Together? How do we pull together?" We invited some councillors, who attended that day—or just about attended that day.

I feel that we are well supported. What is difficult for us now is that we are growing lots of things but relying on volunteers. Board members are trying to do operational work while having full-time jobs. I have a full-time business. We are going to run out of capacity. How do we take the step to providing more services at community level without having to call on more volunteering by the same few people? We also want to provide jobs, which are needed in our community. We are grappling with that.

We are getting a little help from the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations accelerate programme; someone is coming to do facilitation with the board on how we look towards the next step. We are being helped, although I do not know what our outcomes will be. There is help out there, but the gap between organising volunteers at operational level and providing some paid jobs is going to be our struggle. That is our experience.

Paul McLennan: I will put the same questions to David Watson. You mentioned DTAS; I have worked with it and found it to be a great organisation to work with.

Louise Robb: It has been invaluable.

Paul McLennan: Maybe more funding is needed for the likes of DTAS, to build capacity. Louise Robb might want to talk about that, before I ask David Watson to respond on the broader point.

Louise Robb: We have engaged with DTAS since we set up Largo Communities Together. We have worked with a number of development officers, all with different skills, and on the whole we have found them to be extremely good at supporting us to take the next steps. DTAS gives us access to legal advice, accountancy advice, tax advice and so on. As a body, it has been invaluable in supporting us. I cannot help you much more on that question.

Paul McLennan: That is great. I ask David Watson to comment on the wider point. Where would you want to be involved in decision making? Is the work resourced adequately? You touched on that. Perhaps you will talk about DTAS, too.

David Watson: We are a member of DTAS and we hugely respect the help that it gives organisations. We are slightly different, as we are in a relatively rural area with a small population of 1,700 people. Our development trust has 15 staff; we have been quite successful for a number of

years and we work over a wider area—we work over Sutherland.

The DTAS funding for officers that was spoken about has now been absorbed into the investing in communities fund. Previously, the Scottish Government gave DTAS funding to give to anchor organisations. The community anchor organisations were fundamental to the response to what happened during Covid, especially in rural communities, where people were genuinely not willing to leave their homes and did not know how they were going to get 12 miles to Tain or 25 miles to Dornoch to do their shopping. That was about how development trusts could support them. DTAS offers invaluable high-level support, including legal support. The funding that it gets is intermittent, so it is in the same position in that it is always going about for funding.

We have managed to support the community planning process here by going through a number of funds. We initially got funding from the aspiring communities fund, which is a Scottish Government fund. The staff that we now have who support community planning come from Highlands and Islands Enterprise, through its strengthening communities wing. It allows each of our sub-groups to have properly researched action plans and it allows those action plans to be kept up to date and delivered against. That then allows for some co-ordination and for responsibility to be given to different organisations for different aspects. A number of community groups, anchor organisations, development trusts and other organisations across Sutherland can be given responsibility for the delivery of aspects of community planning actions.

Having such support widens the net in relation to who can be involved. If there is a lack of support, that comes right back to the statutory partners, because there is no way of throwing the net more widely. We have had intermittent funding, which has been welcome. We have had superb staff. We seem to be a recruitment agency for the likes of Highland Council and HIE, because we recruit staff who they keep nicking, but that is probably a backhanded compliment to us.

We have had really big successes. At the end of 2019, we delivered a Sutherland fuel poverty summit, which got national media coverage, and we had cabinet secretaries there. That was the result of the hard work that our staff were able to put in to support the networks.

We must also remember that voluntary work is not limited to the third sector. To a degree, the involvement of statutory partners is voluntary, because they also have full-time roles to fulfil. That is one of the problems that our staff can help with. We have statutory partners—whether it be the police, the fire service or the national health

service—that are very busy doing their other roles. Sometimes, people are not trained in community planning when they get roles that designate them as the representative on the community planning partnership. There is also huge turnover in those roles as people move on—I think that five different people have been the police representative in the four years that I have been involved. Sometimes, that can create difficulties.

However, staff support and action plans provide consistency and support to statutory partners, as there is something for them to work on. That has been invaluable, but we always have to try to see where the funding is. There is no mechanism through which we can say, “We’ll go there for funding again.” We have to make a case that the funding will do good things. Sutherland’s good reputation helps us with that.

Paul McLennan: Lionel Most and Ellen Wright touched on where Glasgow City Council sits. Where do the area partnerships and the TSIs sit on support? Is the support from the TSI and area partnerships for community councils sufficient or does it need to be embedded further? If it is not sufficient, what would you like to see?

11:15

Ellen Wright: In our area partnership, the third sector interface has a place. The area partnership works very well; we know what is happening in our local area. It was supportive during the Covid crisis, but I must admit that it was the community—along with councillors and the MSP—that pulled together. Through the thriving places initiative, the community accessed funding for people in the area. We helped by volunteering at food hubs. A huge food hub was set up in our local secondary school for, I think, five secondary schools in Glasgow, and the third sector then got involved. I was involved as an area co-ordinator from mutual aid.

The community pulled together. The community planning partnership was the last to come online. We were still holding community council meetings, and it was actually easier to hold a meeting with our councillors online. A couple of developments were going on in the area, and we were all able to use Zoom to hold meetings. We were eventually told to use Teams; we asked for training on it, and we were basically told how to switch our computers on.

The community and the area partnership work well. The sector has said that the area partnership should be more informal, but ours has been more informal for many years. We meet locally and we call one another by our first names. We are not sitting in a committee room in Glasgow city chambers talking into microphones. We all know

one another. I have a lot of respect for the area partnership—it, rather than the sector, should get the funding to distribute.

Lionel Most: I tend to agree. The area partnership works well mainly because it is for only one ward. Four community council members sit on it with a third sector person, who is very active and knows the area well. We also have representatives from the police and the fire brigade.

My gripe is always that such statutory bodies come along, give their reports and leave, but we might talk later in a meeting about the low emission zone or electric vehicles and want a police view—about how they would feel about giving people tickets with regard to electric vehicles, for example—but they will have left by that point. That is a defect with the area partnership, so we have been asking members to stay for the full gamut of the meeting.

During Covid, we continued our meetings online. We usually held them on Zoom, but we had to use Teams if a council representative attended. We find—I am speaking for the community council, but this applies even to the area partnership—that the best conduit is the councillors. They give us the best support, and at least they have access to council officers and can get us a response, although it is invariably a standard response that has been cut and pasted from somewhere else.

Our problems are dissimilar to Ellen Wright's in a sense. In my community council area, all our problems are first-world problems—we do not have a lot of poverty; we do not have child poverty or anything like that. However, people still have issues—they like to have enough glass recycling facilities for their expensive champagne bottles.

We still need contact with people. I find the area partnership level to be useful and helpful but, above that level, we are kind of left out of things.

Paul McLennan: That is helpful.

The Convener: We are having such a great conversation.

We will suspend for a few minutes.

11:19

Meeting suspended.

11:25

On resuming—

The Convener: This has already been such a rich conversation. The next theme is on local outcomes improvement plans and locality plans. We have already taken quite a bit of evidence on

such plans. I am interested in hearing from you about the awareness of the existence of those plans. In my community, people do not necessarily know that they exist. In addition, if you have experience of locality plans, do you have a sense of whether they are targeting resources where they are most needed?

We have also heard in evidence that the landscape is very cluttered and quite confusing, given the number of plans that must be created with communities and councils. When we talk about community planning partnerships, we are thinking of the services that are delivered to communities rather than about the planning of facilities on the ground. That, too, becomes confusing.

Another aspect of community planning partnerships is the intention to move to a preventative approach. Lionel Most and Ellen Wright spoke about the need for communications to ensure that we can prevent things from emerging, that we are aware of what is happening on the ground in our communities and that we can move to support people where that is needed.

I am packing in quite a lot, but I am interested to hear if you have a sense of whether we are managing to achieve a preventative approach through the plans. There is a lot in that. You can pick up whatever bits have stuck in your mind and you feel that you want to respond to.

Ellen Wright: I am aware of locality plans, but I have not had much communication in relation to that. Ours is called the thriving place programme. However, I can say that, when it comes to discussing the progress of our area partnership, it seems to do an awful lot of good work that is targeted where it is needed. Why is that? It is because the partnership is in the community, it is with the community and it is part of the community. The partnership's offices are in the shopping centre. Obviously, it would be wonderful if it had more money but, as far as I am aware, it is doing a very good job.

The Convener: As part of your role on the community council, do you not have an opportunity to feed in to any of the—

Ellen Wright: No. That is one complaint that I have seen in responses. The plans were handed to the partnership. Why was it not involved at the beginning? I think that the partnership is six years through its 10-year thriving place programme. That is what it is asking for, and you will hear the same call from everybody: you need to involve people at the beginning.

The Convener: Does anyone else have experience of LOIPs or locality plans?

Louise Robb: Is that the same thing as a local place plan, or is it different?

The Convener: My understanding of a local place plan and of what has come forward recently is that those are to do with the physical planning on the ground—that is, a community would decide the physical aspects—and that that plan feeds into the local development plan in terms of where housing will be and that kind of thing.

The locality plan is more about services, which is why we have the fire service and the police represented on a community planning partnership. It tries to pull in all the different bodies that can respond. Last week, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service told us about how it works at community level through CPPs to build relationships, as people trust and have respect for the service. It is doing quite a bit of work on heat in homes and things like that. I find that interesting, because it pulls in the preventative aspect. Members of the fire service can get into people's homes, so they could find out whether someone is living in fuel poverty and what help they would need through Home Energy Scotland and that kind of thing.

11:30

Lionel Most: I am at a bit of a loss here. We feel quite remote from the locality plan. As Ellen Wright said, we have no input into it. I just about know what it is.

Our relationship with the police is quite good, because they make an effort to attend the community council meetings. Again, my gripe is that we need them to stay the whole course. The police sometimes stay to the end of the meetings, which is quite good.

The police also appear at area partnership meetings although, recently, the area partnership has been meeting online. I do not know whether I am going off the subject, but once they have done their bit, the police and other officers switch off their cameras and get on with doing something else, although they are still there for any questions. Once we move to face-to-face meetings, the police will want to get away again. I think that, if we and the community as a whole had more input into statutory bodies, those bodies would get a feel for what we want and need. Because the police come to our meetings, they know our priorities and they do their bit to help. That would not be the case if they just came to the meetings and gave a report but did not listen. That comes back to communication—they have to listen.

The Convener: Something is maybe missing there. You talked earlier about that kind of community representation and joining things up. It is interesting that you are not all that familiar with

LOIPs—local outcomes improvement plans—or locality plans. It would be good if community councils were aware of them.

Lionel Most: Yes, we could be more aware of them but, to be fair, from what I have heard of them, there is not a lot of deprivation in our community council area, so not a lot of organisations in our particular area are looking for funding in relation to deprivation. In the next area, Partick, which I talked about earlier, perhaps there is more awareness.

The Convener: Yes, perhaps there is more activity and awareness of those plans in that area.

David Watson has indicated that he wants to come in.

David Watson: I will make a couple of points. Although I am portraying some sort of utopia of community planning, it is not perfect here. The one area in which the struggle seems almost universal is engagement between community planning and community councils. Although some of our community councils engage well with community planning, certainly, the bulk of them do not seem to deal with it as a requirement—they do it on an as-and-when basis. A more formal process might be interesting.

In Sutherland, we have 17 community council areas and we had locality plans, but because deprivation is harder to record in rural areas, we had locality plans for only five out of 17 of the community council areas. However, those worked well and they were all chaired by different statutory partners. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service chaired the Kyle of Sutherland locality group, and the NHS chaired the Brora group. Therefore, the statutory partners had no option but to get involved in locality planning, which was good. They were then tasked with reporting back to full partnership meetings on what had happened at the locality meetings and how the action plan was coming along. Therefore, they were involved at that level.

Place planning, which is a recent buzz term, is a great step forward, but different people have different definitions of it, so that has to be worked out a bit more. As a result of Covid and the fact that only five of our 17 community councils had locality plans—although deprivation was present in all our community council areas—we have moved away from locality plans at community council level to area forums. We have a west forum, a north forum, a south and central forum, and an east coast forum. Those forums incorporate a wider body of people. Again, they are chaired by statutory partners, but they are making sure that we do not miss any of the areas and they are probably bringing together wider and more effective action plans. That work is still embryonic.

I think that the west forum had its first meeting last night, so we are still working through how that will work.

However, we have hopes that we can create action plans for wider areas that, in reality, have the same issues. It is the same issues that are faced by the different community council areas—having 17 does not make any sense when everybody is talking about homes, broadband speeds and childcare. The area forums seem to work well, and that engagement with the statutory partners as chairs and their duty to report back on the action planning work really well.

Engaging community councils in the process of developing the action plans is crucial, however. We are just sending out the agenda for the south and central area forum, which has on it every chair and vice chair of the community councils in our area. At the most recent meeting, out of the five community council leaders, four were represented. Hopefully, we can help with that by doing that wider area planning.

The Convener: Thank you for describing what is going on where you are—it is helpful. I almost feel that I need a diagram to follow how it all fits together. I might get back in touch with you for that.

Louise, do you have any thoughts on that?

Louise Robb: There are only two pieces that I could probably link to. Personally, I really do not have much awareness of the wider locality plans. We are involved with the Fife resilience plan, and we have good links with that. We have created a local resilience plan along with the police and fire services, which goes down to house level, based on the major risks that we see. That is just about to go live. If that is an example of working in partnership, we are doing that.

Our local community council is chaired by Peter Aitken. We know him very well and we work alongside him and help him with his housing consultations, because the community council is really struggling for members. It is a valuable way of engaging with the planning aspects of the community. I do not want to speak out of turn or speak for Peter, but I know that his major issue is getting people to step forward for that. That is why we work alongside him to help him with consultations, because he physically does not have enough people to do that. We are okay about doing that—it is just about getting along in a community.

That is my experience so far, which is probably not as wide as that of others.

The Convener: Thanks for that. That highlights a possible element of a lack of empowerment of community councils that needs to be looked at

with regard to funding. Development trusts, in a way, got started because they were a way for communities to raise funds, take action and do things that they wanted to do.

The next theme is measuring impact. Marie McNair is leading on that.

Marie McNair: Good morning to the witnesses.

As the convener said, I have been looking at measuring the impacts of CPPs on communities. Lionel and Ellen, I am sorry to hear about your experience of not having much engagement with the community planning partnerships and feeling that you have been overlooked. We can feed that into our report when we have finished our evidence sessions.

Do you think that CPPs target their actions to where they are most needed? I know that you touched on that a wee bit, Lionel, but maybe you could expand a bit more.

Lionel Most: In theory, they are supposed to, but they need information to do that. In the example that we gave of the Glasgow communities fund, the community was not consulted, so it was very much a paper exercise. The council did not even think, “Well, we need so many food banks, and we need so many warm places,” and so on. It did not really look city wide and speak to people, and it was only at the very end when it spoke to us that it realised that it was not targeting the right areas. It was not giving money to people who did not need it, but it was not sharing the money fairly across the city.

That was the major problem. The first thing that we said, which was a no-brainer, was, “Why don’t you have a map?” That would not have been a difficult thing to do. For example, for licensing in Glasgow, there is a map so that the council knows where there is overprovision and where there is not. Why can it not adapt that for the people who apply for grants?

Ellen Wright: But there actually is a map. There is something called the Glasgow City Council dashboard, which came to the area partnership months earlier. I looked it up after the sector review; there is a map run by community planning that shows where all the grants are allocated.

At the review, we were told that the people who allocated the grants, before they came to us for review, had geographical knowledge. However, they had missed out my entire ward, which is the fourth largest area of deprivation in Glasgow. How can you do that? That is why the third sector and the community needed to be involved way before they were actually brought in. The people who made the allocations had to change their minds, because they had realised that they had got things totally wrong.

Marie McNair: Can you give an example of something that you feel that CPPs have achieved in your area? If you cannot, that is okay, but have you noticed anything that they have achieved?

Ellen Wright: Not really, no. If you are talking about the area partnerships, I would say yes, because they are part of the planning process. More power should be given to them. In Glasgow, they are looking at something called citizens panels, which, again, is quite a controversial subject, especially for community councils. Will we be listened to? We will wait and see the outcome.

Lionel Most: I want to follow that up with two comments.

First, I would agree that, in community planning in general, area partnerships are quite successful. I have had experience of their meetings, and I know that you feel involved, heard and so on. Frequently—or, I should say, not infrequently—those partnerships take account of what you say.

On the other hand, the higher-up tiers do not really work for the community. Citizens panels are being looked at in Glasgow at the moment—I note that Bernadette Monaghan talked about this issue when she gave evidence—but I know that a not insignificant number of community councils see such a move as a complete disaster. The aim is to enlarge the body; however, although it will include third sector bodies, which is a good thing, there is no place on it for community councils at the moment. Instead, it will perhaps be made up of local health bodies as well as local education bodies, and we feel that that is the wrong way of getting to the grass roots of the problem. The people involved in this need to be smart about doing that and reaching those who really need to be reached. The third sector would be quite a good way of doing that, but those involved do not seem to be taking cognisance of the sector in that respect at the moment.

Marie McNair: David, you seem to have had a more positive experience, so I will pop the same question to you. Do you think that CPPs target their actions where they are most needed?

David Watson: Absolutely, and what happened during Covid was a perfect example of that. However, what has happened as we have come out of Covid—and this is perhaps more the case with the cost of living crisis—is that we have been able to target food and fuel poverty and raise funding to help with energy costs and food poverty right across Sutherland. We are doing that by engaging with community groups, but it is probably easier to engage with the grass roots and with the third sector in rural areas, because they are not as hidden as they are in urban areas.

Yesterday, we had 12 groups from across Sutherland visit us to look at our polytunnel, our

food larder and all the strategies that we have in place. We are sharing information with them. The sharing of information from successful organisations with others is really valuable.

11:45

Because we are considering environmental issues and food security, we have mapped the community growing initiatives across Sutherland and have applied for funding on behalf of communities where we have not seen significant community growing to encourage them to do it to help with the environment and food security.

Because we are co-ordinated at CPP level, we can target funding to make interventions that really work across the area. We are speaking about a smaller rural area with a small rural population, but the CPP certainly is making a difference. It is bottom up; it is led by the communities, their needs and their wants. The partners respect and respond to that, rather than dictating what needs to happen.

We have the flexibility to create separate sub-groups where we feel that they are necessary to deal with issues that are a real concern for our community. A good example of that is that, when we came out of the first lockdown in Covid, which everybody diligently observed, there was not one case of Covid in Sunderland. Then, all of a sudden, in July, the floodgates opened and visitors from all over Britain were coming to Highland communities. The communities lost their confidence in welcoming visitors and went from the traditional Highland welcome to taking pictures of people's number plates to try to figure out where they were coming from.

We set up a sustainable tourism sub-group to work with the communities to help to understand their needs, inform us about the best ways to address them and inform visitors for visitor management as well. We put out a number of statements about how visitors should behave. That helped the communities to deal with the issues.

That group has now fallen by the wayside because the actions that needed to happen are gone. However, we have set up the homes and infrastructure group to address the housing emergency that we face. I mentioned the depopulation that we face. If homes for people are not built—I am talking about homes rather than housing that can be lost to Airbnbs—we will really struggle, so we have set up a separate group for that. Again, that is led by intelligence from the community and community engagement.

Without community engagement, there is no point in undertaking such work because, if you are

just dictating policy to communities, they will not buy into it.

Louise Robb: I do not think that we have proper links to locality plans. It is in my notepad to go away and ask about that.

Following on from David Watson's point, we, too, are responding with a sub-group about community assets. Its main focus will be affordable housing through the rural housing burden route, if possible. Land is our biggest issue. That is probably not this committee's remit. We have had issues with the provisions on abandoned and neglected land in the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016, but that is for another committee. We will go and fight that somewhere else.

Marie McNair: How should communities be involved in evaluating the impact of CPPs?

Lionel Most: Did you say "evaluating"?

Marie McNair: Yes.

Lionel Most: There is definitely a role for local authorities to speak to the beneficiaries of their facilities and grants. From what I gather, the way that that works in Glasgow is that the council gives out a grant and then somebody writes a report at the end of a couple of years saying, "This is all going fabulously." Nobody really assesses even a sample of the groups. Everything is done on paper. There should be more engagement. People should go out to see the groups, see how they are working and evaluate them properly, even if it is only a sample.

Ellen Wright: It would also be good if reports were given in plain English, not in Councilspeak or Governmentspeak.

Marie McNair: Absolutely.

Ellen Wright: There is a massive difference between speaking to people and talking about locality plans, for example. We need to speak to people in English so that they understand what is being talked about. It might be helpful to do what some organisations do, which is to lay out what was asked for, what is being done and what the outcome is. Make it simple—do not give us 64 pages of information. Community representatives are volunteers, but stuff is flung at us from all over the place. Give us succinct, clear outcomes—even I have used that word now. Tell us exactly what has been done and where we are going. That would help and people would be able to see what was being done.

Marie McNair: David, how do you feel that communities should be involved in evaluating impact?

David Watson: There are a number of things. At the moment, we are looking at longer-term

planning and getting communities involved in that. In the north-west, we are planning for what communities need out to 2045. Again, we may be an outlier, but we think that we engage quite well with that process.

Lionel Most has spoken about reporting. We feel that we are reporting to death on a lot of things that we are doing, so it seems to work okay here. Direct engagement is crucial, but it is also crucial that that is not done in isolation. The statutory partnership partners need to be alongside, so that you are not getting a different perspective from the third sector, the communities and the statutory partners, which would result in a compromise. We need to try to bring everyone together; we always try to do that so that we can reach consensus. If the two sides do not understand one another, that is when bigger compromises have to be made.

Communities are essential to the process, because without them what are we? There is no need for community planning without our communities. To me, community planning has to be about engaging with communities. Communities need to be, at the very least, in agreement with what is happening—the best case scenario would be that they are leading the process—and the statutory partners need to be in agreement with what the communities' needs are, within the parameters of the way in which they have to work. Without our communities, we cannot plan. They are essential.

Louise Robb: I do not think that I could improve on that—David has said it all.

The Convener: We will move on to our last two themes. Miles Briggs will lead the questions on the culture of public bodies and Willie Coffey will come in with questions on local and national leadership.

Miles Briggs: We have heard about attitudes and culture, and I have written down a few comments from panel members who said that those things have not changed. Ellen Wright has spoken about things feeling like a tick-box exercise; Lionel Most mentioned feeling left out; and David Watson touched on communities being dictated to.

I want to explore whether the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 has helped to change the culture. Police Scotland seems to have been given the green light for its role in engaging with the community. I am not sure whether that has delivered any change. Have constructive changes been made to how public bodies engage? Is Police Scotland the only example of constructive engagement, or are there others?

Ellen Wright: We have several projects within SIMD areas where there is co-operation between the police, the fire service, the health and social care partnership, the council and councillors.

When those bodies work together at area level, which is where everyone knows each other, the process works well.

Unlike Lionel Most, when the police or the fire brigade come to our meetings in the evenings, we say, after they have given us a report, that if something is happening so that they are needed elsewhere they should leave our meeting.

In those circumstances, at the local level, I feel that we all work together.

Lionel Most: In Bernadette Monaghan's evidence on 7 March, she said that the council is no longer "the dominant partner". I feel that that is just a veneer. We have all these processes now but, as Ellen Wright said, so far as security planning is concerned it is a tick-box exercise.

As a community council, we are very grateful for the ability to feed through our issues to the councillors and to get our feelings known in that way. As I said before, sometimes those feelings are responded to, but so far as the council as a body is concerned, we still feel that we get presentation rather than consultation from it.

Miles Briggs: If David Watson and Louise Robb do not want to come in on that point, I will expand the discussion to something that all the witnesses have touched on in various ways, which is the pandemic and the emergency response to it. I have been interested in other work that the committee has done that looked at that period, which seemed to show that some barriers had been taken away in terms of public services, which, perhaps due to their risk-averse nature, had not been allowing communities to do what they wanted and to take responsibility. Do you think that those have now disappeared? What worked to enable you to do that? Louise Robb, you mentioned that you literally all got around the table to see what you could do.

Louise Robb: I am struggling to get my head around that issue. My sense is that there is a cultural change in which communities are empowering themselves to action-plan and then tell the council what they are going to do. I do not know whether that is actually happening, but in relation to our resilience plan, my sense is that it has happened and that it seems to be working. The council is open to that and open to working with what we are going to do, even down us placing little cards with people's emergency details on them in windows. The council is saying, "That's great. In that area, we will know that we have to go into a house to help someone, because the details are there." My wider sense is that, if communities start to act for themselves, the councils seem to be open to them doing that.

Miles Briggs: Does anyone else have a comment on that capacity building?

Ellen Wright: I think that the initial response to Covid was an instinctive response by communities. In my community, the third sector immediately swung into action and the actual physical community was there to support the third sector. A lot of those organisations needed time to get things such as Zoom set up and we acted as a sort of buffer zone to give them that time. It worked incredibly well. However, people have gone back to work. People who were volunteers have other commitments and schools are open again, so there is less of that level of involvement.

Another barrier to being involved with things is the time at which meetings are held. Any meetings that are held at Glasgow City Council are during the day. People work, and they cannot always take time off. If you become a member of a committee, such as the area partnership, and then you join a couple of sub-committees, you are committing a lot of time as a volunteer. Nobody is objecting to committing the time that they want to, but the barrier to them doing so is that everything is during the day. The council needs to be more open and flexible in terms of the needs of people who want to help out.

Lionel Most: The other thing that I have noticed is that, post Covid, the authorities are very risk averse. Whereas we resumed face-to-face meetings as soon as we possibly could, the area partnership is still meeting on Teams. I have been pressing for a while to have face-to-face meetings. People are not totally against it, but there is no consensus and several members still want to do it on Teams—which is probably an excuse for something else.

Ellen Wright: We meet face to face.

12:00

Miles Briggs: David Watson, do you want to add anything?

David Watson: I would like to say, first, that I may have used the word "dictating", but we certainly do not feel dictated to by partners. I want to avoid giving that impression, as it is not something that we have experienced.

We get good buy-in from the statutory partners, but I feel that, often, people are promoted into roles without the necessary training in or experience of community planning. They come to it without confidence in their ability to deliver their role. They are also expected to do the community planning work on top of the job that they already have.

For example, a chief inspector or a head of area in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service probably does not have community planning as their highest priority. Creating some space for such

people in the statutory bodies to be able to engage with community planning properly, and giving them support to do so, would help the statutory bodies to contribute better.

On the Covid response, I think that there was a need for the local authorities and bodies more widely to engage with communities because, at that point, nobody knew what to do. Therefore, the best thing to do was to gather evidence on a community's needs from the most local sources possible—community councils and so on.

Things were made easier during Covid. Certainly, from a grant-funding perspective, the audit requirement dropped. It was not that things were not audited or that there was not a responsibility to spend money properly, but the arrangements were less onerous. However, all of that has come back with a vengeance, and it is probably worse now than it was before. The temporary arrangements worked really well for getting resources to the areas that needed them, quickly and without fuss, in order to deal with issues there.

Another wrinkle in the process is that most organisations have moved their application processes online. That can be problematic. We have quite rightly embraced Teams meetings and Zoom meetings, which, as I have said, can be useful in rural areas as they can mean that more people can participate. However, I think that we have to find a happy medium. If we push everything online, it will take away some of the ability to gather community intelligence. Often, we are not dealing with an officer anymore; we are just dealing with a screen. Sometimes, that can hinder the process.

The reaction to the Covid situation was superb with regard to the realisation that the communities were the best sources of information to try to deal with what was happening at a local level. Let us not throw the baby out with the bath water, because that grass-roots engagement is what is important at the community planning level.

Miles Briggs: Thanks. I have taken away some of the points that Ellen Wright made about area partnerships and the fact that you all know each other, and I note that Louise Robb mentioned that some of the success has been around the way in which human relationships have driven what is going on. With regard to who is not at the table in those discussions, Lionel Most mentioned that the third sector sometimes does not have the capacity to engage as much as it should. Are there any views on who has not been able to become part of the process?

Ellen Wright: Even before Covid, I asked for engagement with our area partnership to be expanded. I would like somebody from the local

school to attend, so that we can hear the views of the children. We are constantly told about the importance of the views of young people, but we do not actually often hear their voice.

Especially when it comes to planning, it would be good to talk to the Glasgow Disability Alliance and other people from that community so that we understand their needs. We could engage more people in the process at the local level, not at the high level of the city chambers.

The Convener: Willie Coffey will ask questions on local and national leadership.

Willie Coffey: What a fascinating discussion we have had. Rural communities and the urban community in Glasgow have quite contrasting views. My questions are about leadership. I want to hear your views on, and ideas about, what leadership is and what successful leadership looks like. Is there still a hierarchical system, with leadership dominated by councils? Is leadership demonstrated in a top-down way? Where is your role in that? Which leaders have made a difference in your community?

I will come to Ellen Wright first. What does local leadership look like? What makes a successful community planning partnership in relation to leadership?

Ellen Wright: A good leader is somebody who listens and involves people throughout. That is why, in my opinion, area partnerships work far better than community planning partnerships, because they cover smaller areas. We work together. We do not necessarily need somebody to tell us what to do, but we want somebody who takes people along with them, who listens and who acts on that. There should not just be a talking shop; the person should act on what we say.

Lionel Most: A good leader is someone for whom I have respect. I can think of a couple of councillors, rather than officials, on whom we can rely to help us out when we have an issue. Within community planning and the statutory bodies, there is no assessment of leadership. Well, we are not aware of any assessment—there might be some kind of internal review body. However, we are not aware of any assessment of the leadership of the officers in a council, and there is no mechanism available to us in relation to what success is and what failure is.

As Ellen Wright said, if someone listens and gets things done, they can build respect. A good leader does that.

Willie Coffey: Do you recognise leadership when you see it? In a previous meeting, somebody said that we all know what an elephant looks like, but it is quite hard to describe. Is it quite

hard to describe leadership when it takes place? Is leadership difficult to define, or is it obvious, in the sense that, if you have it, you know it, and if you do not have it, you know it?

Lionel Most: In relation to the area partnership, I would not necessarily say that any one person is a great leader, but there are people who support us, whom we can rely on and whom we follow. I cannot say any more than that. I do not quite know what you mean by a leader in that respect. If you are talking about someone who inspires us to do something, I do not think that I have come across such a person.

Willie Coffey: That is really interesting. Louise Robb, what does effective leadership look like to you?

Louise Robb: It is about responsiveness. The person must be prepared to engage in dialogue to find out what the issues are, and then they must point us in the right direction. They should be honest about what they can and cannot do, so that we know what will fall back on us, and we can then use our leadership in the community. It is a huge question.

Willie Coffey: Do you feel that this is still very much driven by the local authority, or do you genuinely feel that you are a participant in the process?

Louise Robb: I feel that we are completely the other way; we just take the bull by the horns, do our bit and apologise later if we have stepped—unwittingly—on toes. However, that might well be what our communities become. There are lots of leaders in our communities who will make links and who, if we put out a call, will say, “Yep, we can pick that up, because we know someone in the area.” If those in organisations such as the council are prepared to be responsive and honest, they will see that we have the best thing that they can work with. People will be able to tell them whether they can do something; they can say, “Yeah, I can help there” or, “No, that’s probably not an area where we would get much traction right now, but this is what we could do instead.” That is so helpful.

Willie Coffey: You said earlier that sometimes you do not let councillors in. That sounds like quite an empowering thing to say—

Louise Robb: We feel that we can say that.

Willie Coffey: Is that where you guys are? Do you feel that you are in control of a process and that you can contribute?

Louise Robb: Yes.

Willie Coffey: But that is not leadership—it is something else. It is a different dynamic.

Louise Robb: It is not that we do not want them there; it is just that we feel that we should make some decisions at community level without their making their input first with regard to what we need. We then engage with them and ask for the help that we need. After all, we can do a lot of this ourselves; we do not need to be a burden on the services if we ourselves can do a lot of these things. However, when it comes to, for instance, the resilience plan, we absolutely will involve them.

We would not need an MSP, say, to deal with community pathways; instead, we would go to Fife Coast and Countryside Trust, chat to the people there and get them directly involved. As a result, we do not have that double-leg approach of having to go to the council and then to their arm’s-length organisation. There is leadership in all these organisations—and good leadership in many of them—and it is all about our making connections where we need to do so.

Willie Coffey: Thank you. It is up to you now, David. What does effective leadership look like from your experience?

David Watson: For us, although we have what you might call an anointed chair, we have a collective and team dynamic, with the leadership spread so that it does not fall to one person alone.

It is interesting. As I mentioned earlier, our area forum is chaired by the Police Scotland chief inspector for the area; I think that we have gone through four in the five years that we have been involved, but I should say that I went to school with only 50 per cent of them. As a result, you see different styles of leadership, but because community planning and work of that kind are not naturally part of that person’s experience or skill set—they have probably become a very senior officer because they are good at other aspects of policing—they rely on the team. The team is therefore important, and we certainly help in that respect.

We also have more strategic groups from a council perspective. We deal with only six councillors, and I would say that, to a man, they leave their party hats at the door when it comes to community planning. That is really useful, because it means that they are reactive to what the community wants. As for the Highland Council staff with whom we deal, we deal with ward managers rather than senior staff; the councillors take the lead and are therefore responsible for their constituents. Things seem to work that way, too.

For me, leadership is about commitment to and support for each other. There are, as I have said, people who do not have huge amounts of experience of partnership working, but if they

show commitment and respect for the others involved, that can be called good leadership.

We are now in a position in which people are listening to the anchor and grass-roots organisations at the bottom of all this. Councillors and council staff often phone up to ask what they need to do, and the input comes in from our level. Involving communities in the strategic direction and showing respect for that is a huge thing. Respect, commitment and support: that is good leadership.

Willie Coffey: Thank you so much for that.

Have we any more time, convener, or have we run out of time?

The Convener: We have a couple of minutes.

12:15

Willie Coffey: In that case, I will ask about the national guidance under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. Are you aware of it? Does it need to change? What kind of recommendations might you have in order to improve your current experience?

Ellen Wright: I read it yesterday. I have read the 2015 act, and there are certainly a lot of words in it.

Willie Coffey: How do we improve the guidance?

Ellen Wright: Make sure that people follow it.

Willie Coffey: And listen.

Ellen Wright: And listen, yes—and involve people.

Lionel Most: I would highlight better communication, better involvement at an earlier stage with people at the grass roots and proper follow-up afterwards.

Willie Coffey: Do you have any comments about the national guidance, Louise?

Louise Robb: I do not have anything to add to what Lionel Most and Ellen Wright have said. I do not know the 2015 act inside out.

Willie Coffey: Finally, over to you, David. Do you have any final recommendations on improving the process?

David Watson: From a rural perspective, we understand what community planning is there to do in tackling inequalities and so on, and it is very much dealt with at community level. In rural areas, businesses are a huge part of the sustainability of communities. We have to find a forum or a way of engaging businesses with community planning with a level of respect. Without the businesses, the jobs, the income and the ability of businesses to

trade in our rural areas, communities cannot survive.

The place planning that we are all moving towards is perhaps the first stage of that. It allows us to engage with and consider what the community needs holistically. If we take that out, and if we try to deal with inequalities without addressing how we will deal with inequalities in the future—by creating better jobs and careers for people, and by allowing businesses to get involved in solving the housing situation in rural areas—we are missing a big part of what makes communities sustainable.

It would be good to have some sort of tweak to allow what are recognised as anchor community businesses—or something like that—to engage without a threat that businesses will take everything and give nothing back. We must be respectful of the fact that, without businesses, communities cannot survive, and without communities, businesses cannot survive.

Willie Coffey: Thank you very much, all four of you, for those contributions.

The Convener: That concludes the evidence session. Thank you all for coming in; thank you, David, for joining us online. It has been really helpful to hear your perspectives as we take the process of community planning partnership evidence taking further. Your evidence will richly add to our report; I have certainly been making lots of notes, and I understand that lots of colleagues have been making lots of notes, too.

12:18

Meeting suspended.

12:21

On resuming—

Subordinate Legislation

Valuation for Rating (Plant and Machinery) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2023 (SSI 2023/32)

Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development and Use Classes) (Scotland) Miscellaneous Amendment Order 2023 (SSI 2023/35)

The Convener: The next item on our agenda is consideration of two negative instruments. There is no requirement for the committee to make any recommendations on the instruments. Members will note that we wrote to stakeholders to invite views on the Scottish statutory instrument on general permitted development, and a couple of responses are included with the meeting papers.

If members agree to do so, we could write to the Scottish Government to seek further information on how the safeguarding process will work in practice and on whether councils offer clear procedures for raising concerns and complaints, as RNIB Scotland has suggested.

Do members have any comments on the instruments?

Willie Coffey: I am still a little concerned about the general permitted development SSI. It is not clear whether there are sufficient safeguards in that measure. The minister says in the policy note that

“it does not disapply ... controls on obstructions”,

but that does not tell me that councils could not still go ahead with a development, irrespective of its impact or of the community’s views.

There is a lack of clarity in the middle ground about whether people can object to something or participate in a decision, and whether the council should assess an application. That is still not clear to me, I am afraid, which concerns me a little.

The Convener: We can seek reassurances in a letter.

Willie Coffey: I support seeking reassurance, as you have outlined.

Miles Briggs: I agree with Willie Coffey on that. There is a need for guidance to be quite specific, and for all councils to follow that. I met RNIB representatives last week on a separate issue, and we discussed the use of ropes, for example, to create those areas. There is no real guidance or clarification on what that should look like. That is one of the key barriers that blind and visually impaired people often raise, so it is important that

we ensure that the guidance is specific if the measure goes ahead.

The Convener: Taking those comments into consideration, would members like to take oral evidence on the matter?

Willie Coffey: I think that it would be welcome.

Miles Briggs: There are so many people who want to ensure that they have an input into the process, and that it does not have unintended consequences when it is rolled out, so I think that that would be helpful.

The Convener: I think that it would be helpful, too.

To clarify, would you like to hear from the minister on what is going to be rolled out, or would you like us to bring in organisations such as RNIB Scotland?

Willie Coffey: We could probably just get the minister in. We have read the submissions and concerns from the organisations.

The Convener: Good—let us get some clarity from the minister.

Willie Coffey: Whomever it is.

The Convener: Yes, that is right—we will get clarity on that in a few days’ time.

Miles Briggs: Ahead of that, perhaps we could ask the minister, as we are asking them to attend, whether they could provide the guidance so that we can look specifically at what is going to be rolled out. As with short-term lets, guidance can be misinterpreted, so it would be helpful for us to look at that before we question the minister.

The Convener: Let us see whether that is possible.

Marie McNair: The same goes for planning permission for change of use other than premises “that are in close proximity to dwellings.”

That will depend on the interpretation of the guidance, so perhaps we can have a wee look at that.

The Convener: Those are all good points. We need more clarity, and we want some up-front information.

Those comments were all on the second instrument. Are there any comments on the first instrument?

I see that there are no further comments from members. At the start of the meeting, we agreed to take the next item in private, so I close the public part of the meeting.

12:24

Meeting continued in private until 12:45.

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