



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 23 September 2025

Session 6



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LOCAL GOVERNMENT, HOUSING AND PLANNING COMMITTEE
24th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

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COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con)

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Maureen Dickson (Unison)

John Mooney (Unison)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jenny Mouncher

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 23 September 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:31]

Decisions on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Ariane Burgess): Good morning, and welcome to the 24th meeting in 2025 of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. I remind all members and witnesses to ensure that their devices are on silent. We have received apologies from Mark Griffin MSP, Meghan Gallacher MSP and Willie Coffey MSP. Fulton MacGregor joins us online this morning.

Under the first item on our agenda does the committee agree to take items 3, 4 and 5 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you.

Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2026-27

The Convener: The second item on our agenda is an evidence session as part of our pre-budget scrutiny. I remind everyone that the committee has agreed to focus on public service reform. This is the third of our evidence sessions. Today, we are joined by Maureen Dickson, regional organiser, and John Mooney, also a regional organiser, both from Unison. I welcome you to the meeting. There is no need for you to operate your microphones—we will do that for you.

We will just throw our questions out and one or other of you can pick them up. I will start. We have three themes to go through: budget and funding trends; workforce issues; and the approach to transformation.

So far in our evidence sessions, we have heard that, off the back of the Verity house agreement and the conversations around that, ring fencing has decreased. We also hear that, off the back of the United Kingdom Government's spending review, multiyear funding could be an option in the upcoming budget. I am interested to hear about what you have seen in terms of that change in ring fencing and the potential for multiyear funding. Who wants to pick that one up first?

John Mooney (Unison): I will start with multiyear funding, which I think would be a very welcome way forward for councils and for our members who work in councils. It would give councils a chance to do a level of strategic planning.

We have issues with and general concerns about the continued cuts to local government and the real amount of planning that can go on as a result. In local government, we have the services that we want to provide as well as the services that we absolutely must provide. However, we are losing services across the country. We welcome anything that mitigates that in any way.

We believe that the reduction in ring fencing has been helpful, but I think that you can see from the general stats produced by the Scottish Parliament information centre, for example, that there are still issues with regard to where most of the money is spent in local government.

Spending is still very much education and social care-based. Do not get me wrong—those are exceedingly important, given the demographics of the country. However, that leads into a situation that I believe impacts the wider economy as well as our members' ability to move forward in their work. Quite frankly, there are fewer jobs in other areas, and I believe that some of the impact across councils is down to that imbalance.

The Convener: Thanks. Do you have anything to add, Maureen?

Maureen Dickson (Unison): No.

The Convener: You covered that well, John. You started to touch on the impact on your members, and I am interested to hear your thoughts on the impact of previous spending decisions on service users and employees. Could you expand on your view of that?

John Mooney: From Unison's perspective, local government has fallen well behind other areas when it comes to funding. In the same timeframe in which spending on health has gone up by around 20 per cent, spending on local government is minus 0.9 per cent on previous funding deals. That has led to service reductions and restrictions across the board.

Essentially, there are two paths for people who want to move into local government: roles in essential front-line services such as social care, and other roles, for example non-teaching roles in schools. The reality is that without those services and jobs, the other plans that the Scottish Government has for tackling child poverty and the general aim to provide decent public services simply cannot be delivered.

There is a juxtaposition there, because although we seem to value those jobs from an intellectual point of view, the reality is that the money that people are paid does not begin to compare with what they can earn elsewhere. People can move into other jobs where the money is competitive—these days, that even includes jobs in retail and supermarkets. People find that they do not get the same level of hassle in other jobs; they do not have professional bodies overseeing them, and a mistake does not mean that they have to leave their job and their career. We believe that there is an imbalance there.

On the other side, if I can move away from the front-line essential jobs that we are talking about, the ability to get into a host of jobs and career paths has been lessened across the community. I was brought up on a housing estate in Lanarkshire and did not have fantastic school results. I joined the council in the late 1990s as a skill seeker, and I saw people who became planning officers, transport officers and trading standards officers. People could get in the door, work their way up and build themselves a career, which not only was good for them and their families but added value to the country. The ability to do that has been severely lessened. Community learning and development is another great example of a role that has taken hit after hit over the past 10 to 15 years. Our concern is that any plans for budgets going forward will do nothing to fix that. That is particularly the case with what seems to be a plan

to bring in artificial intelligence to move out some back-office roles, for example, as well as what we believe to be a general plan across the public sector in Scotland to reduce staffing levels. Looking at that, we believe that the country is missing out in various ways.

Maureen Dickson: The expectations on local government services that service users have, whether they are parents of children who are at school or clients using social care, are far greater now than ever before. About six or seven years ago, the size of the local government workforce really reduced. As a consequence, we have found that sickness absence levels have gone up among workers who are trying to muddle through in the face of greater expectations of how much work they can pack into 36 hours a week than we have ever faced before. All of that has a knock-on effect.

In relation to salaries, John was right to say that, particularly in schools—and we have spent a lot of time over the past three or four years working with people in schools—the roles that workers are required to do and the expectations from parents around that have grown greatly. With the restrictions and the reduction in the workforce, I worry about how much longer local government will be able to sustain that direction of travel.

The Convener: I will bring in another thread to the conversation that you have both touched on—John, you can weave this into anything else that you would like to come back in with. From the conversations that we have been having, we are aware of an increased level of dissatisfaction with council services. What do you think of the idea of having a national conversation with people? As you have said, there has been a big shift in the focus, with education services and social work services certainly taking the bulk of the budget. Are most people aware that that is what has happened in their local authority area? Perhaps when they look at cuts to leisure services or libraries, for example, they are not aware of the greater demand weighing on councils. Do we need to start to talk to people more about that shift?

John Mooney: I think that we do, and the point that I will make ties into that very well. I think that the general dissatisfaction, if you like, with council services is dangerous—I think that it leads to a lack of trust in public services in general and that that plays a part in some of the protests that we have been seeing on our streets in recent weeks. I do not think there is an understanding of exactly how council funding works. Some people directly engage with councillors—I am thinking of the type of constituent who goes along to a surgery or whatever—and, in my experience, many councillors are happy to explain things to them.

However, I do not think that, in general, the person in the street understands the situation.

It can be difficult for councils. They want to tell people, "We are your council. We provide these services to you. These are your local decision makers, and you should elect them." However, they then have to say, "We are limited to what we can do in this area. We know you want this service, but our funding is ring fenced to deliver a different service."

There is also the issue of demographics, which I do not think is understood at all. I think that Unison members have a decent level of understanding of the demographics of their local council area—I do not want to mislead you—but that understanding is not universal. I do not need to tell you this, but there is an issue with the public clearly understanding that social care is a ticking time bomb. The demand for social care will only get greater, and so will the issues that we have touched on around pay.

There is also the issue of the agility of local authorities and, of course, their partners in health. I worry about there being the agility at the local level to do what is required in each council area. Do you want to talk about that, Maureen?

Maureen Dickson: I do not think that the public realises the pressure that there is on local government until they try to access services. If you are of my generation, you expect things such as libraries, sports centres and so on to always be there. However, then you go to use them one day and find that they are not there. If you do the jobs that John and I do, you are aware of all the cuts and the arm's-length organisations that have been set up, and of the pressures on the ALEOs to deliver budgetary and efficiency savings for local authorities.

I completely agree with John about the pressures on social care. My elderly mother lives with me. She had a couple of half-hour social care appointments every week, but the moment that she moved in with me and my husband, those appointments were stopped, because my council area decided, in conjunction with the local health board, to remove what they considered to be perhaps non-essential social care help for people to continue to live at home. That was really difficult for us as a family to get our heads around. It was very difficult for her to understand, too. I think that the assumption is, "Well, that person lives with a relative; they can just do it." However, relatives may work full-time in demanding jobs. It all has a knock-on effect and puts pressure on to everybody else.

09:45

That is a tiny example of the pressures within social care. It is absolutely a ticking time bomb. We rely more and more on the third sector to deliver social care for us, and unless the fair work agenda is properly implemented and delivers as it should, that also adds a lot of extra pressure into the situation.

The Convener: That is certainly the case when third sector organisations are run by volunteer boards, as they often are. That is an added layer.

I was going to ask about social care, but you have covered that issue nicely. It was great to hear directly from Maureen about her personal story, because that is one of many stories of families across Scotland.

The fiscal framework has been mentioned a few times in our conversation. I remember the question of who is responsible for the fiscal framework first coming up, after I became convener of the committee, years ago, when Kate Forbes was here as finance secretary. The Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities agreed to work on that as part of the Verity house agreement. Within that framework is the funding formula, and it was pointed out a couple of evidence sessions ago that that is what needs to be addressed. The allocation for each local authority is based on various criteria, but nobody seems to want to address that. I am interested in your thoughts about the fiscal framework in general and about the funding formula.

John Mooney: Broadly speaking, we welcomed the Verity house agreement, with COSLA and the Scottish Government working together more on those issues. To be honest, we would probably like COSLA to have a bit more power and be able to push a little more on that side of things, so that there is a genuinely equal and respectful partnership. At the end of the day, although we negotiate with COSLA on pay deals and so on for our members, the reality is that it is the umbrella body and knows what local government needs, so it should generally be listened to.

To be honest, I do not really know what to say about the funding formula, but it is key that it is up to date and as accurate as it needs to be. I have already mentioned our changing demographics a couple of times. Different council areas will have different requirements, depending on whether there are more rural communities and so on. Against the backdrop that I outlined earlier, local government funding has fallen behind that for other areas, which has certainly made my members feel that local government is less of a priority. It is more important than ever for the formula to be correct. If there is not an endless

funding envelope, funding needs to go to the right places in the right manner.

Maureen Dickson: I completely agree with John. In relation to the Verity house agreement, partnership works better if both sides are equal, and I do not think that that has quite been achieved yet. Over the past couple of years, Unison has been one of the bodies involved in local government pay negotiations, but we can go only so far in our conversations with COSLA, because, if it does not have the money, it has to go to the Scottish Government, so the balance is not quite as it should be.

The Convener: It is a work in progress. This committee has done a good job of trying to achieve a balance and, when the Conveners Group met the COSLA leader body recently, we said, "COSLA is an organisation, and the Parliament is an organisation. How can we work together in a better way?" I hope that those are the kinds of things that support the Government to work well with COSLA. It is about creating an atmosphere of respect, as John said.

Before we move on to workforce issues, would you like to make any other comments about what is required from the Scottish Government's forthcoming budget?

John Mooney: I have a general comment. I am paraphrasing a little but, if the First Minister's priorities are growing the economy, tackling child poverty, tackling the climate emergency and delivering high-quality and sustainable public services, there are some real issues in how that plan moves forward. We believe that local government can play a big part in growing the economy in various ways. I have touched on some of those ways already.

Tackling child poverty is key. It is often the most vulnerable in our society who really depend on local government services. They need as much support as we can provide. It is not just about front-line staff; if councils are looking after vulnerable children, they need capacity for those in the back room to compile reports, provide oversight and ensure that social workers have 25 cases rather than 45 cases, for example, so that no one slips through the net. That is all part of providing high-quality and sustainable public service.

Our concern is that overreliance on AI could impact quite a few of those services. First, AI is no substitute for an experienced back-room member of staff who reviews cases, ensures that people get paid on time and so on. Secondly, an overreliance on AI would be really bad for the environment, although we are talking about tackling the climate emergency. If we are talking about cutting the number of public service staff

over the next however many years and replacing them with something that will make it harder for us to reduce our carbon footprint, I do not see how that will work. I am not sure that that should be the direction of travel.

For all sorts of reasons that we have already discussed, we need a fair funding settlement for local government that allows local decisions to be made, so that we get some confidence back in Scotland again.

The Convener: That is a really important point. I like that you made the connection between your point that people who are experienced in dealing with social work cases really understand the nuances of such cases and the fact that AI uses a great deal of power. You also connected that point to the need to tackle the climate emergency.

I will bring in Alexander Stewart to ask about workforce issues.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning. You have already highlighted some of the areas that I will touch on but there is no doubt that you have an ageing workforce and that you have to manage retention and recruitment issues. That has a knock-on effect on the ability of departments such as social care or social work, as well as those involved in community work, which are important within the context of local government and your own local area, to deliver services.

You have already touched on the problems with an increase in sickness absence because people are being asked to do more in a shorter timescale, and the fact that the effort that is involved in managing that workload has had a detrimental effect on many of your members. We are aware of that. It would be good to get a flavour of whether you think that the sickness absence and retention issues are growing. If they are—you will probably say that they are—could you tell us how you are going to tackle that? If you cannot provide the services because you do not have the front-line service personnel, there will be problems further down the road.

Maureen Dickson: You are quite right. Sickness absence levels have increased, but that is not just due to what is going on within the workplace: external factors such as the cost of living crisis are also having an impact.

Local government budgets have been reducing for many years, and there has been a year-on-year build-up of a situation in which there are fewer people and greater expectations. If we take away some of the back-room services that enable front-line delivery, those jobs still have to be done by somebody, so they get passed on to the front-line personnel. That means that the problem just snowballs as it goes down the line, and the level of

public demand on those services is growing at the same time as local government is restricting.

We need to make jobs in local government attractive to the younger generation. I came into local government slightly earlier than John, as I started working in local government finance and pensions in 1989. At that time, people who entered local government employment thought all their Christmases had come at once, because they could see that the opportunities within local government were vast, and it was somewhere that they were proud to work in—I certainly was. However, we have lost a lot of that because there are more attractive jobs and people can get the same level of salary in other jobs where they have far less responsibility.

Until about 18 months ago, I worked quite closely with social work colleagues, and heard horror stories of people working 70-hour weeks and never having a break, because they were working weekends as well. They could not switch off because of the number of cases that they were carrying, the pride that they had in their role and their sense of responsibility towards the people with whom they were working. That is just not a sustainable situation. We need to find a way to make those roles more attractive and to again make local government an employer that people want to work for.

Alexander Stewart: You make a valid point about the respect for the role and the organisation. In the past, there might have been a certain perception of what it means to work for the council and what the role and responsibilities of a council employee were, and that is why both of you went into local government. However, that has changed. The demands that are now placed on council employees and the salami slicing of budgets over decades cannot have done anything but impact on the morale of the workforce that you represent. If there is a perception that people will not get job satisfaction in a role and will have a workload that might make them ill, why would they take that job?

John Mooney: You are absolutely right. Essentially, local government needs to have a future—that is what it boils down to. People within local government have watched cut after cut and job freeze after job freeze, and they have had to simply carry the workload. Regardless of what the media might think, people in local government care about doing a good job and they understand the responsibility that comes with public service. However, when you are continually told—I do not mean necessarily verbally—that you do not matter, that there will just be more cuts, that roles will not be filled and you will just need to muddle along and do what you can, people begin to

understand that the career opportunities that they thought were once there are now gone.

There is a lot of talk about simply getting rid of some mid-level jobs and so on. However, that means that there will be a five-grade jump between someone who has just come into the organisation and the next promoted role, which has implications for their chance of promotion. That creates an environment in which people will turn elsewhere. However, I strongly believe that, for the good of the country, we cannot afford to have people turning elsewhere. People need to believe that local government is a viable option as a career and is rewarding financially and also in terms of job satisfaction, because, in most cases, you are delivering for people in your local community—I do not have statistics in front of me but, clearly, most people in local government work where they live.

10:00

It is difficult to generalise across 32 councils but the fact that we have an ageing workforce is no surprise. We are now reaping what was sown a few years back. When you stop recruiting, when there is a job freeze and when you only offer temporary jobs, that has an impact, as do things such as the changes to pensions over the years. That is why we are where we are.

Local government needs to be valued, and local government workers need to be valued. There is an opportunity for a media campaign on that. Our union tries to pick up the slack on that, but we are limited in what we can do. I think that we should all be pulling together on that.

Alexander Stewart: We all understand that there is a need for workforce reduction and workforce planning to ensure that local government is effective and efficient. When it comes to the management of the council, elected representatives face budget pressures when the officials within the organisation say that, for example, there needs to be a 3 per cent, 4 per cent or 8 per cent reduction across the board. No department—leisure and culture, housing, health and so on—has had a budget increase in recent years, which makes it harder for the management of the organisation to manage what needs to be done, and elected representatives then have to deal with the processes.

I spent nearly two decades in a local council before I entered Parliament, and I have been here for a decade. In that time, I have seen even more erosion of individuals and processes, and you are confirming that today. When it comes to workforce reduction and workforce planning, what do you see as required in order to ensure that you are able to maintain and sustain service provision?

You have already told me that departments, functions and roles have vanished because you do not have that workforce capacity or that planning.

John Mooney: That comes back to the issue of multiyear budgets and the advantages of knowing what framework you will have over a period of time, which allows you to do that planning.

In every council, the elected members have their own political plans for the services that they want to deliver. I remember saying to a leader of the council 10 years ago, "John, I used to have sleepless nights wondering how we could best spend the money. What new service could be developed that would help people in Viewpark or wherever?" Now, people like him are having to make cuts. We understand that no one gets elected to make cuts. The elected members need a level of certainty to base decisions on. However, the problem is that, at this stage, we have had such—I was going to say deprivation, but that might be a bit strong. We have had so many cuts over the years that we are not starting from where we want to be. Even if we are in a situation where elected officials and their appointed officers have a two, three or five-year budget to work with, they will essentially be making up ground for that period. Multiyear budgets are not an instant fix on their own.

Maureen Dickson: Local government falls foul of not having had the investment that other public services have had. That is where we are.

I can safely say that our members who work in local government feel that they are the poor relations, that they are at the sharp end of the cuts and that they are at the bottom of the list when budgets are handed out. It is horrible to say, but people just expect that that is how it will be from now on, with councillors sitting around the table with council officers, trying to work out which service they will cut next.

There has to be some investment in local government. There needs to be a shift in the mindset, because we have gone past the point at which we can continue to take money out of local government.

Alexander Stewart: Finally, you have touched on the comparison between corporate functions and front-line services. Sometimes those back-room or corporate functions have been seen as an easy option to lose, but the fact is that their loss has a knock-on effect on front-line services. Can you give us a little bit of flavour of how you think that sort of thing should be reformed or moved around? After all, the approach is not working.

Maureen Dickson: The fact is that backroom services enable front-line services. Both John and I worked in finance when we were in local government; having worked in payroll, I know that

if you do not pay people, they will not turn up for work. These are core roles and, if that work is not done, it will mean front-line services having to pick up some of it and therefore being unavailable to provide the services that they are there, fundamentally, to provide.

From my perspective, there are probably better ways of working. I am not talking about mass centralisation or anything like that, but there could be collaboration between local authorities when it comes to procurement.

I certainly do not believe that AI is the answer to everything. When I was involved with our social work issues group, we looked at it, and it certainly has a place; I have not used it myself, but there is a role for it in all industries. That said, we need to be careful about how far we go with it, because people like to communicate and deal with other people, and by using it, we might disenfranchise a large section of our population—say, people who cannot interact with AI, or our elderly community who do not have the facilities and are unable to interact with it. It is not the answer, but neither is continuing to target back-room services as a way of frontloading front-line services. It has a knock-on effect.

John Mooney: We need to be careful about saying, "Okay, we will get some efficiencies from the back office." The reality is that we have been saying that since 2010. This is a rhetorical question, but where do you think that the cuts have been coming from since 2010? The so-called fat on the bone in local government has been removed—the back-room services have already been cut. We do need to ensure that we are making the most of technology; I am not necessarily talking about AI, but about normal systems and stuff like that.

We must also ensure that we are not creating some false economy. Mo Dickson talked about front-line workers needing to do certain things, but it goes the other way, too. If you get rid of someone who earns £25,000 a year, somebody earning, say, £40,000 a year will have to pick up their tasks, so you are not getting value for money in your pay bill, either.

As I have said, we need to be careful. With the greatest respect, I do not think that we should rush to assume that there are lots of back-office functions to be cut—at least, not without there being a genuine impact on the ground.

Alexander Stewart: Thank you.

The Convener: I believe Fulton MacGregor has some supplementary questions on workforce issues. Fulton, you were going to ask about AI; I think that we have covered that quite sufficiently, but there were some questions on digital literacy, too. If you wanted to pick those up, that would be

great. [*Interruption.*] I hope that Fulton is there—he did indicate that he wanted to come in on this.

We will park that and come back to it. Evelyn, if you could ask your questions, that would be great.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Good morning, panel. It is lovely to see you here today, and thanks for your answers so far. They have been helpful.

My question is on transformation. What does Unison think that the term means? I see you smiling already at that. I should say that, in evidence that we have taken from others, it is quite clear that it means different things to different people.

John Mooney: Are you asking what we think it means, or what we have been taught that it means?

Evelyn Tweed: You could tell us both.

John Mooney: Genuinely, our experience is that what it means to Unison members that there is a chance they will be facing cuts, their ability to do their job will be directly impacted et cetera. Sadly, all transformation has been aimed at cutting costs. Essentially, then, there is a Pavlovian response to the term.

From Unison's point of view, transformation is not, in itself, a dirty word. We understand that we are in a modernising world, and that there are different, and better, ways of doing jobs, and we believe that our members are capable of making changes and that we can bring them with us. Convener, you mentioned digital literacy. Perhaps there is an issue in that respect that needs to be addressed, but I do not think that it is the end of the world.

The problem is that, quite often, transformation is looked at suspiciously, because of what the end result always is. It is rare in local government that transformation is about things getting better for the sake of getting better; instead, it is all about needing to find a different way of doing something to save, say, £1 million by the end of the year.

Is that fair, Mo?

Maureen Dickson: Yes, it is. The problem with the word “transformation” is that, when it comes to local government, it is always framed around a cuts agenda. You just need to look at, for example, the proposals on the national care service and the national social work agency. Our members find it difficult sometimes to buy in to a lot of these things, because of the years of cuts that have been framed as transformation.

As a result, people are initially—and often quite rightly—suspicious about any form of transformation in local government. If, say, AI were to be part of any transformation plan, I am

sure that our members would automatically say, “My role isn't going to exist anymore, because a computer is going to do it instead.”

Evelyn Tweed: Do you both feel that the term has negative connotations instead of being seen as a way of being efficient, doing things well or doing things better?

John Mooney: This is born from experience, but I would say yes.

Evelyn Tweed: Thank you for that.

The Accounts Commission has stated that reform in councils “is increasingly urgent”. What are your views on that?

Maureen Dickson: Our emphasis in that respect would probably be on investment. Reform is urgent, but we think that the way of resolving that would be to invest in public services and not to continue to restrict them. I agree that it is urgent, but the solutions that we would come to the table with might be different from what others would suggest.

John Mooney: “Reform in councils” is a potentially wide term, and Unison would have different views on different aspects of it. For example, I know that we have been talking a lot about council funding, especially from the point of view of the Scottish Government and the allocation of funds, but we should also be looking at what has happened with, say, council tax. There has been talk of reforming council tax for—I do not know—15 years or something like that, and Unison's view is that we would welcome such a move, as long as those who can afford to pay more do pay more.

There are different types of reform and, to be honest, I think that we would have different views on them. Do you mean—and I am being rhetorical again—that we would go back to the days of Lothian Regional Council? Do you mean that there would be some shared services? Do you mean that the whole remit of local government would change a little bit, and we would be able to decide how we did things?

10:15

As Maureen mentioned earlier, we are already concerned about the overreliance on the third sector for certain services, particularly social care. I led on social care at the time of the pandemic and the Scottish Government's general view was that, because so much had been “outsourced”—and I would put that in quotation marks—to the third sector, it did not have as much control as it would have liked during the pandemic to protect workers and, obviously, constituents. We are in danger of repeating that mistake.

It all depends on what “reform” means. We believe that local government is valuable, that it plays a real and genuine part in the fabric of this country and that, therefore, it should grow as it goes forward. It should remain unmolested, instead of people saying, “We’re going to reform things, so we’ll stick some stuff in health and some stuff in the third sector, and you guys can look after the bins.” I am being slightly facetious, but I hope that you take my point.

Maureen Dickson: I would add that the cost of reform is important, too. We as an organisation and, indeed, our members find it difficult when millions of pounds get spent looking at reform, and what you get is not the right solution. In the process, you spend tens of millions of pounds, only for somebody to say, “This is not the direction of travel that we need to take.” It is difficult for our members, who are trying to do a good job and are having their budgets cut, to see millions of pounds get wasted on looking at some reform that is never going to happen. It is hard for people to accept.

The Convener: Fulton MacGregor is with us. He has always been with us, but we have had a bit of a technical issue in getting him up on the screen and getting his microphone turned on. It is good to see you, Fulton. If you want to come in on anything—[*Interruption.*] His image is gone, so I will keep talking and hope that he is still there. Is there anything that you want to pick up on workforce issues, Fulton? If you could then ask your remaining questions, that would be great. No? Okay, then I will pick up those questions.

We are interested in understanding—in the context of transformation, but it is connected to the workforce—the need for training in digital literacy to ensure that our workforce is capable of navigating changes and challenges. I hear the backdrop of suspicion that is out there, but, AI aside, there are tremendous opportunities with digital literacy. I wonder what your thoughts are on that.

John Mooney: We should, absolutely, be looking at that, because it could only improve the planning and delivery of services. In an ideal world, systems pick up functions in order to make people’s daily jobs easier and maybe start to chip away at some of the problems that we have had, particularly since the pandemic, through people being overworked and stressed. We have already spoken about the issues with sickness absence.

I want to pick up on Maureen Dickson’s previous point about the perceived wasting of money, which goes hand in hand with investment in services. All too often within local government, we will spend a lot of money on a system—which, do not get me wrong, is needed and, if it is working perfectly, is great—but there are then issues about whether the people who are using the system are using it

to the required level and about the stress that is put on them. I am thinking about my own family—my mother-in-law is a school cleaner. The online human resources systems and all that stuff are a challenge for people.

As well as the issue of investment in those systems, there is an issue about whether the technology that you are giving people to use is up to scratch. I can attest to that. I have a Unison phone that technically does the job, but does it do the job? That is part of it, but part of it is also about rolling out the training for people. It is about making sure that your people on the ground are bought in, invested and able to do the thing that you are asking them to do, not having to go away and get a group of their colleagues. There are all those different sides to it.

We think that digital services are key, but we are not convinced about AI for a number of reasons. I would argue that AI is still at an early stage and that we could be throwing good money after bad in certain circumstances.

Maureen Dickson: The technology also has to fit the service, and not the other way around, which we see quite a lot. That is important.

The Convener: Okay. I see that Fulton MacGregor has joined us again. Fulton, do you want to pick up the questions about collaboration and the union’s involvement in public service reform?

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Yes. I also have a question on the back of Alexander Stewart’s line of questioning, on which I tried to come in earlier.

Good morning to the panel. Your evidence session has been good. I apologise for the fact that, perhaps ironically, there have been some issues with the technology here. Who says that we do not plan these things? It almost makes the point that I want to make in some of the questions I will come on to. The issue was that both my camera and my microphone could not be accessed at one point. I have been here and I have heard the session. A good old logging off and logging back on again seemed to work. There you go—sometimes it is not too technical.

Before I come on to my main line of questioning, I want to go back to the issues around the workforce, because that was an interesting discussion. For clarity, I was a local government employee—a social worker—for 12 years. I loved my job and I loved being a council employee, although I worked the 70 hours that were referred to—I remember that well. I should also probably declare an interest in that I was a Unison member for the whole of that time.

When constituents come to see me when there are changes in councils, what strikes me—it struck me when I was a council worker—is their place in the decision making. Often, they feel that the decisions are taken by the high heid yins, as we call them, or by councillors—or maybe a mixture of both—and they are not involved in them. I remember many times, when we were losing services or whatever, we would be told that that was what was happening—and that was the end of it.

Do you both have any ideas for how workers could be more involved in the decision-making process? How could they be involved in saying whether services should be going or not going? Or is that too complicated for councils to do? Everybody would want no services to go. However, if you start from the point that there have to be some cuts in the current climate, how could workers be kept involved in that process?

John Mooney: From a Unison perspective, we play that role as much as we can. Whenever an employer starts consulting with us on general planning or on where things might be going, as long as it is not confidential, we speak to our members in the area, take their feedback and try to bring it to the table. That is a role that the trade unions provide in general.

Within a council, there needs to be a level of realism about consultation. I worked for a council in which there was consultation around how a service should be taken forward, and I have seen councils do public consultations as well: “This is what we’re thinking. What would you like to see us focus on?” and so on. In my experience, those things run up against the reality that the council needs to make a cut and that—particularly in the past, because of ring fencing—it needs to be in a certain area. It does not matter whether you have a great idea for how a service could expand or that the people of Edinburgh want to see more planting or whatever. Those things are often fraught. Even if you do the consultation and you have the conversations, the reality is that a hard decision needs to be made somewhere. It is similar to the point that we made earlier: reform is great, but not if, at the end of the day, it is to take a zero off at the end. That is generally the issue that we come up against.

Our members on the ground also have a perception that there is no real understanding of what their job is like. There is an understanding of the output, what their job kicks out or what statutory provision is covered by them doing their job—please do not misunderstand me; this answer calls for a bit of generalisation, and I accept that—but there is a general feeling that no one knows what their eight hours a day look like. That takes us back to why they are not consulted, of course,

and it is why, when decisions are made at a higher level to deliver things in a certain way in order to achieve certain goals, those decisions do not compute for a home support worker who has 20 visits to make in a day. They do not compute for a school janitor who is now covering three schools instead of one—I do not know how they get their buckets of sawdust or whatever. These are the real issues on the ground, and we need more understanding among the decision makers of what a day in the life is like, rather than just the output of that.

Maureen Dickson: Our members not being listened to and feeling that they are not being consulted on the direction of travel ultimately leads to conflict. Then we spend a whole load of time in conflict, which detracts from the direction of travel that we all need to go in. Unison is there to work in partnership, often with employers, to make transition and change as easy as possible while feeding in the views of our members. When that does not happen, it often leads to conflict.

Lots of local government employers might leave it to the last minute before they come to talk to us, and they often do not talk to us until it is too late. Then the staff who work in local government feel as though they have not had any buy-in to the changes that are being made. It is human nature to be resistant to such changes if you do not understand them, if you are suspicious of them or if you just do not think that they are in the best interests of the council or the service users.

There needs to be an acknowledgement that the decision makers do not always understand what the role is and that the people who carry out the role have the expert knowledge. There has to be a balance there. There has to be a bit of respect as well. The views of those individuals are important.

Fulton MacGregor: Yes. You have made some good points. Unison generally does a good job. Sometimes, though, the issue is when people hear about decisions, which has nothing to do with Unison or the people who are affected. Often, when a paper goes to a council committee meeting, people only hear about it online because somebody happens to share it, and the decision is only several weeks away. There is then a bit of catching up to do.

I am sure that you will both be aware of the situation in North Lanarkshire fairly recently, when the grading of early-years workers was changed, which caused an enormous uproar. Every MSP, MP and councillor surgery was inundated for weeks afterwards. There was then consultation, and there were discussions with workers, but there was not enough time before the decisions were made. That is just an anecdotal point that I wanted to put on the record.

10:30

Convener, can I just check something? There was a wee bit of me logging on and off a while ago. Do you feel that the AI and digital literacy stuff was covered? That was around the time that I was logging off and back on, to try to fix the problems.

The Convener: Yes, Fulton—we covered that area sufficiently. We bottomed that one out, I would say. If you could move on to collaboration and involvement in the public service reform board, that would be brilliant.

Fulton MacGregor: That is great, convener. I wanted to check that.

I want to ask about collaborative working between councils and other organisations or services. Integration joint boards, community planning partnerships and things like that are key in that regard. How is that collaborative work going, and can any more be done to improve those relationships and improve services?

Maureen Dickson: That is a loaded question.

Fulton MacGregor: We like loaded questions.

Maureen Dickson: I have experience of working with integration joint boards. Prior to moving back up to Scotland, I worked in the southwest of England. There was full integration between health and social care down there, which led to private companies, which led to all manner of difficulties. I have seen both sides of it, but the reality is that they could be a lot better at working together.

I have sat in integration joint board meetings where health and local government are not working together as the Scottish Government envisaged they would. There are lots of barriers to their doing that. They are two separate employers, while integration joint boards are not employers. For example, we have occupational therapists in local government and in health. They are being paid differently and are doing slightly different jobs. The situation is not ideal. Definite improvements could be made by integrating services because they are not fully integrated currently. I am not saying that they should be fully integrated, because I have seen how that works in England and it was not ideal down there, either. I do not have the solution to it, though. That is the only problem.

John Mooney: I do not have a great deal to add, to be honest. You are absolutely right, Mo. I assume from my experience of integration boards—in Lothian, Lanarkshire and Forth Valley—that it is not working as was perhaps envisaged by the Scottish Parliament. It is not necessarily smooth sailing all the time, but that is human nature. Organisations have their own

priorities and they bring their own baggage to the table. That can be borne out in how things work in real life.

Mo mentioned occupational therapists. We have the same issue. We have situations in which addiction workers are paid at different levels and stuff like that, yet they are literally sitting at the same group of desks. Again, to be clear, Unison is not in favour of there being one employer for those workers, but that is a real issue. If Mo and I were sitting beside each other essentially doing the same job but wearing two different badges and getting paid two different amounts of money and had different working conditions, that would be an issue. Those kinds of issues exist on the ground.

Maureen Dickson: If we consider technology, different staff access different software and packages. That brings its own challenges and difficulties because, if you are trying to refer a service user to the full range of services to which they are entitled, you need to go through multiple people and multiple types of software.

Alexander Stewart: Can I ask a supplementary question, convener?

The Convener: Hang on a minute. I have one as well. Fulton, do you want to continue with that line of questioning or do you want to move on? We have supplementary questions on collaboration.

Fulton MacGregor: The only other thing that I want to ask about is the union's role at a national level with regard to public service reform. If you want me to ask that now or to leave that until later, that is up to you.

The Convener: Let us hold off on doing that for now and put the supplementary questions on collaboration. Alexander, do you want to come in? I might have something to put to the witnesses as well.

Alexander Stewart: You have touched on the difficulties with social care provision and integration joint boards. Of late, we have seen a large number of agency staff being brought in. Last week, a report came out showing that, over the past five years, about £300 million has been spent on that. In my area of Clackmannanshire, a huge sum of money has been required for agency staff. We are not able to provide the staff from our area and agency staff have to be brought in at an extra cost, which erodes things further. The financial pressures then become even more intense for your members and for the day-to-day workforce. They are pushed into that situation because there is not the staff, but demand still needs to be met, which means spending on substitute staff. That must have a knock-on effect; that impacts the process and your members.

John Mooney: You have described the worst of all worlds, in my view. We have already spoken about wages and how people are valued in general. Added to that is the fact that they do not have the staff, which means that they bring in agency staff. The money that is paid to that end will prop up a private business somewhere, because the real money that you pay—the real hourly rate—will not go to the practitioner. There is also a risk about the level of skill that is being bought in.

Sadly, we see the use of agency staff on a day-to-day basis. Take Clackmannanshire Council as an example. In such situations, as an employer, it has a reduced amount of control over the training, the understanding and the delivery of that service at an inflated price. It is an absolute false economy. There is too much of that going on across local government in general. We need to get right all the stuff that we have been talking about. By doing that, we simply would not need to rely on that approach. “Rely” is the key word, because can you rely on that when you are not in control of the workforce?

The Convener: That is great. We have been talking about collaboration. The idea came out of the work on the Christie commission that we need to move towards a more joined-up approach with collaboration across agencies.

Maureen, you said that you did not have any solutions. Let us pull back from IJBs and community planning partnerships specifically and think about your experience. What do we need to do more of to get genuine collaboration? What is happening? Are there skill sets that fall under collaboration? Do we need to support people to recognise that giving up their own corner and stepping in leads to something better, which is ultimately what we are trying to do with public service reform? You might not have an idea now, but you could come back to us on that.

Maureen Dickson: I wonder whether local government as an organisation and health as an organisation have a true understanding of what each other does. If that is an underlying basic problem, it will all unravel immediately as soon as you put two huge organisations side by side that do not understand each other. I sometimes find that to be a source of frustration sitting in integration joint board meetings where there might be only a basic understanding of things. The IJB might want to achieve something, but how you achieve that in health is really different from how you achieve it in local government. It is the types of organisations that you put together that can be problematic to start off with.

John Mooney: I agree totally. Unison strongly believes in local democracy. We believe in local government and we believe in councils. However,

that then almost creates an immediate barrier to collaboration. Clackmannanshire Council has been mentioned, and we believe that it should be allowed to have its own political vision for the people within its area. That might mean that they clash a little—it is only a little—when they work with NHS Forth Valley or whatever. Although we do not like the fact that that does not run smoothly, who does? Everybody wants everything to run smoothly, but the reality is people saying, “We get that, we accept it and we believe that is how it should be.”

There is a real issue with collaboration from that point of view. Are we in favour of it? Yes. Does that mean that councils will lose their ability to make local decisions? No—and we are not in favour of that at all. Should you marry that up? I do not know.

The Convener: Is there something about organisational structures and how different organisations with their different governance structures come together? I also wonder whether there is something about skill sets. Maureen, you mentioned conflict arising at times. Do we have the skill set in the workforce, and maybe coming up through school, that enables people to sit well with conflict and with disagreement—to agree to disagree, essentially. If, ultimately, we are trying to create a more collaborative culture for public service reform, maybe we need to look at skills development and supporting people with negotiating in those spaces.

Maureen Dickson: I agree with that. Accountability in the main, a bit of autonomy and local democracy are important. I know that, where there has been some collaboration, it has created some of the conflict, because local authorities will feel that local democracy is being removed. All those things need to exist.

John Mooney: Without meaning to be too much on the nose, I agree that there needs to be training to enable people to manage conflict. However, it is easier to do that when you are not working to a budget that you are struggling to meet, when you have had to close two libraries because of the general budget pressures and stuff like that. People are doing their best to deliver in difficult circumstances, and that ramps up everything. It is just human nature.

The Convener: When we went to Orkney a few years ago, we talked to Orkney Islands Council about the single authority model. It will be interesting to see how that develops there and in the Western Isles. That might help because services would be delivered within one organisational structure. That might make sense for local authorities of that size and scale. However, I totally hear what you say about local democracy, autonomy and so on.

I will bring in Fulton MacGregor to ask a final question and maybe some other things will bubble up. It is a good conversation. Come on in, Fulton.

Fulton MacGregor: Thank you, convener. What level of involvement do you feel that the trade union movement has in the work of the Scottish Government at a national level? What input do the unions have to the Scottish Government's public service reform board and local authority transformation programmes? Could they have more input? What would the value of that be?

Maureen Dickson: I am happy to give an example. When the national care service and the national social work agencies were looked at, Unison was fully involved in those conversations. We welcomed that opportunity. As part of that process, we were involved in many of the side working groups that were looking at specific parts of those transformations. We welcomed the fact that we were fully involved in the process, and we felt that we had the opportunity to influence some of the discussions that were going on. Those are the only two pieces of Government work that I have been involved in.

I can safely say that, if something is going on, we will push ourselves forward, because we are the largest trade union in local government in Scotland. We will make sure that we have a seat at the table, or seats at several tables, so that we can look at the various on-going issues. We are always happy to have a seat at the table and to provide input, because many of the people who work for our organisation have a lot of personal experience of working in local government and a lot of skills, and they are more than happy to be involved.

Those are the only two pieces of Government work that I have been involved in, but the level of engagement that we had was good.

10:45

John Mooney: To echo what Maureen said, Unison always wants to be in the tent. That is our default position. We want to influence, consult and negotiate, so, if we are invited, we will be there. If we are not invited and we know that something is happening, we will try to get invited.

I was involved with the Scottish Government working groups on the potential for sectoral bargaining within social care, which ran about four years ago and are probably still running. As Mo said, the engagement is good, because you are in the room with the Scottish Government, COSLA and all the stakeholders. The Government was always careful to make sure that the trade unions were there, and we are genuinely thankful for that.

However, I started to wonder about the level at which we were not involved. It became clear to me that there were subsequent levels. There was an overarching group and all the sub-groups, which we were involved in, and there was something else above that, which we were kind of involved in, but there was yet another level above that. We did not know what that was. We did not know at what level we were involved in that process. There is an element of "You don't know what you don't know."

We are keen to be involved at every possible level. We represent the workforce, and if we are not involved, that means that the Government is not fully speaking to its stakeholders. We ask that consideration be given to that. I am not talking about general involvement. The issue is about the level at which we are involved and the point at which we are at the table. With certain pieces of work, it will be the Scottish Trades Union Congress that is involved, so we might contribute to an STUC delegation or whatever. We ask the committee to bear that in mind. As I said, we will not turn down an invitation.

The Convener: I know what you mean about feeling that there is another level. I have certainly had that feeling when I have been involved in a discussion and, at a certain point, it has felt as though the decision has been made somewhere else.

I want to drill down a bit on the issue that Fulton MacGregor raised. Is Unison or another trade union involved in the Scottish Government's public service reform board? Are you aware of that?

John Mooney: I do not know.

The Convener: All right. That would be interesting to know. Have you been involved in the work on the invest to save fund? A pot of £6 million has been made available for local authorities to bid into. The idea is that, with a bit of money—

John Mooney: No, I am not involved in that. I would like to be.

The Convener: I have told you about some more doors that you need to go and knock on.

This has been a really good conversation. At the risk of making your jaws drop, I would be interested to hear your thoughts, from a workforce point of view, on a four-day working week. It is a difficult financial climate, but there is a direction of travel on that issue. Is there any hope of us ever getting there? It seems to me that we might not have enough people coming in in the first place to enable us to move to a four-day working week.

Both of you might want to come in on that.

John Mooney: We are laughing because the issue of a four-day working week has recently

come under my remit. There are various areas that we are looking to progress with COSLA, particularly as we now have a two-year pay deal. The lack of pay bargaining gives us a bit of space. The four-day working week is one of the issues that we want to make progress on. We have seen the Scottish Government report on the organisations that trialled it, which came out a few weeks ago. In short, we believe that the idea has legs. We believe that it can be good for all the parties involved, and we want to explore it. COSLA has committed to exploring it, and we intend to get that process moving within the next 12 months.

However, as with all things, there are challenges. We are not talking only about the classic financial challenge. There are other things that we need to get right, such as equal pay considerations. If certain groups work fewer hours for the same money, we need to think about how that might impact comparator groups. It is not an easy area to navigate in local government because of the diversity of the different groups in the workforce, but we are looking to take forward work on a four-day working week. It is an area that we are very interested in.

Maureen Dickson: As somebody who works a four-day week—I compress my hours—I am a huge fan, so, in this conversation, you will always be pushing at an open door with me.

Some of the organisations that have trialled a four-day working week have produced some interesting statistics, particularly on the benefits that it has for workers' work-life balance, their mental health and their general sickness absence levels. From our point of view, there would be no detriment to our members' salaries as a result of a reduction in the working week, but, when some organisations look at the idea, their perspective is, "We'll be open fewer days of the week." However, there are clever ways of working round that. If an organisation is open from Monday to Friday, workers going down to a four-day week will not mean that the organisation will not still be open from Monday to Friday. The issue is to do with which four days they will work.

I think that a four-day working week is a trick that we are missing. I think that it would have a positive impact on the workforce and service users.

John Mooney: The research has been surprisingly positive. We always felt that a four-day working week would get generally positive feedback, but it seems that win-wins have been reported. In addition to all the good stuff that we want for our members, such as a good work-life balance and so on, a four-day working week has resulted in productivity going up in the organisations concerned. The organisation has

seen results as well. That begs the question, why would we not explore it? I hope that there is more to come on that.

The Convener: I am glad that I asked the question, because a four-day working week would seem to be a positive response to the issues of sickness and recruitment and retention, which Alexander Stewart asked about. If we move to a four-day working week, as well as making it more appealing for people to come in, that could help with the sickness issue, because it would enable people to get some proper downtime. As you said, people's work-life balance also comes into play.

Maureen Dickson: I have an elderly parent who lives with me. Having three days when I do not work and four days when I do allows me to manage my time much better. It is good from the point of view of my own mental health and my ability to have those additional caring responsibilities. All those aspects feed into that flexible approach to working.

John Mooney: From a childcare perspective, it might put less pressure on council services.

The Convener: That is an interesting point. There is lots of detail that we could dig into, but, on a general level, it has been helpful to get a positive response from you on that issue.

That concludes our questions, although I could ask more, so rich has the conversation been. Thank you very much for your contributions.

As the committee previously agreed to take the next items in private, that concludes the public part of the meeting.

10:53

Meeting continued in private until 11:30.

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