

PE2107/B: Use more money recovered from the proceeds of crime to support community-based charities that train animals to assist in the detection of drugs

Beatrice Wishart MSP written submission of 8 October 2024

Thank you to the members of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee for considering this petition and to the committee staff for their work. I would also like to thank the Shetland Times for raising this issue in Shetland and fundraising for the Shetland charity Dogs Against Drugs. I would also like to thank them for bringing this petition to the Scottish Parliament.

The Shetland charity Dogs Against Drugs operates in Shetland to disrupt the illegal drugs trade through the work of their trained drug dogs and handlers, and to deliver drug education in schools. The charity has long raised concerns about core funding issues due to struggling to fulfil criteria for many funding opportunities, which this petition seeks to address. I have been raising this issue since my election to the Scottish Parliament and I would like to thank those in the Scottish Government I have worked with on this, including the current Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, Angela Constance MSP. I also welcome the recent funding to Dogs Against Drugs from the Scottish Government.

The charity's importance has been recognised by both Police Scotland and Shetland's Community Safety and Resilience Board who have stated that Dogs Against Drugs play a significant role. Police Scotland in Shetland value the bespoke drugs detection model that has developed in the islands since the charity's inception in 2002. Having the trained drugs dogs and their handlers in Shetland is an enormous asset. The dog handlers are Special Constables, and support the Police as required.

Assessment about the funding required to keep these specialist drugs dogs in Shetland should take into account the long-term impact on public finances in departments such as health were the charity to cease operations. If, for example, the value of drugs retrieved last year had not been detected by the drugs dogs and were circulating in the community the impact would have been felt quite quickly in, for example, primary care and mental health services, with consequential budgetary impacts.

The impact of uncertainty unfortunately resulted in one of the trained dog handlers leaving the charity's employment because of the lack of clarity about the future. It should be noted that this was prior to the Scottish Government's recent intervention. If the charity ceases operations, once the handlers and dogs have gone, they will be lost for good and it is anticipated that the floodgates would be open to incoming illegal drugs to the islands. The ability of Police Scotland to access dogs and handlers from Mainland Scotland, instead of having them available locally, would inhibit and diminish their operations in Shetland.

I have previously discussed the possibility of funding from the Cashback for Communities programme with the Scottish Government. It was confirmed to me that the current iteration of the programme runs until 31 March 2026 and is not open for applications at this time, and in any event, the criteria were drawn such that it would have been difficult for Dogs Against Drugs to fulfil the eligibility criteria. This is despite the work that the charity does in preventing the illegal drug trade.

The petition asks that money from the proceeds of crime is used to support community-based animals in the detection of drugs. I support the aims of this petition. Charities like Dogs Against Drugs in Shetland need sources of funding that enable them to continue to carry out this vital work.