



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# **Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee**

**Wednesday 20 September 2023**

**Session 6**



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**CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE**

**13<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2023, Session 6**

**CONVENER**

\*Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab)

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)

\*Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Andrew Mylne

**LOCATION**

The Adam Smith Room (CR5)



## Scottish Parliament

### Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 20 September 2023

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]*

### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Jackson Carlaw):** Good morning, and welcome to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, here in the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh.

At our last meeting, the committee agreed to review its policy on written submissions. Our first agenda item is a decision on whether the committee's consideration of the policy should be taken in private at a future meeting. As colleagues will recall, we expect to have a paper shortly on our policy about receiving submissions once a petition is actively under consideration. I suggest that we publish the paper but that, other than that, the item is conducted, as normal, in private. Are members content to consider the item in private?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Continued Petitions

09:31

**The Convener:** Item 2 is the consideration of continued petitions. I should start by offering apologies from two of our colleagues. David Torrance, the deputy convener, and Fergus Ewing are both unwell and not able to be with us. Unfortunately, the Scottish National Party substitute is not available to be with us, either, so there are just three of us considering the petitions this morning. However, our colleagues have obviously received the papers and have had an opportunity to contribute any thinking that they might have to our deliberations.

### Taxi Trade (PE1856)

**The Convener:** Our first continued petition is PE1856, which was lodged by Pat Rafferty on behalf of Unite. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to protect the future of the taxi trade by providing financial support for taxi drivers, setting up a national stakeholder group with trade union driver representatives and reviewing low-emission standards and their implementation dates.

It was some time ago but, since our last consideration of the petition, we have received a written submission from Transport Scotland in response to our question about synchronising the roll-out of low-emission zones across Scotland, which taxi drivers were particularly concerned about. The submission states that local authorities are responsible for deciding the timing for introduction and enforcement. It states that LEZ enforcement began in Glasgow city centre on 1 June, which I think is well known by the public now, and that the council had introduced a grace period of one year for all and two years for residents within the zone. The council also developed a mechanism for taxi operators to apply for a temporary exemption beyond the June 2023 enforcement date.

In consequence, Transport Scotland is not minded to mandate a transition to electric vehicles at one point in time as an alternative to offering support with retrofitting. Its view is that it is for operators to decide how to meet the LEZ standards.

According to the submission, 250 taxis have now been retrofitted as a result of Government funding. It states that there are no plans to adapt LEZs beyond their current size or scope or to introduce new LEZs in other parts of Scotland.

Do members have any suggestions on how we might proceed?

**Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab):** Could we write to Transport Scotland about having a department that recognises taxis as a form of public transport? We are not considering them as public transport and we are not giving taxi drivers the chance to speak.

**The Convener:** We have put the petitioner in touch with Transport Scotland, but it would be useful to follow up. We want to support the petitioner in that objective, because it seems that taxis were the one form of public transport that was excluded from the formal process. We could write to ask how those conversations have gone—or whether they have gone at all yet—and what the outcome was.

We might also write to the petitioner. Now that the LEZ has been running since June, we could write to ask what the impact of it on Glasgow taxi drivers has proved to be in practice. That would be useful to know. Do members have any other suggestions?

**Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):** It is important to hear from Glasgow City Council, because Transport Scotland has referenced it significantly with regard to how many applications have been received from taxi operators for a temporary exemption, how many exemptions have been granted, what criteria there are for receiving a temporary exemption to the LEZ and how long such exemptions will last.

**The Convener:** I am happy to include that, as well.

**Foysoil Choudhury:** It depends how long it takes the taxi drivers to get in touch with the council. They have to go back to get MOTs and other things done, and it could end up taking two or three months, so, if the exemption is only for a year, they have already lost three months.

**The Convener:** That is a fair point. Are we content with following up, keeping the petition open and taking it forward with those further lines of inquiry?

**Members indicated agreement.**

### High-caffeine Products (PE1919)

**The Convener:** Our next continued petition, PE1919, which was lodged by Ted Gourley, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ban the sale of fast-release caffeine gum to under-18s for performance enhancement, due to the risk of serious harm.

We last considered the petition on 22 February, when we agreed to write to the Scottish Government and UK Athletics.

The Scottish Government responded in April saying that it intended to publish its analysis of the

consultation on ending the sale of energy drinks to children and young people before the summer. It duly did so in May 2023, at which point the minister confirmed that the Government would not take forward mandatory measures in that area. The Scottish Government response states that it will consider commissioning further research into the effects of fast-release caffeine products on children and young people, which would be part of its wider considerations of public health research.

In the first of three submissions to the committee, the petitioner welcomed that news and drew our attention to a study that concluded that caffeinated chewing gum acutely increases central arterial stiffness and aortic blood pressure in young healthy men.

The UK Athletics response notes that, although caffeine is not a prohibited substance, it is on the World Anti-Doping Agency's monitoring programme, which includes substances that it wishes to monitor to identify potential patterns of misuse in sport.

UK Athletics advocates a "food first" approach to nutrition and recommends that, if an athlete decides to take a supplement, they only use products that have been tested as part of the Informed Sport risk reduction programme. The petitioner has responded to that information concerned that a consistent approach is not being taken to child safeguarding and protection on the use of stimulants, particularly where fast-release caffeine gum has been handed out at licensed events. The petitioner has also raised concerns about how incidents involving the use of fast-release caffeine gum are recorded and reported by athletics bodies.

Therefore, we still have rather uncomfortable background information here. Do members have any comments or suggestions?

**Foysoil Choudhury:** If the Government is going to be releasing something, can we ask whether there is a timeline for that?

**The Convener:** We could write to the Government drawing its attention to the petitioner's submissions in relation to the concerns about fast-release caffeine gum, and we could ask when it might consider that as part of its public health considerations, given that it is an on-going issue and that UK Athletics is concerned and is monitoring these matters, as well. Is the committee content with something along those lines?

**Members indicated agreement.**

### **Local Knowledge (Conservation Policy) (PE1966)**

**The Convener:** The third new petition is PE1966, which was lodged by the Scottish Gamekeepers Association. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to formally recognise local knowledge and ensure that it is given full consideration alongside scientific knowledge throughout consultation, decision-making processes and in policy development, specifically within the conservation arena.

Members will recall that we were curious as to whether NatureScot would appoint a representative from the Scottish Gamekeepers Association to its board. NatureScot's recent submission explains that members are appointed by Scottish ministers through a regulated public appointments process and that members are appointed individually and not as representatives of organisations.

The Scottish Government's submission outlines its approach to consultations, saying that consultations seeking public opinion may prioritise local knowledge, while those specifically requesting scientific evidence will be assessed based on their scientific validity. In response to that point, the petitioner feels that scientific knowledge is recognised for its merits while local knowledge is

"given no greater credence than that of public opinion."

On issues of internet connectivity, the Scottish Government points to alternative methods of gathering evidence such as face-to-face events and notes that only basic internet access is required to use its consultation platform.

The petitioner argues that the importance of local knowledge is recognised by the convention on biodiversity and points to NatureScot research on indirect drivers of biodiversity loss, according to which local and experiential knowledge tends to be undervalued in decision making and should be included in governance structures.

There is a bit of a stalemate in the responses that we have received so far. Given everything that the petitioner has said, we could write to the Scottish Government to ask whether it will revise or consider revising its consultation guidance to ensure that, at the very least, it is consistent with the convention on biodiversity. Is there anything else that we might suggest?

**Maurice Golden:** Is it worth following up with NatureScot, in the light of its recent report on indirect drivers of biodiversity loss? We could ask what action it intends to take on recommendations pertaining to local knowledge.

**The Convener:** That would be useful. In addition, if it is the case that all members of the NatureScot board are appointed through a public appointments process, we might ask the Scottish Government what weight is given to local knowledge in the determination of any appointment that is made. Perhaps, in fact, that does not count and, therefore, the petitioner's underlying concern about the absence of it might have some validity. Do we agree to keep the petition open and act accordingly?

**Members indicated agreement.**

### **People with Dementia (Council Tax Discounts) (PE1976)**

**The Convener:** The next petition is PE1976, which was lodged by Derek James Brown. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to require council tax discounts to be backdated to the date when a person is certified as being severely mentally impaired, where they then go on to qualify for a relevant benefit.

The Scottish Government's recent submission acknowledges the differing approaches to the administration of council tax disregard and says that officials are working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to encourage local authorities to adopt a common approach. Colleagues will remember that we established that it was quite different depending on where you lived in Scotland whether you got that benefit redress. The submission was sent in May and said that the COSLA leadership was scheduled to consider the proposal "in the coming weeks."

According to Alzheimer Scotland, the Scottish ministers have the power, through secondary legislation, to amend or remove the statutory test that requires applicants for council tax discount who have severe mental impairment to be eligible for a qualifying state benefit. Alzheimer Scotland considers that the requirement is unnecessary and adds unfairness to the application process, particularly for individuals who have dementia. Alzheimer Scotland wants entitlement to a discount or exemption to be uniform across Scotland and wants guidance to be developed to ensure the fair application of the legislation.

The petitioner's most recent written submission draws attention to his petition to the United Kingdom Parliament, as well as to a UK Government response that states that councils can apply discretionary council tax discounts or exemptions in circumstances where individuals with a severe mental impairment have not demonstrated entitlement to a qualifying benefit. There has been a move in that direction in the rest of the UK, where people obviously feel that the

legislation allows that to take place. What might we further do, colleagues? Are there any suggestions?

**Foyso Choudhury:** Did the Government look into COSLA's consideration? Did we have any correspondence regarding that?

**The Convener:** We could write to the Government asking what the outcome of any of that was. That would be perfectly reasonable, particularly in relation to this point. Is there anything else that we could do?

**Maurice Golden:** As you said in a previous meeting, convener, there is still some way to go on the issue, and we do not have an adequate response. With Alzheimer Scotland's recent written submission, it is worth following up with the Scottish Government about its intentions to amend or remove the legislative test requiring severely mentally impaired people to be eligible for a qualifying benefit to obtain a council tax disregard.

09:45

**The Convener:** That would be reasonable. We could point out that it appears from the petitioner's submission that the UK Government has indicated that it has moved in that direction—or, if it has not moved in that direction, it has clarified that it is possible for that to happen in the rest of the UK—and, therefore, the Scottish Government might want to consider following suit. Does the committee agree to keep the petition open and move forward on that basis?

*Members indicated agreement.*

### **Biological Fathers (Right to be Informed of Welfare Concerns) (PE1977)**

**The Convener:** The next petition is PE1977, which was lodged by Helen Duncan. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to amend the law and update the "National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021" to require social services to inform biological fathers of concerns about their children.

We previously considered PE1977 at our meeting on 18 January—although it seems to be fresher in my mind than that; the year has gone in—when we agreed to seek views from a number of stakeholders.

We have received responses from Shared Parenting Scotland, the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration, The Promise Scotland, and CELCIS—Scotland's Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection. Many of the responses highlight the need for discretion and flexibility in relation to informing parents about welfare concerns, and note that there are some

circumstances in which an obligation to inform a father risks undermining efforts to protect the safety and wellbeing of the child or children.

Shared Parenting Scotland suggests that there is already an obligation on social work and other agencies to inform both parents of concerns about their children, and questions why that is not happening in practice.

According to CELCIS, existing legislation and guidance are sufficient to support best practice, and a more effective way to address the issues that are raised by the petition would be through improvements to workforce learning, knowledge and skills in this area.

In light of that, do members have any comments or suggestions?

**Maurice Golden:** We should close the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders, on the basis that the "National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021" sets out general principles on how practitioners should involve children and families in child protection processes, and the written evidence suggests that introducing an automatic requirement to inform biological fathers would remove flexibility and discretion from the child welfare process and could have the unintended consequence of putting the child at further risk.

**Foyso Choudhury:** I agree with that. Such a requirement could open up a lot of negative avenues.

**The Convener:** We thank the petitioner for the PE1977. There appears to be national protection guidance in place, so we thank them for raising the issue with us. Obviously, it is open to the petitioner to lodge another petition later, if we feel that the matter is still not being acted upon.

*Members indicated agreement.*

### **Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (Funded Places for Scottish Ballet Dancers) (PE1982)**

**The Convener:** The next petition is PE1982, which has been lodged by Gary McKay. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the funding that is provided to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and to help to enable more places to be made available to Scottish students who pursue ballet at that level. This is about funding from the Scottish Government—the Scottish taxpayer—for Scottish ballet.

The committee has received a response from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, which begins by challenging the petitioner's claim that there is a five-person cap on places for Scotland-domiciled



dancers. The response explains that the figure 5 appears in data sets because standard rounding methodology has been used, whereby numbers have been rounded to the nearest five in order to avoid identifying individuals.

The conservatoire also challenges the petitioner's view that its process for awarding places discriminates against Scottish applicants, and states that Scottish dancers who present for audition and who meet the required standard have been offered places.

The petitioner's response highlights the subjective nature of auditions as a means of assessment and raises questions about five dancers who, he says, were rejected by the conservatoire despite having been offered places by a number of other dance schools.

I have to say that I found some of the responses that we have received quite intriguing. Do colleagues have any thoughts on the petition?

**Foysoil Choudhury:** I am surprised to see that we have only five Scottish students in the years from 2009 to 2022. We should write to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland to find out the exact figure for how many Scottish students have received funding, and whether there is a cap. I know that the conservatoire is saying that there is no cap, but it is surprising that there are only five every year.

**Maurice Golden:** I am not clear about whether the rationale regarding the rounding to five or 10 is appropriate.

**The Convener:** I have to say to the Royal Conservatoire that I think that its response is disappointing. I felt almost as though it was designed on the basis that if we read it we would not take much more interest in the petition and we would be fobbed off with what, to my mind, is a very generalised and not terribly constructive response.

As I said, this is about funding—as the petitioner points out—that comes from the Scottish taxpayer and the Scottish Government. I think that the response that the RCS has given almost validates the concerns of the petitioner. It might well be that, in due course, we will take evidence on the petition if we do not get something slightly more satisfactory by way of a written response. Of course, in consequence we will make our own recommendations to the Scottish Government in relation to Royal Conservatoire funding.

We will get back to the Royal Conservatoire, if members are content to do so. I found its argument to be odd. I presume that all the people within any aggregated number are receiving funding, so I am not quite sure what the confidentiality issue is. If everybody is getting it,

who would we be naming in particular, in consequence? If that is an argument that the RCS wishes to maintain because it is bound by a protocol, at the very least it is perfectly possible for us to ask it how many Scotland-domiciled students in, say, the past five years aggregated, were offered places. That would allow sufficient anonymity for us to have a handle on the number who were involved and how many then took up the offer, in case there is variation in that respect.

**Foysoil Choudhury:** We could ask how many applied for the funding as well.

**The Convener:** Yes, we could do three things: ask how many people applied, ask how many were offered places and ask how many took them up, aggregated in five-year increments. We might highlight that we were a bit disappointed with the response, that we take the petition very seriously and that it might well be that we will consider taking evidence on PE1982, before we make recommendations to the Government in relation to funding matters. Are we agreed?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## New Petitions

09:52

**The Convener:** Item 4 is consideration of new petitions. [*Interruption.*]

We are expecting Paul Sweeney and Mark Ruskell to join us. Mark is here. Are you going to speak long enough for Mr Sweeney to get here, Mr Ruskell, or should we take another petition first? I think that Mr Sweeney wants to speak to the next one, too, so I could race on and see where I get to. Therefore, we would consider petition 2030, which is to review cultural funding arrangements to enable Scotland to contribute to the—[*Interruption.*]

Ah. We do not need to do that.

Gentlemen—if you would like to take your seats, we will deal with item 4. Before we consider the new petitions, I say to anybody who has lodged a petition and is watching, and to anybody who is just following our proceedings, that before we consider a petition we invite the Scottish Government and the impartial research service within the Scottish Parliament—the Scottish Parliament information centre—to offer comment to colleagues on the committee so that we have the background, as we consider any new petition.

### Concessionary Bus Travel Scheme (Asylum Seekers) (PE2028)

**The Convener:** Our first new petition this morning, PE2028, has been lodged by Pinar Aksu on behalf of Maryhill Integration Network and Doaa Abuamer on behalf of the Voices Network. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to extend the current concessionary travel scheme to include all people who are seeking asylum in Scotland, regardless of their age.

We are joined in our consideration of PE2028 by our MSP colleagues Paul Sweeney and Mark Ruskell. Mr Sweeney is a veteran of our proceedings, of course, and I believe that Mr Ruskell has also been with us to consider petitions previously. I wish a very warm welcome to you both.

The petitioners highlight the challenging financial circumstances that asylum seekers face, and suggest that extending the concessionary bus travel scheme would support asylum seekers, as a group, becoming much more integrated in our communities.

As the SPICe briefing notes, people who seek asylum in the UK are usually ineligible for most welfare benefits. They have, to use the term that many of us are familiar with, “no recourse to public

funds”. However, the Scottish national concessionary travel schemes are not listed by the UK Government as benefits that rely on public funds, which means that some asylum seekers can already benefit from free bus and coach travel.

Scottish Government officials estimate that around one third of people who are seeking asylum in Scotland are already eligible for concessionary bus travel under the existing schemes—that is, people who are under 22, are over 60 or are disabled. The Scottish Government response has also provided information about a pilot to provide travel support to asylum seekers in Glasgow, which ran from January to July this year.

We have also received a submission from the petitioners drawing our attention to pilots that have taken place in Aberdeen and Falkirk, and encouraging the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland to continue to engage constructively on the matter.

Before I ask colleagues how we might proceed in relation to PE2028, I invite both of our visiting colleagues to speak. Mr Ruskell, would you like to offer a contribution?

**Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** Thanks very much for giving me the opportunity to speak to PE2028. It is on an issue that I have been aware of for a number of years. Having talked to people who are in the asylum system about the daily pressures that they face, the poverty that they have to endure, the lack of opportunity and the constriction of their everyday lives, I feel that such provision is the minimum that we can do to support them.

The committee will be aware that the amount of money that asylum seekers have to live on is very low—I think that it is around £5 a day, and if they are living in hotel accommodation it is around £1 a day. I cannot imagine how hard it would be to live on that amount of money. It feels to me as though it is an absolute impossibility.

The other side of the matter is that I have seen just how transformative the under-22s concessionary travel has been for young people—how it has opened up opportunities, how it has helped people to build relationships, to save money, to access jobs and employment, and just to go about their everyday lives and to have that kind of freedom.

I know that people who are in the asylum system do not have a lot of those freedoms as a right, but they are basic freedoms—just to get about and to participate in society, to see their friends, colleagues and others and to engage in the community. Their situation is hugely restricted, so just having free bus travel would make a massive difference.

The evaluations that the convener mentioned of the very limited pilots in Aberdeen and Wales—we are still waiting to hear about the pilot in Glasgow—will show the value of the policy. It feels to me that it would be a natural extension to the Government's existing concessionary travel schemes—for over-60s, under-22s and people with a disability—to include this category of people.

I have to say that I am really at a loss as to why the provision has not already been introduced. The information that the committee has received in the SPICe briefing is quite clear that such schemes are not included in the category of benefits for which people with no recourse to public funds are ineligible, so that really begs the question whether there is another reason. Is there another legal interpretation that the Government has heard that is making it cautious? Are there complexities with extending the existing card-based concessionary travel scheme to people who are in the asylum system? Are there other issues about identification or other issues around budget? I genuinely do not know. I do not think we have had a clear answer from recent transport ministers. We have had four transport ministers in the past two years, so there is a question there, as well.

10:00

I am concerned that the issue is falling between different ministerial responsibilities. I am concerned that we do not have from the Government a clear view on the reason why the provision cannot be introduced, but I think that the case for it remains. It would be a great service for the committee to get under the bonnet of the issue to understand why it has not been introduced. On the face of it, such provision would be in line with the environment that the Scottish Government is trying to create, which is a welcoming environment for people in the asylum system as their claims are being processed. I do not understand why the scheme has not been extended.

At the end of the day we are talking about small numbers of people—fewer than 6,000—so, again, I do not understand, if there is not a budget reason, why the support has not been extended already.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much. I know that you are not here to give evidence, but I was going to ask a question about the number of people who might be involved, and you have answered it. I think that you have quantified that at around 6,000.

I suppose that the other potential reason, which you did not volunteer, is that this request has been blended in with other requests for extension to the

scheme and, therefore, rather than moving on any, the Government moves on none, in case it is then used as the basis for an argument in another area of extension. I am not arguing that that would be the right thing to do, but I wonder whether that is also in the minds of people who have not taken this issue forward.

**Mark Ruskell:** That is an excellent point. The way in which the concessionary travel scheme has been established is that there is an evidence test for extensions of the scheme, with certain conditions that have to be met and certain qualities of evidence that need to be submitted. That would get into the guts of the reasons why the scheme has not been extended up to now.

The Government is currently engaged in a fair fares review that is looking at concessionary travel and fares across all public transport. I understand from the transport minister, who gave evidence to the Net Zero, Environment and Transport Committee this week, that that will be concluding next year.

Clearly, there are demands for the extension of concessionary travel—for example from people in island communities and from people who need companions to join them if they have a sight issue—but it would be useful to understand the context of how Government is looking at the extension of concessionary travel. In particular, zeroing in on why it has taken so long for the Government to come to a considered view and how this fits with a fair fares review would be a good place to go in terms of questioning and scrutiny.

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to be back in the committee and I am just here to commend and echo what my colleague Mr Ruskell said in this petition to you.

The genesis of the petition came from discussions with people seeking asylum in Glasgow over a number of years about some of the practical challenges that they face living in the city, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. There was a particularly harrowing anecdote that one of the gentlemen related about having an abscess in his gum. He had to get emergency dental treatment, but he could not afford the bus fare into town, so he had to walk 10 miles in the pouring rain in severe pain to go to get emergency dental treatment, because of his financial position as an asylum seeker. That struck me as a quite shocking scenario in a country such as ours. That moved me to ask them what would practically help make a difference and that is where the idea of extending the concessionary travel scheme came from, which subsequently led to a launch of our campaign in December 2021, in conjunction with

the VOICES network and the Maryhill Integration Network.

The campaign has since attracted widespread support from across the asylum sector and continues to be championed by third sector colleagues, including those from Maryhill Integration Network, the Scottish Refugee Council, Friends of Scottish Settlers, JustRight Scotland and Grampian Regional Equality Council. People seeking asylum do not have the right to work—that is the critical issue—and they instead rely on a financial allowance from the Home Office to cover the basic costs of living. That allowance is not inflation proofed and amounts to around £6 per day, and for those living in hotel accommodation, which is an increasing number, it can be as little as £1.36 a day, so they have very limited freedom to move and undertake any real life.

In Glasgow, the cost of an all-day bus ticket is £5. In effect, that means that not just recreational activity or social activity but travel to essential medical, social, legal or Home Office appointments, which often come at short notice, is simply not an option for many people seeking asylum in Glasgow and elsewhere in Scotland, unless they forgo food or other essentials, which has severe impacts. I have had testimony from mothers caring for young children, for example, who have gone without food to make sure that their child got basic nutrition because they had to attend a Home Office appointment under threat of deportation. There are severe psychological implications there as well.

Due to the cost pressures, asylum accommodation is often situated in isolated, peripheral parts of the city and an unaffordable public transport system, which does not function, is ultimately compounding that isolation for many people seeking asylum in Scotland today.

Free bus travel is one relatively small practical intervention that we could make that would allow people to integrate, explore their new surroundings, their new communities and their new country, and I have been proud to amplify this proposal in partnership with constituents and colleagues in the third sector.

I have mentioned previously some of the organisations working with people seeking asylum that have spearheaded this campaign since its launch in 2021, but it is important also to reference that this policy has support from across civil society. Indeed, all faith leaders in the Scottish religious leaders forum have signed an open letter in support of the proposal, and it has also been recommended by the Mental Health Foundation Scotland and the Poverty Alliance.

From a parliamentary perspective, it has been fantastic to work with cross-party colleagues such

as Mr Ruskell and Mr Doris, the MSP for Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn, to engage with the Scottish Government on this ask, both in writing and in meetings with successive transport ministers and Transport Scotland.

I have also met Shona Robison MSP in her previous role as Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government and Neil Gray MSP in his previous role as Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development with special responsibility for refugees, both of whom saw merit in the proposals and undertook to explore them further. To that end, in the programme for government 2022-23 the Government committed to work with third sector partners and councils across Scotland to consider how best to provide free bus travel for people seeking asylum. Since then, a pilot has been run in Glasgow, but there has not really been any further update or any mention of further work or extrapolation of that pilot in this year's programme for government. That is extremely disappointing to those of us who have worked on this project for almost two years.

To that end, I encourage colleagues on the committee to keep the petition open and to invite witnesses who are affected by this—those personally seeking asylum—to speak to the impact that this policy would have on their lives and their current situations. That could inform future correspondence from the committee to the Government regarding this proposal and perhaps create greater impetus to move forward with it. Thank you very much.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much, Mr Sweeney. Did you recognise the 6,000 figure? Did that seem familiar to you?

**Paul Sweeney:** The number of people seeking asylum in the country at any one time varies, but it is broadly around 6,000. We have done some rough cost estimates and there is a very marginal cost to the public, given the wider benefits that this proposal would realise for people's wellbeing, social interaction and so on. It is a very small percentage of the cost of the existing concessionary travel scheme. It is quite a marginal increase in the overall provision. I think that the Government mentioned in its correspondence that around a third of people seeking asylum currently would qualify under the existing schemes for young people, disabled people and over-60s, so we are really just filling in that gap of people of working age.

**The Convener:** I think that this is an important petition that has quite a specific and deliverable ask. Do colleagues have any thoughts, having heard from Mr Ruskell and Mr Sweeney?

**Foyso Choudhury:** I would say that we should get third sector organisations involved as well, because a lot of people do not have direct access to the Scottish Refugee Council. We should get the third sector and other communities involved.

**The Convener:** Who specifically might we contact?

**Foyso Choudhury:** The smaller organisations. In Edinburgh, you have the Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations—Scotland.

**Maurice Golden:** The starting point might be to write to the Scottish Government in order to understand its assessment of this proposal, the associated costs and the numbers involved—that is probably important, although we have heard estimates today. We should ask for an update on the options that it is exploring on this issue. Thereafter, it might be worth considering whether further evidence is required in writing or in person.

**The Convener:** We might also ask specifically the Scottish Government where the pilots have managed to get to and what the outcome was.

Are they any other organisations that we could write to in relation to all of this, or do we want to hear from the Government in the first instance? I think that there is merit in hearing from the Scottish Refugee Council and the Refugee Survival Trust.

I am minded that the Scottish Parliament's Conveners Group will be putting questions to the First Minister directly next week, and I wonder whether this might not be an issue on which I, on behalf of the petitioner, could put questions directly to the First Minister. That is something that we might consider, because the question session with the First Minister next week is on the programme for government. From everything that I have heard, I think that this fits in quite nicely with that, and it might be an opportunity to highlight the work of Mr Sweeney and Mr Ruskell as well.

The nice thing about the Conveners Group when you are convener of the petitions committee is that you are not raising something on behalf of any political party but are raising it on behalf of the petitioner. It would be an opportunity for the petition concerned to be put directly to the First Minister. It seems like something that might give the petition a little bit of impetus.

We will keep the petition open. We may take evidence subsequently, but let us see what progress we can make in the first instance. There seems to have been a measure of good will towards the proposal, but it seems from what Mr Ruskell said that, having got so far, it has then got into a basket of things where nothing then makes further progress.

**Paul Sweeney:** What we are looking for is an extension under a statutory instrument to the existing concessionary travel scheme. That would be the simplest and neatest solution. Certainly, rough and ready cost estimates suggest that it would cost around £500,000 per annum, so we are not talking about a substantial sum of money in the grand scheme of the Scottish Government's fiscal position. There is plenty of headroom to deliver this policy, but it has perhaps been confused with some of the pilots being done through third sector partners. Maybe the cleanest and neatest solution is to simply go with the statutory instrument.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much. I think that we are content.

**Members indicated agreement.**

### **Clydeport (Public Ownership) (PE2029)**

**The Convener:** The next petition, PE2029, on nationalising Clydeport, to bring the ports and harbours on the River Clyde into public ownership, was lodged by Robert Burds on behalf of the campaign to save Inchgreen dry dock. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to use powers under the Harbours Act 1964 and the Marine Navigation Act 2013 to revoke the status of Peel Ports Group's Clydeport Operations Limited as the harbour authority for the River Clyde and its estuary; to establish a municipal port authority in Clydeport's place and bring the strategic network of ports and harbours along the River Clyde into public ownership; and to compulsorily purchase Inchgreen dry dock for the benefit of the Inverclyde community.

As background to the petition, the petitioner has raised concerns about ships breaking away from their moorings at Clydeport-managed ports and the future of Inchgreen dry dock in Greenock. The SPICe briefing notes that the Harbours Act 1964 allows the Scottish ministers to make an order that relieves a harbour authority of its statutory powers, but only if the harbour authority applies for the order or consents to its being made, or if ministers have consulted with the authority and are satisfied that it is unlikely to object.

In responding to the petition, the Scottish Government has noted that

“Scottish ports operate in a commercial environment usually with no direct public funding”.

The response goes on to argue:

“The activities Clydeport facilitates, the employment which it provides for, and the investment made in recent years, are of significant importance to the Scottish economy.”

The Scottish Government has stated that it

“has no plans to explore compulsorily purchasing, revoking the powers of, or nationalising Clydeport.”

The petitioner has also provided a submission with further details about the campaign’s concerns surrounding the regeneration of Inchgreen dry dock as well as concerns about the delays to the Adrossan harbour project.

10:15

Our MSP colleague Katy Clark had hoped to join us for the consideration of the petition but, unfortunately, she has been unable to do so. However, she has provided a written submission that details various concerns that her constituents have raised about Clydeport’s management of ports and harbours along the Ayrshire coast.

Paul Sweeney MSP, who has an interest in the petition, is staying with us following our consideration of the concessionary petition that we have just heard about. Before we as a committee have a think about the petition and consider comments or options, I invite Mr Sweeney to contribute.

**Paul Sweeney:** Thank you, convener.

I have a personal interest in the petition. I have a background in the shipbuilding industry on the Clyde, working for BAE Systems, and I have maintained a long-standing interest in the development of the Clyde corridor as an industrial asset for the wider city region.

I have had long-standing concerns about the port’s general long-term decline as a major port. That stems from ambitious plans that were launched around 20 years ago to develop Hunterston and Greenock as one of the major transatlantic trans-shipment terminals for containers coming across the Atlantic. At that time, huge investment was planned. Clydeport plc then merged with, or was purchased by, Peel Ports Group, which also owns the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company and has a major interest in the Mersey. That is another competing port on the west coast of Britain. Subsequently, huge investment—in the order of billions of pounds—has gone into developing the Liverpool 1 container terminal, and the focus of Peel Ports Group’s operations as a port authority has very much been on the Mersey at the expense of the Clyde.

There is a general, long-standing concern that the Clyde has been in a pattern of managed decline and disinvestment over many years and that the focus has been very much on Merseyside, to the extent that, if people want pilotage on the River Clyde, they call a call centre on the Mersey to get access to it. The situation seems to me to be unacceptable on a number of fronts.

Perhaps there are some parallels with previous inquiries into the management of airports in Scotland. There was an issue with one company managing both Glasgow airport and Edinburgh airport, and having a conflict of interest in that regard. There has not been any serious inquiry into, or study of, the potential long-term economic effects on the west of Scotland and the greater Glasgow city regions.

There is, of course, a container terminal in Greenock, but it does not even feature in the top 10 British ports any more. It has been in decline for a long time. At one time, it was the fifth-biggest container port in the UK, but it no longer appears in the top 100 ports in Europe, for example. There is a major long-term concern.

There is a high correlation between the level of freight traffic that comes through ports and levels of economic growth, so there is a yoke on the west of Scotland’s potential. We have recently seen the publication of population statistics and that the west of Scotland is in long-term decline. There is a broader issue that the Government really needs to pay more attention to. We need to have a serious ports policy and a policy for growing freight traffic through Scotland, ship movements and associated industries, such as the ship repair industry. To that end, the petitioner has made some serious and valid points.

We should be guided by measurable outputs. What is the goal to grow the Clyde? What is the goal to develop and invest in the Clyde and its operations? That is not clear at this point in time. There have been stop-start projects associated with Inchgreen dry dock, which is the biggest mainland dry dock in Great Britain. We should contrast that with what has happened in Belfast, where there has been massive investment in the former Harland & Wolff shipyard site. Nothing corresponding is happening on the Clyde. I have concerns on a number of fronts.

In a more parochial sense, the upper Clyde is, in effect, not dredged any more beyond the Govan shipyard site and at Braehead, where the King George V dock sits. That is a major concern, because there is a real dearth of recreational traffic on the upper Clyde. Anyone who is familiar with Clydeside around Glasgow will know that not many boats go there. That is in contrast with Merseyside, for example, which teems with marinas, wharfage and lots of recreational craft. If Glasgow had a marina at Pacific Quay, that would be a huge boon for the city. It would generate millions of pounds of revenue. No attention is being applied to that.

It is quite extraordinary that, in the early 1990s, a private bill was passed that effectively gave quasi-legislative control to a private enterprise, to manage 450 square miles of riverine land in the

west of Scotland, with huge legal privileges and byelaws, including the management of the riverbed itself. The obligations that that enterprise has in legislation to maintain a navigable channel as far as the tidal wharf at Glasgow Green have not been adhered to for many years. That has starved, damaged and stymied the Clyde's potential from central Glasgow all the way down to the estuary. That merits a broader inquiry. Frankly, I am not impressed by the Government's blasé brush-off in its response to the committee and the petition.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much, Mr Sweeney.

I hesitate to invite colleagues to consider matters at all, because Mr Sweeney's knowledge is fairly comprehensive. Do you have any suggestions about what the committee might consider doing, Mr Sweeney?

**Paul Sweeney:** The issue has been raised in the House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament over the years, but it has not had any serious focus. That has been most frustrating, and a number of parliamentarians across parties have expressed concern about that.

The creation of a space to look at the issue in greater depth would be fantastic, and this committee has a good opportunity to free that space for wider consideration. Stakeholders up and down the Clyde could be considered. I know that colleagues have suggested some stakeholder groups in the estuary and the Firth of Clyde area. Perhaps it would be helpful to consider submissions from the greater Glasgow city region councils and major industrial companies on the Clyde, such as BAE Systems and the Malin Group, which are looking to develop infrastructure on the Clyde, as well as Ferguson Marine and other parties that have industrial operations on the Clyde.

It might also be worth speaking to Maritime UK and other trade bodies that look at port development, to get some analysis of the longer-term growth of the Clyde as a port relative to competitor ports in the UK, and to start to establish a base of evidence on what is going on.

It would also be good if Peel Ports Group responded. It is important that it justifies its position and sets out its plans for investment on the Clyde. No one is against the group per se; what we are concerned about is the lack of clear operational ambition for the Clyde as an asset. I think that, if the group were to rise to that challenge, people would be more relaxed about its stewardship of the river.

**The Convener:** I am very grateful for your experience, passion and comprehensive range of suggestions, Mr Sweeney. Colleagues, I am very

happy to embrace all of Mr Sweeney's suggestions. Are there any others that you might wish to add?

**Maurice Golden:** The committee needs to be clear that we are conflating two separate asks here. One ask is in relation to what we have heard this morning about the future of the Clyde. The other—which is what I believe the petition focuses on—is about a change of ownership with regard to the future of the Clyde. I think that we just need to be clear that one does not necessarily link to the other—but it could. Our focus needs to be on the latter point, although it would be useful to have a fully informed opinion on the future of the Clyde from interested parties.

With that in mind, it might be useful to write to the Scottish Government regarding both aspects: the future of the Clyde and the ownership issue. In particular, I refer to Katy Clark's submission, which says that the former transport minister Jenny Gilruth

"acknowledged that the private ownership of harbours 'can substantially slow progress in relation to improvements and it also comes at a cost to the public purse.'"

If that is, indeed, Scottish Government policy, it strikes me that that would lead one to a conclusion that the petition should be warmly welcomed. However, it is important to clarify that with the Scottish Government.

In addition, it is worth while writing to the British Ports Association, the UK Chamber of Shipping, Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd, CalMac Ferries, Inverclyde Council, North Ayrshire Council and Glasgow City Council.

**The Convener:** Those were some of the suggestions, along with others, that Mr Sweeney made.

Yes, I do think that the petition opens up issues about which I knew very little, I have to say. Despite being born, raised and someone who has lived in and around the city of Glasgow—through which the Clyde is the dominant feature—all my life, I have not really given any recent thought to the issues that are raised in the petition or, indeed, to the issues that Paul Sweeney has discussed in some detail.

From time to time over the decades, I have wondered about the lack of any transformation. I used to come home from school when there were still wharf buildings all the way into the city centre along the Clyde and things were happening in them. They were all done away with, and then we had river taxis for all of five minutes, which did not amount to very much. After that, I seem to remember a seaplane would fly to Oban from somewhere along the river.

Compared to other major cities that you visit where the river is still a teeming lifeline through the city, the Clyde sits rather dormant and apart from city life. Some of the issues that the petitioner and Mr Sweeney raise might underpin some of the lethargy that is associated with all that.

I am very happy to take forward all those issues at this stage. Obviously, we will consider the petition further and decide what we might want to do when we get the various responses.

Are members content with that approach?

**Members indicated agreement.**

### Venice Biennale 2024 (PE2030)

**The Convener:** That brings us on to the petition that we very nearly started earlier but stopped midstride. PE2030, lodged by Denise Hooper, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the funding it provides to the Scotland + Venice project and ensure that Scottish artists can contribute to the Venice biennale in 2024.

The petitioner notes that Scotland has participated as its own entity in the Venice biennale since 2003, with people attending the festival specifically to see the Scottish contributions.

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development has responded to the petition, saying that the decision to pause involvement in the biennale in 2024 is to allow for an important period of reflection and review. The review was expected to begin during the summer just past and was to include a process of sectoral engagement to explore new approaches to the project for the longer term.

The petitioner has also provided a submission highlighting recent comments by the First Minister about the value of culture, and is urging a greater focus on the benefits of Scottish culture and arts being promoted on such a prestigious international stage.

I am tempted to ask what the important period of reflection and review was about. I presume that it was on wider considerations than just this one contributory event. Do colleagues have any suggestions? We could certainly write to the Scottish Government asking for an update on its work to its international culture strategy.

The Government submission refers to the decision

“to pause ... involvement”

to allow

“for an important period of reflection and review.”

I would be interested to know what that means. What was important about it and how long is it reflecting, and what is it reflecting on that is important?

We might also write to Creative Scotland to seek information on the review of the Scotland + Venice project. I would also be interested to know what the outcomes of our past participation have been. I do not think that that is terribly clear. What have we seen? Maybe Creative Scotland can tell us how that compares with our participation in other events. It may well be that that is what the Scottish Government is reflecting on. If we heard from all of them, that would be helpful.

Does anybody else want to comment?

**Maurice Golden:** In addition to that, it would be useful to ask Creative Scotland to include what monitoring metrics it uses to analyse success or otherwise.

**Foysoil Choudhury:** We should ask for a timeline as well.

**The Convener:** I thought that you were going to suggest that we go on a fact-finding visit to Venice, Mr Choudhury.

**Foysoil Choudhury:** I was about to ask when we are going there. [*Laughter.*]

**The Convener:** Okay. We will write to all those organisations, if members agree.

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** I thank Denise Hooper for the petition. We will be investigating the issue further.

### Insulin Pumps (PE2031)

**The Convener:** Our final petition this morning is PE2031. I have a feeling of déjà vu. When I first joined the Public Petitions Committee, some 12 years ago, one of the first petitions that we considered was on the availability at all of insulin pumps at that time. Here we are again, with a petition, lodged by Maria Aitken on behalf of the Caithness Health Action Team, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that children and young people in Scotland who have type 1 diabetes, and would benefit from a lifesaving insulin pump, are provided with one, no matter where they live.

The petitioner highlights what she views as a postcode lottery relating to the provision of continuous glucose monitoring and insulin pumps for children with diabetes, with a particular concern about the waiting lists for those devices across NHS Highland.



10:30

Responding to the petition, the Scottish Government refers to the diabetes improvement plan, which aims to increase access to existing and emerging diabetes technologies that can significantly benefit people with type 1 diabetes. The Scottish Government response highlights that, between 2016 and 2021, it invested an additional £15 million to support the increased provision of insulin pumps and continuous glucose monitoring. The Government also points to current work to roll out diabetes technology with a particular focus on reducing regional variation.

Do members have any comments or suggestions?

**Foysoil Choudhury:** We should write to Diabetes Scotland to get its view. Did you write to Jenny Minto, the responsible minister, for an update? I see that there is a suggestion that we do that.

**The Convener:** I think that we might get to that. I might quite like to write to the different health boards to ask what the current status within each health board is. The assertion is that provision is a postcode lottery. I have a recollection that, right back at the start when the issue was whether insulin pumps would be provided at all, it was a health board lottery. I think that, all that time ago, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde embraced their provision and other health boards did not.

It would be interesting to know what the provision is within each health board and what policies they have surrounding the award of insulin pumps to children. This sits within a framework in which—I think—it is the case that children are meant to get them if they need them, so we need to find out where we are at with all that.

Diabetes Scotland and the Insulin Pump Awareness Group might be able to help us in that work as well. That would be helpful in the first instance. These are very important matters to those people who in life depend on them.

Do we agree to take that action?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** We will keep the petition open, and we will make those inquiries and consider it afresh when we get responses.

That concludes the consideration of our petitions today. We are next due to meet on 4 October. On that note, I formally close the meeting. Thank you all very much.

*Meeting closed at 10:32.*



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