

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 13 January 2009

Session 3

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2009, Session 3

CONVENER

*Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Bashir Ahmad (Glasgow) (SNP)

*Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)

*Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP)

*Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)

*Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)

*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Nicol Stephen (Aberdeen South) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP)

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP)

George Anderson (Militant Retired)

Ron Beaty

Janet Beaty

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)

Mary Scott Macfarlane (Friends at the End)

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP)

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Nicol Stephen (Aberdeen South) (LD)

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Fergus Cochrane

ASSISTANT CLERKS

Franck David

Zoé Tough

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Tuesday 13 January 2009

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:00*]

New Petitions

School Bus Safety (PE1223)

The Convener (Mr Frank McAveety): Good afternoon, everyone. I bid a good new year to visitors to the Parliament. Welcome to the Public Petitions Committee's first meeting in 2009. We have received no apologies. I inform members of the public that all mobile phones and other electronic devices are to be switched off.

Agenda item 1 is consideration of six new petitions. All the papers have been provided for committee members. The first petition is PE1223, from Ron Beaty, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to take all appropriate action—whether through amending guidance, contracts, agreements or legislation—to require local authorities to install proper safety signage and lights on school buses, to be used only when necessary when schoolchildren are on buses, and to make overtaking a stationary school bus a criminal offence.

I welcome to the meeting Ron Beaty and Janet Beaty. A letter from Scotland's Campaign Against Irresponsible Drivers has also been provided to committee members. Ron Beaty will make the three-minute introduction. I ask him to make himself comfortable. The opportunity for questions and answers will follow.

Ron Beaty: Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for allowing me to speak to the committee. I speak especially on behalf of the families who have recently lost children—the Oldham and Milne families—and other families who have been in the same position in the past 30 years.

I ask members to imagine being told that their child will rely totally on others for the rest of their life or that their child was killed when coming home from school. School transport can and does have deadly consequences. In this room in 2006, I brought a similar school transport problem before the committee, but nothing was done. Alex Neil raised the matter with the Scottish Executive, but nothing was done. He said:

"I beg the Scottish ministers to take the matter seriously and to produce an action plan early in the new year."—*[Official Report, 23 November 2006; c 29818.]*

However, still nothing was done.

I was three weeks home from speaking to the committee in 2006 when a young lad from Crossgates in Fife was killed while getting off a school bus. Still nothing changed. In September 2008, Robyn Oldham and Alexander Milne were, tragically, killed within weeks of each other. Nothing has changed. I now appear before the committee again. Surely members will not let me leave this time without things changing.

Parents are right to ask how safe their children are on school transport. Children are our most precious commodity. If we cannot pass laws to protect our schoolchildren, something is seriously wrong. Regardless of where they live, every child needs the same level of safety.

I will describe doable measures that can be introduced to save lives. I am sure that the Scottish Parliament could introduce at least some of them under devolved road safety laws. The safety sign on school buses has been abused for years. It is displayed on old-age pensioners' runs, on tours and on minibuses that are used as taxis at night. Legally, the sign must be displayed when children are on board a bus, yet no law says that it must be removed when children are not on board a bus. That is ridiculous. Advertisements on school buses are larger than the safety sign. Should the situation not be the other way round?

Dustcarts are more visible than school buses. Is that common sense? Buses need extra hazard lights that are set higher on the vehicles, as with all ambulances. The Department for Transport allows that, yet no council insists on that in its contracts, just as no council insists that the safety sign should be removed when no children are on board.

Each bus could have a flashing scrolling message on the back window that said, "Caution—schoolchildren crossing."

Strobe lights could be fitted. Just as undercover police cars have blue strobe lights fitted in radiator grilles, the same lights could be fitted to the back window of a school bus. They can be bought easily—they are certainly not expensive—and they would draw attention to the fact that it is a school bus. School buses should be instantly recognisable as such.

We cannot have service buses also used as school buses with different laws; we need the same laws for all buses that carry children. We need dedicated school transport with trusted drivers and better safety education at school on a regular basis. Those are doable short-term measures that the Parliament can take.

Stewart Stevenson and Aberdeenshire Council recently met the families involved. The one

measure that all the families agreed with—as do many other families to whom I have spoken since—was stopping other vehicles passing school buses as they load and unload. It works in North America, and if that were made a criminal offence here, the law would save lives. Passing vehicles kill children who are leaving a school bus. If we stop them passing, we have a cure. Nothing will prevent every accident, but that measure will prevent most.

Such a law cannot be passed by the Scottish Parliament. You need to take a stand and test your own powers in relation to transport laws. If a new law is needed in Scotland, it should be created. If Westminster does not agree, that is its problem. You must be forceful about this and say that we need this law to benefit our children, even if they do not wish to benefit theirs down south. If our MSPs voted on the matter and secured a majority, that would surely be enough to take it forward regardless of what Westminster thinks. If our Parliament has the will, it will happen—you can fight for it.

It appears that some motorists have so little time that they cannot stop to save a child's life. Is a few minutes really that important? We have 20mph limits around schools and 30mph signs that flash as motorists enter a town. There must be something that we can do. We must get rid of the cheapest form of school transport for children—which many buses are—and replace it with the safest form of school transport. The families whom I represent all expect that the law can be changed and that lives can be saved. In fact, that is what is expected by every parent and every child. Do not make the mistake of saying, "It can't happen to my family." We all thought the same. It will happen again to another family unless legislation is introduced.

I ask the committee one simple question: can you put a price on a child's life? We cannot.

The Convener: Do you want to add to that, Janet?

Janet Beaty: No, thank you. Everything has been said.

The Convener: Okay. Thanks very much.

This is the stage at which I invite questions from members of the committee. You should both feel free to respond to the points that are made by committee members.

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): Mr Beaty, one cannot help but be moved by what you have said. Is the evidence from other legislatures and other countries that do not allow overtaking wholly positive? What evidence do you have to support your contention that if, in co-operation with Westminster, we were able to introduce such a

change to the law, it would be advantageous and would save lives?

Ron Beaty: In North America, the system is very successful, although there are still accidents—with the best will in the world, we cannot stop every accident—and it is enforced strongly. In America, it is a serious crime to pass a bus that is loading or unloading school children. California provides the best example. The buses there are also fitted with video cameras so that, if the bus stops and a car passes, an image is taken and the enforcement officer is sent out.

California has a slightly different system from the one that is used in other parts of America in that, at a double road crossing, the driver can get out of the bus. There are eight lights that flash on their buses, the stop signs come down and the driver gets out, holds up a sign and sees the children across the road. Under health and safety regulations, drivers in this country are not even allowed to leave their seat.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): Mr Beaty, you have mentioned North America. I understand that they have yellow school buses there. Am I right in thinking that the use of such buses has been trialled in Aberdeenshire? I confess ignorance, as I do not know the results of any trial that there has been or whether there are any plans to introduce such buses in Scotland.

Ron Beaty: I do not know what the outcome was. David Blunkett runs the Yellow School Bus Commission, and trials were conducted in various areas throughout the United Kingdom—down south as well as in Scotland. By all accounts, the buses were great and the kids were happy on board because they knew that they were safe. The buses are big and yellow and you cannot miss them. The problem is that, if such a bus were forced on the private coach contractors, they would have a bus that was used for school contracts but nothing else. They would have to find a financial way of getting round that. As far as I and many other people are concerned, that would probably be the way ahead, but it would need a lot of investigation.

Nanette Milne: Are any councils in Scotland forcing bus companies to remove the school bus safety signs by putting that in their contracts?

Ron Beaty: Not as far as I know. The Department for Transport tells them that they can insist on the removal of the signs. We have told Aberdeenshire Council that on numerous occasions, but there are photographs of buses at various times of the night being used as taxis with their schools signs still up. The contractors are not obliged to take them down. Councils have been told that it is not a problem for them to write that into their contracts but, for some reason, they will

not to do so. Perhaps that is an area in which the Parliament could act to take away councils' flexibility as, when it comes to child safety, everybody should operate on the same basis and at the same level. There should not be different levels for different councils; they should all do the same.

Nanette Milne: There is now some movement on the introduction of seat belts in school buses. I have been pushing for that in Aberdeenshire, and I know that it has happened in other council areas. We could perhaps find out what the position is in different council areas regarding the various safety measures.

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): Good afternoon, folks. I was interested in your comments, Mr Beaty. I am sure that everybody around the table sympathises with the parents who find themselves in that situation. You talked about having illuminated signs on dedicated school buses. That could be done easily and without too much cost. How would that apply to buses that run as service buses as well as school transport? Would there have to be an exemption for them or would the same criteria apply? Would they still have to display illuminated signs?

Ron Beaty: To be honest, I cannot see how we can differentiate between the two. To my way of thinking—and probably that of the parents whom I represent—a bus is either a school bus or it is not. How an operator can run a service bus with children on board and call it a school bus is beyond me. That will not work on the ground of safety. The laws that apply to school buses will have to apply to public service buses—there is no way round it. Either we protect children or we do not.

John Farquhar Munro: You are suggesting that, if a percentage of the passengers on the bus are schoolchildren, the vehicle should have an illuminated sign, just as a dedicated school bus does.

Ron Beaty: Exactly. Yes.

14:15

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): I confess that I am looking for a bit of help in understanding how we can make rules for bus companies—I am not worried about who makes them or the legalities that are involved. If an ordinary scheduled bus happens to go in the direction that pupils want to go and goes past a school gate at a sensible time, the local authority will say, "We don't need to run a separate school bus," and it would be right, because doing so would be ridiculously expensive. However, you are, understandably, asking for buses to be

marked as school buses from a point onwards so that drivers and others will understand that they are school buses. I am struggling to see—dare I say it—the practicability of that. I am struggling to find a simpler solution in such an environment than buses having large electronic boards fore and aft that can be switched on to say the right things. Do you have any other suggestions about how things can be done simply?

Ron Beaty: Is that not a simple solution? The driver could switch a sign on and off. Signs near schools flash up to say that the speed limit is 20mph so that people will—I hope—slow down to that speed when they pass the school. If a driver can switch on and off a sign on a school bus that will say "Caution—schoolchildren crossing", surely that will tell people who is on board. Regardless of who is on board the bus, children will still get on and off it. The only way to stop accidents is to stop traffic passing buses.

You mentioned costs. Please do not get me wrong. The other families who are involved with the petition and I probably see things in a different light from how you see them. How can we cost things? How do we price a child's life?

There is another issue. Do the drivers of buses that both children and fare-paying passengers use have disclosures? There may be drivers and others on buses whom we know nothing about.

Nigel Don: I accept that there is an issue to do with bus drivers and children, which applies regardless of whether the children are going to or from school or are out at any other time of the day. However, if I understand you correctly, you are looking for all our buses to be designed in such a way that there will be things like big electronic scoreboards fore and aft—above head height, I presume—that can display the signs that you want to be displayed and which can be changed over time. I take your point. That would not be hugely expensive, but it would certainly involve a significant amount of money, as none of our buses has those things. Is that the way forward?

Ron Beaty: That is only one way forward. I am not being cheeky, but I simply cannot grasp why people do not understand that school transport should be dedicated school transport. I do not see why there should be a mix on buses of children and people who are paying fares. There must be safety for schoolchildren, which there will be by using yellow school buses. Perhaps I am not picking up correctly what you are saying.

Nigel Don: I think that you are absolutely right and that there could be an extended discussion on the matter, but surely it is not difficult to conceive a run on which only one child lives. That is fair enough, but we will not know whether that child will be in school on a particular day and we can

quickly imagine other folk saying, "Why is that being done? A service bus goes past their house—can't they use it?" I see where you are coming from and understand what you are saying, but there is another side to the coin.

If we are looking for a thing like a big electronic scoreboard that a driver can switch on and off at the appropriate stage, it sounds as if we can put up the signage and warning lights that you are looking for in a standardised way and that every bus in every fleet in the country could have such signage.

Ron Beaty: When you speak about a large sign, you frighten me—it does not have to be a large sign. Signs with strobe LED lights are so effective now that they can be seen in broad daylight at a great distance. All that is needed is something that says "Caution—schoolchildren crossing". Strobe lights could be placed in the corner of each window—that kind of electronic gadget is exceptionally cheap. Even switching the lights off and on can be done from the driver's dashboard.

Nigel Don: And in your view those would be small enough to fit in the front window and the back window of the bus?

Ron Beaty: Yes.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): I do not want to labour the point, but I can understand where Nigel Don is coming from. We have great sympathy with the petition, but in an urban setting there are many service buses that travel across the city and carry ordinary passengers as well as secondary pupils—I am thinking here about secondary rather than primary pupils. Do you want to say anything more about the important issue of teaching road safety and school bus safety in schools? We could perhaps push that issue. Do you have any particular examples of local authorities in Scotland that operate good practice with regard to school buses?

Ron Beaty: I will take your last question first. Most authorities try to do the best work that they can within their financial constraints. Money is spent on this, that and the next thing, but money is never spent on school transport. It seems to be the most basic transport in most cases—the oldest buses that the authorities can run.

We are talking about investing in children as well as investing in safety, and they are worth investing in. I am sorry—I forgot the first part of your question.

Marlyn Glen: I was asking about teaching school bus safety, and road safety in general.

Ron Beaty: Talisman Energy is currently producing a DVD that will be sent to every school and viewed by every pupil. Carla Oldham, the mother of Robyn—the young girl who was run

down—is taking part in the DVD. I hope that it will reach children in the schools.

We also have plans for children to design high-visibility jackets for themselves. There are a lot of things going on, but it comes down to the basics in the end. If you take a link out of a chain, the chain falls and, in my view and the view of the other parents involved, the main link in the chain is that we do not have dedicated school transport. School buses do not look like school buses. They are no different apart from having a small square sign in the back, which has been abused for years and, as a result, means nothing to drivers now. We need to up the ante and show that a school bus is exactly that. As Nigel Don says, folk could come up with hundreds of other ideas, and things could be adapted to fit buses, but we certainly cannot leave things as they are. Kids are getting killed and injured on a regular basis, and it has to stop.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Do you have any indications on whether accidents and deaths are more prevalent on the morning run, when children are being picked up to be taken to school, or in the afternoon, when they are being dropped off after school?

Ron Beaty: Most accidents occur in the afternoon, when kids are dropped off from school. Erin was just about a foot and a half from the pavement on the safe side of the road when the car passed the bus and knocked her down. Robyn Oldham was in the middle of the road when she was knocked down; and Alexander Milne stepped out from behind the bus.

John Wilson: You have suggested that all schoolchildren should be covered by the safety measures that are recommended in the petition. Should the measures apply to all children, in both primary and secondary schools? In my village, I see children being picked up in the morning to go to primary school. In effect, you are asking for dedicated school buses, as they have in America, to pick up every child who requires bus transport.

Ron Beaty: The system would have to cover every child. Otherwise, we would have somebody deciding that this school would have one system but that school would have another. We would end up with fragmentation, and it would not work. This may be where we are going wrong. Over the years, the Scottish Parliament has allowed councils to make their own rules. It is perhaps time for the Government to set a framework so that every council is required to operate in exactly the same way.

John Wilson: The school bus that I see is usually a private-hire contract bus, not a regular scheduled bus. Contracts usually go to private-hire companies. As well as the bus to the primary school, two older-style double-deckers pass my

door in the morning, on the way to pick up secondary school children in another area. In many local authorities, school run services are contracted out to private-hire companies.

In the past, the Parliament has discussed the introduction of seat belts on coaches that transport children on school runs. The most common argument against seat belts is cost. One of the local authorities in my area is trying to set money aside from its budget each year to give to contractors so that they can install seat belts in their coaches. It is the local authorities that let the contracts for school bus runs. Have you any figures for the costs that are associated with each yellow bus—each dedicated school bus—when services are delivered by local authorities?

Ron Beaty: I have done no costings for that whatsoever. To be quite honest, that is beyond my wit.

I congratulate Aberdeenshire Council on having insisted that all school buses be fitted with seat belts, which is good news. It will remove quite a lot of buses from the present fleet. The council is also stopping double-deckers being used as school buses, which is a great idea. Even at the best of times, double-deckers are potentially unsafe for children. In our area, they can carry a whole generation of children. Further south, all the children in particular streets are probably on board the same bus.

Seat belts are one link in the chain. However, without the other links, the chain is incomplete. An holistic outlook is required.

The Convener: Do members have any final questions?

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): The technology is there to put any notice that you like in the back of a bus. That notice would be stored on a chip and could be altered at the flick of a switch. Buses are large and they obstruct views, so for safety reasons there should certainly be a campaign for such technology to be adopted on all public transport. It would not be only for children; other kinds of messages could also be displayed on the backs of buses.

14:30

Ron Beaty: We have a gentleman who is working on various inventions. In the argument about seat belts in buses for children, some people say that children would not put them on, or they ask who would be responsible. The answer to that is easy. An electronic chip, which Robin Harper mentioned, can be used to point out when a seat belt is not fitted. The bus would not move until the child put on their seat belt. The rest of the children on the coach would get on at the child,

who would put on their seat belt and that would be the end of that. Eventually, people get used to such things. For example, people eventually got used to the 70mph limit on motorways and the 20mph speed limits.

Before I leave the committee, I ask members please to think about our proposals and save children's lives.

John Farquhar Munro: I have a small question. There is a lot of sympathy for your petition. The idea of illuminating buses that are on the school run so that people can identify them immediately is fine. You said that you want a restriction on traffic so that it cannot pass such buses when they stop—the restriction would make passing them an offence. How would we amend the legislation to control traffic that passes school buses? Would we do that at local authority level through byelaws or would there have to be national legislation?

Ron Beaty: It would have to be a national law, because byelaws that are set by councils tend not to work. Somebody has to be there, and if a national law was passed, the forces of law—the police—would be involved, so anything to do with that law would then become important.

There could be video cameras on buses. Many buses already have cameras that record what happens in front of them. Down south, a car driver who is in a bus lane can have their photograph taken by a bus. A ticket then is issued, and the car driver is fined for being in a bus lane. Many Stagecoach buses in Scotland have video cameras on board. It sounds like new technology but, in this day and age, there is no problem with electrical gadgets.

John Farquhar Munro: So you think we should have national legislation for the traffic offence.

Ron Beaty: National legislation is the only way.

Bashir Ahmad (Glasgow) (SNP): Parents and teachers can play a major role. When a child leaves in the morning and the parents take them to the car or bus or whatever, they should remind the child to be careful and to take extra care when they cross the road or leave the bus. That kind of reminder will stay with the children.

The same applies to teachers. When children leave the school to go home, the teacher in charge of the last class should give the same message and tell the children to take extra care when they cross the road. I would hope that if that message was given to children twice a day, in the morning and when they leave school, there would be a lot of improvement.

I am from a backward world, where no transport to school was available for children. When we walked to school and back to the house, we saw lots of bricks and small bits of concrete here and

there on the footpaths. The teachers told us to put aside whatever we saw on the road, so that the footpath could be cleared. That happened a lot.

Janet Beaty: You have to tell drivers who are passing school buses to look out, too. It is not always just down to the child. You have to draw attention to the bus and let drivers know that children are there. I agree that we have to tell children about road safety at every level, but you have to tell the drivers, too. There has to be a warning sign to draw attention to the school bus.

Ron Beaty: When Robyn Oldham was run down, she was in the middle of the road. Regardless of what the teacher said to her, she obviously thought that the road was safe to cross at that time. Erin was three quarters of the way across the road when she was run down. I understand what you are saying and I agree with a lot of it: road safety needs to be taught better in schools.

After Erin's accident, we found out that a child's perception of danger changes radically with age. Even at 10 to 12-years-old, when children get off a bus and look to the right and see the parked bus, their assumption is that it is safe to cross, because the parked vehicle is preventing anything from passing. It does not matter what you tell them—that is what they perceive to be the case. They look one way, see that the road is clear and step out.

Erin knew her road safety; Alexander Milne knew his road safety; and Robyn Oldham knew her road safety. There are problems teaching road safety in schools. However, the biggest problem is that when it comes to passing a school bus, drivers could not care a toot. They do not slow down. The "Highway Code" tells them that they should take care, but they do not have time to take care. They see the bus; they see a small square sign in the back window, which means virtually nothing; and they pull out and pass the bus. To them, it is not a school bus; it is not marked as a school bus or coloured as a school bus. All it has is a small, square sign, not much bigger than a piece of A4 paper, in the back window. Until something is done about that, I am afraid that children will continue to be killed and injured.

The Convener: Every member of the committee has asked a question. That has not happened for a while, so perhaps we have addressed the concern that was expressed at the beginning about our understanding the importance of the petition.

I think that the petitioners have heard members' willingness to try to explore the issues that they have raised. We would be frustrated—although it would be nothing compared with what the families have experienced in having to deal with difficult

consequences—if they did not think that things were moving on at all.

At this stage, I invite members' views on how to take forward the petition. I do not want the petitioners to leave today feeling that they have not achieved something in relation to finding solutions to the difficult problems that they have raised. I invite suggestions from members, after which we will try to explain what we want to do next with the petition.

Bill Butler: In the first instance, we should ask the Scottish Government a number of questions, such as what specific actions it is taking to make routes to school safer for children and how it promotes best practice among local authorities in how they handle contracts, especially with regard to better signage and lights on school buses. We should also ask the Scottish Government whether it supports in principle the change in the law that the petitioners have been asking for, which would ban the overtaking of a stationary school bus. If the Scottish Government supports that change in principle, let us ask whether it will make representations to Westminster to see whether Holyrood and Westminster acting together can affect that change in the law.

Nigel Don: I wonder whether we might take a step slightly beyond what we have normally done in the past year and a bit that I have been on the committee and agree that we think that the proposal is important and we want to see a change, as the petitioner does. Rather than just asking questions about what people are doing—although we need to do that, and I support what Bill Butler said and would also suggest that we write to some local authorities for their views—perhaps we could frame those letters in a way that says, particularly to the Government, "We would like to see a change on this and can you advise us how that change can be brought about?" We could ask the Government to address each of the issues that the petitioners have raised and clarify what would need to be done to make the change so that we are not unsure about how to proceed. If the Government says that the matter is reserved to Westminster—I believe that some of it is—it ought to be encouraged to write to Westminster. It might tell us that the best way forward for the committee is to write to Westminster, too. Alternatively, we could ask the Government to tell us what to do. I have certainly got the message from the petitioners that the matter needs to be addressed. This is not a paper exercise, and I believe that we need to make some progress.

John Wilson: Although the petition talks about drivers of motor vehicles overtaking stationary school buses or buses that are identified as transport for schoolchildren, there might be a wider issue about how we transport children. I

refer particularly to the point that was made in response to my question about the incidence of accidents when children are dropped off and then cross the road. Although it might be fair to say that such buses should not be overtaken, there is also an issue about on-coming traffic being able readily to identify that a bus in the distance is dropping off schoolchildren.

There has been some discussion of warning lights at both the rear and the front of buses. As with pedestrian crossings, drivers would then be made aware that they were approaching an area where pedestrians might be on the road or about to cross it.

There is a wider issue about how we deal with the safety of passengers coming off school buses. As Nigel Don mentioned, we could ask the Scottish Government to ask the UK Government about what measures can be put in place to safeguard children getting off buses not only from traffic coming up behind the bus, but from other traffic using the road. As a road user, it scares me when I see buses, particularly school buses, dropping off children at blind bends, where other road users cannot see what is going on in front of them. We need to bring all such measures into play so that we create the safest possible environment for all children getting off buses and an environment in which other road users also feel secure. The trauma to any driver involved in a road accident, particularly when a child is involved, can be debilitating. I hope that the Government will take on board our concerns to safeguard the environment not just for children but for other road users.

Nanette Milne: I think that Mrs Beaty said that drivers need to be aware, which is so right. When I was a councillor, we dealt with an issue of speeding beside a school. We looked into the matter carefully and found that the people speeding were mums on their way to pick up kids from school—even they were not really aware of the possible consequences of their actions. I would like to find out whether councils are doing anything to educate children and parents about road safety.

I would also like a bit more detail on the yellow bus trial. We should find out how successful that has been in the trial areas, what the costs are and whether it might be rolled out across Scotland.

14:45

Robin Harper: I accept Nigel Don's point about the way in which we should approach the Department for Transport. I think that we should do so by providing a list of specifics.

We should also note—this applies to cities rather than to small villages—that other physical

steps can be taken. Near my local primary school, the railings are positioned in such a way on both sides of the road that the children can proceed conveniently only to the controlled crossing point. In other words, it is not easy—or even possible—for the children to run out into the road from either end of the bus.

The Convener: The committee will now try to pull together those points into a course of action. Once we have agreed that action, the petitioners will be kept informed of any progress. When the committee reconsiders the petition to look at the responses, the petitioners will be notified. I hope that we will be able to make progress on the issues that have been raised.

We have absolute agreement from committee members that we should raise the issue with the Scottish Government, the UK Government's Department for Transport and the education and support mechanisms that provide advice here in Scotland. We are also agreed that we should explore with a number of local authorities how to create good guidance frameworks for school transport contracts and the operational conduct of bus operators that provide school transport.

I agree with Nanette Milne that we should explore the issue with the UK Yellow School Bus Commission. Initiatives have also been undertaken by local authorities and others with FirstBus, which I think is the major bus operator that has tried to deal with the issue. Such initiatives could produce further welcome developments if resources were made available for them.

Nigel Don asked whether, as a matter of principle, the committee could agree with the petitioners by supporting this safety initiative and calling for the overtaking of school buses when they are in operation to be banned. The committee took a position on a matter of principle—curiously enough, on seat belts, which Nanette Milne mentioned—in a previous parliamentary session when dealing with a similar situation. Therefore, it would not be remiss of the committee to take an in-principle position by recommending a particular course of action. We could ask both Governments as well as other agencies to make progress on addressing the issue to the satisfaction of the petitioners. Would that be worth doing? Is there a consensus among committee members on that? If there is, we can move forward.

Robin Harper: For the sake of clarity, it might be wise to add “while the bus is unloading or loading children”, given that a school bus that has no children on board could stop.

The Convener: I am not too worried about the semantics; I think that we should just agree the broad principle. A lot of lawyers will probably give

us 10 reasons why we cannot put a certain sentence together, but we will see what happens. I mean no disrespect to anyone in the legal trade—I probably was disrespectful, but there we go—but, essentially, we first need to achieve a consensus on the matter. According to the information that I have in front of me, the issue has popped up a couple of times both in this Parliament and in the House of Commons, but it has not got any further. We need to create some momentum on the issue to meet the petitioners' aspirations. If we can agree most of that and pull those points together, we can move forward.

I hope that John Wilson is about to give me a conciliatory contribution.

John Wilson: I am aware that local authorities can introduce 20mph speed limits on the roads outside school buildings. As has been mentioned, the issue is whether local authorities can introduce byelaws on the operation of school buses, as that might offer a way forward. Given that they can put up speed reduction signs outside school buildings, they might be able to introduce byelaws on the safe transportation of schoolchildren, for whom they have a duty of care. Although we need to go to the Department for Transport to get the regulations changed, we should investigate whether local authorities can make changes locally.

The Convener: That is a positive suggestion, which we can raise directly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and a few specific local authorities. Perhaps we could choose a city authority and a rural authority, because the experience of road use will be different in those areas.

Members have made helpful suggestions, which we will pull together and raise with the agencies that have been mentioned. I have explained the process. We have managed to get to the heart of the issue that the petition raises. All that I can say is that I hope that we can make progress on it on behalf of the petitioners and those who have supported the petition, and that today's consideration has been useful.

Assisted Dying (Referendum) (PE1228)

The Convener: PE1228 by George B Anderson, on behalf of the Militant Retired, calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to hold a referendum on assisted dying and asks the Parliament to hold a debate on the issue. I welcome to the meeting George Anderson, Alice Watson and Mary Scott Macfarlane; I think that Mr Anderson will lead off. The format is that you have three minutes to speak to the petition, after which we will have a question-and-answer session.

George Anderson (Militant Retired): My eyesight is bad and the battery has gone in my watch, so you will have to keep me in touch with time.

The Convener: I will keep the conversation going until you are ready. I am losing my eyesight, too, so I can sympathise. On you go.

George Anderson: Dr Libby Wilson was supposed to come along to the meeting, but she took unwell. Alice Watson and Mary Scott Macfarlane from FATE are here to help me out.

In the next few minutes, I would like to expand on why we need a referendum and a debate on assisted dying. Believe it or not, my first source is a wee history book, in which something caught my eye the other day that I thought was pretty relevant. I will read out what the author says about the last hours of George V on 20 January 1936 at Sandringham house, Norfolk:

"The king's health had been deteriorating for some years ... and by the beginning of 1936 he clearly had little time left ... His hand shook so badly that he could no longer write his diary and his doctor, Lord Dawson ... issued a bulletin from Sandringham: 'The king's life is moving peacefully to its close'. He gave the dying man drugs to ease the pain and also apparently to hasten the end so that the news of the death would appear in the quality morning press rather than the evening papers. The king died that same night."

I ask you to consider how that relates to the subject of the petition.

The second item that I want to read to you is from one of the case studies in Margo MacDonald's consultation paper. I do not know whether many of you have read that, but it is worth a read, as are Jeremy Purvis's papers. Both made helpful contributions to the debate.

The case study involves the Bowman family from Cumbernauld:

"Mrs Bowman suffered from Parkinsons ... She was totally dependent on others, mainly her husband."

Mrs Bowman bravely chose a day to explain to her family—I am choked up reading this—that her

"life had become intolerable and that with her husband's help, she planned to end it rather than endure what she saw as meaningless torture.

Her children respected her decision, and their father's agreement to co-operate with it. Mrs Bowman's death took place in her home by means of a combination of drugs and possibly, suffocation."

The family never discussed how Mrs Bowman's life ended, and

"Her death certificate did not record her death as having been due to suicide or assisted suicide."

That is another important point.

Those are two graphic examples of assisted dying; there are many others if you care to read up

on them. I have one here—Raymond's story—that I will not read out to you but which can be had from FATE. It is about a trip to Dignitas, and it does not spare us any of the details. It takes us in another direction—to Switzerland, to be precise—and it gives a full account of what happened there. I will spare you the details; suffice to say that Raymond's story would break a stone's heart.

Why are terminally ill people being forced into exile in the same way as lepers were in medieval times? Let me suggest a possible reason. Those who drew up the Suicide Act 1961 did not envisage that other countries would amend their suicide laws, which has resulted in people who have terminal illnesses seeking assistance abroad. That phenomenon can only increase if the figures that show our aging demographic are to be believed and the laws of this country remain as they are.

I have one final point to do with our call for a referendum. If the city of Manchester can hold a referendum on traffic congestion charges, it would be perverse for the Scottish Parliament to fail to treat the issue of assisted dying less seriously. I do not know whether members have any questions or whether my friends have any contribution to make.

The Convener: Committee members will ask questions, to which any of the three witnesses can respond.

George Anderson: Alice Watson has asked me to explain that FATE means Friends at the End, in case members do not know that. FATE is based in Glasgow.

The Convener: We are aware that a couple of members have raised, and are raising, the issue of legislation for a framework for assisting people who wish to terminate their lives. What discussions have you had with members who have raised the issue in the chamber? How do you feel about the members' bills that have been proposed?

15:00

George Anderson: When all of this is over, I will write it up, as it has not been a happy experience. I wrote, either by letter or by e-mail, using my daughter's computer, about the business of asking for a referendum—that was all that I asked for. I will quote one of the half a dozen letters that I received, without saying from whom it came. The letter states that my comments "have been noted".

The Convener: I invite Mary Scott Macfarlane to comment. Members have raised the issue in the chamber; most recently, Margo MacDonald's proposed bill has received publicity. How do you

think that the proposed bill will engage with the issues that you raise? Would it be worth your exploring that option before initiating a debate on a referendum?

Mary Scott Macfarlane (Friends at the End): We have had contact with both Jeremy Purvis and Margo MacDonald over a number of years. Jeremy has spoken at Friends at the End meetings. We have written to all MSPs in my area of Lothian and the Borders on several occasions over a number of years. My most recent contact with Margo MacDonald was at St John's church, towards the end of last year, when she met Ewan Aitken and we had a debate. I assured her then that I was totally on line with what she is proposing and that we back her 100 per cent. We have been in touch with both Jeremy Purvis and Margo MacDonald and know how they feel; I think that they know how we feel.

Bill Butler: This is a serious issue, and there is much to be said on both sides. How would you respond to someone who said that they supported members of the elected Parliament introducing members' bills on the issue to which your petition relates, because that is part of representative parliamentary democracy, but that they could not support a referendum on it, because by and large referendums are concerned with constitutional issues? Why do we have a Parliament if there is to be democracy by referendum?

George Anderson: My first response is that Manchester City Council does not look at the issue in that way. This is not a constitutional matter. Referendums such as that which we propose are held in Switzerland all the time—the aim is to find out what the people think. The petition was prompted by the wee poll on the issue that my local paper conducted about a month ago. Do you have the material that is on our website?

Members: No.

George Anderson: I thought that you might have a printout of that material, but it does not matter. My local newspaper asked its readers whether there should be a law sanctioning voluntary euthanasia; 84 per cent of people said yes in response to that simple, straightforward question. I want to know whether that is the view nationally as well as locally, and the only way of finding out is to hold a national referendum. Never mind your cosy wee meetings in the Parliament—put the issue out to the people. I do not know what that would cost—there is a cost to everything—but we propose a postal referendum. How did Manchester do it?

Bill Butler: I understand what you are saying, but others take a contrary view.

Nigel Don: I do not want to go too far down this road, but I echo what Bill Butler has just said. Both

he and I have been members of the Justice Committee for a while—we spent all this morning dealing with issues there. With respect, law making is rarely a simple matter, and any law that we might be able to introduce in this area would involve a lot of complexities that it would not be appropriate to deal with in a referendum. However, we have got the point that there is a serious issue.

I suggest that one of the reasons why the replies that you have had to letters and e-mails have been fairly terse is that this is quite a difficult subject for MSPs and others to get to grips with, so it is much easier to give a simple reply.

George Anderson: Please do not insult my intelligence. I know that it is a difficult issue; I was a nurse at one time, so you do not need to tell me that it is a difficult issue.

Nigel Don: There are considerable concerns about what the law might be able to say and how it should be drafted. Experience tells me that it is not a simple matter. I have got to the point of recognising that we must have a debate about the matter. That is why I welcome Margo MacDonald's consultation, because on whichever side of the divide—if there is a divide—anyone might stand, it is such a current issue and so relevant to the general population that we must at least grasp the nettle and address it.

That is where I am coming from. We therefore need to write to the Government—I echo what I said previously—not so much to endorse a view, which I would not want to do at this stage, but to say to it that we think that this is a real issue and to ask it what, if anything, it proposes to do about the matter. If its view is that it does not propose to do anything, we should have the Government saying that.

The other recommendation that I will make—as petitioners you will be aware of this—is that because there is a general public consultation on the issue, we should encourage anyone who has a view to respond to Margo MacDonald's consultation paper, because that is the fastest way forward.

The Convener: I noted assent from members to those suggestions, so I think that there is agreement with them. Are there any other questions for the petitioners?

George Anderson: Before—

The Convener: I am chairing the meeting, George. Haud on. As there are no questions, George can now come in.

George Anderson: Nigel Don said that it would be inappropriate to hold a referendum. What do you mean by that? How is it inappropriate to hold a referendum?

Nigel Don: Manchester's referendum—I think that London had a referendum on a similar issue—asked a specific question about a specific issue, which was an issue about which people would not die in a ditch, if you will allow me to use that phrase, but you are asking a question that, we accept, is hugely complicated. You cannot just define "voluntary euthanasia". Every time you put "just" in—

George Anderson: You are confusing two things. I am asking for a referendum; you are confusing that with drawing up a bill. I am not asking you to draw up a bill. I am asking you to ask the people: do they want help at the end of their lives if they want to get out of it?

The Convener: There is an issue of process that we will all negotiate about. Essentially, when a referendum is held, either by a local authority—on whether there should be congestion charging in London, Manchester, Edinburgh or wherever—or by Government in the UK or Scotland or, in Europe's case, encouraging or not encouraging referendums on other issues, the decision to have a referendum will be taken at a certain point in the process.

The question that you are asking at this point is, "What is the view of the Scottish Government—or any other institution with the power to hold a referendum—on whether we should have a referendum?" The purpose of the Public Petitions Committee is to take that forward.

You have been around for long enough to know that there are people around this table who profoundly disagree with the position that you have articulated. There will be arguments about that among parliamentarians and others, including the public. That debate will happen and we may not agree. The issue that we are addressing now, however, is the specific one that you have raised in your petition and what we want to do next. The core of Nigel Don's contribution was about what we want to do next with the petition to seek views from those who would make the decision about the principle of a referendum.

We could go into endless detail about whether in a pluralist democracy with a Parliament and so on it is always necessary to consult through a referendum. Some folk are passionately in favour of doing so and others think that it is a waste of time, but we will have that debate. Some issues will end up as the subject of a referendum, because people make them sufficiently important. You might wish the issue that you care about to be one of those. We want to move your petition through the process to try to address your concerns.

Do members have other views?

Robin Harper: I do not know whether this will help, but it might be useful for you to know the views of other committee members. We have engaged in a parliamentary process on the matter, Margo Macdonald has lodged her proposal for a bill, which I support, although some other members do not. A consultation on the bill is under way, which will be extremely useful as it will canvass people's views on the subject in general and on other matters that might get into the bill if it is considered by Parliament. I feel that asking for a referendum at this point might hold that process up—it certainly will not help it. However, it would be interesting to get on record the Government's response to a call for a referendum.

George Anderson: I point out that Jeremy Purvis asked for 18 signatures in support of his members' business debate, and he got five. That is what I am up against. As the post that I received shows, I am up against the politicians, not the doctors and not the church.

The Convener: Plenty of other folk are queuing up to be against politicians as well.

Rightly or wrongly—regardless of whether you agree with the situation—MPs and MSPs have to determine issues based on the endorsement that they have as individual representatives. This is an issue about which people have powerful emotions. There are many different views on the matter and there are different layers to those views.

We want to find out the position of Government on the matter. Robin Harper has identified the fact that a process has been begun by politicians who are not unsympathetic to the position that you have raised. He would like that process to be allowed to be explored, and I am sure that all members agree with him.

I believe that the committee is agreed that we want to take your petition to the next stage by seeking observations and comments from the Government and others. When we have received those responses, we will seek your perspective on them. Hopefully, that process will be helpful in moving forward some of the issues that you have raised.

George Anderson: So that is it, is it?

The Convener: I assure you that it is not. You might be part of the sceptical brigade but, as I have explained, as part of the process that is now under way, the petition will come back to this committee, and you will—

George Anderson: Kicked into the long grass—that is the phrase.

The Convener: You might have that perspective, but I do not share it.

George Anderson: I remind you that none of us would be sitting around this table if it were not for a referendum.

The Convener: We could continue this intellectual tennis match all day, but we do not have time. You are speaking to another ex-teacher, George, so I am enjoying it.

We guarantee that you will be notified of the responses that we receive and will be informed when the matter is due for discussion at a subsequent meeting of the committee.

Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (PE1212)

The Convener: Our next petition is from Jean Camidge. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to hold a public inquiry into whether the Scottish public services ombudsman has delivered the quasi-judicial complaints-handling service that it claims to provide and to review all complaints that have been brought by members of the public but have subsequently been rejected by the SPSO.

We have had a number of petitions on the SPSO, and I am conscious that we have sought views on the issue before. That might influence how we deal with the petition.

I invite members' comments on the petition. Members will remember that we drew to the attention of the Review of SPCB Supported Bodies Committee all petitions on the SPSO that are before the Public Petitions Committee.

15:15

Bill Butler: The Review of SPCB Supported Bodies Committee will report in April, so it might be wise to wait to see what action will emerge from that that might be relevant to PE1212. We can keep the petition in the pending file until then.

The Convener: We did that with a previous petition, so we will do it with this one.

A977 (PE1221)

The Convener: PE1221, by Sandy Morrison on behalf of Fossoway and district community council, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to recognise that the A977 is part of the strategic road network in Central Scotland, that the opening of the new Clackmannanshire bridge will lead to increased traffic on the road and that, as the safety and welfare of the whole community is of paramount importance, the Government should provide funding of £1.5 million for traffic mitigation measures to provide long-term safeguards for the community.

The presence at this meeting of so many members from the Aberdeen area confused me about the geography of the A977. I wondered where in Aberdeen it was—thanks for that! Richard Simpson is a regional member for the area that includes the A977 and has expressed an interest in the issue in the past. He will expand on the issues that the petition raises and then we will have questions.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Lab): There are certain principles involved in this case, which is why I think the Public Petitions Committee's view on the petition will be important. The Scottish Government decided to create the Clackmannanshire bridge, at a cost of £120 million, and it was brought in on time and on budget. It is now open, which is excellent, even if it did cause the First Minister to get pneumonia at the time.

Prior to and after the opening, the Government also funded a bypass for Kincardine and road works to the south of the bridge that allowed various traffic problems to be solved, which was all very well and appropriate. However, the appropriate contention of the petition is that the Government should also be responsible for the consequential effects on local communities of the national decision to build the bridge. The negative effects on communities along the route of the A977, including Forrestmill, Blairingone, Powmill, Rumbling Bridge, Crook of Devon, Drum and Balado, have not been taken into account fully by the Government.

Against the advice of the council at the time, the A977 was de-trunked in 1966, but there is no suggestion that it should now be re-trunked. The issue is, therefore, about a local road; it is not a trunk road issue. However, that is where the problem arises and why the Public Petitions Committee's view will be important. The question is whether a national undertaking should also bear the costs of its consequences.

Why should that be the case with the A977? All the reports that were received predicted that, following the opening of the new bridge, it was likely that traffic would immediately increase by 40 per cent, with a steady growth in additional traffic on the road over the ensuing five years of up to 100 per cent. However, the communities concerned are sceptical about those figures and consider that they probably underestimate the true position, because the removal of all the traffic blocks for the Kincardine bridge means that traffic levels are likely to increase substantially. Currently, there are some 24,000 crossings a day of the old Kincardine bridge, of which 6,000 are by heavy goods vehicles. HGVs go through the seven communities that I mentioned at the rate of one per minute. On the grounds of safety and of

ensuring that the A977 does not become a trunk road and the main road for HGVs, my and the petitioners' view is that the Government must fully fund the required consequential elements.

At present, all the traffic on the A977 has a clear and unimpeded run from the Gartarry roundabout through the various villages, and we believe that the safety and welfare of those communities is seriously compromised by the lack of crossing points and the absence of pavements and traffic lights. In particular, there are no roundabouts to slow the traffic down.

I turn now to the current situation with accidents. The report by the Tayside and central Scotland transport partnership—tactran—and other reports that I have received indicate that there is already a higher than average number of road traffic accidents on the A977. Only two weeks ago, there was an accident when two horses strayed on to the road.

There is a perception that the A977 is a preferred route for HGV traffic, which causes major concern to residents. It is also the preferred route to the north-east when there are restrictions or closures on the Forth road bridge. Those will continue when there are high winds and so on; they will not decrease in frequency at least until 2017—and we do not know what will happen beyond that. The closures are in fact likely to increase in frequency, given the increased maintenance work as the bridge nears the end of its life—we now know that the bridge's life is to be extended, but the closures will nevertheless continue. The road appears to be used as the main distribution route for at least one major supermarket, as well as for tankers travelling to and from the Grangemouth refinery.

The introduction of roundabouts would primarily be on the ground of safety, as they would slow traffic through the communities concerned, thereby making the route less desirable as a through route for HGVs.

Perth and Kinross Council is not seeking to have the road re-trunked, which would make it the total responsibility of Transport Scotland or the Scottish Government. The council has fully accepted that, despite the predicted increase in the amount of traffic, it will retain responsibility for what will undoubtedly be increased maintenance costs.

It is just over £1 million that is at stake. Remember that that is a one hundred and twentieth of the cost of the Clackmannanshire bridge, and we should also bear in mind the substantial amount of money that was required for the road works on both sides. Only £1 million is required to ensure that the measures that I have discussed are introduced on the A977.

The principle has already been partly conceded by Tavish Scott, the former Minister for Transport, who agreed to £250,000 being made available for improvement work. Surely, as for any major project, there should have been agreement beforehand on the effects of the new bridge opening and the necessary works, which should have been funded as part of the Clackmannanshire bridge project. I hope that, as it considers the situation, the committee will examine those issues in relation to the Clackmannanshire bridge and future projects.

Bill Butler: I will act as devil's advocate, convener. You are telling the committee, Dr Simpson, that none of the local authorities concerned wishes the A977 to be—this is a terrible word—retrunked. The latest answer from the present Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change, which was given on 18 June 2008, was:

"We have no current plans to designate the A977 as a trunk road."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 18 June 2008; S3W-14058.]

How do you work through the problem with the £1 million that the local authorities are seeking? How can they justify that request—you are articulating that desire on their behalf—given that such moneys are given only for trunk roads?

Dr Simpson: The principle has already been conceded with the granting of £250,000 towards it. Retrunking the road would mean that it would be designated as a major route, which HGVs would use. The modifications that have been proposed to help persuade people that it is not the best through route to take, and to provide the communities along it with enhanced safety, would be undermined by retrunking.

Retrunking is not at the centre of the argument, however; the centre of the argument is whether, when work on a major structure is undertaken on part of the trunk road network or, following a Government decision, on the transport network as a whole, the Government should bear the consequences and take into account the effects on, and safety of, the local communities concerned.

Robin Harper: I certainly sympathise with concerns about the condition of the road. I have experienced the congestion on it; indeed, it is the most appalling that I have ever seen on a relatively minor road in Scotland. However, there are competing interests to take into account. If the Government had £1.5 million to spare, cycling groups, which are desperately short of money, might want it. Moreover, as Bill Butler has pointed out, the petitioners are asking for extra money that would not normally be available. Has the council done everything that it can within its present budgets to slow traffic on that route? After all, a

major concern with regard to people's safety and wellbeing will be the speed of traffic through the villages.

Dr Simpson: Indeed. Perth and Kinross Council has agreed to undertake some upgrading in relation to four or five priority mitigation measures in a list of 10 that was agreed with the local community. Those particular elements, which include cycle paths and pavements, will involve smaller amounts of expenditure; however, we need to remember that Perth and Kinross has to bear the road's maintenance costs which, given the fact that the volume of traffic has increased by 100 per cent, can only rise. Moreover, the council has one of the country's more extensive non-trunk and rural road networks, so it already faces some quite major issues.

Given that the cost of the bridge was upwards of £130 million or £140 million, £1 million should have been set aside for consequentials. At the outset, there should have been discussion and agreement between the council and the Government on the appropriate allocation of costs. I hope that the Public Petitions Committee will not only seek the establishment of such a principle for future projects, but agree that the issue be revisited to ensure that more of that £1 million is provided.

Some of the correspondence that I have seen has suggested that the regional transport partnerships have been given money for this work, but there has been no sign of any contribution, either from them or from Transport Scotland. The various groups involved simply failed to get together before all this started and agree on the projects that were necessary to protect these communities. They should have done so; indeed, the Government should have made available the entire sum for consequentials or, failing that, at least agreed a sum to allow Perth and Kinross to proceed.

John Wilson: Dr Simpson indicated that the Government that commissioned the bridge should have ensured that money was available to carry out necessary works on the road. He also said that £250,000 was given to the local authority for works; however, the petition mentions a £1.5 million contribution. I want to get these figures sorted out. What is the total cost of the work proposed in the petition? Is it the £1 million that Dr Simpson has mentioned? Is it £1.25 million, which is the £1.5 million mentioned in the petition less the £250,000 that has been made available? Is it £1.5 million plus that £250,000? If we are going to take forward this petition, which has been submitted on behalf of Fossoway and district community council, I want to be clear about the real figure for the works and how it has been assessed.

Dr Simpson: Thank you for asking that question—I certainly understand your confusion over the figures. If I remember correctly, when discussions were held in 2004-05, the original costing for the 10 mitigation projects—the list of which I have given to the clerk and can be circulated to members—was £1.048 million. Obviously, that figure will have increased.

I am not sure whether the exact figure is £1.5 million now, but the works that are involved are fairly clear, and those works should have been undertaken. The local authority may be responsible for some of them, but it is certainly not responsible for the bulk of them. The three roundabouts, which would be around a quarter of a million pounds each, are the most expensive element, but they will slow down the traffic, which is important. The first six priority items, which include the cycle path, pavements and a crossing, will help considerably and are funded within the current £250,000, but the three roundabouts are important. I appreciate that things are still not absolutely clear, and I am sorry about that, but the usual issue of real-time and original costings arises. That is why the costings are different.

15:30

John Wilson: I am an occasional user of the A977. I used to travel almost annually to the wildlife fair in Kinross, and the road was the easiest access route for me to get there from where I live.

The issues are whether roundabouts are the best way to slow down the traffic on the road, the costs associated with putting in roundabouts, and whether alternative traffic-calming or speed-reduction measures can be put in place. If the costs are mainly due to installing roundabouts, can we consider another method of slowing down the traffic? I know from going through some of the villages that you mentioned that they have traffic-calming measures and speed restrictions, and that hitting a 30mph zone in some of them is sometimes difficult for many drivers after being on a section of the road with a national speed limit. We must consider whether other measures can be put in place that could reduce the costs, make the situation more sustainable and provide the safety measures that Dr Simpson and the community council are looking for in dealing with the traffic flow in the area.

Dr Simpson: I am not a traffic expert, but from the information that Perth and Kinross Council has given me, the measures that I outlined are thought to be appropriate. As a politician rather than an expert on the matter, I must accept what the council says is the most appropriate way to proceed. I suspect that it may have to find funds over the next few years for some of the work, but it

will put in place the most cost-effective and least expensive measures that it can find to protect the communities in question.

Nigel Don: I recall the road well, as I used to live in Dundee. It was the alternative route for people struggling with the Forth bridge.

The idea of large numbers of heavy goods vehicles going through Rumbling Bridge is quite appalling. I can visualise what would happen and understand why people want to stop it.

I have got the message that the issue is not rethinking; rather, it is trying to ensure that there is relatively little traffic on the road and that that traffic goes as slowly as is reasonable for safety and general noise reasons and to reduce wear on the road. However, I wonder what the consequences of success might be. Has anybody given any thought to where the traffic will go if the road becomes not the alternative route of preference as a result of such engineering works? Will it go through Dollar or have I misread my mental map? Is there a risk that we would simply displace a problem if you got what you want? I appreciate that the community council, whose consideration is probably fairly localised, would regard that as a success, but the community council in the neighbouring area might not be quite as pleased.

Dr Simpson: I do not think that traffic would go through Dollar, because it would then have to go through another three or four very controlled towns—I am referring to the route along the hillfoots. Going through some of the villages there is very tight; heavy goods vehicles would take an inordinate time to get through them. The main thing that we do not want to happen is traffic diverting from the Forth bridge on to the route. There will be real problems if it is seen as a speed route.

I have been shown photographs of an accident that happened in 2000, in which a major vehicle was tipped up in a field. A fuel vehicle has also been involved in a crash not far from a school in the area. That would have been a serious issue if the weather had not been right.

Our duty as parliamentarians is to say that there is a joint responsibility to deal with the consequences of major changes such as the new Clackmannanshire bridge. The bridge is undoubtedly welcome, because there have been horrendous traffic jams there, but it should not endanger other communities. In general, a joint responsibility should be negotiated before a change is made, not afterwards. The fact that it will have to be negotiated after the change in the case that we are discussing is due to an earlier failure and is not the current Government's responsibility. Nevertheless, addressing the issue

will lay down an appropriate marker for future projects.

The Convener: We will now consider how we want to take the petition to the next stage. I am open to suggestions from members of the committee.

John Wilson: I suggest that we ask the Government to reconsider the decision about additional funding for the road in order to allay the fears of communities along the route. We should also approach Perth and Kinross Council in the hope that it and the Government will get together to consider the most suitable remedial action that can be taken to alleviate the flow of traffic. We are not going to stop the flow of traffic from the bridge, which will still flow through the villages, but we must try to ensure that sufficient measures are put in place so that the type of accidents that Dr Richard Simpson mentioned do not occur in future and communities along the route are safeguarded.

We should ask the Government to reconsider that matter along with Perth and Kinross Council. I hope that the Government will respond by taking action.

Bill Butler: I tend to agree with my colleague John Wilson about the direction that the committee should take. In writing to the Scottish Government, we could ask whether—to use a phrase that lawyers say does not mean anything, even though they are always using it—without prejudice and in consultation with Perth and Kinross Council, the Government will revisit the A977 and consider whether discretion could be exercised regarding the road given the safety issues involved, or something like that.

I do not think that we should let the petition go. It is a difficult one because what Dr Simpson is asking for, on behalf of the community council, is not a retrunking but a negotiation between the Scottish Government and the main council that is involved to determine whether moneys can be made available from whatever source to begin to deal with the issues and effect traffic mitigation measures.

Nigel Don: I think that Dr Simpson is also making a more principled point, which is that we should ask the Government how it will address the consequences of major projects for minor roads in future.

The Convener: We will pull together those three helpful suggestions and take the petition forward. Obviously, you know the process, Dr Simpson. Perhaps you could indicate it to the community council as well.

We will have a brief comfort break before we continue.

15:38

Meeting suspended.

15:43

On resuming—

The Convener: I ask members if we can delay consideration of the next petition—PE1224—in order to consider the subsequent petition on the Scottish Police Services Authority. Three parliamentarians from the affected area are present and I am conscious that they have a meeting at 4 o'clock with the chair of the SPSA, so I do not want to act against their interests. I ask that members indulge them by bringing the petition forward, although that will limit the time that we have to consider it.

Members indicated agreement.

Forensic Services (PE1226)

The Convener: Lewis Macdonald will lead off, then other members will speak.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): The petition concerns the proposed closure of the forensic laboratory in Aberdeen. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice gave the go-ahead in May for the building of a new laboratory in Dundee, which has been welcomed there, but he required the authorities to consult again on their proposal to close the Aberdeen laboratory. He called for a full, frank and transparent consultation, which—by universal agreement—has not happened. That is why the laboratory staff and their trade union have lodged the petition.

Unison, which represents the staff at the Aberdeen laboratory, has not—it is fair to say—been formally consulted, although the proposal first surfaced more than 12 months ago. It would be useful for the committee to hear from Unison, from the SPSA, and in particular from the chief constables of Grampian Police and Northern Constabulary, which are the main customers of the forensic laboratory in Aberdeen. The chief constables will be able to inform the committee about the consultation process and—even more important—about the importance of having a forensic science laboratory in the north of Scotland. I offer that proposition to the committee for members' consideration, as it is important that the committee hears from the chief constables about the service.

15:45

The Convener: I do not know what we will get from the quartet of Aberdonian representatives who are present today, but it might be quite a lot. I ask Brian Adam to speak first—we have also been joined by the Lib Dem MSP Nicol Stephen.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The petition raises a particular concern about the fairness, transparency and openness of the consultation process. Some consultation has taken place, but not in the manner with which we would be familiar. A number of face-to-face meetings have taken place between SPSA officials and interested stakeholders. One of the stakeholders, who is very experienced in the processes of government, told me that he is still waiting for a copy of the minutes of the meeting that he attended, so that he might comment on them and ensure that they are accurate and reflect his views. He also wants to see what others at that meeting said, in order to make further representations, but he has not been able to do so.

Some of the technical aspects of a normal consultation process have not been applied to this consultation exercise. I endorse what Lewis Macdonald said about how we might try to resolve the issues, but it might be of interest for the committee to hear from the SPSA about how it has reached the present stage and how it intends to resolve the matter. There have been some significant changes in the make-up of the SPSA board since the process started, and there may be further staffing changes.

The inadequacy of the consultation process was initially highlighted by the cabinet secretary, who insisted that the plan dealt inadequately with the proposal to close the laboratory in Aberdeen and move it and the fingerprint service to Dundee, and therefore had to be dealt with again. It is still not being dealt with adequately, and the petitioners are right to bring the matter to the attention of the Public Petitions Committee. I hope that you can help to resolve the matter.

The Convener: In the interests of proportionality, I ask Mike Rumbles to contribute.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Well said, convener. I will focus on the nub of the issue, which is service delivery, and the efficient and effective detection of murder and other serious crimes. In the debate on the proposed closure that we had in Parliament last week, Fergus Ewing, the deputy minister who is dealing with the matter, made an erroneous statement. He said that nobody was talking about diminishing the level of service, but we are all talking about that. Colin McKerracher, chief constable of Grampian Police, and the local police board have made it clear that if Aberdeen is closed and the service is run from Dundee, the level of service for the effective detection of serious crime will be diminished.

As my two colleagues have said, the consultation process is flawed. I emphasise that I have never seen a campaign with more cross-

party support than this one: there is support from all the MSPs who spoke in the debate and every MSP from the north-east has been involved. It is absolutely right that we get to the nub of the issue, which is service delivery. We must ensure that service is not diminished.

The Convener: Any campaign that includes both Mike Rumbles and Nicol Stephen is remarkable.

Nicol Stephen (Aberdeen South) (LD): I do not have much to add to what has been said. I agree that there is a lot of cross-party unity and cross-party anger about the way in which the issue has been handled. It is appropriate for the committee to consider the matter further, but that is a decision for the members of the committee to take.

The Convener: I am conscious of time, so I invite members of the committee to ask brief questions. We will try our best to get through them in the next seven or eight minutes.

Nigel Don: I am sitting beside another MSP for Aberdeen on the committee; I think that there are six of us in the room.

Marlyn Glen: Ahem.

Nigel Don: I am sorry, I completely missed Marlyn Glen.

The Convener: I knew that there was a takeover.

Nigel Don: I will not comment on that further. When you are in a hole, you should stop digging.

There are not too many questions to ask. We had a substantial debate on the subject last Thursday, which lasted 50 minutes, such was the interest in it—we cannot afford to spend that amount of time on it today. We need to clarify what we can take from this meeting. I have a string of suggestions. Perhaps I should defer making them until Nanette Milne has asked her questions.

Nanette Milne: It is okay.

Nigel Don: We need to ask the Scottish Government for its take on the issue. We should put that in the spotlight. We need to seek the views of the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland. We should also ask the chief constables of Grampian Police and Tayside Police for their take on the service that they will receive if the lab is removed. We should write to Her Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary, who will have his own view. We should write to Grampian joint police board and Tayside joint police board to ensure that we are clear about their perspective. We should write to the Scottish Police Services Authority and its new chief executive, to whom colleagues will be talking within 10 minutes, to ask for their view on what is going on. Nanette Milne or

other colleagues will correct me if I have missed anybody.

Mike Rumbles: Perhaps you should include Northern Constabulary, which is served by the laboratory in Aberdeen.

Nigel Don: Of course.

The Convener: I invite other representatives of the northern lights element and Robin Harper to comment.

Robin Harper: There is complete cross-party support for the campaign. I am sorry that I did not attend the debate, but I signed the motion, because I was concerned. I support Nigel Don's suggestions.

Nanette Milne: I suppose that I am the fourth party that has been involved with this issue in the north-east. All the local representatives—not just those who have been at various meetings—are of one mind. The debate showed our unanimous take on the issue.

I go along with the suggestions that Lewis Macdonald and Brian Adam made about taking evidence from the chief constables—

Brian Adam: No minutes have been produced, so people do not know what has been taken from the consultation meetings.

Nanette Milne: I support the suggestions that have been made. I just want to say that I had hoped to go to the meeting at 4 o'clock, convener.

The Convener: I will not elaborate further. There seems to be a shared perspective. Before we move on to the next stage, we will pull together the views that committee members and other parliamentarians have expressed. I hope that people's endeavours in the next hour will lead to benefits. I appreciate that Nanette Milne will have to leave this meeting.

Scottish Flag (Parliamentary Chamber) (PE1224)

The Convener: We turn now to the petition that we held back to allow us to deal with petition PE1226. Petition PE1224 is by John Blyth and Helen McNeill, who call on the Parliament to consider displaying the flag of Scotland in the parliamentary chamber.

Robin Harper: A request relating to the Parliament's insignia was raised with the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body before, and it was turned down. Nevertheless, we should refer the request in the petition to the SPCB so that it can make a judgment. We should also write to the petitioners, reminding them that the SPCB has already taken a similar decision on the Parliament's logo.

The Convener: The clerk is telling me that the petitioners are aware of that point. However, Robin Harper raises a legitimate point of process, relating to who assesses and determines such issues.

Robin Harper: One issue was sent to the SPCB, so the other should be, too.

The Convener: Okay. As no other members want to comment, we will accept that recommendation and return to the petition in due course.

Current Petitions

Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (Appeal Tribunal) (PE1076)

Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (Audit) (PE1163)

Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (PE1186)

15:56

The Convener: We move now to our consideration of current petitions. A number of members have suggested moving a particular petition further up the agenda, but we will start by considering three petitions that have been grouped together.

Petitions PE1076, PE1163 and PE1186 are being considered together because they are all on the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. Among a range of issues that they raise is an appeal tribunal to review final decisions. One of the new petitions that we dealt with earlier was on a similar subject. Do members have any views on how we should deal with these petitions?

Bill Butler: I refer you to my previous remarks and our previous decision.

The Convener: Yes. We should defer consideration of the petitions until we learn what emerges from the Review of SPCB Supported Bodies Committee. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Family Mediation Services (Funding) (PE1120)

The Convener: Petition PE1120, by Brian McNair, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review its family law policies and spending levels to ensure that more emphasis is placed on family mediation services and family support for children. Previously, we had a substantial discussion on the issues that the petition raises. Do members have any views on how we should proceed?

Bill Butler: The Government has provided information on the level of funding that it will make available to mediation services in each year up to 2010. In the early years framework, the approach will be to intervene early to support children and families. I do not know that there is anything else that this committee can do.

The Convener: It has been suggested that we consider closing the petition on the ground that the

issues can be addressed through guidance within the Government's structures.

Nigel Don: I do not disagree with closing the petition, but can we also write to the Government to ask whether it proposes to review the adequacy and effectiveness of mediation services?

The Convener: Doing that might mean that we cannot accept Bill Butler's suggestion—although in closing the petition, perhaps we can write to the Government to draw attention to the issues that have been raised.

Nigel Don: It would be nice to put the point to the Government. Personally, I would like there to be a review of how well mediation services are doing and of how adequately they are funded.

16:00

Robin Harper: I would like to take it a bit further, convener. The available funding is very small indeed—it is almost minute—and is just about the minimum that is required to employ one or two people in each council, except for one or two honourable exceptions. I would like to register my concern at the level of funding. I do not know whether the committee agrees with me.

The Convener: You still want to close the petition, but you want to register your concern.

Robin Harper: I wish to close the petition and also register my concern.

Bill Butler: The monitoring that Nigel Don has suggested could examine Robin Harper's point about whether the funds are inadequate. They certainly seem to be inadequate, or the bare minimum.

John Wilson: I am not sure that we can close the petition while members are raising concerns about the level of funding. Although the information that is before us indicates how much is being spent, it does not tell us about the demand for family mediation services. Also, if we promote such services, demand will increase. If the Government has set aside funding for these services, it should be able to indicate the number of people who request or are directed to them. If the figure increases, the Government will need to increase the resources that it makes available to enable the services to deal with that. There is no point in having the policy if people cannot access the service because there is not enough funding.

It would be useful to keep the petition open and ask the Government to specify the number of individuals who have been referred to family mediation services or who have used them in the past. We could also ask whether the Government intends to monitor the situation in the future.

The Convener: Okay. I recognise members' willingness to address the problem, and two or three questions have been raised with a view to exploring it further. Let us keep the petition open and try to achieve a resolution through asking for the information.

Nigel Don: I am happy to go down that route, but I wonder whether we might ask the Government a wider question. It would be useful to know not only how the money is being spent but what other services are provided from local authority budgets or by the voluntary sector and other organisations. The adequacy of services needs to be considered in the round.

The Convener: Okay. Thanks for that guidance. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Members who have other duties to attend to this afternoon have expressed interest in petitions PE1179 and PE1180, therefore we will move on to them. The members will speak on behalf of constituents and petitioners.

Acquired Brain Injury Services (PE1179)

The Convener: Petition PE1179 is by Helen Moran, on behalf of the Brain Injury Awareness Campaign, and calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce a separate and distinct health and community care client category of "acquired brain injury" to ensure that people with acquired brain injury and their carers, in particular, get the services and support that they need and that agencies can plan and deliver services more effectively. David Whitton and Paul Martin are here to speak on the petition because of constituents' concerns. I invite David Whitton to speak, followed by Paul Martin.

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): I will say a few words in support of the petition. Just over a year ago, a constituent, Dr Mark Ziervogel, came to see me to inquire about the treatment that is available to people with a brain injury once they have left hospital. Dr Ziervogel and his colleagues from the Brain Injury Awareness Campaign, who are responsible for the petition, are in the public gallery today.

Dr Ziervogel's wife suffered a head injury in an accident, and there were concerns that her follow-up treatment was not as connected as it should have been. On his behalf, I wrote to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing and she replied, outlining the work of the national managed clinical network for acquired brain injury. As the committee will know, the network receives funding from NHS Scotland for its administration costs.

The objectives of the network, as the cabinet secretary outlined to me, are to map out services

for people with acquired brain injury who are aged 16 to 65; to promote the adoption of recognised standards of care; to identify the educational needs of the health groups that are involved in the care of people with brain injuries; and to identify the information requirements of patients, families and carers. The cabinet secretary emphasised that it is important to ensure that the standards of care are the same throughout Scotland, no matter where a patient happens to live. I am sure that we all agree with that.

The committee has received the responses to the petition and the Brain Injury Awareness Campaign's response to the views that have been expressed. I do not need to go over that ground again. Suffice it to say that it is clear from the responses to the petition that there is still a case to be made for recognising people with acquired brain injury as a distinct health and community care category.

I will highlight three of the responses to the petition. Headway Scotland said:

"As long as the status quo prevails whereby there is no separate and distinct health and community care client category of acquired brain injury, people with this condition and their carers will continue to lose out in relation to the services and support they require."

The Princess Royal Trust for Carers said:

"The Trust would request that the Petitions Committee make recommendation to the Scottish Government to give particular consideration to this group to ensure improved mainstreaming of services to better meet the needs of this very complex caring situation."

The Scottish head injury forum said:

"If ABI were a separate category for the purposes of planning, funding, and delivering NHS and local authority services this would make it easier for everyone to recognise and co-ordinate the pathway of care, and would improve the clinical and social outcome for many people with ABI."

The type of brain injuries that we are talking about affect, in the main, young men who have been involved in car accidents, but there are many others. People who have suffered such trauma often have violent mood swings and become aggressive, and they can become alcoholics and suffer deep depression, which affects not only them but their families. It has been shown that, where a proper aftercare policy is in place—in countries such as Australia and New Zealand and in parts of the USA—the patient outcome is much improved. It is important to understand that those who are affected by acquired brain injury may need a lifelong follow-up process.

If the Scottish Government accepted that there is a client group of acquired brain injury patients, it would bring social services and health services together behind a coherent treatment and policy procedure. At present, as we see in the response

from the Scottish Government primary and community care directorate, there are

“no plans to introduce a separate and distinct ... client group”.

Indeed, the Government seems to suggest that setting up such a group would require extra resources. The Brain Injury Awareness Campaign disputes that. As you can see from its reply, it suggests instead that what is required is a reorganisation of the resources to obtain a better outcome for patients with the condition through setting up an identifiable category of care for people with acquired brain injury. I hope that the committee agrees that the petition should be kept open and forwarded to the Scottish Government for further investigation, to allow such a group to be established as soon as possible.

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): It is important to put on record that Helen Moran, in partnership with others, has put forward a very constructive case for change. I am sure that other members share that view. That must be taken into account when the issues are considered by the Parliament.

I am an avid reader of the *Glasgow Evening Times*, as, I am sure, are other members. A powerful case was made in the *Evening Times*, not just by Helen Moran but by another individual who had experienced difficulties with an acquired brain injury. The powerful case was made that, although the care that he received for his condition when he was treated in hospital was exemplary—he made that clear on a number of occasions—he had concerns about the care that he received after he left hospital. Helen Moran and others have, on many occasions, raised the issue of the support that is provided to those with the condition following their release from hospital. We must take that into consideration. The points have been well made by David Whitton and others.

The Convener: Do members of the committee have any comments, observations or questions?

Bill Butler: We are obviously trying to achieve a reorganisation of resources, as David Whitton put it, so that what the petitioner requests—a separate and distinct category of ABI patients—is ceded by the Scottish Government. We should, therefore, write to the Scottish Government on that basis. We must ask how people with ABI will be prevented from falling through gaps in provision, as there is no distinct and separate ABI category to lessen the danger of that. As Paul Martin suggested, we must ask the Government how it will ensure that carers of people with ABI get the services and support that they need. We must convey to the Scottish Government the petitioner’s case that there will be a better chance of the various agencies delivering in a planned way the

services that citizens with ABI require if there is a distinct and separate ABI category.

John Wilson: In their responses, the Scottish Government and NHS Quality Improvement Scotland refer to a draft report that will be available in early 2009 and a final report that will be published in May 2009. As Bill Butler indicated, we must try to ensure not just that people do not fall through gaps in the system but that we get uniform delivery for ABI sufferers throughout Scotland. We do not want excellent services to be delivered in some health boards—as reporting has shown—while others are declassifying and downgrading support services. If ABI services are to be delivered throughout the NHS in Scotland, they should be delivered at the same level—there should be no postcode or health board lottery that results in people in different areas getting different treatment. Ensuring uniform service delivery throughout Scotland is a common thread in petitions that have come before the committee.

We should continue consideration of the petition. As Bill Butler indicated, we need to write to the Scottish Government for further information. It will be interesting to find out what is contained in the draft report and in the final report, when it is published in May. We want to ensure that some of the fears and concerns that have been expressed are addressed by NHS Scotland when it rolls out the new programme for the delivery of services.

Nigel Don: I draw members’ attention to the letter of 21 November from the primary and community care directorate, which is signed by Jean MacLellan. The last paragraph on the first page states:

“The Government has no plans to introduce a separate and distinct health and community care client group category of acquired brain injury.”

If that is the position at the moment, collectively we are challenging the Government to say why such a group is not needed. The evidence appears to point in another direction. Given the large number of pieces of paper that we have received, we should ask the Government to explain its position.

Bill Butler: I agree with Nigel Don. We could also ask the Government whether the NHS carer information strategies will include ABI training for health staff, which would be helpful.

The Convener: I know that Paul Martin and David Whitton are familiar with the process, as they have appeared before the committee before. I ask them to inform the petitioners with whom they have been dealing that we will discuss the petition further once we have obtained answers to some of the points that have been raised.

Paul Martin: Would it be appropriate for the committee to ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing to respond to its inquiries?

The Convener: No problem—that will be done. Thank you for your time.

Further Education (Students with Complex Needs) (PE1180)

The Convener: PE1180, from Tom and Josie Wallace, has been before the committee before, and Alasdair Morgan is here today with the petitioners. The petition calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to ensure that students with complex needs are supported in their further education placements and that appropriate funding mechanisms are provided to enable such placements to be taken up.

I know that Alex Fergusson, who has expressed an interest in the petition, would have liked to come along to this afternoon's meeting, but Presiding Officer duties have worked against that. We heard some of the arguments on a previous occasion, but Alasdair Morgan would like to amplify a number of points.

16:15

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): Thanks very much, convener. My brief remarks relate mainly to the Government's response, which is in one of the committee's papers. All I would like to do is quote from the Government's conclusions, which are in bold, to give members a flavour of what I think the issue is:

"there is more we can do ... we are funding a new post",

a revised version of the guidance will be issued,

"arrangements will be discussed ... This group will reconvene early in the new year ... This will also be discussed ... discussions between all the relevant parties are progressing ... This too will be discussed".

Those quotations, which are from different paragraphs, make it clear that people are aware of the problems. Evidence that other people have submitted in response to the committee's call supports that idea but, to someone who is outside the process, the pace of progress seems to be glacial. In the meantime, Mr and Mrs Wallace's son—I appreciate that his case is not the substance of the petition—cannot get the placement that is best for him, although a placement is available south of the border.

I urge the committee, at the very least, to find a way of developing the pressure on the Government so that all the intentions that are expressed in its response are delivered in the form of concrete action within a reasonable timescale. Many good intentions have been expressed, but we need effective action, and I would like the

committee to take steps to ensure that we move closer to the taking of such action.

The Convener: Thank you. Do members have any comments or observations? As Alasdair Morgan has suggested, there is broad agreement on the direction of travel.

Bill Butler: We should echo Alasdair Morgan's general comment when we approach the Scottish Government. We should tell it that its intentions are good and that they hit the mark but that we need to know what concrete action it intends to take and whether it can give the petitioners a good approximation of the timescale. Despite its having all the good intentions in the world, progress has been "glacial", to quote Alasdair Morgan, and that is not good enough. We should praise the Government for its general thrust but say that its programme of action needs to be expedited.

The Convener: There is agreement from the committee for that course of action. I thank Alasdair Morgan for his time and patience.

Diabetes (Self-management Plans) (PE1123)

The Convener: PE1123, by Stephen Fyfe on behalf of Diabetes UK Scotland, calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to ensure that all NHS boards provide the necessary resources to promote and deliver diabetes self-management plans to all people with diabetes.

Do members have any comments or observations? We have considered the petition on a previous occasion, and I do not know whether I am totally convinced that we have a framework in place to deal with diabetes issues.

Bill Butler: Our information is that the diabetes managed clinical networks are monitoring the delivery of diabetes structured education and that the Scottish Government supports the approach of the Scottish diabetes education network, so I do not know what other practical action we can take.

John Wilson: You expressed reservations, convener. Can you expand on those reservations before we make a final decision on the petition?

The Convener: When we consider petitions that relate to the involvement of managed clinical networks, I have a sense that groups often come back and say, "What you thought was happening is not actually happening on the ground."

I am reluctant to suggest closing the petition, but if people want to do so, that is fine. However, given the fact that the incidence of diabetes is growing and that it will continue to be one of the most important issues in our health service planning, I worry that, if we close the petition, it would send a message that things are okay.

Nigel Don: I endorse your reservations. At the top of the list of medical consequences of obesity is diabetes. Given that an obesity epidemic is manifesting before our eyes, we know that diabetes will grow as a problem.

I think that Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network guidelines are being revised, which is always an important moment. I am not sure when an updated SIGN guideline on self-management plans will be issued but, if we defer taking further action on the petition until the new SIGN guideline is announced, we might be in a better position to judge what doctors are saying and how implementable the proposal is.

John Wilson: I support Nigel Don's suggestion. I also agree with the suggestion that we consult groups such as Diabetes UK Scotland and some local groups to find out their opinions about the delivery of the service. If we close the petition, we are effectively saying that we accept what various bodies have told us about the measures that they are implementing, but what bodies tell us about those measures does not tell us much about what is being delivered or whether it meets the needs of the user groups. Depending on the feedback we get from the diabetes groups, we might have to write to the Government to say that certain issues have to be resolved before progress can be made.

The Convener: I agree that we should explore those issues further, as that will give us greater certainty when we ask the Government about its timeframe and decide whether its recommendations meet the petition's aspirations.

Do we agree to keep the petition open, as the issues are still unresolved?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 (Snares) (PE1124)

The Convener: PE1124, from Louise Robertson, has been before us on a couple of previous occasions. An additional letter from the petitioner, which contains more recent information on the issue, has been circulated to members. The petition calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to amend the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 to introduce provisions to ban the manufacture, sale, possession and use of all snares.

Bill Butler: I think that there are still outstanding issues. For instance, I do not know how the new regulations will ensure that protected species are not at risk, so we could ask the Scottish Government about that.

John Farquhar Munro: There are issues that are still unresolved. The snare is not selective—it is destructive to all forms of wildlife—and many

organisations object to snaring. The Government points out that new snares that reduce the risk of long-term injury to the animal are being manufactured, but I do not accept that at all.

I submit that we keep the petition open until we get clearer answers.

Robin Harper: Asking for new methods to be introduced raises questions about educating gamekeepers. Not only do we need to know whether the new snares really cause minimal suffering, we have to find out whether organisations such as the one that has submitted the petition will be involved in training gamekeepers and land managers in their use.

The Convener: So various questions need to be addressed including, for example, the impact on protected species and whether we can encourage the development of training for gamekeepers and land managers in other methods of control.

John Wilson: Given the petitioners' response, I suggest once again that, when we write to the Government, we ask why some landowning organisations can manage the land without using snares. After all, the list of organisations provided by the petitioners contains a number of substantial landowning interests that have obviously found that they do not need snares to control the types of animals that the Government claims landowners want to control or, indeed, eradicate. It would be useful to hear the Government's response to that question.

The Convener: Okay. With that approval, we will move on.

Advocacy Services (PE1126)

The Convener: PE1126, which is from Lesley Learmonth and Joan Mulroy on behalf of Enable Scotland, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to debate and amend legislation to ensure that people with learning disabilities in Scotland have an enforceable right to the services of an independent advocate and that such services are adequately funded. The committee has supported this petition in the past, and I believe that several issues that it raises still need to be explored with the Government. Do members have any comments or suggestions?

Bill Butler: It would be useful to ask the Government whether, as the petitioner has indicated, there is uncertainty about people's rights under the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 and whether its review of the act will clarify them.

Robin Harper: I declare an interest as the co-convener of the cross-party group on learning disability.

We could ask the Government for a timeline of action arising from the review and any benefits or improvements that might accrue from it; whether it is satisfied that the process by which a person with a learning disability can challenge a lack of advocacy services is simple, straightforward and designed with those people in mind; and why only 19 of the 32 local authorities mention learning disabilities in their single outcome agreements. It is important that we get an answer to that final question.

The Convener: It would be worth while to encourage ministers to meet Enable Scotland, which, after all, is a national organisation with a very valuable perspective on the issue. Of course, that might well be happening—as a minister, I met representatives of that organisation and others—but we should perhaps encourage the Government to discuss the specific concerns with Enable Scotland.

Nigel Don: I am wondering—as I have been for most of the afternoon—whether we should ask the Government a slightly wider question. Has it, for example, considered the value and benefits of advocacy services, which I would have thought were enormously useful to service providers as well as to individuals who would otherwise struggle to articulate their concerns? I see no need to distinguish between different sorts of disability with regard to communication. After all, it does not matter where folk come from; such services are enormously valuable to anyone who needs someone at their side to explain things. I wonder, therefore, whether the Government has reviewed or has any plans to review the provision of services not only throughout the country but across the various client groups and situations in which they would be of use.

The Convener: As members have raised a number of points that need to be explored, we will keep the petition open.

Free Public Transport (Under-16s) (PE1174)

16:30

The Convener: The next petition is PE1174, by Juliana Wolkow, on behalf of Holy Cross high school secondary 4 pupils. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide free public transport for all under-16s who have no income. I understand that a review of the Scotland-wide concessionary travel scheme for young people is being undertaken, so I think that the best course of action would be to invite the Government to liaise with the petitioners to involve them in the review. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Historic Building Listing (PE1176)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1176, by Thomas Ewing and Gordon Prestoungrange, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide a right of appeal against decisions by the Scottish ministers, following advice from Historic Scotland, not to list a historic building, to ensure that the value that a local community places on local heritage assets is fully reflected and that buildings can be considered for listing even when a planning application affecting them has been submitted.

A couple of issues have still to be resolved with Historic Scotland and the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland. Do members have suggestions on how to take forward the petition? Are we happy to endorse writing to Historic Scotland to seek responses to the submissions received from the petitioner, particularly on what concrete actions—a lovely term to use when talking about historic buildings—Historic Scotland will take; when greater transparency should be ensured with regard to rights of appeal against listing; and whether Historic Scotland considers that the current practice in relation to listing buildings when there is a live planning application should be reviewed as outlined in the submission from AHSS?

Nigel Don: We might make the point in the letter that, as parliamentarians, we expect transparency and that an answer that says, “No, we don’t tell anybody what we’re doing but it doesn’t bother us” is not acceptable.

The Convener: Okay, that is accepted.

Radiation (Genetic Effects) (PE1177)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1177, by John Connor, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to carry out research into the genetic effects of radiation for all Ministry of Defence radiation workers and an investigation into whether child cancer clusters exist in all the parts of Scotland where nuclear submarines were, and are, based. Members have before them copies of additional information that the petitioner sent by e-mail to the committee clerk. Do members have any observations on the petition?

Bill Butler: One point of difficulty is that, as far as I am aware, the Scottish Government has no plans to fund research in this area as it considers it a reserved matter, which is a hindrance to the petition. I do not know whether we can do anything practicable.

The Convener: The option is to close the petition on the grounds that several issues that it raises have been explored through a variety of

different reports and that the Health and Safety Executive is content that appropriate research on cancer incidence and genetic effects arising from radiation exposure relating to workers in nuclear installations continues to be carried out by the Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment and the Health Protection Agency. Do we wish to close the petition on those grounds? Do members feel that there are still issues to be explored?

John Wilson: I am content to close the petition, but I want us to ask the Scottish Government to request the UK Government to continue to monitor the situation. The issue will not go away and the fears and concerns of parents and others need to be addressed, so it is incumbent on us to ask the Scottish Government to work with the UK Government to ensure that on-going monitoring takes place.

Robin Harper: I am content that a huge amount of research has been done in the area and continues to be carried out, but there is still an issue—I am not putting it in the way of closing the petition, but I would like to draw the committee's attention to it—about the presentation of the figures. It is sometimes difficult to draw very much from the figures. There is a process called Barnardisation, which allows a slightly more transparent and accurate picture of what such statistics mean, but there has been resistance to introducing Barnardisation for leukaemia and cancer figures. I point out that that issue remains live.

The Convener: We will take that point on board. Do we accept the recommendation to close the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

Rural Fuel Prices (PE1181)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1181, from Helena Coxshall, which calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to make representations to the UK Government on the cost of fuel in the Western Isles and to indicate the impact of that cost on individuals who are resident on those islands.

Alasdair Allan has expressed an interest in the petition. We have discussed aspects of the petition previously, but I invite Alasdair to comment.

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): Thank you, convener. I appreciate the chance to speak again.

I welcome Councillor Donald Manford, who is the convener of the transportation committee on Western Isles Council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, and, not Helena Coxshall herself, but someone

else who has been associated with the petition: Archie MacKay.

The papers that have been submitted and which the committee has considered are self-explanatory, but the petitioners have asked me to elaborate on a couple of points and to clarify some points that arise out of John Swinney's correspondence with the UK Government, which took place after a prompt from the committee.

First, I will update members on the situation. The last time that we met, Robin Harper presciently asked about the prospect of fuel being brought in by road to Ullapool and taken across by ferry to the Western Isles. Since then, the prospect of that happening has arisen. Because of the reduction in the ferry fares, that is now being considered as a realistic option. The fact that a company considered doing that has prompted Scottish Fuels, which previously said that its prices were immovable, to reduce them by several pence as a result of the threat of competition. I should clarify that that affects only Lewis and Harris; it does not affect any of Scotland's other island communities—not even the Uists and Barra—but it is an interesting aside.

Secondly, the petitioners have asked me to comment briefly on the tax element, which the Scottish and UK Governments discussed—as I said, prompted by the committee—in correspondence. They do not understand the point that is made in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's letter about “perverse incentives”, which might arise if the tax system were to be adjusted so that those in the most remote areas paid a lower rate of tax on fuel—the perverse incentive, presumably, being that drivers in Glasgow and Edinburgh would want to fill up their tanks on Islay or Shetland. The petitioners genuinely do not understand what is meant by that.

The petitioners are not calling for petrol or diesel to be cheaper in Scotland's island communities than it is in Glasgow or Edinburgh; they want it to be not quite as much dearer. They asked me to clarify that point, since the issue arose in the correspondence. This has obviously been a difficult time economically for Scotland's island communities, as it has been for Scotland as a whole. The island communities that pay more for their fuel than people pay anywhere else feel a particular injury when they find themselves, as a result, paying more VAT. That is worth mentioning again.

The petitioners would also like to clarify that part of the grievance that people on the islands feel relates to the fuel that is used in houses. There is no gas supply in most parts of our island communities, so people have few choices. Because domestic fuel oil is now such a valuable commodity, theft has been taking place, which is

very unusual for the Western Isles. There have been numerous instances of fuel oil being siphoned out of tanks, including a tank at a children's centre in Barra. That gives members an idea of what a valuable commodity fuel oil has become.

It is worth reflecting on the updated prices that the petitioners are complaining about. The price of unleaded petrol this week was 89p in Glasgow; it was 103p in Benbecula. Diesel was 94p in Glasgow; it was 113.9p in Benbecula. That differential has a major impact on the economic viability of the islands.

The petitioners have asked me to convey their request: they respectfully urge the committee to examine the issue seriously and to make the necessary representations to Her Majesty's Government.

The Convener: I invite committee members' comments and observations.

Robin Harper: The proposition that we take evidence is interesting. However, might it be better to send the petition to the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, for it to take up the matter? The issue clearly needs to be pursued. There is tremendous inequity for the islands' small population.

The Convener: There is clearly an issue in the petition, and the petitioners are asking us to raise the matter with the UK Government. I know that the minister responsible in Scotland has raised the matter directly, and we can see the response from the UK chancellor. I do not know whether this committee can do much more. We have raised the matter, and it has been identified. We can continue to ask the Scottish and UK Governments to monitor the issue and to consider whether there are ways of mitigating the concerns that the petitioners have raised.

John Farquhar Munro: I certainly think that we should keep the petition alive. There is nothing new in the petition; the statements that are contained in it have been made over many years, but we have never had any real satisfaction. The Treasury and those who are responsible keep telling us that fuel duty and VAT are controlled by Europe, and that the Government has no locus to alter that. However, in the past two months VAT has been reduced from 17.5 to 15 per cent on some commodities. I do not think that there was much consultation with Europe on that. If the Treasury is allowed to make such a change, I see no reason why the same could not happen for fuel. We hear complaints that such a change would be difficult to administer and monitor, but I am sure that there would be ways of getting round it.

16:45

John Wilson: Robin Harper suggested referring the petition to the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee. There is also the possibility of referring it to the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee. There is a serious issue around the economic times that we face, and the pressures on and survival of rural and island communities in particular. As the member for the Western Isles, Alasdair Allan, said, a number of people in those communities rely on the fuel not only to drive and get about the area, but to heat their homes. We have just come through a severe winter, yet we are telling people who decide to live in rural and island communities that they must pay a premium for their lifestyle. That would be unfair on any community. We should refer the petition to other committees, because it might tie in with the fuel poverty debate that continues in Scotland and at the UK level.

We in the central belt and in other parts of Scotland are seriously considering how we support pensioners to live in their homes. Pensioners receive a flat-rate heating allowance from the UK Government, which does not go as far in rural and island communities as it does in the central belt. We need seriously to consider how we deal with fuel in our rural and island communities.

We could refer the petition to other committees to take on board. We need strong and thriving rural and island communities. That will benefit not only those areas, but the rest of Scotland, because they will be actively involved in Scotland's economy. If action is not taken by the Scottish Government and the UK Government, those communities could wither on the vine and die.

Robin Harper: I propose referring the petition to the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee. It could deal with transport fuel costs and, as part of its climate change remit, consider what extra funding could be provided for renewables and extra insulation for housing and businesses in the outer isles, to reduce demand for fuel. That needs to be part of the process, anyway. We should think first of increasing fuel security by reducing demand. Irrespective of the fact that people in such areas pay a premium on fuel prices already, they are likely to carry on paying higher fuel prices as time rolls on in the next decade. I hope that an initial investment in insulation and renewables to reduce demand would be more than welcome.

Bill Butler: I am not against keeping the petition open. A referral to the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee might be seen as a positive move.

We should write to ask the Scottish Government what measures it can take to address the concerns about increased heating costs and fuel poverty. We should also ask it to write to the Treasury to make strong representations by enclosing the petition and asking the Treasury to clarify what action individuals and businesses in rural areas are meant to take to deal with the higher fuel costs that have been outlined. That would be even-handed and rational.

The Convener: That proposal is helpful, as is Robin Harper's suggestion of asking one of the committees—preferably the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee or the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee—to explore the issue.

The issue is a matter of judgment in different arenas. The chancellor has made his judgment and the petitioners—understandably—seek another judgment from him. We will see what we can do. The petition asks us to raise the matter, which we have done. We want now to move it into other arenas to obtain further detail and at least to keep open the opportunity for broader discussions.

The impression that I take from members is that we will not close the petition. We will refer the issues that it raises to the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee and ask other committees whether they wish to explore the issues that it raises. Bill Butler suggested raising the concerns directly with the Scottish Government and Her Majesty's Government.

Robin Harper: It is correct to say that, in the Scottish Parliament's first decade, fuel costs have been a running issue that has not been dealt with adequately.

The Convener: The clerk is going to enlighten me a bit at this late stage in the afternoon when I am really tired and exhausted.

Fergus Cochrane (Clerk): If the committee agrees to refer the petition to the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, the replies to the letters that Bill Butler has requested we send to the Government and the Treasury would go to that committee, not this one. We would ask both Governments to respond directly to the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee.

The Convener: The clerk is happy now. We were doing so well with Zoé Tough in the role.

Epilepsy Specialist Nurses (PE1182)

The Convener: PE1182, by Allana Parker on behalf of Epilepsy Scotland, urges the Government to increase the number of epilepsy specialist nurses and ensure that all NHS boards provide adequate epilepsy services for adults,

children and people with a learning disability. Several committee members are members of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on epilepsy. For that collective group of us, I mention that interest prior to any recommendation being made. The petition is self-explanatory. Are there any views on what to do with it? There are still issues to raise with Government before we get satisfaction on the petition.

Bill Butler: We should ask the Government whether it will meet all NHS boards to encourage them fully to implement the SIGN guidelines and the NHS Quality Improvement Scotland standards for epilepsy. That might be a starter.

John Wilson: We should ask the Government to say what action will be taken against NHS boards if they fail to deliver. Once again, I make a plea for uniform delivery of services throughout Scotland so that we do not end up with a health board lottery. The plea is to the Government to ensure that adequate services are provided throughout Scotland. To return to the convener's earlier point, we might have to contact voluntary organisations and others to ask for an indication of whether the services that are being delivered are adequate to deal with the needs in each community.

Robin Harper: We should also ask the Government how it will ensure that epilepsy services for people with a learning disability are consistent throughout Scotland.

The Convener: That is helpful. We will keep the petition moving forward and seek views from the various Government departments.

Planning etc (Scotland) Act 2006 (Third-party Right of Appeal) (PE1183)

The Convener: PE1183, by Keith McCarter, on behalf of the Coopersknowe residents association in Galashiels, relates to a third-party right of appeal. The Scottish Government has stated clearly that it will not introduce a third-party right of appeal, as it considers that the new planning framework adequately addresses the concerns that the petitioner raises. The petitioner is aware that the petition could be closed. Are we happy to close the petition with an acclamation of unanimity? No—Robin Harper wants to say something. I was trying to get consensus there.

Robin Harper: I would like to put on record my support for a third-party right of appeal.

John Wilson: Likewise, I put on record my disappointment with the attitude that the Government has taken towards a third-party right of appeal in planning applications. There is a serious omission in the planning regulations on that.

The Convener: Are any other absolutions required by members? No. Okay—thanks very much.

Eco-friendly Schools (PE1184)

The Convener: PE1184, by Mrs L Albarracin, on behalf of the Bellahouston academy eco-committee, calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to make funding and other assistance available to enable schools to become environmentally friendly and achieve green-flag status. The Government provides funding for the eco-schools programme and additional measures. Do members have any views?

Bill Butler: On that basis, we should close the petition.

Robin Harper: All eco-schools face problems of one kind or another—part of the challenge of being an eco-school is to get past those problems. I would like to record my dissatisfaction that any local authority is not prepared to fund recycling bins in classrooms. The petitioners have got round that problem and have benefited from the experience. I am quite happy to close the petition.

The Convener: Okay. We will close PE1184 on those grounds.

Road Bonds (Sewers and Drains) (PE1185)

The Convener: Our final current petition is by Andrew Kaye, on behalf of the Coopersknowe residents association in Galashiels. PE1185 calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to amend relevant legislation to ensure that sewers and drains associated with roads from new developments are included in road bonds. The petition has been in front of us before. Are there any views on how to deal with it?

Bill Butler: There does not seem to be any movement from the Government or any of the related agencies. I do not see what else the committee can do in a practical sense.

The Convener: Should we close the petition?

Nigel Don: I think that we need to close the petition because, as Bill Butler said, we have done everything that we can do. However, it might be worth noting in passing that roads become the responsibility of the local authority and so a bond is deposited with the local authority.

John Wilson: No—

Nigel Don: Okay, a bond is deposited: never mind where it goes. The difficulty is that the landowners who have bought the plots and the houses on them finish up being responsible for any sewerage and water works that are not completed because no bond is payable in that situation. It might be wise if developers or the

lawyers who are buying from developers of large estates were to find some way of ensuring that there is a bond that covers the cost of those works. In other words, perhaps purchasers' lawyers need to put together a mechanism for protecting their clients. The local authority looks after itself but, at the moment, purchasers are not protected. They would need to get together to be protected and their lawyers would have to develop a scheme to achieve that, if it is worth the bother, which it might not be.

John Wilson: I am reluctant to close the petition, because there are issues around the adoption of roads in new estates. In my experience, some local authorities are willing to adopt roads on new estates and do so fairly quickly. However, problems arise when local authorities take longer to adopt a road. Before the local authority adopts the road, it must satisfy itself that the road is up to an acceptable standard. Unless the local authority puts a bond for the construction of the road on the firm that is building the new houses, there can be difficulties with the local authority adopting the road without incurring substantial costs.

The issue is whether local authorities and other agencies, such as Scottish Water, should impose bonds on construction firms. At the moment, the hard-pressed construction industry is trying to ensure that it can continue to construct new houses, but new houses mean new housing estates, which mean new roads and water courses. The question is whether local authorities and other agencies use the bond system adequately to ensure that, if there are any failings in the road or sewerage construction, the local authority or Scottish Water can hold the bond against the developers to ensure that any required works are done without imposition on the new homeowners. In many cases, and in the current economic climate, new homeowners will have a hard enough task to pay their mortgages without being landed with a potentially large bill to cover the cost of upgrading a road or water system when the problems were not their fault in the first place.

The Convener: What do you suggest we do with the petition?

John Wilson: We should ask the Government whether the local authorities and other agencies that are involved are applying adequate bonds to safeguard people who are entering new estates, and whether they are providing the relevant level of security for roads and water systems.

The Convener: I am fairly comfortable with that suggestion. We all have such cases in our caseloads. The petition refers to a unique set of circumstances, but John Wilson is exploring the broader principles. I am happy to accept his suggestion.

New Petitions (Notification)

17:00

The Convener: The paper on the notification of new petitions is in front of us. Those petitions will come to meetings of the Public Petitions Committee in due course.

Before I close today's meeting, I want to record members' appreciation for the work that has been done by Zoé Tough, our assistant clerk. She has told me that her surname should be pronounced "Tooch", although I have been pronouncing it "Tuff" for the past year and a half—tough luck. Zoé is moving on to pastures newer, bigger and better. She is moving back to the north-east of Scotland, which is particularly relevant today, given the number of issues relating to the north-east that we have dealt with.

Along with the other members of the clerking team, Zoé has been the private face of the Public Petitions Committee and has dealt with sometimes difficult issues that are raised by the petitions. We acknowledge the work that you have done; well done and, on behalf of committee members, good luck in the future.

John Wilson: It is amazing what some clerks will do to avoid going to Shettleston in a fortnight's time.

The Convener: I am lucky because the meeting will be held in Margaret Curran's constituency, not mine.

Meeting closed at 17:01.

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