



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 29 October 2013

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE
17th Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con)

*Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP)

*Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab)

*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Pete Gregson (Kids not Suits)

Patrick Krause (Scottish Crofting Federation)

Roddy MacDonald (Scottish Crofting Federation)

John McLean

Professor Kirsten Stalker (University of Strathclyde)

Cheryl Stevens (NWG Network)

Sheila Taylor (NWG Network)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Tuesday 29 October 2013

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 09:16*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (David Stewart): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to today's meeting of the Public Petitions Committee. I remind you to switch off any mobile phones or electronic devices, because they interfere with our sound system.

I register apologies from Jackson Carlaw and apologies for lateness from Chic Brodie, who has been caught up in traffic on the M8.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking agenda item 5 in private. Does the committee agree to take item 5 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation in Scotland

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is evidence in our inquiry into tackling child sexual exploitation in Scotland. As agreed, we will take evidence from two panels. On the first panel are Sheila Taylor MBE, who is chief executive officer, and Cheryl Stevens, who is project co-ordinator, from the NWG Network—the national working group for sexually exploited children and young people. You are both very welcome. Thank you for coming along to aid and advise us in our evidence session today. I invite Ms Taylor to make some brief opening remarks about the work of her group, after which I will kick off with some questions before my colleagues ask further questions.

Sheila Taylor (NWG Network): Thank you very much for inviting us. It is worth explaining how the network works, so that you understand where our knowledge comes from.

In a previous life, I was the chief executive of Safe and Sound Derby, which was the charitable organisation responsible for making the police respond to child sexual exploitation in Derbyshire. That led to 28 girls going through the court system to give evidence and nine men going to prison for a total of 84 years. We learned a lot in that process. Through the child exploitation and online protection centre's thematic inquiry, we noted that we had 554 cases of child sexual exploitation, at all different levels, to manage within the organisation over a three-year period. That is where my knowledge came from.

I then moved to the national working group, which is a network of professionals that involves more than 260 organisations, including entire safeguarding children boards, a whole police force, organisations such as Barnardo's and national organisations. It has become a massive network of professionals who deal only with child sexual exploitation. Our job is, through the network, to help people get through the complexities of child sexual exploitation, so we have a wide brief. We have young people from all sorts of different backgrounds who experience all types of child sexual exploitation, and we help people to couple up with someone else who has dealt with something along the same lines, so that they can learn from their successes and errors. We have a range of forums, covering boys and young men, serious case reviews, police work, strategic leads, those who manage case loads, research practitioners, parents, health and a range of other specific issues within child sexual exploitation. Our job is to pull all of that together.

Our website has more than 500 resources that people can download to help them manage child

sexual exploitation, and we will shortly add a 90-minute online training programme that our team of specialists has put together

It might be worthwhile for me to brief the committee on our team of specialists. We have somebody with an enforcement background who specialises in trafficking, as the experiences and symptoms of children and young people who are sexually exploited—whether or not they are trafficked—are more akin to those of trafficking victims than anything else.

We have someone who comes from a health background and has been a designated nurse for more than 10 years. He has a history in mental health therapy and huge knowledge in the area of child sexual exploitation, so he progresses work in the health arena. We have people in our team with child protection, safeguarding and strategic backgrounds in order to help our work. We also have somebody who helps to bring out the young people's voices on what they need and their experiences of having agencies working with them at different times.

That is a very brief sketch of our network, but it covers more than 1,600 professionals who work in the field of child sexual exploitation.

The Convener: Thank you for that outline. I have a couple of questions—I will start with a straightforward one to set your work in a Scottish context. I understand that your organisation has a United Kingdom-wide remit. What links do you have—or aspire to have—with Scotland that might assist us with our inquiry?

Sheila Taylor: We have some projects in Scotland—Cheryl Stevens might be better able to answer that question.

Cheryl Stevens (NWG Network): Yes, we currently have as members the Quarriers what if projects, the wilderness project, Barnardo's Scotland, the green light project in Aberdeen and the Aberlour Child Care Trust.

The specialist team are in Scotland this week to visit those projects, make links and take learning from Scotland to feed into the network. The network only works if the network works it, if you like.

We will take the resources that Scotland can give the network, put them in and share them out again. We are building links throughout the UK.

The Convener: The organisations that you mentioned are all well respected. You will know that it was the petition from Barnardo's Scotland that led to the committee's inquiry.

My second question is wider and relates to England and Wales, in which you have particular

experience. You may have picked up on a *Sunday Times* report couple of days ago that stated:

“Child protection reforms brought in after the Baby P scandal have failed to reduce the number of deaths of young children from neglect and abuse”.

That includes sexual exploitation in the home. What is your assessment of that claim?

Sheila Taylor: We deal with child sexual exploitation and not familial abuse—we separate those two elements, which perhaps muddies the waters with regard to statements such as that in *Sunday Times*. I am not sure what the figures are in that regard.

However, I know that there are often deaths in the area of child sexual exploitation simply because people have not realised the gravity of the situations that young people experience. A child who is experiencing child sexual exploitation is one of the most vulnerable young people of all, and many are just hanging on. If they are in a very difficult position, we start to lose lives.

The Convener: The *Sunday Times* article notes that the Manchester safeguarding children board undertook “a detailed analysis” of 14 serious case reviews in England where a child had died from neglect or abuse. The common thread that it picked up was

“a failure by child protection agencies to communicate clear signs of child abuse to each other or rigorously to assess the risk of harm.”

What is your view of that assessment?

Sheila Taylor: I support that absolutely—we do not train our professionals in how to look for child sexual exploitation. I can give you a flavour. We all know about the Rochdale case, the Oxford case, which was at the Old Bailey, and operation retriever in Derbyshire, and we can list a host of other cases that have made it into the media. Those cases inform people in their arena.

In my tours of the UK—the whole team are out all the time, as we travel constantly to meet people to talk about the issue—very often when I am with the police or social services, for example, I find that they look for a particular set of indicators, which in turn spawn investigations around the type of people whom the media have covered. The hardest sexually exploited young person to spot would be a young man from a black and minority ethnic community background who has a disability and who is exploring his sexuality. Of course, we do not deal well with any of those things and we do not spot those cases. The likelihood that such a young man will be picked up as a case of child sexual exploitation is low.

Another aspect is that we often criminalise our young people. We see behaviour as a criminal activity and we do not understand that it is a

symptom of child sexual exploitation. That is a key issue. University College London did a short piece of research into the links between offending, child sexual exploitation and the overrepresentation in relation to that. That covered three categories: aggressive crime, acquisition crime and non-compliance crime. Aggressive crime means things such as assault. When people get into difficult situations, they might become aggressive. For example, if they are in a care home, they might be aggressive with people there if they receive a text message that says that they have to leave and go somewhere or other. The consequences are so great that it is actually easier for the person to go rather than to let themselves be restrained, which might end up with assaults and that type of thing.

An example of acquisition crime would be young people who have to shoplift the vodka that offenders then use on them to make them more compliant. The offenders will give the young people massive amounts of alcohol, which makes them more compliant to the abuse that is about to happen, and it means that they are not credible witnesses because they cannot get their story straight, as they cannot remember. We are seeing fatal levels of alcohol being given to children.

The Convener: Are you aware of any studies among prisoners to assess levels of past abuse?

Sheila Taylor: I am not aware of any, and I think that that is a gap everywhere. Research has been done on paedophilia and the drivers for it, but we are not looking at paedophilia—we are looking at hebephilia, which is an American term. Paedophilia involves pre-pubescent children, whereas hebephilia involves post-pubescent children. There is a different driver for that. I am not aware of any research on that, and we are fairly comprehensive in our coverage. That is a gap in our society.

The Convener: Obviously, I cannot predict what the committee might recommend in our report, which is still to be written, but would it be useful for us to flag that up to the Scottish Government and suggest that it should endorse future research into levels of past abuse among the prison population?

Sheila Taylor: My take on this is that we can put as many sticking plasters on as we like, but the conveyor belt of children will keep going until we work out what is driving it. The drivers of the conveyor belt are the people who perpetrate the crimes. We have to be careful not to limit it to male offenders. We have a case at the moment where the leader of the group is a woman. Although the group is predominantly male, it is led by a woman. People are less able to see women as offenders, especially if they have a family and seem to be normal members of society.

The Convener: There is a stereotyping approach.

Sheila Taylor: Yes—there is stereotyping.

The Convener: I ask Cheryl Stevens whether she wishes to comment on anything.

Cheryl Stevens: Not at the moment, but I will do.

The Convener: Right. I want to make sure that you get your time in court.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I want to follow up on the point about the number of professionals who are involved in your network. You said that you represent 260 organisations and 1,600 professionals. How many professionals do you estimate are out there working in the area? Are the professionals whom you bring together just the tip of the iceberg, or do some people who work in the area not realise the links that could be made with the national working group?

09:30

Sheila Taylor: We have 1,600 professionals. I am not saying that everybody who works with child sexual exploitation is a member of the network, but a huge number are, simply because people feel lost when they start to work with the issue. We create the network and the specialist team that is on the end of the phone to give people advice and help them along. It does not really matter what the legislation says; the advice for young people on keeping safe and how to manage all of that is the same.

I sit on the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups, which has done different site visits. Through that work, we recognise that a huge number of safeguarding children boards in England still turn around and say that there is no child sexual exploitation in their town or city. That is just not true. If you look for a specific format for child sexual exploitation, you will think that you do not have any, as it looks slightly different in your town or city.

We do not have all the professionals who work in the field. We are in Scotland because we feel that we are underrepresented in Scotland, given how we might be able to help. We had a long conversation about how we could inform Scottish people about how we can help and tell them that the network is as accessible to them as it is to everybody else. We have come up for the week to talk to a range of people.

John Wilson: One issue is the links, or lack of them, between the different agencies that are supposed to be working in child sexual exploitation. I am thinking about the police and

social work, education and health services. How many of those types of organisations are part of the national working group? Is there a need for closer working relationships with different organisations and agencies to get them to understand the links and the need to work closely together?

Cheryl Stevens: We have a wide range of professionals, front-line practitioners, researchers and policy makers from health, education, social care, charities and charitable projects. We link into every agency that we can, but some areas have more representation than others.

The network holds forums and shares information, and not just from health to health, for example. The health forum shares its learning and challenges with all the other forums. It will share problems, challenges, learning and effective working practices with the boys and young men forum, which will share information with the local safeguarding children boards strategic leads forum. We assist each area to understand problems and the constraints that each organisation may have. Health will have a work remit, but the police may not understand that remit, and they may ask about things that are beyond it. Likewise, health will ask the police about things that are beyond their remit. We help to show people what the different remits are and how everybody can share information.

One of the biggest questions throughout the network is how we can share information effectively—not only official information that needs to be shared with the police and social care, but information that needs to be shared with every other agency. The network is very good in that regard. An agency can ask us a question, we sterilise the information so that no sensitive information is included, send the question out across the network, listen to what the network says in response, and feed that back to whoever asked the question. That sharing of information is successful, and that is what makes us unique and successful as a network organisation.

Sheila Taylor: I will give another example. The health forum recognised that there is an underrepresentation of health movement and a lack of ability in identifying and putting in the right therapeutic interventions for young people who are experiencing child sexual exploitation. We worked with the health forum and a retired general practitioner to create a grassroots survey of practitioners in the field that asked about the barriers they face and their successes. The results were published in a report called “If you Shine a Light you will probably find it”. The report, which is on the front page of our website, is very clear about what young people experience, and anyone

can download it to learn about the health issues that affect children and young people.

John Wilson: I welcome all the information that has been provided on the issue, on what the website does and on the links through the network. How many of you are working in your specialist team, and how is it funded?

Sheila Taylor: When I started in 2011, there was just me and a seven-hour worker who managed the network. We are now a team of seven. We tend to work directly with about 7,000 professionals over a year, in different ways, but the number of telephone calls and consultations that we do is much wider than that. We are only a team of seven, but we are still accessible. I do not know how we manage it, but we seem to be able to answer most people’s queries and network them with somebody else, because that is the point. We are not looking for all the answers; we want to understand what everybody else is doing so that, if a police officer is doing an investigation into a particular pattern of child sexual exploitation, we will know somebody else who has done something similar and we can put those two investigating officers together. If there is a health or child protection case that is very difficult, we will match that with somebody else so that they can share professional knowledge in confidence.

To answer the second part of your question, we are funded through charitable donations and grant-giving bodies, so we continue to put in funding bids.

John Wilson: Have there been any discussions with the UK Government regarding direct funding?

Sheila Taylor: We have had discussions with the UK Government. We are currently a recipient of a Department for Education grant that is aimed at the voluntary sector, but I do not think there is any other understanding that we could become funded by the Government. That is a shame, because a huge amount of our resource is spent on trying to find the money to keep those individuals going. It is difficult to put a number on how many people we support, but I would suggest that we probably support several thousands of professionals in one way or another, either through the website or by putting information out through LinkedIn, Facebook and other channels that help to make it accessible.

John Wilson: Given your earlier evidence regarding the number of cases that are now emerging and on-going, and the future cases that may be out there, I was interested in your comment that some local authorities do not recognise that any child sexual exploitation is taking place in their area. How do we get the message over, and how do you get the message over, to professionals and other agencies working

in local authority and health board areas that do not recognise the signs that may indicate child sexual exploitation?

Sheila Taylor: In England, part of our Department for Education bid involves being proactive in areas that say that, so we can cover some of that. However, organisations must still have the will to move forward. It is interesting that, when we go to an area that says that it does not have child sexual exploitation, because we have lived and breathed the issue—since 1999 in my case and from very early on in Cheryl Stevens's case—we can often see the recruitment activity happening to get young people involved in towns and cities. That is happening in our communities.

We have created a community awareness programme—it is called say something if you see something—that can be downloaded and sent out with all the details on. It comes with training and it is aimed at everybody in the community, including hotels, retailers, visiting ice rinks and fairs—visiting entertainment that comes to town is a major issue. The idea is to inform all the people who work in such settings.

One area has gone so far as to use a training programme on child sexual exploitation to teach people, when they are training to be taxi drivers, what child sexual exploitation looks like and how to identify it. Taxi drivers in that area are now ringing the police to say, "I've got this—it isn't right. What do I do about it?" That is prevention.

We can do the intensive stuff all we like, but we must put prevention in place and stop children being raped. We talk about child sexual exploitation, but we are talking about systematic multiple rape over a long term.

John Wilson: I have had a concern throughout the committee's inquiry. You talked about visiting fairs, and I remember reading a book about the black country a number of years ago that raised the issue of child sexual exploitation among young males. How do you get the message over to the public about reporting child sexual exploitation that they suspect is taking place in the area of a local authority or police authority that does not recognise that such exploitation is happening?

Sheila Taylor: That is an issue. When the public and parents ring us to say that the situation is not being handled effectively in their area, we pick up the phone to offer that area our expertise, to help it to manage cases more effectively. This is a journey; some people have got on the train, some have yet to get on it and some of us have been on it for a while. That is the difficulty with where we are.

There is still a lot to learn—for example, in relation to young people from our black and ethnic minority communities, who find it incredibly difficult

to come forward and have added complexities in doing so. They face added threats, which make it difficult for them to disclose their situation. In addition, we do not create the right environment for them to do that. The Muslim Women's Network UK has done interesting work in producing a report on victims from the Asian community, which describes the difficulties and barriers that they face in coming forward.

The Convener: You mentioned your website and your presence on Facebook, Twitter and so on, but how do people get to that? Do you publicise your work in other ways to third sector agencies in England? Do you also cover Wales?

Sheila Taylor: Yes—and Northern Ireland.

The Convener: A more difficult issue is how you advertise to victims of exploitation the good work that you do.

Sheila Taylor: We need to be clear that we do not work directly with victims. We support professionals to do their job. I hope that, in a few years' time, the network will not be needed and professionals will have mainstreamed the work—they will understand what they are looking for and be able to manage that. We should have no more than a five-year strategy behind us, but I feel that the strategy might have to be for considerably longer.

Upskilling people is the thing, so that we are not working directly with young people, other than through the youth participation, when we hear their voice and about what they need. It is also important to hear what parents need. Not all parents are involved in this, and many are the best protectors and providers. We need to hear their voice and what they need to support them. We should strengthen the family unit so that the child is better protected.

It is really word of mouth that gets us out there. We run on an absolute shoestring, but we seem to manage quite well. I want people to join us because they want to join the network. I do not want people just to feed off the network; I want people to feed the network as well. That is the way it works. The larger the network, the more information that we have in it.

09:45

The Convener: I understand your point about not working directly with victims. I have a particular interest in victims and I would be quite keen to develop in Scotland the English model of a victims commissioner. As part of that, I met the previous victims commissioner for England and Wales and the previous victims champion for England and Wales. I have been interested in the work that they have done, directly in the Ministry of Justice. Have

you had any direct involvement with the victims commissioner?

Sheila Taylor: I have had more involvement with the Commission for Victims and Survivors in Northern Ireland than I have had with the commissioner in England and Wales. We tend to respond mostly to the professionals, although we get called on by the Home Office and central Government to help them to develop their strategies.

It is important to have somebody to answer to this issue and to look at it properly. It is a big, complex issue, which involves many children, yet it is so underrepresented that unless we give it proper focus, we will not pick up all those children. When we do not pick up those children and we allow them to go back into society untreated and unsupported, they will grow up to be adults with a warped sense of what a healthy relationship is, and we will just be perpetuating all the issues.

One thing that is absolutely important but which we really have not got yet is the therapeutic intervention. We talk about investigation, disruption and prosecution, and we talk about child protection, making the child safe and how best to protect them, but then we stop. What are we doing? Who will help those children to recover as much as they can? I came across a case in which one young person had been raped by 43 men in one night. How does a young person recover from that if somebody does not put the right therapy in place?

However, we have to understand it better as well. Part of what we do is to work with countries overseas that have grown in a different way from us. We did some work with Holland, which has quite a nice therapeutic intervention. We are going back to Holland in November to look at the next stages. There are approaches out there in the wider world, and we try to network so that we bring in what is being done in different countries.

We are holding a conference in March next year. We have only two speakers, one of whom is a lady who manages projects in Uganda—a non-governmental organisation voluntary worker. Such organisations are largely how those children are managed at the moment, on a day-to-day basis. The other speaker is from a research-to-action project in the United States of America on the therapeutic needs of children.

The rest of the conference—this goes back to the network—will be tailor made. There will be 40 workshops and, over the two days, conference delegates will pick the workshops that they need, to tailor make the day to their requirements. That is how we work all the time; as we go round, we recognise practitioners in the field talking about what they do really well. On our list, we have

people from Scotland whom we want to come to the conference because there is stuff here that we need to share with the rest of the UK, just as what the UK is doing is useful to Scotland.

The Convener: That is very useful.

Cheryl Stevens: The complexities of understanding, recognising and identifying child sexual exploitation are massive. People tend to see just the behaviour of the victim and to deal with that, because it is easier to deal with antisocial behaviour or theft from an off-licence than it is to see behind those behaviours. Many of the victims whom we are aware of will externalise by smashing windows or kicking police officers. Some of that is about them looking for a means of escape—it is easier to be arrested for something than it is to have to go back to the perpetrator.

We have been looking at child sexual exploitation for years and years, and the complexities are so great that practitioners have to do a massive amount of learning. That is before we even start to look at the learning that the community has to do. It is easier to turn a blind eye and allow things to happen than it is to face up to the issue. It is a massive task. As Sheila Taylor said, we have been looking at the issue for 10 or 15 years. I have been looking at it for longer than that, because my daughter was sexually exploited. Despite that, practitioners in England are answering the same questions that we were answering 10 years ago. As new staff come in, the training is not there for them to learn about the issue. They are learning how to deal with issues that are easier to deal with than sexual exploitation is, such as antisocial behaviour and health problems.

Sheila Taylor: It is important that we teach our children in a school setting how the issue manifests itself in society and what the triggers and indicators are so that they recognise it. When I was a child, the message was about the stranger danger and how children should not take sweets from a stranger. Everyone is nodding their head, because you all knew that message, but we do not do that now. We do not teach young people well about healthy sexual relationships. There was a piece of research by Plymouth University—I think that it was Plymouth, but I could be corrected—that looked at where young people who were exploring their sexuality learned about that type of relationship. Because that is not incorporated in sexual health education in schools or in any other setting, they visited porn sites to see what to do and how things worked. If that is someone's education, they will have a distorted view of what a healthy gay relationship is. We need to teach our children how to manage the issue.

The Convener: That gap that you mentioned is clearly as applicable to Scotland as it is to

England, Wales and Northern Ireland, so it is certainly something for the committee to think about when we produce our report.

Sheila Taylor: Absolutely. We have tried to address that. We have just worked with an information technology organisation, and a thing called “Cody’s choices” is now downloadable from our website. It is aimed at school settings and people who work with small groups of young people, and it would work with an individual. It takes young people to a setting—whether a hotel, a flat, a shopping centre, a park or a bus station—and looks at how the issue works in those settings, what sexting is, what the implications and impact of it are, what the profile of an offender looks like and all those types of things. A host of photographs are provided, and the children have to guess whether the person is an offender. Photographs are provided of all sorts of people who look as if they are offenders who are not and of people who do not look as if they are offenders who are. It is about getting young people to assess why someone might want to be their friend, to offer them gifts and all the rest of it.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I need to bring in some other members.

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): I was busy listening to your evidence, which is super. Welcome to the Scottish Parliament, and thank you for the information that you have provided.

Sheila Taylor: We are loving it.

Anne McTaggart: I will try to keep my questions short. There are loads of questions that I am dying to ask, but I hope to get your cards at the end, so that I can ask you more questions after the meeting.

The convener will be glad to hear that I will focus on just two issues, one of which—strong therapeutic support for young people who have been exploited—you mentioned. You referred to what has happened in Holland and some of the research that has been done in the USA. Is there anything that you think would be relevant for Scotland to learn? Are there any examples of good practice that we should look at?

Sheila Taylor: It is difficult to say that there are examples of good practice. However, we have a number of residential units that are looking at how they support young people. Interestingly, they are all developing in a slightly different way.

When we talk about children in care, we must be careful. We see a range of professionals who say that they have a CSE specialist home, but what they mean is that they have had CSE victims in their home before, they have experienced child sexual exploitation and they know what to

expect—there has been no therapeutic intervention.

We have other people who are developing a therapeutic programme, some of which is of enormous help. I would not say that we have it right yet, but I see a willingness in some arenas to develop care that looks different from what we offer currently. I hope that, somewhere along the line in the next year or two, we will be able to hold up something as the start of a therapeutic intervention—we cannot get this right straightaway; we cannot look for clear answers and solutions immediately—that will need to be worked on.

Anne McTaggart: Have you seen, or heard about, any good practice on the measures to disrupt and prosecute offenders that we could use in Scotland?

Sheila Taylor: I am afraid that I cannot use the term “good practice” in relation to anywhere, but I can use the term “effective and improving practice”. Children and young people are still being sexually exploited and raped, so we do not have it right yet.

We have good examples of disruption and investigation. Staffordshire Police has a good method, which I particularly like, of scoping and tasking its police force in dealing with and disrupting child sexual exploitation. Lancashire Police has a good strategic delivery of multi-agency teams to manage sexual exploitation across the whole of its area. We have some really good virtual teams in which people are not co-located, but specific individuals in organisations have virtual management of the situation.

It is important to have a voluntary sector organisation supporting affected young people. In some of the child sexual exploitation and serious case reviews that we see, the voluntary organisation has had between 600 and 800 direct contacts with the young person in a 14-month period. I know of no local authority or statutory organisation having that luxury of time to develop such trust. There must be continuity. Investigations go on for a long time, but the professional individuals from the children’s services and child protection services and the police officers involved change constantly. A person who has been multiply raped will not want to keep talking about that experience. For example, a new social worker who has read their notes may come along and want to hear about it directly, but then that worker moves on or they are off sick and another one comes and the person has to go over it again.

The NGOs offer that continuity. That is important, right from the moment when a person’s case is recognised. It can take months for a child

to start talking about what happened to them and that comes out in tiny nuggets of information, which someone has to put together. When a disruption or investigation occurs, that same person has to hold that young person's hand through the process because it is so frightening. The person then goes to court, and the nine, 11 or 15 men who raped them are present and they may be cross-examined by each of them. We have young people in court for eight or 15 days being cross-examined by men who come across as authoritative, dominating, aggressive and controlling. How does a person get through that unless they have somebody really solid behind them?

I do not know whether you have ISVAs—independent sexual violence advisers—in Scotland. They are an interesting way to manage young people who are going through the court process. It is worth looking at how ISVAs are working in England. The role is a new one—the advisers have been in place for only four years or so. The role is really interesting. That person knows all about how the court process works and they support the young person all the way through; they do not forget to support the family while they do that, because it has to pick up the pieces afterwards.

10:00

Anne McTaggart: Ultimately it does. Thank you—I share your concern.

The Convener: Thank you. I will bring in Chic Brodie and then Angus MacDonald.

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): I apologise for being late. I had the opportunity while stationary on the M8 to listen to yesterday's case in Manchester.

Sheila Taylor: Is that operation Windermere, the Stockport one?

Chic Brodie: Yes.

We have a cause-and-effect situation and the effect is desperate. We understand that. You mentioned assessment of those who perpetrate the crime. In your wide experience, is there a way by which one could define or determine exactly who might perpetrate such crimes, and therefore pre-empt them?

Sheila Taylor: I do not think that there is. It would be beyond my ability to do that. Somebody must look at that—not just an academic but somebody with a psychological background or a psychotherapy background. A team of people needs to look at the problem properly because, until we understand what the drivers are, we will be unable to put the right interventions in place to stop people coming through.

We need to be able to recognise earlier the people who offend, so that that intervention—

Chic Brodie: In your opinion, is there enough intelligence gathering by social workers or the police to try to pre-empt someone who might fall into the perpetrator category?

Sheila Taylor: No. We wait for activity—we recognise the activity and then we try to disrupt it or we investigate it for prosecution.

Chic Brodie: The horse has bolted by then, has it not?

Sheila Taylor: Yes. The horse has bolted and children have been raped. We have to understand what drives the problem, in order to start effectively putting something in place. We are working with victims. There will always be victims; at some point or other, we must work with people who offend and those people who buy things or take part but who do not actually go out and recruit. If something is happening with 20 men, it shows the supply-demand-victim chain, and we should be doing something on all fronts.

Chic Brodie: I am trying to get at whether there is a mechanism. I listened to the two young girls in yesterday's case. With the best will in the world, there will always be victims in such circumstances. If we want to shut down or zeroise that effect, we have to do something much more positive about the perpetrators.

Sheila Taylor: Before you arrived, I mentioned that we have done quite a bit of work about paedophilia and we understand that this is not paedophilia. Paedophilia refers to prepubescent children; this is hebephilia, which refers to postpubescent children. We do not even know that word here, so nothing is being done around it, as far as I am aware.

The Convener: Do you have any experience of work in England, Wales and Northern Ireland that is being done with perpetrators of child sexual exploitation in the prison system, in the community or anywhere else?

Sheila Taylor: We have had contact with quite a few prison workers who have expressed concerns about attitudes. What we are getting down to—this is my personal take, which comes from an evidence background—is the attitude to women. However, it gets complicated, because boys and young men are sexually exploited. They are hard to see, and we see them as young offenders. Quite often, it is learned behaviour that they carry on, but not in all cases. It gets really complicated and it needs a team of professionals to look at it properly.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): Good morning, Sheila and Cheryl. I have found the evidence that you have given this morning

extremely helpful but extremely troubling as well. It is important to this committee that recognition is given to the need to listen to young people who have experienced CSE but, unfortunately, the committee has had some difficulties in the course of the inquiry in arranging direct contact with exploited young people. You have already stated that you do not work directly with victims, but can you tell us what initiatives are out there to enable the voices of young people to be heard and, what is more important, how the young people's voices can be used to influence policy in the future?

Sheila Taylor: Leslie, who is sitting behind me in the public gallery, is part of my team and is our youth participation officer, so she will come and tap me on the shoulder and tell me if I get something wrong here. However, we run a number of initiatives in which people get involved. For example, there is the having our say 2 photography project, which is about young people trying to get some of their thought patterns through to professionals. It is really difficult for young people to come forward and talk about CSE. I do not think that I could sit here and talk to you about it if I had been multiply raped on a number of occasions, but it is even more complicated for young people of 12 or 13 to do that. The photography project is one way of bringing young people's voices through.

The Association for Young People's Health has looked at peer-on-peer mentoring with young people. That has a health aspect and is the young person's voice coming through for the health side of things. Leslie, bless her, has passed me a note to help me out on that.

All sorts of experiences of young people have been documented. We have just had a dialogue with three young women who experienced child sexual exploitation for a number of years. Quite a lot of young people have come out of it to the other side. However, we know that if we do not listen to the young people, we will have only the professional's assumption about what they need, so listening is really important.

There are ways of listening to the young people's voices, including ways of doing it that mean that you do not have to do it directly. There are organisations out there that are engaged with children and young people who have been sexually exploited. Have you asked them whether they can get their voices to you through some other means? When the Crown Prosecution Service ran its consultation programme on the new way in which it would manage child sexual exploitation in England, a group of young people responded to the consultation to say how it did not fit with them, and so did a group of parents.

There are therefore mechanisms for hearing the young people's voices, but you will not get one of

them to sit here and talk to you, because that is too great a task. However, there are other ways of doing it. I am more than happy to talk to you about how we can help to facilitate that with organisations in the area. However, you would have to have a small fund of money to enable that to come together because of the constraints that those voluntary sector organisations will have.

Angus MacDonald: The committee had the agreement of organisations, but the difficulty was in getting the individuals to speak. However, that is totally understandable. I hope, though, that that can be looked at again in the future.

Chic Brodie: I want to follow on from the question that I asked before about the pattern of perpetrators and ask about the parents. Is there a characteristic family or pattern of family environment that would make children easily available to perpetrators? What roles do the parents play?

Sheila Taylor: The role of parents is very important. When we look at child sexual exploitation, we see parents at one end of the scale who are involved and complicit because they are aware of the exploitation but do not do anything to stop it, right through to parents who do everything that they can to stop it. There are professional people such as solicitors, heads of services for the national health service and child protection officers who are parents of children and young people who have been sexually exploited, but those people have not been able to stop it on their own. We regard all parents as being on a raft and susceptible to having their children sexually exploited.

It is worth considering how cases are managed in Holland. There, people talk about multiple-complex cases, which involve a child we might all know about, who has been in the equivalent of our services from childhood and who might have experienced child abuse and been a victim of domestic violence, neglect or drugs and alcohol abuse in families—all things that make a child vulnerable early on. With child abuse in particular, that is learned behaviour, the child does not understand the boundaries and does not know what is normal and not normal, and the progression into child sexual exploitation is part of that journey. The starting point for that child will be much earlier, and work might be required with the family.

There are also single-complex cases. Such a case might involve a Daisy Sunshine of this world. She has no vulnerabilities in her life, and she has a normal, healthy relationship with her parents in a happy family home. Her only vulnerability arises when she is a teenager. She might be friends with somebody who is engaged in child sexual exploitation. Out of concern or curiosity, she might

go along one day, and she gets locked in, raped and filmed—she is involved then, with the blackmail and all the rest of it. A whole host of other things might manifest themselves around that individual child. The starting point for that individual is very different. Usually in such cases, the family is very supportive in trying to do everything that it can to manage the situation.

On the other side, there are what are called cultural complexities in Holland. In Holland, they look just at the links between forced marriage and child sexual exploitation, but I would expand the consideration of cultural differences to take in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender difficulties and issues involving young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, people associated with gangs and a whole host of factors in cases where it is the culture that a child is in that influences things. The starting point for that child will be different from the starting point for Daisy Sunshine—a young person who has not had anything happen to her in her life that has involved services since early on.

Chic Brodie: So there are no common threads.

Sheila Taylor: There are no common threads.

Chic Brodie: After the event, what conversations will be held with parents? Is there any analysis of the parents' involvement?

Sheila Taylor: It might be very useful for you to speak to representatives of an organisation called PACE. Can you remember what that stands for, Cheryl?

Cheryl Stevens: Parents Against Child Sexual Exploitation.

Sheila Taylor: I do not know whether PACE covers Scotland—it covers all of England. It is a network of parents who all have children who have been sexually exploited. It may well be worth asking PACE for its analysis of parents. The parents will be no different, whether they are from Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales or anywhere else—their experiences will be much the same.

I can remember a parent telling me that I have no idea what it feels like, sitting around a table with professionals, trying to protect their child, and everybody has a file in front of them on their child, but they do not know what is in it. The parent has to learn the job of everybody around that table to ensure that they are doing the job that they should be doing. We should be strengthening the family unit and helping it to support the children. We are seeing the family unit dissolving under the pressure, with siblings going on to be sexually exploited or other issues arising.

The Convener: You have mentioned PACE. If the committee agrees, we can write to it and ask

for some written evidence to aid our understanding of the issues.

Sheila Taylor: Yes. We can help you with the details, and we can make that connection alongside you, so that PACE responds to you appropriately.

The Convener: Even though it does not operate in Scotland, there will not be huge differences between the two nations on this issue. I appreciate that.

Anne McTaggart: I emphasise how welcome your knowledge and information has been. There is real concern about the Asian, black and ethnic communities. This is black history month, and the Scottish Parliament has hosted a black history exhibition—and I hope that you go along and see it before you leave the building today. To give you a flavour, the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on the middle east and south Asia has a keen interest in working with young women in particular and in looking at human trafficking and female genital mutilation. I will perhaps follow that up with you later.

10:15

Sheila Taylor: If you have a task group that is looking at the issue, we are open to an invitation to sit on it and to help you to expand that knowledge. If you do not need us, that is fine and we are not worried about it, but we are happy to sit round that table if there is something that we can help you with. We perhaps do not need to attend every meeting, or we might do so for a period. We sit on a lot of strategic groups. I sit on the Home Office working group on sexual violence against children. We sit on a number of Association of Chief Police Officers groups and strategic oversight groups. There is no reason why that cannot happen here. All that we ask for is some assistance with the cost of travel to get up and down, as we do everywhere else.

Chic Brodie: In asking this, I am not laying the victims aside. We have talked about the perpetrators and the parents—what is the attitude of the police and social work people to such cases? I am talking not about specific cases, but in general. Is the approach all-embracing and one of heavy involvement? What is the approach?

Sheila Taylor: To give a broad-brush picture, there are cases where the approach is not right. I see the police taking the lead. The police are more proactive on the issue almost everywhere I go across the UK. That is usually because they have heard of the big stories and they understand that there has not been a good response to previous allegations, so they are exploring that. We see that child protection services are playing catch-up a bit because they might not be aware of what has

happened in policing and then suddenly find something in an investigation. Simply because of the nature of the issue, an investigation cannot last for a long time, because we are talking about young people being raped. There has to be a disruption or an arrest quickly, because there are young people in a rape situation. Quite often, there has been a failure to engage the appropriate health professionals to build that network of support and welfare round the child.

We have a strategy that works well when a local authority is trying to work out an approach. We call it the gold, silver and bronze strategy. The gold part involves the decision makers from the police, the health service, youth offending services and child protection services coming together to ensure that they have properly resourced what needs to happen. The silver group is the heads of service who are managing directly those who work in the service. The bronze level is the practitioners who work directly with the children. Those three levels feed backwards and forwards into one another.

That works fairly successfully in each area, but I suggest that Scotland might need a platinum level, which is an overarching approach setting out what Scotland is going to do. Each area would then have its gold, silver and bronze levels. That is nice and easy to articulate and to communicate to professionals in a way that they understand.

The Convener: As you know, one advantage of having a single police force is that at least we do not have a postcode lottery, with different police approaches in different areas. That certainly helps.

Sheila Taylor: Yes, but you need to develop specialism within the teams. One difficulty that I experience wherever I go is that the police are the most fluid organisation that I have come across. A police officer can be in a post but, because of the way that the police work, they can be part of the way through an investigation, which means knowing the young people and understanding them, but then be moved on. Every two or three years, they are moved on. We need a specialist team that will stay in post for a while.

Chic Brodie: What is the definition of an area? The convener made a point about Police Scotland. I am sure that police officers do not do one job and then move on to another as quickly as that. Is the issue not more to do with the community than with a larger area, as Sheila Taylor talks about? What has been your experience of working with smaller communities, where potential victims or perpetrators or poor parenting might be better known?

Sheila Taylor: We have a duty to create a society in which there is zero tolerance on the issue, but we have a long way to go on that. We

need Auntie Gladys to report it if something is going on in her family, next door or on the street. Community education has to happen. Before you arrived, I mentioned our say something if you see something campaign, which has posters and flyers on what people are looking for and what they should do. There is a pro forma that people can fill out if they have never given information to the police before. There is information on how to do it and how to fill out the form. There are 90 pages of help for communities to create zero tolerance in society.

The Convener: Sadly, we are out of time—I allowed a little bit more time. I am sure that I speak on behalf of the committee in thanking both our witnesses for their excellent evidence. It is obviously a difficult area, so it has been tremendous to have your expertise and your signposting to other organisations that we can use. I am sure that the committee will want to use you as a resource when it comes to writing up our report to get pointers and to use your expertise in a practical way. As you said, I do not believe that there is a huge difference between Northern Ireland, Wales, England and Scotland. We have to look at the best practice that you have identified and at the gaps in Scotland. From today, I can certainly pick up several points on which it would be essential to make recommendations to the Scottish Government, which is of course awaiting our report. I am grateful to the Government that it is not rushing ahead with its report and is waiting until we have completed ours so that we can help to guide practice in Scotland.

Sheila Taylor: We are more than happy to help with any recommendations and to put more meat on the bones for that in any way that we can. This visit is probably just the first to Scotland, although I have to confess that I have been up here several times, but that was to see individual people. It would be nice to be more involved.

The Convener: Thank you again for coming and for giving evidence.

I suspend the meeting for two minutes to allow the witnesses to leave.

10:22

Meeting suspended.

10:26

On resuming—

The Convener: We will now hear from Professor Kirsten Stalker, who is professor of disability studies at the University of Strathclyde. Thank you for coming to the meeting. I appreciate your arriving early in order to hear the previous evidence session, which I hope was useful to you.

Professor Stalker is a member of the Scottish ministerial working group on child protection and disability. Professor Stalker, I ask you to address the committee briefly. That will be followed by questions, in the same manner as with the previous panel.

Professor Kirsten Stalker (University of Strathclyde): Thank you. Good morning, everyone.

As the convener said, I am professor of disability studies in the social work section at the University of Strathclyde. I am also a qualified social worker. Most of my research has been on disabled children's everyday lives, views and experiences, disabled adults and adults with learning disabilities.

In 2010, along with colleagues at Strathclyde, I published a scoping study that looked at the abuse of disabled children, child abuse and child protection, and the needs and rights of disabled children. Although it was only a small study, there has been quite a lot of interest in it, which shows the dearth of research and information about abuse of disabled children. I can tell the committee about some of the lessons from that, if it is of interest.

Professor Julie Taylor, who is professor of child protection at the University of Edinburgh, and I have funding from the Scottish Government to look at thresholds and triggers in relation to practitioners acting on child protection concerns in relation to disabled children. We are completing the fieldwork and doing the analysis for that work, which should report at the end of the year.

Professor Taylor and I also have funding from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children to carry out a UK-wide study to look at the views and experiences of child protection services among disabled young adults and children.

I have not done any research specifically about child sexual exploitation in relation to disabled children, although I have done a little bit of homework for today. There is not much research on the topic.

The Convener: Thank you. You predicted my first question, which was about the work that you have done on child protection in relation to the abuse and maltreatment of children and young people with disabilities—I think that you have effectively answered it.

Are there big gaps in the academic research that we could recommend to the Scottish Government that it should address?

Professor Stalker: Yes. There is definitely a gap in knowledge about disabled children and young people in relation to child sexual

exploitation. I have had a brief discussion with Professor Jenny Pearce about the need for research and the possibility of doing some UK-wide research on the topic. It would be good if the Scottish Government was interested in funding someone to do such research.

The Convener: That is a useful suggestion about future research, because part of our job is to make recommendations to the Government. I appreciate your points on that.

10:30

John Wilson: Good morning, Professor Stalker. You said that you have not focused on child sexual exploitation but on the sexual exploitation of disabled groups. For me, disability covers a wide range of different conditions. Have you done any research, and do you have any findings on whether particular disabled groups are more vulnerable than others?

Professor Stalker: Yes. Perhaps the point to make before I answer the specific question is that disabled children generally are at greater risk of abuse than non-disabled children. A meta-analysis of 17 studies looking at a total of more than 18,000 children, which was published in *The Lancet*, concluded that the prevalence rate of abuse of disabled children was three to four times higher than that of non-disabled children. However, that and other research has indicated that certain disabled groups are at even higher risk. For example, in 2000 Sullivan and Knutson published a very big study that was carried out in Nebraska, which looked at the records of more than 50,000 disabled and non-disabled children and concluded that children with behavioural disorders had a 5.5 times higher risk of abuse than non-disabled children, and that children with learning disabilities had a four times higher risk of abuse than non-disabled children.

What we do not know enough about is the direction of causality. For example, some children, particularly those with behavioural disorders and developmental delay, might have acquired those impairments as a result of having been abused—in fact, some will definitely have done so—but we do not know enough about the extent of that causation.

John Wilson: That is interesting. We are interested in the work that has been done to identify sexual exploitation of disabled children. You are right that there is a crossover between children with behavioural difficulties—or children with behaviours that are regarded as not normal—and how such behaviours might have been caused by something in the family. Have any studies been done on whether specific behaviour by children is a result of their treatment or sexual

exploitation in the family? Do we know the root cause of such behaviours?

Professor Stalker: I am not aware of such studies. Some medical studies might have considered that area, but as I come from a social work background I tend not to look at medical literature. However, I have read a number of studies in which the point is made that we do not know enough about that direction of causality. The area requires further investigation.

John Wilson: Given that some of your area covers the experience of older individuals with disabilities, could you give examples of where you think from your investigations sexual exploitation might have started at an early age rather than later in life? Do you have examples of where sexual exploitation of an individual might have taken place at a younger age but has just emerged because of the care that has been put in place for that individual, with the people who work with them having identified that sexual exploitation has taken place? Often, the only cases that we hear about involve someone with a disability who is in a care home and a care worker is identified as the perpetrator. There have been a couple of high-profile cases involving such circumstances in the media recently.

Can you give any examples of where you think that particular groups of disabled individuals may be more prevalent in terms of being abused by carers or family members?

Professor Stalker: I got slightly lost there, because I felt that the question changed at the end. I think that your initial points were about the age of the children.

John Wilson: Yes.

Professor Stalker: There is evidence from the large Nebraska study by Sullivan and Knutson that the typical onset age of abuse of disabled children is younger than it is for non-disabled children. Typically, abuse of non-disabled children starts around six to nine, which is early primary school age, whereas that very large-scale study found that typically the onset of abuse of disabled children was from nought to five, which is pre-school age. We do not know the reasons for that, but the difference is quite significant.

You did not ask me about this, but I think you should know that there is also a difference in gender patterns in the abuse of disabled and non-disabled children. Again, this is not something that we fully understand, but evidence from a number of studies shows that boys are disproportionately represented among disabled children and young people who have been abused, compared with the male and female ratios among non-disabled young people who have been abused, if you see what I mean—and that includes sexual abuse. There are

more males than females in the population of disabled people generally, but the difference is not large enough to explain that difference in the incidence of abuse.

John Wilson: You indicated that the level of abuse in the pre-five age group is higher for disabled people than it is in society in general.

Professor Stalker: It is higher than it is for non-disabled children.

John Wilson: Who are the main perpetrators of the abuse?

Professor Stalker: I do not know the answer to that question. I would imagine that at that early age it would be family. The most common form of abuse of disabled children—I know that this is not what the committee is looking at—is neglect. Of course, neglect may make children more vulnerable to other types of abuse, including sexual exploitation.

Could you repeat the question?

John Wilson: Who are the main perpetrators of such abuse?

Professor Stalker: It is important to bear it in mind that most parents of disabled children provide loving, safe, secure homes for their children and do not abuse them. However, there is some evidence that, in relation to young teenage girls with learning disabilities for example, there may sometimes be older men who present themselves as a boyfriend—they may or may not be family friends or acquaintances. I am sure that that could come under your remit of child sexual exploitation.

I am generalising, but we know from a lot of research that many young disabled people in general—and young girls with learning disabilities in particular—may feel lonely, and may feel that they do not have a lot of friends and that it is hard for them to keep up with their peer group and do everything that their peer group does. Therefore, they may be particularly vulnerable to approaches and to grooming and so on by older people—older men.

John Wilson: Sorry, Professor Stalker, but I have to come back to pre-five abuse. For clarification in my own mind, is abuse more neglect than sexual exploitation?

Professor Stalker: The most common form of abuse of disabled children of any age is neglect. Abuse generally—I do not know if it is specifically neglect; I am speculating that at that age it may be neglect—of disabled children, in comparison with non-disabled children, typically starts in that earlier age group.

John Wilson: Given that our inquiry is about child sexual exploitation, I am just trying to make

clear the evidence that we are hearing, which is that there is abuse but not necessarily sexual exploitation.

Professor Stalker: I have not got any evidence or heard anything that suggests that disabled children under five are subject to sexual exploitation. I dare say that some may be, but I have not seen any evidence about that.

Chic Brodie: Good morning, Professor Stalker. I note your background in social work. I hope that I am not misconstruing what you are saying, but am I right that we are not capturing and consolidating information to provide a base for research?

Professor Stalker: There has been very little research in Britain over the past decade about policy and practice in relation to the protection of disabled children. The study that the Scottish Government commissioned, which I am involved in, is one of the first for about 10 years.

Chic Brodie: How aware are social work departments of the need to provide not just general information but specific information on cases involving disabled children?

Professor Stalker: It varies tremendously. In a small scoping study that we did two or three years ago, we found that some senior managers in central and local government were unaware of the higher incidence of abuse of disabled children and actually had the view that because a child was disabled they were somehow protected from abuse. There is a myth that nobody would dream of harming a disabled child.

Chic Brodie: Are we saying that in 2013 there is still a myth that disabled children are somehow exempt from being abused?

Professor Stalker: In 2010, some people had that view; yes. I think that probably some still do.

Chic Brodie: Wow!

The Convener: You mentioned a small-scale study. Could you share the results of that study with our clerks and give us some information on it?

Professor Stalker: Yes.

The Convener: I will not take up time now, but that would be useful.

Angus MacDonald: Good morning, Professor Stalker. You have already covered the prevalence of CSE and said that perhaps your current understanding is limited with regard to statistics.

Professor Stalker: Excuse me for interrupting, but I covered the prevalence of child abuse, not specifically sexual exploitation.

Angus MacDonald: Okay.

As you know, there has been some debate and dispute regarding the prevalence of CSE among young people. From what you said in your opening statement, it is unlikely that there are any current statistics that show, for example, the prevalence of CSE among young people with disabilities, although you stated that it could be three or four times higher than it is among non-disabled young people.

Professor Stalker: No. I stated that there is evidence that abuse generally of disabled children is three to four times higher. I have no specific figures on child sexual exploitation.

Angus MacDonald: Clearly, we need to get those figures. What measures would produce a more accurate understanding of the prevalence of CSE among young people with disabilities? How can we get those figures?

Professor Stalker: One of the first things would be to have practitioners record the presence of impairment whenever they deal with disabled children. We know that even in cases that go forward to the child protection register, impairment is very often not recorded. The Scottish Government's child protection statistics suggest that the rate of abuse of disabled children is very low, whereas it is actually higher than it is among non-disabled children on average.

Sometimes there are issues about practitioners recognising that a child has an impairment, particularly if it is a learning disability or an invisible impairment, or if the child is on the autistic spectrum. It may be difficult for practitioners to be aware of the impairment, and therefore it is not recorded. The NWG Network is addressing those statistics. It is an area where improvement is needed.

Angus MacDonald: Clearly.

You mentioned a child with autism. There should be a system whereby, if such an impairment is recognised at a later date, the information should be added retrospectively.

Professor Stalker: It should be, yes, but in the working group we have discovered that it is not added retrospectively. The records are completed at referral. If it later emerges that a young person has an impairment that was not originally recognised, practitioners do not think to go back and put that on the records, which are sent to the Scottish Government as the statistics.

Angus MacDonald: So, currently, the figures are not accurate.

10:45

The Convener: John Wilson has a quick follow-up question.

John Wilson: My question goes back to vulnerable individuals, particularly those who are on the autistic spectrum and those who are physically disabled. I want to separate the issue of abuse from that of child sexual exploitation. Do we have any evidence that shows that children in those groups are more vulnerable to child sexual exploitation than are children in society in general? I am talking not about pre-fives, but about children who are older than that. I want to tie the issue in with our wider inquiry into child sexual exploitation in society in general.

Professor Stalker: I do not know whether what we have amounts to rigorous evidence, but I have looked at a number of reports on child sexual exploitation that have been published in the past few years to see whether disabled children were mentioned in them. In our scoping study, we had one example of a young girl with mild learning disabilities who was sexually abused in the family home for a number of days by friends of her father. Although that case was reported to the police through an aunt, it was dropped, because it was not thought that the child would be seen as a reliable witness. That is a big issue for disabled children and young people in such cases. I know that a lot of cases do not go forward to court anyway, but I think that that is a particular problem when a disabled child is involved. The child in that case was able to name the first name of one of the perpetrators but did not know the name of the other perpetrator, and that was seen as being no evidence.

Members probably saw in the press the recent case of a young deaf-mute woman who was trafficked into the country at the age of 10. She had to work as a slave, labouring and so on for an older couple, but she was also persistently raped by the man. That case was heard in court recently.

I have read about a six separate cases involving disabled teenage girls who contacted ChildLine. Those young people, who had learning disabilities, had been subjected to internet grooming and had been asked to send explicit pictures over the internet. One of them told ChildLine that a man had told her that she was beautiful, which no one had ever told her. Another man said that she would be loved if she sent the photos. We are talking about young people who might have quite low self-esteem, which could be associated with their difficulties.

The committee's previous witnesses referred to the report, "Unheard Voices: The Sexual Exploitation of Asian Girls and Young Women", which has just been published by the Muslim Women's Network UK. It looked at 35 cases, of which three were disabled young women, two of whom had learning disabilities.

Yesterday, I talked to a colleague from a voluntary organisation who told me of a case that it is dealing with that involves a young man whom the organisation is fairly certain is on the autistic spectrum, but who has not been diagnosed as being so. He has been found to have downloaded 5,000 indecent images of children, and is about 13 or 14 years old. Apparently, the police were quite taken aback at the scale and level of his activity.

I know that those are isolated examples, but such examples tend to centre around young people with learning disabilities and young people on the autistic spectrum. As I said, it may be that the former group are more prone to being groomed and are perhaps more impressionable and looking for friendship. I know that I am generalising again, but it may be that some in the latter group—young people who are on the autistic spectrum—may be good with information technology, software and computers, but may not understand some of the norms of social relationships. At the risk of stereotyping such young people, some of them can be very persistent, go into things in a lot of detail and become a bit obsessive, so if they latch on to that type of activity they may get into it in a big way.

John Wilson: I understand that individuals with obsessive compulsive disorder may get deeply involved in research, particularly if they can, through the internet, access more information or download more material. You have made some general comments about how vulnerable young people—in particular disabled vulnerable young people—can effectively be lured into situations that are not of their making. You also talked about the police following up and looking for evidence or credible witnesses to go to court. Do you think that that is a serious issue, and are there perpetrators out there who specifically target disabled vulnerable young people, purely because they think that they can get away with carrying out child sexual exploitation without fear of prosecution?

Professor Stalker: Yes, I do think that; it is linked to the big debate about disability hate crime. There is a view that offending against disabled people is caused by hatred of disabled people; I do not share that view, by and large. I think that a lot of offending against disabled people is because they are seen as easy targets and as being vulnerable. A lot of disability activists do not like that perspective because—understandably—they do not want to portray disabled people as being vulnerable. Nevertheless, if you have a visual impairment you cannot see your attacker coming, if you have a mobility impairment you cannot remove yourself from the site of the abuse, and if you have communication impairments it may be difficult for you to report, so I think that there are aspects of some people's impairments that make

them more vulnerable and that certain perpetrators home in on them.

The Convener: That is reflected in the law, is it not? If I remember correctly, there are, in relation to sexual exploitation, extra protections for vulnerable people who have mental health issues. The mental health acts lay down extra penalties for people who abuse people who have mental health problems.

Professor Stalker: I do not know whether there is a mental health act that does that, but there is criminal justice legislation that does, so there would be added penalties and stiffer sentences.

The Convener: So, that is reflected in the law.

Professor Stalker: Yes, but the number of people being prosecuted under that law is extremely low—it is in single figures.

The Convener: We might be able to get some statistics on that. If you have any statistics, we would be grateful if you could pass them on to us.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): You have already answered quite a few of the questions that I had about research. When we are considering young people with disabilities who have been, or who may become, victims of CSE, is there a need for specialised training in that area, and is there a need for national guidelines?

Professor Stalker: Yes, I think that there probably is a need for national guidelines. There are pros and cons to generic guidelines that are applicable to all children and young people, and to guidelines that are specific to disabled children and young people. In England—I think it was in 2006—the Government issued specific guidelines that were about an inch thick on protection of disabled children. In Scotland, at that time, we had only generic guidance, in which until 2010, when national guidance on child protection was issued, disabled children were practically invisible. There was very little to highlight the fact that disabled children and young people are at higher risk and also receive less protection. In 2010, the national guidance on child protection included a short section—about three pages—specifically on disabled children being one of a number of groups that required particular attention. As you know, those guidelines will be refreshed at the end of the year.

There are different views on separate guidance on disabled children. Would practitioners think that it is only for people who work with disabled children and so there would be no need for them to even read them? Would including information on disabled children in generic guidelines mean that such children would be at risk of getting lost in that guidance and their particular vulnerabilities not highlighted? We need to be somewhere in the

middle. Perhaps we should have in the national guidance a separate but longer section on the topic, which would refer to additional separate guidance.

Anne McTaggart: We have spoken about training of professional bodies, including in teaching, health, social work and education. Are you aware of best practice and the amount of time or study that is allocated to university courses to train staff in such bodies? Are you involved in that training?

Professor Stalker: Do you mean specific training on sexual exploitation of disabled children?

Anne McTaggart: Yes.

Professor Stalker: I have not come across that. I teach social work students about protecting disabled children, but that is because I volunteer to do so. I do not think that awareness is high, but I do not know what training other universities provide. As I said, awareness among practitioners is generally variable, so training is definitely needed. More community awareness and training are needed, too. The issue is partly about how disabled children are viewed and valued—or not—in society. At the end of every research report that I write, I say that a public awareness campaign or education exercise is needed on valuing disabled children and young people.

The Convener: Is it worth the committee's while to write to universities that teach social work to ascertain what aspects of disability are covered in courses—in particular, on protection of disabled young people from child sexual exploitation?

Professor Stalker: Yes. That would be a positive step.

The Convener: Police training is, I presume, also an issue, and has a key role to play.

Professor Stalker: Yes. In our scoping study of about three years ago, we interviewed a police representative who had some responsibility for child protection. She said that the police were not always well prepared and trained to interview disabled children and young people who have been abused, and that they relied on their social work colleagues to do that.

John Wilson: While we are talking about the police, I want to ask about procurators fiscal. Once the police make a report, the procurator fiscal decides whether the case should go ahead. Where we have vulnerable disabled individuals—Professor Stalker cited examples in which individuals were felt not to be credible court witnesses—who makes that call? Is it the procurator fiscal's office?

Professor Stalker: That would be the subject of a research study that I want to do. A couple of years ago, my colleague Nick Watson at the University of Glasgow obtained figures from all the police forces in Scotland on reports of disability hate crime that had come to them; the figures were very low. We obtained statistics about the number of cases that went from the police to the procurator fiscal, and then from the procurator fiscal to the courts. Then, we counted the number of cases that were prosecuted; I think that eight hate-crime cases were prosecuted in a year.

11:00

John Wilson: Could we go back slightly? How many cases were reported to procurators fiscal?

Professor Stalker: Procurators fiscal made decisions that resulted in about half a dozen different possible disposals, and only a minority of cases went forward to court. I am sorry that I cannot remember all the figures. Some people got warnings from the procurator fiscal, and other cases were discontinued. There were various other disposals that I cannot remember.

John Wilson: This is an issue that I think we have not covered before. We have discussed social work, education, the police and other agencies, but the committee has not really considered the procurator fiscal's role within the prosecution scenario. That might be something that we can add to our future deliberations on how cases are dealt with—in particular in relation to vulnerable disabled individuals. Although they might find themselves being listened to sympathetically by the agencies and the police, the cases that find their way to the courts seem to be a small proportion of those that are reported by the police to the procurator fiscal, as Professor Stalker has just indicated.

The Convener: John Wilson makes some good points. Although we have had representatives of the Crown Office before us, we have had a lot more evidence since then, and other points have arisen. It may well be that the committee will wish to write to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service to ask about the points that have arisen in today's evidence session.

I am conscious that we are a bit short of time.

Chic Brodie: Let us pretend that you have a magic wand, Professor Stalker. If you had one wish—to carry out one action that would make the biggest impact—what would it be?

Professor Stalker: I would wish to include disabled children in all the other measures and initiatives that are taken, and ensure that all those measures and initiatives are accessible to disabled children. Although, as I have said,

disabled children have additional needs and may require additional support, they should be included in all measures that are taken to protect children from sexual exploitation, and to prevent it from happening in the first place. That includes simple things, such as considering how disabled children can report and disclose. How accessible are services such as ChildLine to disabled children? Those are things that we do not necessarily always think of. If information is being given out, is it in formats that are accessible to disabled children? If policies are being developed, are we taking account of the particular needs of disabled children?

The Convener: Alas, we are out of time. I thank Professor Stalker very much for coming along and giving evidence. As I said to the other witnesses, this is a very difficult area, so it is great to have had your expertise today. We hope that you can help and advise us when it comes to writing our report over the next few months.

Professor Stalker: Yes.

The Convener: I appreciate your coming along.

11:03

Meeting suspended.

11:05

On resuming—

New Petitions

Whistleblowing in Local Government (PE1488)

The Convener: The next item of business is consideration of three new petitions. As previously agreed, the committee will take evidence from the petitioners in each case. The first petition is PE1488, by Pete Gregson, on behalf of Kids not Suits, on whistleblowing in local government. Members have a note by the clerk, a Scottish Parliament information centre briefing and the petition. I welcome Pete Gregson—I am sorry for the delay; as he probably picked up, we had quite a busy earlier session—and invite him to make a short presentation followed by questions from me and my colleagues.

Pete Gregson (Kids not Suits): I will start by asking who shapes change in our local areas. We may think that it is the council politicians whom we elect, but most of the matters that occupy the council business agenda are there because senior officers have tabled them. In a report, they tell politicians about a problem or an opportunity and why they believe that their solution is the best one. Our councillors must accept the statements that are made in such a report as written. However, such reports can be biased or misleading, as we have seen in Edinburgh with the trams, with property conservation and even with the Castlebrae high school closure proposals.

When such reports are biased or misleading, there is a very good chance that there will be at least one worker somewhere on the council staff who will be well aware of the issue. If an officer is concerned about a bad report, mismanagement or the unintended consequences of a council decision, they have just two choices: they can keep quiet or they can go to a manager. There is no doubt which course most bosses would prefer them to take, because nobody really likes a troublemaker.

Most councils have a policy on public interest disclosure that is meant to encourage staff to take malpractice concerns to their managers. The first problem with such policies is that a biased report cannot be construed as malpractice; the second is that such policies do not protect staff. In Edinburgh, two council whistleblowers have been disciplined or sacked in recent years. In the case of the property conservation whistleblower, the council's audit committee heard in 2010 that there were problems, yet the departmental head assured it that matters were in hand—they were

not. The whistleblower was rooted out and sacked, as reported in the Edinburgh *Evening News* in July last year, and his case goes before an employment tribunal in November. He had raised his concerns with his line manager but nothing changed; then he went to a more senior officer, but the deafness went all the way up to his head of department so that did not help either.

In 2006, a similar thing happened. A council officer disclosed anonymously by email to the council leader that almost £500,000 of council cash had gone missing from the Edinburgh lifelong learning project. The leader passed on that information to the education department, which chose to hunt down the whistleblower—he was traced and disciplined for the leak as council staff are not allowed to disclose to councillors. He took the case to an employment tribunal at his own expense and won, receiving a £5,000 compensation award.

Sometimes, staff leave the council rather than risk blowing the whistle. Ten years ago, politicians were warned about the tram plans. Deputations to committee focused on the financial shortfall, to which councillors replied that they must rely on the advice of senior officers, who were saying that the fears were unfounded. However, transport engineering staff were expressing concerns about issues to their managers. However, those staff members who flagged up problems were marked men and many chose to preserve their professional integrity by leaving the council.

The union knows that staff are victimised. In early May, Edinburgh Unison passed a motion calling for better whistleblower protection for council workers, which would include allowing staff to report malpractice to councillors. As I mentioned, present policies forbid that practice.

Council workers from two other big Scottish local authorities have told me that they are fearful about or have been disciplined for reporting malpractice. Also, councils discourage staff from speaking to councillors about their concerns. The 2010 councillors' code of conduct backs that stance. It tells councillors

“not to engage in direct operational management of the Council's services; that is the responsibility of the Council's employees.”

We need a safer system—a system that puts knowledge in the hands of politicians directly because they are accountable to the electorate, who must foot the bill. Whistleblowers feel safer if politicians are involved because they are outside management.

The only safe scheme, I think, is for each council to contract a commercial whistleblowing hotline that reports mismanagement or poor advice to senior politicians from within and without

the ruling group. The politicians would come from the audit committee, as every council has one. A sub-committee comprising a representative from each party should consider disclosures to the hotline. If all agree that a disclosure represents a risk worthy of public concern, it should go on the council risk register and become public. The committee could then ask the monitoring officer to report on the risk, which would subsequently be made public, too. An important consideration is that, before that report gets to committee, the whistleblower should have the right to comment on it and to highlight matters that they do not agree on. The councillors may then decide to seek further evidence.

It is important to note that the definition of whistleblowing is presently restricted to malpractice. However, council staff should be allowed to blow the whistle on misleading reports as well, because such reports lead to funding decisions. It is public money that is at stake here. My petition calls for staff to be allowed to point to such reports as mismanagement, which allows a broader definition than malpractice alone.

At present, the Government considers that it is for each council to come to its own whistleblowing arrangements. The president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities is not convinced of the need to change. However, whistleblowers go to employment tribunals. They must keep outside of the media for fear of damaging their case. If they win, they are usually forced to sign a gagging clause, so it is very rare for that problem to be publicised.

I believe that what has happened in Edinburgh will take place in other authorities, too. Much funding to councils comes in the form of a block grant from the Government. It is public money at issue here. Whistleblowers often want to report mismanagement or misdirection because they feel that bad financial decisions are being made. I am asking you, as holders of the public purse, to instruct measures to ensure that they can feel safe to speak up.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Gregson. I have a couple of points. My questions may overlap your statement a little, but that is no bad thing if it gets clarity on the record. What is your assessment of the current whistleblowing measures in Scotland?

Pete Gregson: I know that the NHS has a line that is run by Public Concern at Work, which is a helpline rather than a hotline. It has a different function because, as a helpline, it is there to advise a staff member on what they should do with their disclosure. The adviser will probably have the health board's disclosure policy in front of them and the usual advice is for the staff member to take their concerns to their line manager or the trade union. A hotline would be quite different. I do

not know of any Scottish local authority that has a hotline, although I know that Edinburgh approved a new policy last month. Do you want me to go through it quickly?

The Convener: I am afraid that we are a wee bit tight for time, but if it is in writing, perhaps you could pass it to the clerks.

Pete Gregson: The new policy is very much along the lines of what I have just described. The governance, risk and best-value committee will take reports from a commercial hotline. Edinburgh has decided to go down the way that I am proposing. It did not originally intend to do so. In June, it was going for a different option. Since then, it has realised that this is about the management of risk. If it wants to avoid risk, the safest thing to do is to involve elected members and have a whistleblowing hotline that is outside the council.

The Convener: Do you wish to see legislative change in Scotland so that every local authority and public body would have to follow the same new whistleblowing charter?

Pete Gregson: I would like every local authority to have the same measures in place as the ones that Edinburgh is adopting.

Chic Brodie: Good morning, Mr Gregson. I am going to be a bit robust, if you do not mind, because this is quite important. Have you ever stood for the council?

Pete Gregson: No, I have not.

Chic Brodie: Do you believe that our councillors are so supine that they do not ask relevant questions of officers?

Pete Gregson: I think that councillors work very hard but they are often part time and do not have the facts in front of them. They have to ask questions. Decisions are made that are subsequently regretted.

Chic Brodie: That happens in all walks of life, I am afraid. Do you believe that MSPs are supine?

Pete Gregson: No, but I do not think that you are really involved in the comings and goings of local authorities—

Chic Brodie: That is not the case. If someone raises an issue with me or any of my colleagues regarding a council decision or an issue in which we find that the process is not being followed, we would not be doing our jobs if we did not follow through. You are suggesting that there are things going on that the elected members appear not to be made aware of. Do you have evidence of any particular situation?

Pete Gregson: Well, they cannot get directly involved—

Chic Brodie: Do you have any evidence of a particular situation, Mr Gregson?

Pete Gregson: The only one that I can think of is where MSPs might comment on a council decision, such as the closure of Castlebrae high school, on which Kezia Dugdale was happy to say that she thought that the report was biased, but MSPs do not have access—

Chic Brodie: Did the public take issue with that? Did those who were affected demonstrate or make representations to the council?

11:15

Pete Gregson: Yes. The school pupils and parents did so. However, I know from council staff that there was a perception that the report was biased and did not state the full picture. There have been other issues. In Edinburgh, there is a desperation to reach the Scottish housing quality standard by 2015, with the result that several thousand houses have been demolished three years too early. It was known some time ago that the credit crunch meant that demolition should not proceed, but the councillors had okayed it. If council officers had been allowed to speak to councillors, they could have pointed out that the process needed to be slowed down. However, Edinburgh wanted the SHQS as soon as possible, so there was an urgency that was not real, given that other authorities were not driving at the same speed.

Chic Brodie: But you will accept that sometimes there are exigencies that affect the way in which we have to approach issues.

I have one final question. Your petition states:

“Cash which should be spent on the front line gets lost in the back office—and our kids are the biggest losers.”

How much money do you think would be spent on chasing every hotline call that was made to all the authorities in Scotland and therefore how much cash would be lost that could be spent on kids?

Pete Gregson: In Edinburgh, the cost of the trams has been £400 million or £500 million over budget and the property conservation scandal will cost about £40 million. A whistleblowing arrangement would perhaps cost the council £20,000 a year.

Chic Brodie: You cannot pretend that the trams issue has been kept under wraps and needed a hotline or whistleblower.

Pete Gregson: No, but when the decision to proceed was taken 10 years ago, some council staff were unhappy with what was being fed to councillors.

John Wilson: In the committee, there are five members who were formerly councillors, so we have some experience—

Chic Brodie: It is six.

John Wilson: My apologies, Mr Brodie. I just ignored the party that you represented at the time.

The petition on whistleblowing is interesting but, to an extent, it is a bit naive given the decision-making process that takes place in some local authorities. I cannot generalise about how decisions are made, but I know that in the two authorities in which I was involved as an elected member decisions that came to committee had been predetermined by the convener or the majority group in the local authority. So the point about taking a whistleblowing complaint to a special committee to consider could be negated because if the majority group was involved in the original decision or recommendation to the council, it will have predetermined the decision. How do you see us getting to a position whereby, when whistleblowers are concerned about recommendations that have been made to the council, the decisions can be overturned? My experience is that if a majority group on a council votes for something, that is the decision, irrespective of the recommendation from senior officers or consideration by the convener of such a committee or the council leader.

Pete Gregson: That is usually down to the audit committee, which is generally concerned with risk. If something is happening that needs intervention, that committee, as the guardian of risk, would put it on the risk register—or keep it on there—and flag it up as a public issue. There are always agendas and directions, but sometimes decisions are made without councillors having the full information. In the audit committee—or, in the City of Edinburgh Council, the governance, risk and best-value committee—there are opportunities for scrutinising some of the decisions that may prove to be problematic later on.

John Wilson: Not when that committee is dominated by the majority party that made the original decision. That is the point that I am trying to make with regard to the democratic process, or lack of it. I know of a recent example in which a local authority group leader issued an instruction to conveners of committees in which the group holds the majority and the convenership to shut down any debate or questioning in the committee structure of issues that are presented to the council for recommendation or approval. How would a whistleblowing line help in that situation, in which a clear instruction has been issued to shut down any questions or dissent in the council committee structure? How does the whistleblower get their views expressed in that domain?

Pete Gregson: My proposal is that, within the audit committee, there would be a sub-committee that would include politicians from every party, including the parties that are outside government as well as those in the administration. Those politicians would be party to looking at the whistleblower reports, and I suppose that it would be up to them to decide. If the group agrees that there is an issue that needs to be explored, that can happen. If there is a split in the sub-committee, and the ruling group thinks that the subject is closed but the other party does not, those members can go back to their group and try to raise a motion to bring to the committee to flag up how dangerous it might be not to act on the issue.

John Wilson: Mr Gregson, I have every sympathy with the intent of your petition; the difficulty lies in the application. You gave examples in your opening remarks of situations in which officials of the council have felt that recommendations that senior officers made to the committees or to the full council were not correct or were made on the basis of misleading information. Apart from the audit committee, to whom would the whistleblowing hotline members be responsible?

The difficulty that I find is that, if a council official is responsible to a line manager who is responsible to an executive director who is responsible to the chief executive, at what stage is the complaint from the whistleblower stymied as it goes through the system? Do you think that senior officers of the council who were party to making the recommendations would be happy with dealing with some of the whistleblowing complaints that may be made?

Pete Gregson: Well, no, they would not, because the complaint would undermine their judgment, but it is still important that that happens. What Edinburgh is doing is interesting, because it is splitting up concerns by asking the hotline provider to parcel each concern up according to whether it is major or minor. If the concern is major, the council will ask the hotline provider itself to carry out the investigation, take evidence from various sources and write a report on it. The council suggests that minor concerns will probably be left to a line manager to deal with.

The mechanism that Edinburgh is proposing is quite good, in that the council will get the hotline provider to do the investigation and then take its conclusions to the monitoring officer and chief executive for comment. The matter would then go to the governance, risk and best-value committee. Those two officers would get a chance to comment on whatever the hotline provider has written up.

John Wilson: I welcome that response, but I still have a difficulty with the internal process for whistleblowing in a local authority, particularly about whether the issues raised by a whistleblower would be adequately dealt with in the investigation process or whether, because the officers dealing with them might in some cases be fairly junior officers accountable to line managers and others, the complaints could be quashed. For example, if an officer in legal services made a complaint through the whistleblowing hotline about how a decision or recommendation had been made or presented to the council, the officer could be accountable to the legal services senior manager, and the question is whether the senior manager would be happy with the complaint coming forward. Would it not be better to have a whistleblowing hotline that was completely outwith the local authority's control and allow whistleblowers to make a complaint or raise issues with an independent body that could carry out an investigation to find out whether there was proper scrutiny and whether full information was provided to councillors before a decision was made?

Pete Gregson: I think that the independent hotline would be an independent body. If the hotline is operated from outside the council, then it is independent, even though the council has a direct arrangement with the contracted provider. I am not sure about having a national hotline, because it is probably important that each local authority has its own hotline provider and can choose who that would be and maintain a relationship with them.

John Wilson: I will leave it at that.

The Convener: We are a bit short of time, but do any other colleagues want to come in?

Angus MacDonald: My local authority has a facility for whistleblowers to highlight areas of concern. As a councillor and, more recently, as an MSP, I have been approached on a number of occasions by council officers or individuals who have had concerns regarding committee reports or reports on investigations undertaken by the council, so I have some sympathy with the petition. However, I also have sympathy with John Wilson's line of questioning. Given that a new structure has denied democracy in my local authority—Falkirk Council—because debates are guillotined if they are allowed at all, I am concerned about how an audit committee or sub-committee could properly address the issue. How would you address a democratic deficit such as the one that we have in Falkirk Council? Do you agree with John Wilson that there is a strong argument for having an independent hotline rather than one that the local authority monitors?

Pete Gregson: I do not have a huge problem with a national hotline, but I think that a hotline that

is monitored by the local authority has a relationship with the authority and is beholden to it. I do not really know what has gone on in Falkirk. For me, the issue is about an audit committee and a risk register. I think that councils have to hold a risk register. It is about putting things on the risk register so that it is in the public eye that an issue has been flagged up that needs to be explored. Until an issue gets on to the risk register, it is not a public matter.

One of the problems at the moment is that councillors tend to be excluded from the whistleblowing process; it is expected that it will all be done within the management system and the corporate management team. I do not feel that that is fair, because councillors will often end up carrying the can for something that they did not fully understand or appreciate at the time because there were facts that were not made available to them. On that basis, the process is unfair, because they will get the boot after four years but officers are there for life. That is why I think that the councillors or politicians need to be brought into the process so that they hear about mismanagement reports. That could be done in a number of ways, either following John Wilson's approach or following mine.

11:30

The Convener: I am afraid that we are short of time. The committee is at the point of summation before we decide the next steps. Members have a note of the various options that the clerk has suggested, one of which is to continue the petition and seek advice of the Scottish Government, COSLA and Audit Scotland.

Chic Brodie: Mr Gregson, I appreciate your intent and understand how you might feel. I share some views about how we train, manage and ensure participative management across industry, commerce and public service. Sometimes there are political problems, but the culture needs to be changed, not so much the process.

On that basis, convener, I suggest that we do not continue the petition.

John Wilson: We should continue the petition. Convener, you named the Scottish Government, COSLA and Audit Scotland. I suggest—and I declare an interest here—that we also write to Unison, Unite and GMB. We should also write to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman—I hope that the witness for the next petition is listening—and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers.

Angus MacDonald: I agree with John Wilson that we should write to those additional bodies. When we write to COSLA, can we ask for its figures on hotlines and helplines and ask what

procedures are in place for whistleblowing among its member local authorities?

The Convener: Chic Brodie and I are meeting the president of COSLA on another subject on Friday. If we give advance notice, we might be able to get a verbal report at that time.

Anne McTaggart: I agree with John Wilson that we should write to the organisations that he listed, including the unions.

David Torrance: I agree with John Wilson.

Angus MacDonald: You might receive a verbal report on Friday, convener, but will you receive a written report?

The Convener: Yes. COSLA might not be able to give us a verbal report because of the lack of notice, but we will certainly ask for a written report for the committee.

Chic Brodie: Will we call for a vote?

The Convener: We do not tend to have votes on this committee. There has been an overwhelming majority in the comments.

Chic Brodie: Being a good democrat, I will go along with the decision.

The Convener: We have a unanimous decision to continue your petition, Mr Gregson, and we will write to all the organisations that members such as John Wilson mentioned. We will keep you up to date with any developments and I am sorry again that you were delayed. We had a very busy evidence session earlier.

Pete Gregson: One thing that I forgot to mention is that bullying can be an issue but the current definition of malpractice excludes it. I am thinking of mismanagement and bullying—other issues could come through the hotline.

The Convener: Thank you very much for giving up your time.

11:33

Meeting suspended.

11:33

On resuming—

Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (Parliamentary Governance) (PE1489)

The Convener: The second petition is PE1489, by John McLean, on realignment of parliamentary governance on the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. Members have a note by the clerk, the SPICe briefing and the petition. For the record, I draw members' attention to the fact that I am a

member of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.

I welcome John McLean to the meeting. I apologise for delaying you and keeping you waiting. As you may have picked up, we had a very busy evidence session on our inquiry. I invite you to make a short presentation; if possible, keep it to no more than five minutes. My colleagues and I will then ask a series of questions.

John McLean: Good morning, convener. On behalf of me, the co-sponsors—Accountability Scotland and Scottish Ombudsman Watch—and 141 signatories, I thank the committee for finding time today to review our petition. Our petition identifies the interface between three tiers of complaint handling in Scotland: public service providers, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman and parliamentary governance. Our petition concentrates on parliamentary governance, as it is only through the realignment of that tier that we can be assured of success.

Some brief notes were suggested to give the committee an overview. Diagrams 1 and 2 identify the SPSO's basic parliamentary remit towards its annual reports, strategic plans and budgets. Diagram 3 defines the partial scope of the legislation and the regulatory obligations for parliamentary governance. It also identifies the relationship between regulations and specific SPSO documents that are required by the Parliament.

Regretfully, we contend that none of those requirements was ever fully applied by the SPSO or soundly scrutinised by any parliamentary governance body. Those aspects of our argument can be reviewed in the suggested delinquency list. It is only a selective representation, but we consider that it clearly identifies questionable aspects of the parliamentary governance process and the scope as it is applied. Those aspects include the absence of any overarching parliamentary governance logic. We therefore strongly suggest that the current parliamentary governance process demands realignment.

We reference some key political environment-type documents for the committee. There is a strong commonality in those well-known examples, as they all failed to define the public as a key stakeholder in complaints handling or to achieve putting the public at the centre of the process. Interestingly, none of the literature that has been published throughout the history of the SPSO has referenced the need to interrogate the SPSO's integrity or considered the impact of the parliamentary governance process on the administrative justice performance of complaint handling in Scotland.

An important Crerar recommendation that was never advanced stated that Government needed to be

“more proactive in seeking assurance.”

We avidly agree. Why was that never put in place by parliamentary governance?

We have also provided an outline corrective action flow chart, which notes that an essential building block for successful reform of parliamentary governance is the criticality of an independent investigation into the SPSO's performance and integrity.

We pose the following important points for consideration by the committee. First, why is there parliamentary governance of the SPSO? We suggest that parliamentary governance is not an arbitrary decision, but one that is of critical weight, as it is essential to provide accountability to Parliament.

Secondly, what is the purpose of scrutiny? We contend that it is to ensure compliance with an approved remit and to provide an opportunity for timely corrective actions, but we strongly argue that neither matter has ever been properly applied.

Thirdly, what is the subject of parliamentary scrutiny? The subject is the SPSO's performance, which should be achieved against its parliamentary remit. That is defined in statute as a review to ensure the ombudsman is fulfilling all the functions of the post as set down in legislation, and for the use of resources. A dictionary definition of “functions” is “office-holder's duty” and “mode of action by which it fulfils its purpose”.

Therefore, the ombudsman is required to comply with all the legislation and regulations that govern a body that was set up by Parliament. Our position is that the scope of the SPSO's mode of action is not recognised within the parliamentary governance process. That is a fundamental and fatal omission.

The Public Petitions Committee's remit to advance democracy is possibly the most powerful and demanding of any parliamentary committee. We therefore expect, support and welcome critical scepticism as an important action to establish the truth, and we trust that we will match that challenge. We also trust that similar consideration will be given to all opinions that are provided to the committee by others who may offer contrary views on our petition. Regrettably, history has proven to us that the written and the spoken word are sometimes not necessarily worthy of the integrity that we are all anxious to attribute to them.

Thank you, convener.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Mr McLean. Thank you for keeping to time. As you

can see, we are very busy today. Thank you for providing us with a highly detailed simplified logic diagram. I appreciate all the time and effort that you have spent in preparing documents for the committee.

I have two questions for you. First, are you looking for legislative change to enact the aims of your petition?

John McLean: I think that some could be made, but just getting the remits as they are written implemented would be a major step.

The Convener: You will know that there are two simple ways of dividing how commissioners are governed both in Scotland and, indeed, in Westminster. First, there is responsibility through the parliamentary arm—as you know, most of our commissioners have some responsibilities to committees but mostly to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body—and, secondly, some organisations are responsible to the Scottish Government. For example, in Westminster the victims commissioner is effectively a governmental body rather than a parliamentary body. I would make that the divide. Do you see a third way in which the process is neither parliamentary nor through the Government but some other body is responsible for a commissioner?

John McLean: No, I think that the bodies are suitable. They just need to look at what is in front of them and apply it.

The Convener: Thank you. Chic Brodie has a question.

Chic Brodie: I do not have a question, because the convener has just asked my question.

John Wilson: I have no questions at present, because I am a member of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee, which will take evidence from Jim Martin, the ombudsman, in December. That committee is designated by the Parliament to receive the SPSO's annual report and ask questions about it.

I know that, in the past, the SPSO itself has raised issues about the powers that it has, because there is an issue about what happens when the SPSO's report on an organisation has found it not to have carried out its duties as it should have done and it has not dealt with the issues. The SPSO now covers quite a wide range of organisations, as its remit is much wider than local government and includes the Scottish Prison Service as well as other bodies. There is an issue about what powers the ombudsman has to instruct organisations to correct procedures. He can make recommendations, but currently the SPSO does not have legislative power to force an agency or organisation to carry out recommendations that it has made. I may be able to look at that issue

when the Local Government and Regeneration Committee questions the ombudsman.

John McLean: That is not really what I am talking about. I am interested in the ombudsman doing the job that he is employed to do and carrying out his remit. I understand the argument about extra powers, but why does he not apply properly the powers that he has?

The Local Government and Regeneration Committee takes evidence, but it does not really get answers. There is a complete breakdown between what that committee believes is its function and what I believe the legislation states. You do not apply the term "functions" in anything that you do with the ombudsman—you say that the ombudsman is entirely unaccountable, but he is accountable to Parliament via his report. The report should cover all the items that he has to report on, but it has never done that. The ombudsman provides information about recommendations, implying that they are remedy and redress, but they are not. If you read his own definitions, he says that. However, no one takes up the matter—mainly because people are so busy. I understand and appreciate that, but they do not have sufficient information on which to act.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr McLean. I appreciated your earlier comments about the committee's important role. The key thing for us is that we have always seen ourselves as the window to the Parliament. Whatever has gone on in the past is—in one sense—irrelevant to us, because we are looking at the matter afresh. Today is our first opportunity to have you before us, so we are keen to see how we can progress your petition.

Angus MacDonald: Perhaps I could give an example of a possible way forward. This is just off the top of my head, so bear with me.

John McLean: Go for it.

11:45

Angus MacDonald: Audit Scotland is overseen by the Scottish Commission for Public Audit, on which I serve. The commission meets on a regular basis and considers the annual report from Audit Scotland. In effect, the SCPA audits Audit Scotland. There might be an argument for a non-parliamentary committee similar to the SCPA to be formed to oversee the SPSO. What would be your view of such a solution?

John McLean: A separate entity is needed, whether it reports as a sub-committee or is a hierarchy in itself, to see that the thing is done. [Interruption.]

The Convener: I remind anyone who has their mobile phone on to switch it off, please. They

interfere with our sound systems. It may well be our witness's phone, in fact.

John McLean: I apologise, convener. It has a mind of its own.

Angus MacDonald: I just thought that I would throw that idea into the pot.

John McLean: It is an excellent idea. I made suggestions that there should be a sub-committee, which would report to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee, say, or to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. However, my correspondence with both those bodies has not proved fruitful—but your suggestion, off the top of your head, is excellent, Mr MacDonald.

Angus MacDonald: I do not come up with many.

Anne McTaggart: I wish to expand on that suggestion. Who do you think should be on such a body?

John McLean: What a good question—there would need to be someone with the experience and the skill set required. I do not think that there is any specific place that they would have to come from. The resource is available all over. It could be inside the Parliament, or it could involve people who are external to the proposed committee being seconded. It would require people who understand what the ombudsman is doing and how that is being failed by that parliamentary committee and the SPCB.

The Convener: There are no other contributions to be made before I move to the summation. As you know, Mr McLean, the next stage is that the committee decides what the next steps will be. We have an options paper that gives us various options, one of which is to continue the petition and to seek advice from other bodies so that we can make a more informed decision. If we do that, we will need to write to the SPCB; as you have mentioned, it has a key role, as well as the SPSO.

We could take any other action that the committee views as appropriate. One possibility that is not on the paper but which, it has occurred to me, we might want to think about is to refer the petition immediately to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee. We tend not to do that, in that we want to make as much mileage as we can ourselves—we are not a simple referral agency—but, as Mr Wilson pointed out, that committee will be considering the matter. That is therefore an option for this committee.

John Wilson: I disagree with the convener about referring the petition to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee at this point. That committee is tasked with examining the annual report that is presented by the SPSO.

There is an issue here for the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. Our recommendation should be to write to the corporate body in the first instance to get its views. Although the Local Government and Regeneration Committee has oversight as regards the SPSO's annual report, as presented, the corporate body has a specific role in overseeing the management and operation of the SPSO. It would be more appropriate if we referred the petition to the corporate body—bearing in mind that you are a member of the corporate body, convener—and sought its response on the issues that have been raised. At a later date, we could then perhaps refer the matter on to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee, so that it could take on board the views of the corporate body as well as those of the petitioner.

The Convener: Mr Wilson has outlined the normal process that the committee follows, and we are just flagging up the available options. In terms of timing, it makes sense to get advice from the corporate body before we do anything else.

Chic Brodie: As John Wilson said, convener, you are a member of the corporate body. Could it at least consider Angus MacDonald's suggestion, which I think is highly appropriate in relation to what we are trying to achieve and what the petition has brought to light?

The Convener: I shall certainly ask for the full set of papers to go to the corporate body, along with Angus MacDonald's suggestion. That makes a lot of sense.

David Torrance: I agree with that.

Anne McTaggart: I agree with that decision.

The Convener: Angus MacDonald made the suggestion. I take it that he agrees?

Angus MacDonald: Agreed.

The Convener: As you have heard, Mr McLean, the committee is unanimous that we need to take forward this important petition. The corporate body has a key role to play, so we shall send it all the paperwork, along with Angus MacDonald's suggestion. We shall keep you in the frame as to how things are developing and look again at the petition in a future committee meeting once we have had the information back from the corporate body.

Thank you again for coming along. You have done a thorough piece of work here. I am particularly impressed by your simplified logic diagram, and I know that you have put a lot of time and effort into the petition. The committee will continue the petition and keep you up to date on development.

John McLean: I know that you are tight for time, convener, but may I comment on Mr Wilson's position?

The Convener: I am sorry. It is a matter of procedure. Once we have had the summation we cannot bring anyone else in again. Nevertheless, we appreciate your coming along. Thank you, Mr McLean, and I am sorry that we delayed you.

I suspend the meeting to allow the witnesses to swap round.

11:51

Meeting suspended.

11:52

On resuming—

Control of Wild Geese (PE1490)

The Convener: We come to the third and final new petition today, which is PE1490, by Patrick Krause, on behalf of the Scottish Crofting Federation, on control of wild goose numbers. Members have a note by the clerk and a SPICe briefing on the petition.

I welcome the petitioners: Patrick Krause and Roddy MacDonald. I apologise for the delay, gentlemen. I should say that I am familiar with both petitioners as I am a member of the cross-party group on crofting. I invite Mr Krause to give a short presentation of no more than five minutes.

Patrick Krause (Scottish Crofting Federation): It will certainly be no more than five minutes.

Thank you for inviting us to defend our petition. I wish to say at the beginning that Roddy MacDonald and I are not experts in wild goose management. We have raised the petition on behalf of members of the SCF, who asked us to do so, and I have done that in my capacity as chief executive of the SCF because our members see the escalating numbers of geese as a problem.

The problem is not new. It has been going on for a long time now—decades rather than just years—and it is getting worse, so we have raised the petition to ask the Scottish Parliament to put pressure on the Scottish Government to look at whether it is addressing the situation in the most appropriate way and whether the budget that is afforded to the control of wild geese is sufficient.

We are looking particularly at the Uists, because that is where the membership raised the question with us and asked us to lodge the petition. As members might know, the Uists are an area of high nature value. The machair in the Uists is unique in the world, not just in the UK, because it

is cropped in a traditional way that encourages biodiversity. We are saying that the vast numbers of geese in the Uists, particularly the greylag geese, are threatening the biodiversity and conservation of that unique habitat and, from our point of view, are threatening the very existence of crofting in the Uists.

When we raised the petition, the Scottish Government's public response to it in the press was to say that the SCF had not been participating in the national goose management review group. I should say that we participated in the group at one time, but we then stopped for a period because it was felt that the group was not active enough and that—rightly or wrongly; probably wrongly—our presence on it was perceived by our members to be condoning what the group was doing. We stopped going to the group in response to that public perception. However, we now go to the group again and, in fact, we will attend it next week. I just thought that we should get that issue out of the way.

I will conclude by introducing Roddy MacDonald, who is a crofter on South Uist and who sees the goose problem on a daily basis. He used to work for the comhairle and was on its goose management committee. I think that it is much more likely that he will be able to answer many of members' questions—with your permission, convener.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Krause. I was just going to extend that courtesy to Mr MacDonald—please feel free to intervene and to provide any answers that you wish to contribute, Mr MacDonald.

As you know, Scottish Natural Heritage has a scheme in Orkney to permit the limited sale of wild goose carcasses under licence. Would you support an extension of that scheme if the European Commission agreed?

Patrick Krause: Yes. We have discussed that issue at length. We feel strongly that SNH is reducing goose numbers through its adaptive management programme. We applaud that and we are supportive of the adaptive management approach, but the trouble is that, obviously, it creates a lot of dead birds. In the Uists, they have been getting buried. Not to put it too strongly, that seems to be a bit of a perversion of what we are trying to do. It is a resource that really needs to be used.

The Convener: Would you support the introduction of goose management schemes? There were schemes in the past that have not continued in some areas.

Roddy MacDonald (Scottish Crofting Federation): Yes. In the past four years in the Uists, we have had the machair life project, which

has involved RSPB Scotland, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and the SCF. It has been looking at crop protection, which is one of the main issues in the Uists.

As Patrick Krause said, the machair is unique and is hugely important to the crofting set-up, because most of the crops that are grown are hay and cereal crops, which are fed to animals. The scheme has been on-going for the past four years with money from the European LIFE+ programme, but it will come to an end at the beginning of next year. People are really worried, because it seems to have worked well. Crops have been protected using lethal and non-lethal methods.

Running alongside that for the past year or part of the year has been the adaptive management that is being undertaken by SNH. If crops are not protected and people stop cropping, there could be a problem with what happens not only to the agricultural or crofting side but to the environmental side.

The Convener: This question is perhaps best put to Mr MacDonald. It is clear that the common agricultural policy and the Scotland rural development programme are crucial for farmers and crofters in the Western Isles. I spoke in a debate on that issue just a few weeks ago, and I know that we are not totally in place to get the programme up and running next year, although there will be some transitional funding. Do you see the rural development programme as vital for farmers and crofters on this issue?

12:00

Roddy MacDonald: Yes. It has been difficult for some people to get into some of those programmes. When the programmes started, the environmentally sensitive area scheme was running, and the take-up in the Uists was fantastic. Nearly everyone who was cropping on the machairs joined those schemes because they were seen as a payment for traditional cropping methods, which people were using anyway.

As schemes have developed since then—I think that that was in the 1980s—they have perhaps become more focused on the environment or other issues, and crofting or agricultural production has not been the main focus. I am not saying that crofting should be the main focus, but there should be a balance between the environment and crofting because of the importance of producing feed for cattle production in the Uists.

Patrick Krause: A fear that we have about such an important scheme being under the Scotland rural development programme is that it will become a competitive measure. We do not believe that something as vital as it should be a

competitive measure; the Government should have a budget specifically for it.

The Convener: When you say a competitive measure—

Patrick Krause: We fear its becoming a rural priorities measure, for example, and applicants having to compete and gain points to be able to get the money. Realistically, that would mean that crofters in the Uists might compete to get money to control geese against somebody in the east of the country who wants money for a slurry store, for example.

The Convener: It also depends on the exact size of the rural development programme. The last time we looked at the matter, we did not have the final figures. It is clear that the size will be vital. We also need to know what the modulation rates will be, as they affect the move from pillar 1 to pillar 2. The Government is still considering that particular move.

Chic Brodie: Good afternoon. I ask my question out of some ignorance. I know that we have talked about adaptive management measures—I assume that that means culling the goose population—but what can legally stop the geese breeding? As a townie, I know the impact that seagulls have had, for example in Ayr. People cannot cull them because they are protected, but they use measures to prevent them from laying eggs. What can be or is being done in that respect?

Roddy MacDonald: A number of measures have been tried. The adaptive management measure involves killing birds before they nest. That has been part of the approach taken to reduce the numbers of nesting pairs and chicks that are raised.

There have also been small attempts to oil eggs and take eggs out of nests, for example. That was done only a couple of times. I cannot say what the scientific answer has been, but some birds certainly just gave up on their nests and went away and nested somewhere else.

It is quite difficult to know what else to do. Shooting has been the main thrust. Greylag geese are a quarry species that are shot during the open season. Adaptive management tries to reduce the numbers that produce young. The counts of resident geese have gone from 2,000 in the early 1980s to hit a point of 9,500. Those are not migratory geese. Some 3,000 barnacle geese are resident in North Uist over the winter as well, so we are talking about resident geese. The adaptive management scheme has been about attempting to reduce the number of breeding pairs.

Angus MacDonald: Good afternoon, Patrick, and good afternoon, Roddy. Hailing from a farming

background on the Isle of Lewis, I have a great deal of sympathy for the petition. In my younger days, I would be lucky to see four or six geese on a field at any one time. Just last week, I saw hundreds in one field and proceeded to move them on.

Geese can do colossal damage to crops; four geese can eat as much as one sheep. There is also an argument that geese excrement can cause abortions at lambing time. No farmer or crofter in the Western Isles or indeed the northern isles can continue to sustain such losses. The problem will get worse before it gets better.

There are different goose management procedures on different islands. Islay has a completely different system from Orkney. On Islay, people are paid a considerable amount a year to shoot geese. Would you be seeking similar systems throughout the northern isles and Western Isles, including the adaptive management system that you mentioned, rather than the current piecemeal approach in which different islands approach the issue in different ways?

Roddy MacDonald: From the point of view of the Uists, what is really needed is both of the strands that have been going on for the last number of years. That is a crop protection scheme that is lethal and non-lethal—because you can scare geese away from crops—and the adaptive management scheme to try to take numbers down to manageable levels.

There have been resident geese in Uist since the 17th century. Caithness, Solway and Uist had resident populations of greylag geese. What we have now in Lewis and Harris, and Coll and Tiree, is the overflow of geese from those areas. There are now resident populations in those areas, whereas in a lot of other areas, such as Islay, the geese are mainly migratory, which is a different problem.

The Uist scheme has not been to protect grass; it has been only to protect crops. You still get the fouling on grass because, when the geese are put off crops, they will quite often go on to grass. Some people might disagree with that approach, but at least the grass is growing. If a crop is damaged, it will not grow again. From that point of view, both strands have to be part of a scheme, especially in the Uists, for the machair area.

The Convener: I apologise to both witnesses that we are a bit short of time. Mr MacDonald, as an active crofter you will know that there are a number of ways in which you can scare off geese. I think that there is something in your report about old cars being dumped in fields. I was not quite sure of the relevance of that, but I am sure that you can tell us.

Roddy MacDonald: Geese are wily beasts. They very quickly get used to something that is not changed. The non-lethal scaring methods are things like wee fences round a plot. The geese like to land on a loch, for instance, and walk in to a plot. They will not land on a growing crop; they will land on a flat area, where they can see that there are no problems, and then walk in to a crop. There is therefore a whole list of methods of scaring them off: kites, bird scarers, whistling things and scarecrows. You can even use a fence round a crop because geese do not like to jump over anything; they like to walk in.

The aim of the machair life project, supported by the RSPB, has been to try to get more corn grown, and to take that on to sheaves and stooks and so on, so that you are feeding corn. The seed that you get off that is good for the birds. What you have then is areas that are cut for silage and areas that are kept for seed and corn. If you do that, you get runways for geese to land, which makes those areas much more difficult to protect. You would use every method that you could—lethal or non-lethal—to scare the geese and try to protect those areas.

The Convener: That is very useful. Unless there are no urgent questions, we come to the summation point, which, as you probably know, is where we decide what the next steps are.

Members have a note of various options. In this case, it would seem sensible to refer the petition to the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee because it has included this issue in its work programme and is very enthusiastic that we should refer the petition to it. While we are not normally a referral agency the first time that we take evidence, this time it makes a lot of sense to pass the petition to a committee that is specialising in the subject.

Angus MacDonald: As a member of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee, I alerted the committee's members and clerks to the petition. There has been some concern among the members of that committee in the past about the control of geese. The committee is fully aware of the situation in the Western Isles and northern isles. To save time, it would make sense to refer the petition to that committee right away.

The Convener: Do members agree?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Under rule 15.6.2, we therefore refer the petition to the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee.

I thank our witnesses for keeping us informed. Clearly, this is a key issue, and we will ensure that the petition is referred to the Rural Affairs, Climate

Change and Environment Committee as soon as possible. Thank you both for coming along today. I know that Mr MacDonald has had a long way to come.

12:10

Meeting suspended.

12:11

On resuming—

Current Petitions

The Convener: Given the time constraints upon us now, I propose to defer consideration of the three current petitions to a future meeting. Do members agree to do that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Accordingly, as agreed in agenda item 1, we move into private for the remaining agenda item.

12:12

Meeting continued in private until 12:30.

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