Dear Franck

CONSIDERATION OF PETITION PE1277

I refer to your letter of 25 March 2011 to my colleague Dave Thomson seeking a written update on the nature and timing of actions by the Scottish Government to address the issues raised in the petition. As indicated earlier, the Scottish Government’s consideration has been informed by proposals in the recent joint study by the British Geological Survey and Scottish Natural Heritage.

The study, Scotland’s Geodiversity: Development of the Basis for a National Framework is a comprehensive document which assesses the value and status of geodiversity in Scotland and develops a case for a national strategic framework to enable better recognition of geodiversity within relevant policy areas. It identifies research needs and evidence gaps and recommends development of a framework for geodiversity, using the Scottish Soil Framework as a possible model, through the mechanism of a “Scottish Geodiversity Forum” or Working Group to build on the study’s framework proposals and to prepare an implementation plan, targets and actions. The “framework” would be underpinned by raising awareness of the significance of geodiversity and developing mechanisms for local authorities and others to take account of it. This is discussed later in the letter. However, the study states that a geodiversity duty should not be regarded as essential for the development and implementation of a framework. The linkages to Scottish Government Objectives and key policy areas such as biodiversity and climate change are also explored in depth by the report as well as the pressures and threats to geodiversity.

Scottish Government officials have now met with the joint study’s authors’ together with the petitioner, Mike Browne, in his role as Vice-Chair of the Scottish Geodiversity Forum and members of the Forum. The Scottish Geodiversity Forum is a voluntary sector body which has been set up to widen the profile of geodiversity and influence national and local policies. It is the Scottish national forum for geoconservation groups, geoparks and other related...
organisations, and interested individuals. It incorporates GeoConservation Scotland and the Scottish Geology Festival Organising Partnership.

Discussions have progressed well, initially focusing on how the various concerns might be addressed through a voluntary approach on geodiversity and how this could be developed collectively. It was agreed that the focal point for this work should be the Scottish Geodiversity Forum involving as wide a range of other bodies as possible together with observers from the Scottish Government, SNH and BGS. The Forum has met twice over the summer with further meetings planned this autumn and winter as appropriate to progress its work.

Discussions on a possible geodiversity framework have been stimulated by a draft scoping paper exploring possible options for the way ahead and providing an outline geodiversity framework, along the lines proposed in the joint study. It posed a number of questions regarding the framework, and proposes two key initial actions: firstly awareness raising, and secondly establishing a Geodiversity Forum, or Focus Group, to provide a platform to assist in awareness raising, to develop a programme of actions which different organisations may sign up to on a voluntary basis, and for undertaking reporting and review of progress against targets. Following consideration of the paper by the Forum a number of suggestions have been offered on its format and content and it was decided that a re-drafted paper will be circulated widely for consideration prior to the Forum’s next meeting. The aim will be to produce a web-based promotional document underscoring the importance of geodiversity, with agreed visions and aims together with the actions stakeholders can take to ensure these are realised. Given the decisions taken on the role of the Scottish Geodiversity Forum there would be no need to establish a separate “Geodiversity Forum, or Focus Group” as proposed in the scoping paper.

Another key area of interest for the Forum is the work SNH have been asked to do as part of the Scottish Government review of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy (SBS) to ensure it meets new challenges posed by new agreements and targets set at both global and EU level (through revisions to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity and the publication of a new EU Biodiversity Strategy). Both sets of agreements require a focus on halting both biodiversity loss and the degradation of ecosystem services. As part of the review, and in the context of a broader ecosystems approach, SNH have been asked by the Scottish Government to start to develop an integrated strategy more effectively incorporating geodiversity as highlighted in the joint study.

It will be necessary to develop a clear statement of how geodiversity can contribute to the main areas in the SBS and the actions that will follow, and to demonstrate convincingly how geodiversity will make a real difference to delivering the targets. Therefore, a discussion paper has been prepared on proposals for geodiversity inputs to the revision of the SBS and this will be considered by the Forum, involving as wide an input as possible from stakeholders, and in light of further information from SNH on the mechanisms for input to the review when this is available. Work on this will continue throughout the autumn and winter. A draft revised SBS is likely to be produced by mid 2012.

Finally, as regards access to ground investigation data, there are of course implications if data is not being shared, for example, this may result in higher construction costs for development. BGS have confirmed that in the absence of statutory obligations for the vast majority of ground investigation data, they are currently reliant on data being provided mainly on a voluntary basis. This approach has considerable limitations and data are not being
shared in many instances and for many reasons. We will explore with BGS and its sponsor department NERC how this issue can be addressed.

I hope that the above provides the Committee with the information that it requires and reassurance that the issues raised by the petitioner and others are being addressed.

The joint study can be found on the Scottish Parliament website at:


Yours sincerely

R N McNeill