



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Public Petitions Committee

**Thursday 1 February 2018**

**Session 5**



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**PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting 2018, Session 5**

**CONVENER**

\*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con)

\*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

\*Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Dr Sarah Glynn (Scottish Unemployed Workers Network)

John McArdle (Black Triangle Campaign)

George Potts (Scottish Countryside Rangers Association)

Robert Reid (Scottish Countryside Rangers Association)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Catherine Fergusson

**LOCATION**

The Sir Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)



# Scottish Parliament

## Public Petitions Committee

Thursday 1 February 2018

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]*

### New Petitions

#### Welfare Cuts (Mitigation) (PE1677)

**The Convener (Johann Lamont):** I welcome everyone to the second meeting in 2018 of the Public Petitions Committee, and I remind members and others in the room to switch their phones and other devices to silent.

Agenda item 1 is consideration of two new petitions, on which we will hear evidence. First, PE1677, which is on making more money available to mitigate welfare cuts, has been submitted by Dr Sarah Glynn on behalf of the Scottish Unemployed Workers Network. I welcome to the meeting Dr Glynn and John McArdle, who is a co-founder of and campaign co-ordinator for Black Triangle, an organisation that is run by and for disabled people.

Thank you both for attending this morning. You may make a brief opening statement of up to five minutes, after which the committee will ask a few questions to help inform our consideration of the petition.

**Dr Sarah Glynn (Scottish Unemployed Workers Network):** Thank you for the invitation to come before the committee.

Our petition is a response to immediate and severe need. Put simply, the question is this: if our Parliament cannot protect Scotland's poorest and most vulnerable citizens, what use is it? Although we are representing the Scottish Unemployed Workers Network and Black Triangle today, we have discussed the petition with WestGAP in Glasgow, the Edinburgh coalition against poverty and Inclusion Scotland.

We are all only too aware from the people whom we work with and help of the devastation that so-called welfare reform is causing. As a nation, we have become accustomed to newspaper stories of benefit decisions that have left families in fear and destitution. They are not the result of glitches or bad apples, but examples—and not always the worst—of what happens when a system that was established to provide a measure of social security is transformed into a form of social control. Some indication of the scale of suffering that is being caused is the rising demand for food banks, which

are a form of charity that should have died out with the establishment of the welfare state.

What the UK Government has called welfare reform can often be described simply as welfare cuts—and those cuts are huge. Indeed, that is primarily what we are here to talk about. However, we are also seeing a very deliberate qualitative change, with a return to the Victorian belief that individuals are to blame for their own misfortune. Therefore, we have been pleased by the Scottish Government's public rejection of that approach.

There has been a lot of talk about dignity, but that is of no help if folk are being left to struggle for survival. Last week, the European Committee of Social Rights produced yet another report that pulled the UK Government up for the meanness of its benefits system. In the post-war years, benefit rates rose in line with earnings or prices, whichever was greater, but in 1980, they were tied to prices, which meant that while incomes and living standards rose benefits were left far behind. We have now had almost two decades of cuts and freezes, and people on benefits are being excluded from more and more activities that others take for granted such as school trips, everyday socialising with friends, a good varied diet, decent heating and a home computer—and that is when the system is working smoothly.

As has been noted in the papers that have been prepared for this meeting, research commissioned by the Social Security Committee sets out figures for the benefits that have been lost to people in Scotland since 2010 as a result of welfare cuts. By 2020-21, those losses will add up to over £2 billion a year. Moreover, the documents show the losses resulting from different benefit cuts both to individuals and all together. Some are very large, and some households are suffering from several of those cuts simultaneously. In addition, vast amounts of distress and on-going complications are resulting from what can only be described as a criminal level of negligence in the workings of the various Department for Work and Pensions bureaucracies. Benefit delays are the cause of many requests for extra help from the Scottish welfare fund or food banks.

People are astonishingly resilient. Generally, that is a good thing, but it is frightening to see how people's expectations adjust to surviving in a world where options are always constricting. That has its own consequences, feeding into an epidemic of mental and physical health problems and isolation.

The petition is deliberately not prescriptive about how best to mitigate that misery. We are calling for an acknowledgment of the need to put more money into the system to help those who are affected and for that to be done in a holistic way. Every cut translates into personal and social disasters, and each has generated calls for the

Scottish Government to mitigate it. They need to be looked at together, or it will be too easy for all those different and desperate needs to be set in competition with one another.

We are happy to answer questions and to send information afterwards on some of the areas where more spending would make a real difference. We have a lot of evidence on the need for more help with discretionary housing payments, extra money for child benefits, more for the Scottish welfare fund, more for advice, and more help for sick and disabled people and people who have been sanctioned.

It is a pity that this session is taking place so far into the debates on the Scottish budget, because the other side of the coin is the need to raise more money. Now that the budget has opened the door to more progressive taxation and people have got used to that idea, let us make it really progressive and raise enough money to make a significant difference.

We have also noted in our petition the potential for replacing council tax with a land value tax. Discussion of that might need a session of its own, but we refer you to the work that Andy Wightman has already done on it for the Scottish Greens. His report was written in 2010. It anticipated that the system could be up and running in five years.

We appreciate that there is an understandable reluctance by the Scottish Government to spend money on things that should be looked after by Westminster. It is galling when there is so much more to do, but when it comes to welfare, it is very necessary—even a matter of life and death. What more important role does Parliament have than to protect a country's most vulnerable citizens and help create and preserve sustainable communities?

For those who believe that Scotland's future lies in devolution, the devolved Parliament must be put to full use. For those who believe that devolution is not enough, it is important to use all the powers that we have, in order to demonstrate the need for more. For those who cannot see beyond the bottom line, when it comes to benefits, the phrase "a stitch in time" could not be more true. Help now can prevent family and social breakdown, which brings much greater financial costs, as well as personal tragedies. It also puts money into deprived areas, where it can have the greatest positive impact on the economy.

The approach that the Scottish Government is currently following may seem cautious and pragmatic but, unless it does more to help those at the sharp end of welfare reform, we will be left with poor people and poor economics.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much. The petition calls for the Scottish Government to make

more money available to mitigate the impact of United Kingdom Government welfare cuts, and you have made the case effectively for that. I understand that you will not have a precise figure, but roughly how much more money do you think should be made available? We have finished stage 1 of the budget, but we have another two stages to go. If you were going to make a budget ask, what would it look like?

**Dr Glynn:** Ideally, we would like to mitigate the effect of losing that £2 billion a year, but we appreciate that that is a lot of money. The more that can be done, the better. For example, the benefit cap, which the Scottish Greens did a paper on, currently affects 3,700 households. The Scottish Government estimates that that has led to a total loss of £11 million, but it has put up only £8 million. Adding £3 million would make that up comprehensively and make the mitigation automatic. That would make a huge difference.

That is just one example. I have not seen the calculations for it, but another is adding £5 to child benefit. The Labour Party and a huge group of charities and third sector organisations support that, and they have the evidence behind it. It is reckoned to be the most effective way of putting money back in.

The biggest single cut is the one that applies right across the board—the freezing of benefits, which has affected everybody. This is deemed to be probably one of the most efficient ways of dealing with that. I am sure that John McArdle has something to say about disabled people, who have probably been hit the worst.

**John McArdle (Black Triangle Campaign):** Disabled people have been extremely hard hit by the migration from the disability living allowance to the personal independence payment. It is cold comfort for people who are being reassessed under the current regime that we will have our own system in a few years. People are losing their entitlements now. Out of 526,000 DLA claimants who were reassessed for PIP up until October 2016, 21 per cent were rejected and 23 per cent ended up worse off financially.

We also had the judgment from the Court of Appeal before Christmas, which the Government at Westminster is not going to appeal, that people with mental health problems have been discriminated against with regard to the allowance for mobility within their DLA. Many people have been left stranded; they have lost their mobility vehicles and it has been catastrophic.

The spectre that we have on the horizon is that, if there is any change of circumstance, people will be migrated to universal credit and they will lose their severe disability premiums—they will just be gone. It is poverty and immiseration on a vast

scale and I would have thought that, in a country such as Scotland that prides itself on being progressive, a serious discussion should be had about what we can do, given the powers that we have, to mitigate this catastrophe. The situation has been described by the chair of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Theresia Degener, as a “human catastrophe” for disabled people. That is no exaggeration. I do not think that the chair of a UN committee is given to hyperbole. The UK Government has been found to be in breach of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in a “grave” and “systematic” way.

Given that the disabled community of Scotland faces such a catastrophe, it is incumbent on our Government to step in and to take hard and well-thought-out measures to alleviate the suffering that people find themselves in.

**Dr Glynn:** There are a couple of ways that money can be targeted. One is to provide a lot more help through the Scottish welfare fund, which can help some of the people who are the hardest hit from all the different groups. Another is to provide more money for people to give advice so that people get the help that they need and get the benefits to start with, so that we are not picking up the pieces afterwards.

That would make good sense, because we have come across people who have been told, “We can’t put your appeal through yet because we haven’t got anybody available to do it for months,” or, “The person you’ve been seeing is not with us and we don’t have anybody else to replace them.” How much help is available varies across the country, but even people who have got help have said, “The people who are helping us are just so busy and pressed, they are not doing the job properly.”

**John McArdle:** I would echo that. Possibly, giving disabled people assistance with their applications and with negotiating the system is the most helpful thing of all to do.

**Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP):** In the petition, you have outlined the steps that you took to raise the issue with your local MSPs—and ultimately, the majority of MSPs—prior to submitting the petition. You also wrote separately to the Minister for Social Security. Can you tell us about the responses that you received, particularly from the Scottish Government?

**Dr Glynn:** I have not got them with me. We did not get very much that was very positive, to be honest. I know that the most recent question that was raised, not by us but by the Edinburgh coalition against poverty, which wrote to Jean Freeman about the money for people being

evicted, received a very disappointing response. A family was evicted just this week; and it is absolutely horrific, and I can give you some information about that. The Scottish Government prides itself on the housing legislation, and particularly on the homelessness legislation, but that does not mean anything if you do not have the housing benefits to pay for homes and people are being evicted because of that. It was also disappointing that, in that particular case, responsibility was pushed back on to the councils.

We have not got very far, to be honest. We are told that concerns are being taken on board, but nothing very constructive happens. The Government may respond with a list of what is being done, and we appreciate what has been done with the bedroom tax, for example, but that just shows the difference that such initiatives can make.

10:15

**Angus MacDonald:** Can you confirm that you got an official response from the minister?

**Dr Glynn:** Yes, we had a letter from the minister.

**Angus MacDonald:** Can you share that with the committee when you get the chance?

**Dr Glynn:** Yes.

**The Convener:** Once the meeting is over, if there is any more information that you want to feed in or things that you feel you can expand on, we are more than happy to take a further response.

**Dr Glynn:** It was some time ago, to be honest, so I cannot remember the details of it.

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** I have a wee follow-up on Angus MacDonald’s question. Did you contact your MPs and have you made representations to the Westminster Government?

**Dr Glynn:** We have specifically contacted MSPs. We are always in touch with our MPs about on-going problems, and John McArdle is about to go down and see people in London.

**John McArdle:** I have been to see Ash Denham and I speak to lots of people in the party, including Deidre Brock and Ben Macpherson.

**Rona Mackay:** That is fine. I just wondered whether there was a balance between Holyrood and Westminster.

**John McArdle:** We are constantly lobbying.

**Dr Glynn:** Chris Law has been very good about raising these issues at Westminster.

**Rona Mackay:** I totally agree with a lot of what you have said with regard to the UK Government's benefit cuts, but I also want to say that we have only 15 per cent of the social security powers here in Scotland, so that ties our hands just as much as decreasing budgets do. I was going to ask about the human and financial cost of the policy, but I think that you have outlined that well in your statement, so we all know what those costs are. However, I would be interested in your views on a citizens income.

**Dr Glynn:** I very much support that. It would solve so many problems and would provide a base that people could go from. There are different ways of looking at a citizens income and it cannot be instead of all the things that society provides, such as health and education, because you could have a very right-wing citizens income that says, "This is it. Now you're on your own, mate." The kind of citizens income that is as well as all those things that are provided would be fantastic. It has been encouraging to see the amazing growth of interest in that, for obvious reasons.

One of the interesting things about child benefit and the call for extra help on child benefit is that it is in that sort of vein—apart from recently, when it was removed from the very top, which I do not think was the right decision, because you should tax people more at the top, not take away what should be a universal benefit and bring in all the means-testing stuff. The point of a universal benefit is that it is universal. Adding £5 on to child benefit is in the same sort of vein as a universal basic income, and in the same way it would be for everybody. It is the most effective way of making sure that people get what is needed, and people do not feel that they have to plead for it because it is theirs by right.

**Rona Mackay:** That is interesting.

**John McArdle:** There is a good report that was written by Ontario coalition against poverty, with which we have a relationship. I would be happy to provide it to the committee.

In principle, a citizens income is a good idea, but there are many pitfalls that need to be avoided in rolling it out. To echo Sarah Glynn's point, provided that it will not take away from other areas, in principle, it makes sound economic sense.

**Rona Mackay:** You have talked about the assessments and the terrible things that disabled people are having to put up with. Are you encouraged by the plans for our social security system, in which there will not be revolving-door assessments and people will be treated with dignity and respect? I know that that is not going to happen next year, but does that give you any comfort?

**John McArdle:** I certainly wish that it could happen more quickly. The kind of scapegoating that has gone on in the right-wing press these past seven years is alien to most Scots. In Scotland, there is a sense that, no matter who you are, we are all Jock Tamson's bairns. I believe that there is still a larger degree of social solidarity here. However, it is going to be a hard job.

We do not want for-profit companies having anything to do with the assessment of disabled people. We do not want assessments that are based on a pseudo-scientific model called the biopsychosocial model of disability, which is complete nonsense and has little to do with evidence-based medicine, although we do not want the medical model—we want more of a holistic approach. The current assessment regime is simply catastrophic and we would like it to be done away with altogether. We do not think that it has saved money or that it makes any economic sense. It has been profoundly damaging for society and the economy.

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** Good morning, Mr McArdle and Dr Glynn, and thank you for coming to give us evidence. We are considering your petition at the same time as the Social Security (Scotland) Bill is being scrutinised by the Social Security Committee. I note that you contributed to the Scottish Government consultation on the bill and made a submission in response to the Social Security Committee's call for evidence at stage 1. Have you made any representations regarding amendments that you would like to be made to the bill at stage 2 to deliver some of the changes that you are asking for in your petition?

**Dr Glynn:** Yes. I am trying to remember the details of those, but we can send that to you.

**The Convener:** You can let us know. The areas of interest to you are the ones that you should focus on. The Social Security Committee is meeting as we speak, and it is going through some of those issues.

**Dr Glynn:** Yes—I saw that it is meeting.

To follow up on what John McArdle said, there is obviously enormous excitement, particularly about the fact that there is to be a more dignified approach, but there is real dismay among people and a lot of disillusion because of the delay. That debate has passed, and, as John said, the question now is about what we can do to help the people who are being hit now. It is expected that, by the time that the devolved system comes in, everybody will be on PIP—the transfer will be complete—and so a lot of people will have lost out. One issue that we have raised—perhaps in the document that Brian Whittle asked about but certainly with the minister—is whether the Scottish



welfare fund could be used as a vehicle to help people who suffer from mobility problems and who have maybe lost their mobility vehicle and as a consequence have become really isolated and had their ability to lead an independent life devastated.

The Scottish welfare fund is a discretionary fund but, although there is more and more need for it—the delays, debt and general bureaucratic mess-ups from universal credit mean that it will be called on more and more—the fund has stayed the same for the past three years, yet it is quite a flexible way of providing help to the people who most need it. I am not an expert on all the legal aspects, but it could be a vehicle for helping people with vehicles—sorry about the turn of phrase.

**Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con):** Good morning and thank you both for coming.

In your petition, you provide an example of how you consider the Scottish Government is able to make changes to the tax system, as a mitigation measure. Some of that is happening through the budget at the moment, but can you expand on what changes you would like to be made to the tax system?

**Dr Glynn:** The tax system has become a bit more progressive but, by changing the bars and where the different levels come in, it could be made more dramatically progressive. It is possibly easier to make those changes earlier in a parliamentary session, so that people can see that it does not affect the majority of people but only those at the top.

There are also instances where taxes are being misspent. I absolutely single out the help that is being given to first-time buyers, because it has been pointed out that that help does not really help them. All that it does is push up the prices of housing for everybody, so, economically, it is not a good measure at all.

We also raised replacing council tax with a land value tax. I have a background in housing and that is something that I have argued for previously, from a housing perspective. Not only is a land value tax a much more progressive system, it is a system that can be used to limit property speculation and stop housing being as absurdly expensive as it is in this country.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** You talk about taxation being made more progressive so that it hits only people at the top. Do you have any thoughts about where you would like to see that pitched?

**Dr Glynn:** I am not a tax expert—I know that there are lots of people who have done work on that—but the changes that we have seen have been very small. If we look back historically or at other countries—the Nordic countries are the first

ones we would think of—we see that it is possible to have much higher rates of taxation. That certainly does not mean that people leave those countries, because people recognise that those taxation systems pay for much better services for everybody. Not enough notice has been taken of all the work that has been done on the advantages of a more equal society, such as the work by Wilkinson and Pickett on the advantages for everyone—even for those at the top—of a more equal society.

**John McArdle:** Sir Michael Marmot, the public health epidemiologist, has done work on that as well.

The problem with a great deal of this is that Scotland does not have the economic levers to crack down on tax evasion and avoidance, as that is reserved to Westminster. Our elected representatives must keep up the pressure to ensure that Westminster really does the business in collecting the tax that is owed and avoided, because corporations are not paying their fair share. The Bermuda papers and so on are absolutely scandalous. It is high time that people stepped up to the plate and paid their fair share, because people are really suffering in society. The problem is the people who are already obscenely wealthy, who take, take, take and give nothing back.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** Through any of the campaigning or discussions that you have had on the issues that are raised in your petition, have you considered any other ways of mitigating the reductions in welfare spending, other than through changing the taxation system?

**Dr Glynn:** Do you mean for bringing more money in?

**Michelle Ballantyne:** How can the effects be mitigated other than through tax? You mentioned a couple of ways. You suggested using the welfare fund more openly but, at the moment, the fund would still be the same, so all that you would do is create competition.

10:30

**Dr Glynn:** No, you definitely would need to put more money in if the fund was going to do more.

The other idea, which we mentioned earlier, is to provide more funding for advice so that more people can get the benefits that they should be due, which are part of the Westminster system. That would be a good bit of funding. It is a stitch-in-time measure to help people so that their lives do not fall apart. Often, when you speak to someone, they tell you that one small thing happened to them and you know that they are going to say, “Then my marriage broke down and

we both needed homes but I did not get somewhere where my children could come and visit.”

One thing leads to another, so it also makes economic sense to stop that process right at the beginning with good advice through a bit of extra funding. It would also enable those people to play a fuller part in society. Welfare reform is wasteful for individuals and for society. The areas that are being deprived are often geographically concentrated so, if a little bit more money went to the affected families, that money would be in their local communities and would make those communities more viable as well. There is a really strong economic case for people right at the bottom to get more money.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** You mentioned ensuring that all tax due is paid. Obviously, tax evasion is illegal but tax avoidance is not, so there is a question about whether tax laws should be changed and tightened up. However, within the current envelope of spending, are there budgets that we should not spend and that should be redirected into welfare spending to mitigate some of the issues or should we just raise more money?

**Dr Glynn:** When we raise the matter, it is easy for people to say that we are already committed to spending money on this and that. The last thing that I want to do is to say that you should not raise public sector pay or provide proper funding for councils. Those things are vital, which is why we need to raise more money. The point of phrasing the petition in the way that we did was to say that there is more money. We are a really wealthy country. Vital things should not be set against each other, so we need to raise more money.

I gave the example of putting more money into supporting first-time buyers, which I do not think is helpful for anybody. I do not know the sum of money that is involved but I am sure that, for many of the people about whom we are talking, it could make a significant difference.

**Angus MacDonald:** I was pleased that you mentioned the land value tax in your papers and contributions. The idea has been mooted in the Parliament for a number of years but it seems to be gaining traction to the extent that the Scottish Government’s programme for government has tasked the new Scottish Land Commission with reviewing the potential for introducing a land-value-based tax. As part of your research into that aspect of the matter, apart from the work that Andy Wightman has done, have you considered any examples in northern Europe or further afield where a land-value-based tax works?

**Dr Glynn:** I have not but I am glad that it is being considered. There is a huge amount of interest in it. It has been discussed here over the

past century. It must be done properly and fully. I am interested in it because there are many good aspects to it. When land is improved due to some Government spending, it is the most efficient way of getting the benefits of that improvement to come back to the public as well.

**Angus MacDonald:** I am sure that we are all keen to see what comes back from the Scottish Land Commission.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** I have one last question; it is on something that leaped out at me when I read your petition initially. You wrote to everybody except the Conservative group. Did you not write to any Conservative members because you felt that it would have been totally pointless, or were you taking a political stance?

**Dr Glynn:** I wanted to mitigate the cuts that have been brought about by the Conservative Party at Westminster, and I assumed that you were behind the policy of your party at Westminster.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** Even so, surely it would be logical to present your evidence to all sides.

**Dr Glynn:** Okay—next time, you will get a letter, too.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** Thank you.

**The Convener:** It would be interesting if we managed to create some more rebels.

I thank Dr Glynn for coming along. It has been a useful and thought-provoking session, in which some solutions have been suggested. The Social Security Committee, which is meeting at the same time as this committee, will be wrestling with some of the nitty-gritty of the issue.

What do we want to do with the petition at this stage?

**Michelle Ballantyne:** We ought to start by writing to the relevant minister to get their view on it.

**Rona Mackay:** We should write to the Government.

**Brian Whittle:** There is a crossover with the work of the Social Security Committee, and it would be interesting to find out where it has got to on the issue. We might be able to feed into its work, or it could take on the petition.

**The Convener:** I think that the consensus is that we should write to the Scottish Government to get a response to Dr Glynn’s request with regard to the extent to which it would consider mitigating the welfare cuts. Its argument is that there is no money available elsewhere in the budget. Dr Glynn has made one suggestion to test that argument, and I presume that others could be

made. We could ask the Government to comment on the idea of the Scottish welfare fund being increased and on the provision of support to help people to access the benefits that they are entitled to. There is frustration not just about the cuts in the system, but about the fact that people's ability to get access to what they are entitled to has been limited by cuts elsewhere.

As well as getting an initial response from the Government, we can flag up to the Social Security Committee that we are considering the petition and that, the next time that we look at it, we will need to decide whether it would be appropriate to pass it on to that committee, or whether we could do more work on it.

Do members agree to get an initial response from the Scottish Government on the evidence that Dr Glynn has presented today?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** I again thank Dr Glynn for attending the meeting. We will have a short suspension to allow for a changeover of witnesses.

10:38

*Meeting suspended.*

10:39

*On resuming—*

### **Countryside Ranger Services (National Strategic Framework) (PE1678)**

**The Convener:** The next petition is PE1678, on a national strategic framework for countryside ranger services in Scotland. The petition was submitted by Ranger Robert Reid, on behalf of the Scottish Countryside Rangers Association.

We will take evidence from Ranger Reid this morning. He is accompanied by George Potts, who is the chairperson of the Scottish Countryside Rangers Association. Welcome, gentlemen. I invite you to provide a brief opening statement of no more than five minutes, after which we will move to questions from committee members.

**George Potts (Scottish Countryside Rangers Association):** We are here today on behalf of our association seeking your support for our petition, which asks the Scottish Government to implement the strategic framework for ranger services as set out in the "Rangers in Scotland" report.

The report, which was published in 2008, stated that there were more than 300 full-time equivalent posts in the sector and expressed an expectation that that number would grow. However, we can show that, in the past 10 years, at least 100 ranger

posts have been lost. We are deeply concerned about that and about the impact that it will have on service delivery and the environmental and social benefits that rangers can deliver, as well as the impact that it will have on those remaining in the service and their career prospects. It is not a planned reduction; it is random, unstructured and ill-considered. We feel that we are now at crisis point.

The strategy that was adopted in 2009 marked a watershed, as it broke the direct link between Scottish Natural Heritage and the local authority ranger services with which they had grant-aid agreements. However, the structure and function of ranger services and their role within local authorities and other funded bodies was, by that time, well established.

The training and background of countryside rangers across Scotland resulted in a significant degree of continuity with the model that SNH had been able to support. A couple of employing authorities attempted to redefine the role of their rangers by breaking down the jobs into their constituent parts. However, almost without exception, that diminished the role of those involved and created vulnerable services where previously strong ones with an established track record had operated.

SNH still operates successful grant agreements with non-governmental organisations and with community-based and private sector ranger services. Those partnerships continue to prosper and act as a vital conduit in the delivery of SNH's corporate strategy.

The association feels that the main casualty of the change in the relationship between SNH and local authority services was the loss of national reporting on the outputs of Scotland's ranger services that SNH was able to co-ordinate, as that was a way of providing a comprehensive picture of what rangers deliver across Scotland and of benchmarking that in terms of the continued investment of grant aid. We know of a social return on investment study that was done before the change that showed a return of £10 for every £1 invested.

A significant investment of public money has been made over the past 44 years to create ranger services across Scotland with a local and a national identity. Those services operated under the guidance and support of a Government agency and ensured that national priorities were recognised in the delivery of local services. Recognition was also given through the use of our national ranger service badge—the only ranger badge in the world that has people on it—which acts as our charter mark and a mark of the quality standard in our sector.

The Scottish model worked extremely well and has been copied by other countries in the development of their countryside ranger services, and Scotland's rangers were responsible for the formation of the International Ranger Federation, which is now in 90 countries. We feel that that leading role will soon be lost as the capacity of rangers across Scotland falls into terminal decline.

In conclusion, I draw members' attention to the public support that our petition has received and particularly the many supportive comments that have been made. The wider public recognise and value their ranger services as forming part of a national approach, and we feel that the Government and relevant agencies should be asked to revisit the 2008 policy document. It is still relevant and aspirational and, if it is properly implemented and monitored, it will begin to address the issues that we are bringing to your attention today and help secure the important national asset that is rangers in Scotland.

10:45

**The Convener:** Thank you very much. I want to begin by asking a wee bit about the background and the national strategic framework, which was issued in 2008. You have referred to who was involved in its preparation and flagged up the intention behind it, but I am interested in finding out whether, when you were developing the framework in 2008, you were aware of the critical decision to make the funding part of the main settlement to local authorities, which, as I understand it, was taken in 2009 on the back of the local government finance distribution review. When that decision was on its way, did you make any representations or raise any opposition in your belief that this is what would happen?

**Robert Reid (Scottish Countryside Rangers Association):** Our involvement was very small and mainly at the edges. The strategic plan was basically put together and given the nod by organisations such as the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and SNH.

**The Convener:** This is the 2008 plan that you are talking about.

**Robert Reid:** Yes. That was what was put on the table. I do not know whether the idea was to address it in the future, but some employers and SNH looked at the document, saw the targets that were in it and saw that they were being met. Unfortunately, our problem is that the number of rangers for meeting those targets is in decline, and the new pressures on the rangers who are left are having an impact on their health and welfare. Moreover, given the loss of jobs, this is a career opportunity that is going downhill. Those are the concerns that we have.

It is perhaps worth saying that our association has been totally voluntary for 40 years. In other words, the rangers who run and support it do so on a voluntary basis.

**The Convener:** So, in 2008, COSLA, SNH and so on produced what they thought was a really good blueprint for the future.

**Robert Reid:** Yes.

**The Convener:** And there was a national framework under which a countryside ranger in one part of the country would have a connection with a ranger in another part. However, the decision in 2009 to bundle up the money and give it to local government was, in your view—

**Robert Reid:** We had no say in or input into that.

**The Convener:** But you believe that that was where the change came, because there was no longer any discrete fund to support a nationwide approach.

**Robert Reid:** Yes.

**George Potts:** The document talks about the national reporting that was to be co-ordinated by SNH. We believed at the time that it would still take an active interest in the outputs of rangers and the type of work that they were being asked to do.

**Robert Reid:** SNH now grant aids NGOs and various estates, and it still has to return national figures. However, local authorities do not, so no one in Scotland knows how many rangers we have. According to a survey that we are working on—we had hoped to complete it by today, but we are only about 50 per cent through it—it looks as though we have lost 100 ranger posts in Scotland.

That said, a lot of good news is coming out of that survey. We asked a lot of questions about, for example, ranger service delivery, and that is very much meeting all the targets in the strategic plan. We as the people on the ground are delivering on a daily basis.

**The Convener:** But the basic decision was to lift ring fencing from the money going to local government, with the consequences that you have highlighted.

**Robert Reid:** Yes.

**The Convener:** I think that the same has been true in other areas. Thank you—that was very helpful.

**Brian Whittle:** Good morning. As you have suggested, the strategic framework dates back to 2008, which means that it has been a decade since the work was done. Has anything changed

in that time with regard to the initial concerns that prompted its development?

**Robert Reid:** The framework was brought to us—we did not have any input into the framework. It was a case of us being told, “This is what you will deliver.” It was a new approach to what had to take place. We had no way of asking questions or having any input into what the impact would be, but we had to implement it on the ground when it came in.

**George Potts:** There has not really been a change since the framework was brought in. Bob Reid and I between us have 70 years of experience and in essence, we are doing the same job; we have just changed the language in which we do it. We have moved from promoting country parks to biodiversity to access and, in latter years, to health. However, the job is much the same. The strategic framework reflected a distillation of the experience Scotland-wide and set the tone for how we could go forward.

**Brian Whittle:** Why do you consider that the 2008 framework would still be relevant today? What benefits would it bring to the provision of ranger services?

**Robert Reid:** Basically, ranger services are delivering the framework daily. The trouble is that we do not have enough people to make the type of impact that the framework was aiming for.

**Brian Whittle:** So, the 2008 framework is still relevant.

**Robert Reid:** Yes, very much so. It is what the rangers today are out delivering. They are meeting Scottish Government targets, European Union targets and Westminster targets on biodiversity and all the other aspects that come within the job remit.

The ranger services have had to absorb a lot of changes that have come through naturally from the EU, Westminster and the Scottish Government. We are trying to meet the requirements that are set for us. Our employers are enforcing that in the sense that they have to report back that they are meeting the targets. That filters down to the ranger services and back up to the heads of department. That is how the stats are brought together.

**Brian Whittle:** Is it a numbers issue?

**George Potts:** Yes.

**Rona Mackay:** My question was going to be whether the framework is still referred to by stakeholders, but you have answered that in your responses to Mr Whittle.

You talked about the survey that you are doing. When do you expect that to be complete and what

are your plans for it? What are you going to do with the information when you get it?

**Robert Reid:** We were hoping that we would already have it completed. Unfortunately, it is not finished. It involves a telephone conversation with every ranger service in Scotland. The survey takes roughly 15 to 20 minutes and a lot of questions are asked concerning the numbers and the roles that ranger services are delivering, some of which have changed. We are also finding out from questions in that survey whether the Scottish Countryside Rangers Association is delivering what our members ask for.

I hope that we will have put all that information together by the end of February. As to what we will do with the information, maybe the Government should do some major statistical work on the evidence that is coming out of the survey, because we are not statisticians; we are basically concerned people who are trying to look after our members' welfare.

**Rona Mackay:** You spoke about the jobs that have been lost. Is someone filling those posts or are those jobs not being done?

**Robert Reid:** No one is doing those jobs. There have been some reconfigurations in certain services, but that is around heads of department and what departments are attached to.

Senior ranger posts have been lost, and main grade posts and seasonal posts are being lost. Seasonal posts back up the ranger service at the busy times of the year when Scotland goes through a tourism boom, so there are fewer people on the ground providing a professional service.

**Rona Mackay:** Are there some areas that are better than others at keeping the ranger service going? I am thinking about rural areas and tourist areas, in particular.

**Robert Reid:** One example is that of Highland Council, which axed the whole ranger service in the past two financial years and moved the rangers into a trust. However, we found out from the survey that even the rangers who were put into local authority trusts a number of years ago are not secure in their jobs now, and they feel that they are targets in the next round of cuts. Rangers have been moved from one organisation to another. Local authorities have been taking a big hit. The National Trust for Scotland is looking to shed 79 members of staff in the current round of cuts and rangers will be included in that. It might be worth saying that one local authority interviewed for a range of posts three or four weeks ago and appointed a ranger, but he has now been paid off. It is a crisis.

**The Convener:** I note from the evidence that, when there was a transfer from Highland Council

to High Life Highland, the council said that there had been a reduction in the number of countryside ranger posts from 22 to 10.5 full-time equivalent posts.

**Robert Reid:** Yes. It is also worth noting that, although we have the reading from 2008, there were a lot of job losses in the 1996 period. The reductions that are taking place now are probably the second round. One of the reasons is that local authorities, under various pieces of legislation, had to appoint access officers for work that was previously done by a range of services. There are biodiversity officers and conservation officers, so there are jobs in the countryside, but they divert from the wide role that rangers undertake.

**The Convener:** Once the survey is completed, it would be helpful for us to get a copy of the results. Are you expecting to get an indication of the number of rangers from the survey?

**Robert Reid:** We are working on that at the moment. I will have a wee look at what we have. It is done service by service. We have lost 17 senior ranger posts, so we are now sitting at 24.5 posts. We have lost 50 ranger posts, so we are now sitting at 147.5 posts. We have lost 33 seasonal ranger posts, so there are 44 posts. However, we are only halfway through the survey.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** Good morning, gentlemen. In your petition, you refer to the ranger development partnership and the ranger manager forum. Who are involved in those groups and what do they discuss?

**Robert Reid:** Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission Scotland, the National Trust for Scotland and Historic Environment Scotland are involved, and there is representation from the Loch Lomond national park and COSLA. There are also one or two representatives from local authorities. As an organisation, we feel that we need to write to every ranger authority—councils and other employers—to state our concerns.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** You said that only some local authorities are in the groups—the key funders and employers are not involved.

**Robert Reid:** The local authorities are not all involved. COSLA is, but we have not been in discussion: there has not been a meeting for perhaps two years, as far as I am aware.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** Do you mean of either group?

**Robert Reid:** Yes.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** What did the groups discuss when they were active?

**Robert Reid:** The things that we discussed included the professional qualification for rangers that the association had developed, and other

programmes that we had developed, such as the Scottish junior ranger programme and the challenge award, which I hope employers will consider taking on board. However, through the survey, we are finding that services do not have the capacity to promote the programmes or to take them forward.

11:00

**Michelle Ballantyne:** Is your association responsible for the policies and the guidelines that rangers work to? Do you update them, or are they stagnating?

**Robert Reid:** No, we are not responsible for those. The whole ranger system came out of the Countryside (Scotland) Act 1967. The then Countryside Commission for Scotland drew up the vision for rangers—and the commission got it right.

The parks system for Scotland brought together country parks, regional parks and what were called “special parks”—“national” was not a word that was used at that time. As George Potts and I would say, things are not as they were in the good old days in terms of Government funding. The carrot that was dangled was a 75 per cent grant from central Government to establish the system. It was recognised that the system was required because of what was taking place on the ground.

**George Potts:** Michelle Ballantyne used the word “stagnating”. That is not a word that we are familiar with—the profession is young and vibrant and there are lots of young people with energy and enthusiasm who bring in new ideas, share best practice and ensure that the service that they deliver is relevant to their customers.

Over the years, there have been lots of changes, many of which have been led by the rangers themselves. The profession does not stagnate, because lots of young people come through and we have new challenges, new legislation to comply with and new requirements from the employing authorities.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** I was referring to Mr Reid’s comment that the committee had not met for two years. That committee is where updates to policy guidelines and qualifications are made. Have things stagnated in those two years, or is somebody else taking on the work?

**Robert Reid:** I suppose that that confirms how powerful that little group is, when it gets together, in representing the industry. However, it might not cover as wide a range as we would expect it to.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** You have lost a voice by that group not meeting. Do you know why it is not meeting?

**Robert Reid:** No. It is possibly because the pressures that have been put on the association to deliver mean that it is struggling to survive at the moment and things have slipped, or perhaps no one has picked up the gauntlet.

**Angus MacDonald:** I note that you met the chair of SNH in 2016, and that you have liaised regularly with the nominated SNH member since then to

“exchange information and address concerns.”

Has that been helpful to the relationship between the ranger service and SNH? Has there been any direct approach to the Scottish Government on the matter?

**Robert Reid:** We have a good relationship with Alison Matheson in Inverness, who is our SNH link person, so we are well supported in that sense.

SNH, like many other organisations, including the Forestry Commission Scotland, seems to be going through a period of change, and we think that we may not feature at the decision-making level at SNH as we did in the past. The countryside sector, whether we are talking about forestry, Historic Environment Scotland, the private sector or the estates, is in an unknown period.

**Angus MacDonald:** SNH has a new chair, so it may well be worth it to request a meeting with him. He has been in front of our Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee and is willing to look at a number of issues, so it might be an opportune moment to speak to him.

**Robert Reid:** We are in the process of seeking a meeting with him. In 2014, the previous SNH chief executive officer said that the best value for the national health service in Scotland is Scotland’s ranger service.

**Angus MacDonald:** There you go.

**Robert Reid:** From the survey, we can see that there have already been about 13 million visitors, if we put together all the ranger services that we have established. Therefore we provide a large professional service over a wide area. We are proud of it and it is envied elsewhere. The Danish Government picked up the Scottish system, and the English and Welsh ranger associations are envious that we have a national identity, which they do not have. We do not want to lose that. It may be worth saying that our logo is in the Parliament, as part of the Public Petitions Committee exhibition in the foyer.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** I understand that rangers are employed by a wide variety of employers, in a range of sectors. How does the framework apply to rangers who are employed in the private

sector? Would implementation of the framework be supported by landowners, for example?

**Robert Reid:** The framework applies across the board—whether the employer is and NGO, a local authority, a private sector organisation or a rural community or island community. It covers all those areas. We are also finding that although some rangers are grant aided, they still fear that their jobs are not secure, even in the private sector.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** Is that because the general atmosphere is one of employers saying rangers can be let go?

**Robert Reid:** Yes—it seems so. We have not been able to have any overall protection, as the Scottish national ranger service.

**The Convener:** I think that we have reached the end of our questioning. We now need to think about how we will progress the petition. Do members have any suggestions?

**Brian Whittle:** I have been remiss in not declaring an interest at the start of the meeting. My brother-in-law is a ranger—although not in Scotland. England has the same issues as Mr Reid raises.

As a starting point, we should write to the Scottish Government to seek its view on the petition.

**The Convener:** We would be interested to hear the Scottish Government’s views on the importance that it perceives the national service as having, and on whether it recognises what Mr Reid describes as a consequence of the decision in 2009. We could perhaps also write to other organisations that have interests in land, including the Forestry Commission Scotland and the National Trust for Scotland.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** I would like us also to write to COSLA to seek its thoughts, because it has been directly involved.

**The Convener:** There might be a conversation to be had about ring fencing having been removed and whether COSLA has been tracking what has happened.

**Angus MacDonald:** Rather than just get an overall view from COSLA, I wonder whether we could perhaps write to each local authority. It would be good to get a figure on how many rangers each still employs. We could also write to arm’s-length external organisations that are associated. We have seen the reduction at High Life Highland, which I presume is an ALEO. We need to get figures from those, too.

**Robert Reid:** It might be worth my while to say that in the Highlands the tourist industry is homing in on Skye and the Fairy Pools, but there is no ranger service on the island.

**The Convener:** Really?

**Robert Reid:** No—there is not. Since the 1970s, rangers have been trained to deliver management of people in the countryside. The issues apply over a wide area.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** If we are going to ask local authorities for their numbers of rangers, either via COSLA or directly, can we also ask them for their three to five-year plans for them? Most authorities have forward budgeting, so if they intend to have budget cuts it would be good to know that.

**The Convener:** We could also write to the national park authorities and to Scottish Land & Estates. I do not know whether organisations such as Community Land Scotland would have a view on whether they manage their land—

**Robert Reid:** Crown properties have ranger services.

**The Convener:** Yes. If we are looking at communities that have taken over land, we could ask whether they have taken over the responsibility for rangers, too. There is also SNH itself, of course.

**Angus MacDonald:** There is also Crown Estate Scotland.

**The Convener:** That is quite lot to be going on with.

Mr Reid, once you have your survey in a form that you think might be worth our while to see, as you said, we would appreciate that.

I thank our witnesses very much for their attendance, for giving evidence and for answering our questions. There is quite a lot for us to proceed with, and we will keep you in touch with the progress of the petition.

I suspend the meeting briefly to allow witnesses to leave the table.

11:10

*Meeting suspended.*

11:11

*On resuming—*

### **Land Registration etc (Scotland) Act 2012 (PE1676)**

**The Convener:** Agenda item 2 is consideration of a new petition on which we will not be taking evidence. PE1676, on the Land Registration etc (Scotland) Act 2012, was submitted by Tony Rosser. The petitioner believes that there are two major flaws in the act, and his petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish

Government to review it, with particular regard to the cadastral map and the provision of supporting materials. Members have a copy of the petition and a Scottish Parliament information centre briefing.

With regard to the cadastral map, the SPICe briefing explains that

“This is the statutory term given to the map which covers the whole of Scotland.”

The briefing sets out the current process for mapping in the land register under the 2012 act, and notes that

“The base map currently used is the OS map.”

It adds that section 11(6) of the act

“empowers Scottish Ministers to make regulations to allow other systems of mapping to be used”.

The briefing notes that Registers of Scotland

“receives 500 updated map tiles per week from OS”

and explains that section 11(7) of the act allows Registers of Scotland

“to make consequential changes to the Land Register when the base map is updated.”

The petitioner has indicated that, within that process, he would like it to be mandatory for Registers of Scotland to check the validity of updated Ordnance Survey maps, which he considers will

“avoid any inaccuracies or questions about the validity of updated ... maps”.

He also considers that

“Where maps are in dispute the RoS should arrange a re-survey (to be conducted by OS or RoS) ... and proprietors should have the opportunity to question/approve the revised ... plan.”

The SPICe briefing explains that, under section 80 of the act, the keeper of the registers of Scotland

“must rectify ... the Land Register where there is a manifest inaccuracy in a title sheet or the cadastral map and note other inaccuracies”.

It adds that, where an individual has a query or concern about an inaccuracy, they can refer it to the Lands Tribunal for Scotland.

In recent correspondence with the clerks, the petitioner indicated that he does not recognise that as being the case. He stated that he had had three refusals to update an error on his title deed plan, and that he was not made aware that he could raise the issue with the Lands Tribunal for Scotland.

The second concern that is raised in the petition relates to the provision of material in support of requests to Registers of Scotland for a revision of title deeds, specifically in the event that a property



owner has died. The petitioner believes that any such request should be supported by a death certificate. He has indicated his understanding that that was “commonplace under previous legislation”, and considers that

“Provision of a death certificate negates the possibility of error by a proprietor or solicitor”.

The SPICe briefing refers to correspondence with Registers of Scotland, which states:

“the Keeper takes the view that if a solicitor tells us that a proprietor is deceased, we are entitled to rely on that”.

I should note that the petitioner has contacted the clerks to say that it is not necessary to use a legal person in that process. The clerks have checked that with SPICe, which has confirmed that, technically, the petitioner is correct. However, SPICe stresses that not using a solicitor is rare in practice and that people often use solicitors when dealing with complex matters before the Lands Tribunal, as referred to previously.

11:15

The clerk’s note indicates that the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee took evidence on two draft Scottish statutory instruments in November, and the instruments were not approved. The Scottish Government subsequently laid a replacement draft instrument—the draft Registers of Scotland (Digital Registration etc) Regulations 2018. The Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee took evidence on that instrument at its meeting on Tuesday 30 January and agreed to recommend that the draft regulations be approved.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

**Angus MacDonald:** Having served on the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee in 2012, when it scrutinised the Land Registration etc (Scotland) Bill, I have some sympathy with the petition, which does not seem to me to be a big ask. However, before we take the issue further, I would be keen to know whether there are capacity issues at Registers of Scotland. Unfortunately, I cannot recall why the need for a death certificate was not included in the 2012 act. There is certainly merit in looking further at the issue.

**The Convener:** It strikes me that, if it is possible for people to represent themselves in an action, that would give everybody comfort that there was a death certificate, rather than their relying on the word of a solicitor. I think that the petitioner’s evidence mentions that his solicitor did not do the job correctly—or, that may have been behind the petition. Therefore, it is reasonable to ask whether the proposals would give more confidence.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** The problem is that redress is down to the person who finds that there has been an error, and there are time bars. A couple of constituents have come to me with this very problem, so there is a need to revisit the issue. If someone who has lived somewhere for a long time suddenly finds that a boundary has moved but they are time barred from addressing the issue, that is incredibly inequitable and unfair, because they did not know about it. Therefore, we really need to have a look at the issue.

**The Convener:** The petitioner says that he did not know that he had the right to appeal to the Lands Tribunal. In contacting Registers of Scotland, it is worth asking whether there is a process or form for that, and whether information is provided to people in that situation.

**Rona Mackay:** Registers of Scotland is definitely a port of call. Maybe there is a need for greater public awareness of what the process is and what is available to people. We should contact Registers of Scotland and the Scottish Government on the action that is called for in the petition.

**The Convener:** We should certainly ask the Scottish Government whether it is looking at the legislation to ensure that it does what was intended. The example that the petitioner has raised might allow the Government to reflect further on the legislation.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** In effect, there is a loophole or a gap that people are falling through. I hope that there are not an awful lot of people, but it is a big issue for those who are affected.

**Brian Whittle:** I note that the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee has just taken evidence on a related instrument. It would be interesting to try to cross-reference a little and find out what evidence it heard.

**The Convener:** That committee agreed to recommend that the draft regulations be approved, so it might be worth flagging up the petition to it. I am interested in the fact that the earlier instruments were not agreed, so perhaps we can look at that further.

There is quite a lot there. We are agreeing to write to the Scottish Government and to Registers of Scotland in the terms that have been identified. If there is an issue about people having to deal with a system that is not friendly, we want to know what has caused that. We should also ask about the issue of capacity. Do members agree to that approach?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** That ends our consideration of petitions. We now move into private session.

11:19

*Meeting continued in private until 11:36.*

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