



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Public Petitions Committee

Thursday 15 March 2018

Session 5



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

3rd 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:

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con)

Jennifer Edmonstone (Twins and Multiple Births Association)

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Helen Peck (Twins and Multiple Births Association)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Catherine Fergusson

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Thursday 15 March 2018

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:31]

New Petition

Multiple Births (Support for Families) (PE1683)

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

The first item on the agenda is consideration of a new petition, PE1683, on support for families with multiple births, which was lodged by Jennifer Edmonstone. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide better support for multiple-birth families, including both financial and non-financial support.

I welcome to the meeting Jennifer Edmonstone, along with Helen Peck, who is the Scottish co-ordinator of the Twins and Multiple Births Association. Thank you for attending this morning. You have the opportunity to make a brief opening statement of up to five minutes. After that, the committee will ask a few questions to inform our consideration of the petition and to see whether we can tease out some of the issues you have identified.

Helen Peck (Twins and Multiple Births Association): Thank you so much for taking the time to see us today. I am the Scottish co-ordinator for TAMBA. I am here today to support Jennifer Edmonstone, who is an activist and the secretary for the East Kilbride twins and triplets club. She will outline the background of our petition and give you evidence of the unique challenges that our families face. I will also help along the way by sharing some stories, which may help you to better understand.

From TAMBA's point of view, it is timely to be here today for three reasons. First, the Government has just announced that £1.6 million is to be set aside to support families in neonatal care. That is especially important to our families, as 50 per cent of them spend time in neonatal care, and it would be great to know how the money will be allocated to multiple-birth families and those who may have to be transferred to units far away from home. The Government has also announced that it is looking to support an initiative

to fill the gaps. As a charity that has never had Government funding before but which delivers many services to support multiple-birth families across Scotland, we would like to hear how you could support us. It would also be fantastic if the committee could gather evidence from other departments to see how policies could better support our families.

I now hand over to Jennifer Edmonstone.

Jennifer Edmonstone (Twins and Multiple Births Association): As you are aware, the petition refers to a mixture of reserved and devolved powers. Appreciating this, I ask that you please do not lose sight of the bigger picture when considering the devolved matters, as this area is only as great as the sum of its parts.

My aim today is to build on the headline issues in the petition by highlighting what the typical family of multiples is like. I accept that many of the relevant Scottish Government policies, including the new baby boxes, certain grants for those in need and so on, are aimed at families more generally. However, via the petition, I want to show that having a multiple birth is different in many ways and that, therefore, the Government needs to aim some of its relevant policies directly at families with multiples.

I hope that you will understand fully some of the challenges that families of multiples have been facing for years, which lead to pressure physically, emotionally and financially. Forget the glamour and "trophy factor" of celebrity parents with multiples that is portrayed in the media, as that can often undermine the true struggle. Having multiples is undeniably a privilege, but it is full of extreme highs and there are sometimes extreme lows.

What is typical multiple life like? It starts with a high-risk pregnancy and birth. Three per cent of all United Kingdom births are multiples, and life can be hard for that small number of people, with multiples being two times more likely to be stillborn and six times more likely to have cerebral palsy than a singleton birth. Of the multiples that are born alive, 68 per cent of twins and 95 per cent of triplets are born prematurely compared with 7 per cent of all births, and 15 per cent of twins and 42 per cent of triplets are born very prematurely compared with 6 per cent of all births, leading to 52 per cent of twins requiring extra hospital care. However, that does not account for further medical care that is needed after discharge from hospital, which is a common consequence of having premature babies. Extra time spent in hospital can be expensive for a family, with car park charges and so on, and can require extra time off work. It is, therefore, understandable that postnatal depression and relationship breakdown are more prevalent in families with multiples.

Feeding is another issue that I would like to bring to your attention, as 80 per cent of multiple mothers do not breastfeed compared with 60 per cent of singleton mothers. For those who exclusively formula feed, the cost is about £480 per singleton and over double that—£1,060—for twins. That excludes bottles, sterilisers, and electricity costs, which are also doubled. Several factors have been accounted for in that. Fifty per cent of multiples spend extra time in hospital, meaning that they are introduced to more expensive brands of formula. As it is not recommended that parents switch formula, they are often stuck with that. Unlike first-infant milks, follow-on milks are much cheaper and offers are permitted, but using them goes against health visitor advice. Also, as most multiples are born prematurely, they should be weaned later—at seven months at the earliest—meaning more expense is incurred on formula.

Nursery fees are also a big issue for us. As we are aware, childcare is expensive and can push many families into poverty or financial hardship. That is even more prominent in families with multiples. To evidence this, I have compared the cost of sending two children to nursery on a full-time basis when the mother is back at work. For two children who were born two years apart, it was approximately £55,000 over six years. For two children who were born three years apart—that is the national average age gap between first and second children—it was £64,000 over seven years. For twins, the cost was £70,000 over just a five-year period. When broken down, what does that mean? The average salary is £22,000-ish net. When parents who are on the average salary have two children, they will profit every year that they are in work. However, when parents who are on the average salary have twins between the ages of one and three, the nursery fees will exceed one parent's salary, which often means that one parent chooses not to return to work, as there is no incentive to.

Finally, there is child benefit. The UK is unusual in paying a premium for the first child that is born. The Government recommends that the money should be used for clothes and food, as the arrival of the first child has the largest impact on finances. If multiples are a mother's first pregnancy, what is not considered is the requirement for multiple items at the same time: car seats, cots, nappies, food, formula, bottles, bedding, clothes and shoes. It has been estimated that twins do not cost double but about 50 per cent more than having one child, and that needs to be accounted for.

I will quickly give you some global comparisons. France offers an additional 18 weeks of maternity leave for twins and 30 weeks for triplets. Ireland offers a grant for families at birth and then at age four, and child benefit is one and a half times and

two times that of a singleton for twins and triplets respectively. Australia allows people to pay off their nursery fees over a longer period of time. All those measures could help.

In conclusion, families of multiples are asking for help. The ways in which the Scottish Government could help are as follows: it could increase and match child benefit for each multiple born; it could provide more funding, earlier, for childcare for families with multiples; and it could support improvements in maternity leave, maternity pay and paternity pay by bringing this petition to the attention of Westminster. If improvements such as those are made, it is likely that women will be in a better position to return to work sooner and multiples will be put on an equal footing with singletons.

The Convener: Thank you very much. That was absolutely fascinating. All the things that you do not think about were presented there. It really captured the issues of the petition.

You were asked what previous actions you had taken, and you said that you had spoken to your MP, who indicated that she would raise with employers' groups the issue of referring to families with multiple births in employment policies. Can you give us any further information about your engagement with employers' groups and what responses you have received?

Jennifer Edmonstone: That work started with Kirsten Oswald and, as things changed in my constituency, it was passed on to Jackson Carlaw. Kirsten Oswald was going to approach employers' groups, but that fell by the wayside. Then I started engaging with Jackson Carlaw and Paul Masterton instead. They took me on a different path, ending up here.

The Convener: We can think about that, reflecting on the views of employers' organisations.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): As you have acknowledged, some of the laws and policies relating to maternity leave and support for families are reserved to the UK, while others fall to Scotland within the devolved powers. Let us concentrate for the moment on the devolved powers, which include the powers to top up reserved benefits, healthcare services and early learning and childcare. Within those areas, can you expand on your introductory remarks and tell us where you think the further support you are calling for should be prioritised to make the biggest difference to families?

Jennifer Edmonstone: Childcare is one of the biggest areas and is the most problematic for us. It is stopping us from getting back into the workplace, because it is not permitting people to earn enough of a wage to get back. Any form of

top-up in that sense would be helpful. Ways and means of getting children into council nursery care would be helpful as well. Do you have anything to say on that, Helen?

Helen Peck: Yes. I have a good story that gives an example of that. A few years ago, I dealt with a mother of triplets who lived out in Clackmannan. Her husband worked away from home: he was four months on and back for a month at a time. She was really isolated and finding it really hard. With three babies and no family around her—her parents lived in Ireland—she was finding it a real struggle. We were in frequent contact with her and urged her to contact Home-Start to see whether it could give her some extra support but, sadly, it did not have the resources in her area. Then she got into contact with her local council and said, “I’m really struggling.” By that point, her kids were aged two and were quite a handful, as you can imagine. She had looked at all sorts of options, even trying to get the triplets into a private nursery, but it was outwith the realms of possibility for her because it was far too expensive.

We ended up helping her to contact her local MSP, who then contacted the council. The council was fantastic, because one of the local school nurseries that normally would not take children until the age of three—her girls were, I think, two and three quarters—made an exception to the rule for Isla Malloy for two days a week. It took the girls for two mornings a week, which for her was categorically a lifeline. She had developed quite bad postnatal depression just because she felt so overwhelmed. That happened purely because she told the MSP, “This is a real problem.”

The issue affects not only mothers of triplets but mothers with twins who are in the same situation. Isla Malloy was a nurse, so she was well aware of the signs of postnatal depression. She was also aware that, in order to continue being a nurse, she would have to keep her hours up, although she found that very challenging just because of the magnitude of having triplets. The council gave her the lifeline that she needed.

Angus MacDonald: Thank you for that. As a matter of interest, which council was it?

Helen Peck: It was Clackmannanshire Council.

The Convener: Well done, Clackmannanshire Council.

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): Good morning, and well done. I thought that you spoke very well. Your petition calls for better financial and non-financial support for families with multiple births. Among the non-financial support, one of the areas identified in the background information in your petition is encouraging healthcare professionals to be mindful of multiple-birth families. On that point, you provide the

specific example of providing one prescription/minor ailments treatment per child rather than grouping multiples together. Could you explain what grouping multiples together means in that regard?

Jennifer Edmonstone: It is probably easiest to explain that I have identical twins, so people usually see them as a unit. In a famous high street chain pharmacy, I registered my children—or so I thought—and was given what I thought were two minor ailments prescriptions. I then went back and the pharmacist said, “Only one of yours has been signed up. We need to sign up the other one.” They had given me one prescription for both of my children.

That does not happen across the board, but it is not uncommon. Other people have seen that. Sometimes, people get confused about the fact that they are two separate people who both need help. That is a specific example of where I was going with that.

09:45

Michelle Ballantyne: That would seem to be an issue with the pharmacy, because, legally, they have to be treated individually for treatment and prescriptions. That is why I was confused.

Jennifer Edmonstone: Definitely. It is about saying that they are two individuals. It was maybe not the right example to use, but my two quite often get grouped together, and I think that happens more with identical twins than with fraternal twins.

Michelle Ballantyne: That is about perception and the way in which people react.

Jennifer Edmonstone: It is an example of how everything is portrayed. I have always been treated as though I had one birth and one child, although I had one birth and two children.

Michelle Ballantyne: Absolutely. On the theme of healthcare practice, in your opening statement you talked about premature birth and the impact of not being able to breastfeed. A significant piece of work that has been working really well in Scotland is the milk donor bank. A huge amount of breast milk is being donated, particularly to the neonatal units, and we have quite an efficient system of supporting that now. Have you come across the milk donor bank? It would obviously be a major way of solving that problem.

Jennifer Edmonstone: I have not used any donor milk myself. I asked about it and was told that I was not allowed to use it, but I think that maybe I was not in the right circumstances.

Michelle Ballantyne: How old are your children?

Jennifer Edmonstone: My children are a year and a half old, but I asked earlier on. One of my daughters was having an operation and I was hoping to use donor milk because I had no milk by that stage. It would have meant not needing to starve her for eight hours, but I was told that I would not be allowed it for that. That is the only time that I have come across donor milk.

Helen Peck: My girls are going to be 14 on Saturday. I have identical twin girls as well.

Michelle Ballantyne: Donor milk was not there for you.

Helen Peck: It definitely was not. I work quite closely with a lot of the neonatal networks, and I know that the milk bank is an amazing scheme—it really is fantastic. We have done a lot of work on it and were involved with Una McFadyen in the early stages of it.

Michelle Ballantyne: Do you feel that it is now contributing to solving some of the issues?

Helen Peck: Partially, yes, but there is a long way to go. The situation is tainted with other issues that go along with it such as mothers not being encouraged to breastfeed in hospitals. We run a lot of antenatal classes and practical preparing for parenthood classes, and we have first-hand contact with the mums. In some hospitals—purely, I think, because the midwives are too busy—breastfeeding has not been encouraged, shall we say, as much as it should be. Some mothers have even been made to feel slightly put down by being told, “You have two—you will never manage that,” when the reality is that, if they want to, there are methods.

Michelle Ballantyne: There are methods to support that.

Helen Peck: There are methods, yes.

Michelle Ballantyne: We could also look at that and do some work on it.

Helen Peck: Yes.

Jennifer Edmonstone: Quite a few infant feeding specialists have been cut in certain areas. I definitely think that, if I had had more support, I would have had a better chance at succeeding in breastfeeding, although I cannot confirm that.

Michelle Ballantyne: No, but support does help.

Jennifer Edmonstone: Yes.

The Convener: I am advised by Angus MacDonald, who has been on the Public Petitions Committee for a lot longer than I have, that the national donor milk bank came about as a consequence of a petition to this committee that was closed in April 2015.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): From reading your petition and the background material, and from hearing your presentation, we understand that one of the core concerns underpinning the petition is that, for families with multiple births, the issue of financial cost is not just a case of multiplying the costs that apply for most single births, as you have alluded to, but that additional costs arise as a result of circumstances that are more likely with multiple births. As you said, multiple births are more likely to be premature, and there are additional childcare costs. At the risk of making myself shudder, can I ask what other experiences are multiplied? Do you have examples of experiences that are multiplied in the case of multiple births?

Jennifer Edmonstone: The big one for me is shoes. Anyone who is a parent knows that shoes are very expensive.

On a more serious note, it is the start-up equipment: all the car seats—there is no way you can have only one—the cots, and the double buggy. I know that the double buggy is not two things, but it is a more expensive bit of kit. The cost is not doubled, but there is definitely an impact. Helen Peck and I have said that those first five years are crucial. She can give you more of an example about later on in life, but the beginning is the tough time financially.

Helen Peck: There are issues even before your babies arrive, or after your babies arrive but before you have them home. For our parents it is commonplace for their babies to arrive particularly early, and I know families that have spent their life savings travelling back and forth to neonatal care because their babies have been in hospital for a long time. Both babies do not necessarily get discharged from hospital at the same time, so the journey can be necessary for even longer.

Most families do not plan to have a multiple pregnancy. When you find out that you are pregnant with two, or three, or four, your idea of the way that life would be is turned upside down. You may have budgeted for things, but you find yourself saying, “I never budgeted to have to buy two of these, or two of those.” If, like me, you do not have other children, you do not have the joy of having anything that you can hand down. The reusable market is not there. I relied very heavily on things such as NCT sales to be able to afford to buy things in the early days, because it was such a massive amount of things. The baby box is fantastic and will contribute to a certain degree, but some of our mothers will not be able to use the stuff inside it at the very beginning, because it is not in teeny-tiny sizes.

Jennifer Edmonstone: As Helen said, it is the buying two of everything that is the problem. I need to dress both children. I had the naive

thought that I might have one wardrobe that I could half between the two of them, but that just did not happen.

Helen picked up on the costs when you are in hospital. I was lucky that my children were in the same hospital—although, yes, they were discharged at different times—but to be in a different hospital, with car-parking charges and nothing to eat other than hospital food, you find yourself stuck and in a bit of a robotic way for a while because you are just living day to day. Your partner has had to take time off work, you are taking time off work, you are eating into those holidays and the costs can mount up very quickly, even in the average multiple birth.

Brian Whittle: I have broken into a cold sweat. [*Laughter.*]

The Convener: I am looking at all my friends with twins with a great deal more sympathy. I thought they put the cute quotient very high.

I believe that Mark Griffin MSP has had a campaign to support families in which a child is receiving neonatal care in hospital and to look at the costs associated with that, to which the Scottish Government has responded very positively. Maybe the Government has a sense of that, and perhaps its response could be extrapolated to the issues that you have highlighted.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Continuing the theme of financial support, your petition says that child benefit for the first child is £20.70 and for every child thereafter it is £13.70. Would you like to see all children in multiple births being paid the first-child level of support?

Jennifer Edmonstone: That would be the optimum. I definitely see things differently because, like Helen Peck, my two are my first two and, again, there is no sharing. I read the child benefit policy from the 1990s, which explained why child benefit came about and why the first child got more. Having a multiple birth puts you in a different financial position.

TAMBA is very good at supporting us. Ever since day 1, it told me that my children are the same—they are equal—but when it comes to child benefit, I have to do a calculation for my standing order to put the two child benefit payments together every month and divide the money so that they get the same. I do not understand why that difference of 12 minutes should make a difference. What the amount should be, I am not sure, but the discrepancy is too great. They should be on the same level, whatever that is. Twins or triplets or more should be treated in the same way.

Helen Peck: I agree with Jennifer. It should be the same. If someone has two or three babies, 12 or 20 minutes apart, why should there be a discrepancy between them? It is not that you are having one child and a half child. The other child is a child in its own right.

As to what the payment should be, I do not know. That would have to be thought about, but there should be a fairer split or and the payment should recognise that it is financially really challenging for families. Even for families who are middle earners it is financially challenging in the beginning. I remember speaking to Wendy Alexander years ago, when her babies were born. She was fantastic and she had a really good interview with us. She said that she had absolutely no comprehension of how expensive it would be to have twins or of the magnitude of the effect that the whole thing would have on her life. As much as she would not have changed it for the world, there was no getting away from the fact that the first few years would be particularly financially challenging. I would say that that bit lasts five years. When the children go to school, things seem to even out a bit.

Jennifer Edmonstone: I believe that Ireland has a discrepancy in its child benefit—is it one and half times more for those with twins and two times more for those with triplets?—which is really interesting.

Rona Mackay: You are probably aware that under the new devolved social security powers, the Government is proposing—it has not been settled yet—a £300 payment to parents of multiple-birth children, and thereafter the normal child benefit. What is your opinion on that?

Jennifer Edmonstone: Will that be means tested?

Rona Mackay: I do not believe so.

Jennifer Edmonstone: Any step in the right direction is a positive, but I would question whether that is enough. I am an okay earner, and I have had to take a career break. I do not think that £300 would have changed that for me. My career break will be two and half years out of my legal career.

Rona Mackay: However, it could help you with start-up costs.

Jennifer Edmonstone: It could definitely help me with them. It would not help with getting back to work, but, yes, any step in the right direction would be a good step.

The Convener: I understand that TAMBA was established in 1978 and has been campaigning and providing support for families with multiple births since then—I am horrified to say that it has been 40 years. [*Laughter.*] Anyway, in that 40-year

period, have you seen any overall change in the way that multiple births are understood and supported by Government, healthcare providers, and so on?

You have alluded a couple of times to the pressure on families. A new baby is a huge emotional pressure anyway, but if you are disproportionately likely to be in hospital, have late discharge, have early or premature births and have anxieties to do with those things, what kind of support is available? Is there something that clicks in once it has been identified that you are having a multiple birth? Are there extra supports there? Could more be done in that regard?

10:00

Helen Peck: I would definitely agree that over the past three to four years, our relationship with the Scottish Government has blossomed. We have done quite a good job of making people more aware of the challenges that our families face, and the Government is really supportive of that.

As I said earlier, we try to fill the gaps where people need support that they do not necessarily get from hospital. We have year-long funding from awards for all Scotland, which enables us to provide free midwife-led, day-long antenatal sessions for every family in Scotland. We do them through maternity units. I can honestly say that within 24 to 48 hours of putting it on the website, the session will fill. We take a maximum of 20 people at each session. It is great that a lot of the hospitals support that, because they do not provide those kinds of sessions to the same extent that we do, purely as a result of financial cuts and things like that. We hope that we will be able to provide them for long time to come.

I will give you some examples of other things that we do. Our families go through quite a hard time in the beginning and a lot of people end up with postnatal depression because of the overwhelming nature of their multiple pregnancy. TAMBA operates something called twinline, which is a phone helpline that is run by volunteers. All our volunteers are trained and are parents of multiples—we have all been there and are able to advise. We also have a group of honorary consultants who are specialists in their fields, so if somebody comes to us with a query about their children going to school and whether the children should be separated into different classes, for example, we can give them specialist advice about how they should approach their school. We are there, filling the gaps.

We also offer bereavement support. We understand that there are other bereavement support groups such as SANDS Lothians, which

does a marvellous job, but we run our own specialist bereavement support group for families of multiples. As I am sure that you can appreciate, the loss of a twin or both twins, or triplets or one out of three triplets, is very difficult and different from the pain of families who have lost one baby. I am not saying that it is any worse, but it is different, because if you had identical twins, for example, you have the constant daily reminder, as you watch your child grow, that their sibling is not there, and it is very challenging. Also, if the babies are in neonatal care and you have one surviving child in neonatal care, that can be really distressing too, because people see your baby and they treat you as a mum whereas actually, in your heart, you are still a twin mum, because you carried two babies for such a long time.

Jennifer Edmonstone: On a personal level, I want to echo what Helen is saying. I am just a twin mother, not part of TAMBA. TAMBA has been a really great support, particularly through their antenatal classes. I have not tapped into some of the other support that Helen has referred to, but I echo everything that she has said. Any more funding for TAMBA to provide those services would be fantastic.

The Convener: So there is not just a financial issue; there is an emotional issue in addition to the kinds of pressures that new mums have anyway.

Michelle Ballantyne: You have focused on childcare, with regard to returning to work and having the freedom to get some breathing space. We have had the policy of 600 hours of free childcare, and the 1,140 hours offer has started to roll out and should be in place for every child by 2020. Are you getting any feedback from your parents on that? Are they able to access and benefit from that? I presume that that should make quite a big difference to multiple-birth families.

Helen Peck: Parents are really grateful for the extra hours of childcare that they can get. The one thing that I would say that is pertinent to our families is that the first three years are so financially challenging. Once your maternity leave is finished, you might think, "I might return to work", but the two-year wait before your state childcare kicks in makes it impossible to return to work—not for everybody but for a lot of our parents—because of the financial challenges you face in the first three years from the babies being born to their going to nursery. I have to say I was delighted when mine went, because at that stage they had upped the offer by half an hour. I thought, "Yes—fantastic! The things you can get done in half an hour."

Jennifer Edmonstone: I think Helen and I have both been affected by that.

Michelle Ballantyne: Do you mean in the period from age one to three?

Jennifer Edmonstone: Yes—or zero to three.

The Convener: Thank you, again, very much. We now have to think about how we want to take the petition forward. Please will you make available to the clerks the statistics that you quoted in your opening statement? That would be really useful in our pursuing the petition.

Do members have suggestions about how we might take this forward?

Brian Whittle: Can I comment?

The Convener: Yes, as long as it is not rude.

Brian Whittle: You know me so well, convener.

Obviously we should be writing to the Scottish and UK Governments to get their views, but I wonder whether there should be a query as well. One thing that popped out in the evidence is free childcare, which is currently for four and five-year-olds and some vulnerable three year-olds—

Michelle Ballantyne: It is three and four-year-olds and some vulnerable two-year-olds.

Brian Whittle: That is the one. Perhaps there is possible question about differentiation and an earlier start for childcare for multiple-birth children.

The Convener: That was one thing that occurred to me. If there is particular pressure on isolated mums, mums without support or families without support, should the category of “vulnerable children” include multiple-birth children, because of the associated pressures? That is a reasonable question to ask.

We should certainly write to the Scottish Government. We have had some representation from TAMBA, but it might want to say something more. Home-Start has been mentioned, and I know it does fantastic work at the local level. I would be interested to know whether Home-Start is aware of this issue.

Michelle Ballantyne: We should write to the Royal College of Midwives to seek its views on this.

From a health point of view, there are issues around that starting point. The milk donor bank is increasing its work significantly. We could double-check the advice on not using formula, because obviously that would make a huge difference to mums.

Rona Mackay: We could write to the Child Poverty Action Group.

The Convener: Yes.

Angus MacDonald: In addition to the Royal College of Midwives, we should write to the Royal

College of Nursing and the Multiple Births Foundation.

The Convener: We could ask the clerks to look at whether there are other child poverty groups or organisations such as Bliss that would be aware of some of the issues with multiple births. It would also be worth while contacting the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

The witnesses mentioned what was done in Ireland. Could we ask the clerks to have a look at what the different kinds of offers are to families in other countries, maybe within Europe?

Michelle Ballantyne: Could we also check the legal requirements for prescriptions? We should clarify that so that TAMBA can advise mothers what to do in situations where things need to be corrected.

Brian Whittle: Looking at other countries, I think that France also has an interesting approach to the issue.

The Convener: Today’s session has opened up a series of issues. The financial one is the most challenging, but there are a lot of emotional issues. The figures that were quoted at the beginning show that when someone in is setting out on this journey, things can be quite stark—maybe I should have known about that—in not just financial terms but emotional terms. There is a series of issues that we can raise.

If, on reflection after the committee session, the witnesses decide that there is anything else that they want to provide us with, they should please feel free to do so. Of course, we will contact you once we get submissions back from the other organisations.

Michelle Ballantyne: Could I make one last point? The other issue is multiple births that are not the first birth. I think it would be worth including TAMBA’s commentary on that. Obviously the financial implications are slightly different in those circumstances, but it would be worth including that, because otherwise we might focus on just the first birth.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses very much for their attendance. It has been very interesting and useful, and I look forward to the responses that we get. I have never been so grateful to have only had one child at a time. I did not realise how fortunate I was. Thank you very much.

Jennifer Edmonstone: Thank you very much.

Helen Peck: Thank you.

10:09

Meeting suspended.

10:12

On resuming—

Continued Petitions

Pernicious Anaemia and Vitamin B12 Deficiency (Understanding and Treatment) (PE1408)

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is consideration of continued petitions. PE1408, from Andrea MacArthur, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review and overhaul the current outdated and ineffective method of diagnosing and treating pernicious anaemia and vitamin B12 deficiency.

Members will recall that, when we last considered this petition in October, we agreed to write to the Scottish Government to ask whether the recently established haematology short-life working group would meet the petitioner and keep her informed of the progress of its work. The petitioner met the short-life working group in February and described the meeting as “a very positive experience”. The petitioner also confirmed that the working group would continue to liaise with her.

The petitioner’s submission highlights two specific issues outwith the control of the working group in relation to vitamin B12 injections, more details of which are contained in our meeting papers. The petitioner has contacted the appropriate stakeholders in relation to these issues and has been advised that there are concerns relating to the safety and efficacy of the injections as well as the inability to change the licence for the vaccination. As members will be aware, issues to do with the licensing of medicines are outwith the Parliament’s purview.

Do members have any suggestions on how we might take this forward?

Michelle Ballantyne: We have probably gone as far as we can with this petition. The responses make it fairly clear that matters with regard to relicensing, changing the licensing position and the efficacy of injecting are all outwith devolved powers, so we would just run into problems further on that we could not solve. I believe that the responses are quite rational and I think the petitioner probably needs to be satisfied with where things sit at the moment.

The Convener: That the petitioner said that her meeting was very positive is encouraging.

Angus MacDonald: This is another petition that has been on-going for some time—in this case, since 2011. It is good that some progress has been made, and I am pleased that, as the convener has mentioned, the petitioner had a very

positive meeting with representatives of the short-life working group. It is also encouraging that the group pointed the petitioner in the direction of appropriate stakeholders to try to address the two outstanding issues. I agree with Michelle Ballantyne that given the progress that has been made—although not complete—we should close the petition. After all, we can take it no further at this stage.

10:15

The Convener: Are members content with that?

Rona Mackay: I am totally content. We should look on it as a partial success story, given that the petitioner will be liaising with the short-life working group and is appreciative of that. As has been said, we have taken this as far as we can. Now that the petitioner is engaging with people who can effect change, we should close the petition.

The Convener: If that is the case, I propose that we close the petition, under rule 15.7 of the standing orders, on the basis that the petitioner has met the haematology short-life working group and that the group has committed to continue to liaise with her. In recognition of the response that she has received, we want to thank the petitioner for highlighting these issues and for her persistence in pursuing them. Do members agree?

Members indicated agreement.

Residential Care (Severely Learning-disabled People) (PE1545)

The Convener: PE1545, by Ann Maxwell on behalf of Muir Maxwell Trust, is on residential care provision for the severely learning disabled. At our last consideration of this petition in October, we agreed to ask the Scottish Government what information it needed to make recommendations about the strategic direction to support people with learning disabilities with complex needs. We also asked the Government to respond to the petitioner’s specific concerns that the workstreams commissioned to address the data visibility of people with learning disabilities in Scotland largely focused on the prescription and effect of antipsychotic drugs and that that does not represent the group of people whom the petitioner represents.

The Scottish Government’s response confirms that

“The Scottish Learning Disabilities Observatory ... is conducting a project on antipsychotic medications use with adults and children with learning disabilities.”

However, it states that that is only one project

“within a much larger programme of work, aimed at addressing the diverse needs of people with learning disabilities in Scotland.”

The Government's submission also says that:

"The Observatory is happy to supply more information on any aspect of this work to the Committee."

Do any members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Brian Whittle: It would be interesting to get the petitioner's response to the submissions we have had in the first instance.

The Convener: Absolutely.

Rona Mackay: The observatory has offered to supply more information. We should ask it to do so, because we should definitely find out more about this. I have to say that I was a wee bit puzzled by the response, because I am just not sure that the whole of the petitioner's ask has been addressed. As has been said, we need to find out what the petitioner really feels about the Government's submission and get the information from the observatory. I feel the issue has been only partly addressed.

The Convener: The question continues to be whether the observatory is focusing on only one aspect, and I suspect the petitioner is probably still frustrated by that. Do we agree to ask the petitioner to make a written submission in response to the Scottish Government's submission and to take up Rona Mackay's suggestion that we seek the information offered by the observatory?

Michelle Ballantyne: Convener, we should also ask the observatory to respond directly to the petitioner's suggestion about the provision of residential care. It has not answered that question.

The Convener: Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

In Care Survivors Service (PE1596)

The Convener: PE1596, by Paul Anderson, James McDermott and Chris Daly, is on the In Care Survivors Service Scotland.

At our last consideration of this petition in October, we agreed to ask the Scottish Government about the role of the survivor engagement manager and progress with its engagement plan at that time. The Scottish Government's submission notes that some survivors have spoken directly to the survivor engagement manager, and that the survivor engagement manager

"attends meetings between Future Pathways and survivor representative organisations",

which it says has proved useful for survivors. The bulk of the Government's submission focuses on the new future pathways model for survivor support services and outlines a range of measures

that has been incorporated into the model to encourage and facilitate on-going engagement.

One concern that the petitioner previously expressed was whether survivors would have the opportunity to input into decisions taken about their future health. The Scottish Government's submission explains that if a survivor accesses support through the future pathways model, the first step within that is to have a discussion with their support co-ordinator.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Angus MacDonald: It is fair to say that the initial concerns about the funding of the In Care Survivors Service Scotland have largely been addressed through various channels. The introduction of future pathways gives survivors who receive support from Wellbeing Scotland, which used to be Open Secret, additional support and access to the discretionary fund, too. That is good news. I would therefore say that the petition has delivered a result, which is good to see.

The Convener: I sit on the cross-party group on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Wellbeing Scotland and other survivor organisations are represented on the group, too, and I would be interested in hearing from Wellbeing Scotland, in particular, as well as the other organisations in the field.

I have detected from the cross-party group an anxiety about the motivation behind the Scottish Government's strategy. I am not saying that it is not doing a lot of good work, but there is an on-going debate about how best to support somebody who is dealing with trauma. The suggestion from some organisations is that the Scottish Government has a fixed view, whereas Open Secret—as it was—offers a more holistic understanding of how to deal with a person who has been through trauma. In some of the other models, you have six weeks and then you move on in the process. Is the committee willing to test the Scottish Government's response not so much with the survivors who sent the petition but with some of these survivor organisations?

Michelle Ballantyne: Reading through the response, I was slightly confused by it, because the petitioners have made a clear statement of what they want. Obviously, the Government has taken a different route and is saying, "This different route will meet the need." There seems to be a gap between the petitioners' request and the Government's response; the petitioners did not want the triage-type route that seemed to be at the crux of the type of care that was being given. I am supportive of the idea of asking the cross-party group for some feedback, and I think that the petitioners' response would be interesting, too.

Brian Whittle: I echo that. If we are to close this petition, I want to understand whether the organisations are comfortable with the undoubted progress that has been made and whether their understanding of that progress speaks directly to the petition. I think that we are almost there.

Angus MacDonald: As I understand it—and I could be wrong—the Government has listened to Wellbeing Scotland, which was formerly Open Secret, to the extent it did not completely close down the service. That service is still available to anyone who requires it. However, it would be good to get clarification on that.

The Convener: You are right. The suggestion from the paperwork is that there has been movement but, to be fair, I would like to test that with the survivors' organisations instead of simply going back to the people who have brought the petition forward, just to get a sense of whether that has been followed through. If it is acceptable, we can liaise with the cross-party group on which organisations will be able to do that.

Rona Mackay: I am unclear about when future pathways started and what people feel about it. I do not know the timing of the whole thing.

The Convener: It is a massive issue, and it represents a change in the landscape in light of the issues around the inquiry and the very fact that having the inquiry might encourage people to come forward to disclose what has happened to them. There is a general anxiety about the level and kind of support that is going to be available and whether that support will be on-going. That is something we can pursue.

Michelle Ballantyne: The Government's submission says that ICSSS attended a particular meeting, but there is no indication of what its commentary was or what its feelings were. I have to wonder, therefore, whether its saying that is just a kind of tick in the box.

The Convener: The suggestion is that we write to the convener of the cross-party group, which will afford us the opportunity to test the issue directly. Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Armed Forces (School Visits) (PE1603)

The Convener: Petition PE1603, on ensuring greater scrutiny, guidance and consultation on armed forces visits to schools in Scotland, was lodged by Mairi Campbell-Jack and Douglas Beattie on behalf of Quakers in Scotland and ForcesWatch. I welcome Edward Mountain MSP, who has shown an interest in the petition in the past. Thank you for your attendance.

At our previous consideration of the petition, we heard evidence from representatives of the armed forces about the work that is carried out in relation to school visits. We invited the petitioners to make a written submission in response to that evidence; that submission has been received. The petitioners remain concerned about visits by the armed forces to schools and have set out a number of options that they suggest the committee consider. Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Brian Whittle: The last time that we heard evidence on PE1603 I was of a mind that we had gone as far with it as we could go. I was satisfied, from the submissions from the armed forces, that they are conducting themselves as we hope they would. I was almost going to say that we should, in those circumstances, close the petition. However, I was prepared to take a little bit more evidence and to allow the petitioners the opportunity to respond. My opinion is now that we have gone as far as we need to go on PE1603. I suggest that the committee consider closing the petition.

Angus MacDonald: Rather than close the petition at this point, there may be some merit in the committee preparing a report on its consideration of the petition, given that we have taken extensive evidence—in particular, in the previous evidence session on PE1603. That would also help the petitioners to move forward. I think that a report is the way forward.

The Convener: I am interested to hear members' views on that.

Rona Mackay: I disagree with my colleague Brian Whittle entirely that PE1603 should be closed. I agree with Angus MacDonald that we should have a report. I still have concerns about data collection. I feel that we do not know what materials are being used in schools during the visits—we have no idea and have not seen them. I do not feel that we have gone much further forward or answered the questions that arose when PE1603 first came to us. There is more work to be done.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I say at the outset that I am grateful to have been allowed to follow PE1603, and for the input that the convener has allowed me at committee.

I was taken by the evidence from the Army, the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force to the effect that they attend schools only when they are asked to do so. They made that very clear. They also made it clear they are not recruiting when they do so, but are raising awareness and engaging with the community. I am very aware from their evidence that there has been a significant shift since 2014, with much more internal monitoring of

visits, very careful messaging and a more inclusive approach in the services, as employers.

I also reiterate that I was a soldier for 12 years. Being a soldier is not all about bearing arms. Many soldiers do other things—for example, keeping the peace—which I did in Cyprus—delivering food to ethnic minorities in Africa and Cyprus, where they could not get it, helping in and running refugee camps, and training to increase the standard of awareness of soldiering. It requires dedication and commitment.

10:30

What worries me slightly is that PE1603 assumes that the forces are going into schools to recruit people on the basis they cannot get other jobs. I can state that when the going gets tough you need committed soldiers who are volunteers.

I have looked at what the petitioners are asking for. They have asked for child rights impact assessments, which I find an odd thing to request. When the services go into schools they are incredibly aware of the impact of their visits, and they absolutely take into consideration the age group of the people whom they address. The petition calls for additional scrutiny and guidance: the forces have made it clear that since 2014 that has very much been the case.

The petitioners also want people to be made aware of the issues in recruitment to the forces. I absolutely believe that the forces have an obligation to make sure that people understand what they are taking on; as I said earlier, we do not want in tough situations people who are not aware or are not volunteers.

The petitioners have asked to be involved in guidance, they have asked for commitments from the armed services and they have asked for guidance for school visits. I could go through why I think that has all been achieved and given. However, it seems strange that the services, which are hugely respected in this country across all groups of people, are being asked to do things that go way beyond what is needed from other organisations. We do not ask other organisations that go into schools—the police or any other employers—to make such commitments.

I believe that we have heard very clearly from the services that they take their commitment seriously. To push the petition further might well damage the view that people have of the armed services. Therefore I humbly ask the committee to consider following the suggestion of my colleague, Mr Whittle. Thank you.

The Convener: Our writing a report, as suggested by Angus MacDonald, would afford the opportunity for that argument to be prosecuted,

which would reflect some of the evidence. That is something that we need to think about. It is not a choice between closing PE1603 and continuing it forever. A report would, as per Angus MacDonald's suggestion, reflect the balance of the evidence that we have heard.

I also welcome Maurice Corry MSP for this item.

Before I hear from other members, I say that on one level we will not get agreement: my sense is that there are folk who think that the armed forces are so unique that they should not go into schools, and they would not want young people being encouraged to choose the forces as a career option. I am clear in my head that as long as we need armed forces, that is a legitimate career choice for people.

I am also clear that there has been a change in my lifetime. It has been commented on before; there is the Billy Connolly song that talks about a soldier ending up in hospital who was promised he would get to go skiing. I remember seeing as a young woman the Army's advertisements using skiing. That is not the way the armed forces are now presented. The point about the armed forces' roles other than in conflict was well made.

That flags up to me questions about who goes into schools, what the general protocols are for somebody making a case for a particular career choice and what safeguards there are. There are some jobs that I would not have wanted my children to have considered—maybe becoming a MSP is one of them. That is a slightly facetious point, but there is an issue about who gets access to young people to make arguments about the jobs that are available to them.

I think that the choice for the committee is to close the petition or to produce a report that would represent the balance of arguments that have been presented to us.

Michelle Ballantyne: I expressed my opinion at the last meeting that we should close the petition. If a majority of committee members feel that a report is the way forward, that will be fair enough, if it is a balanced expression of where we are.

My concerns about PE1603 have partly been to do with the content of some evidence—in particular, in the response we got from the petitioners. A lot of it is outdated and does not take into account changes that have taken place in the past few years. There are some contradictions, where they talk about information and then refer to it later as being not clear.

They say in the summary of issues that there are five key areas of concern regarding the armed forces' visits to schools. They identify the first one as being the number and distribution of visits. Their argument throughout their report seems to

be that the forces target, in particular, urban areas and areas of deprivation, and that they focus mainly on state schools and not on the independent sector.

I have two comments to make on that. Recruiting offices are based in urban areas, of course. It is about access; the volume is closer. The key thing is that the forces do not force their way into schools. They do not say, "We are coming"; the schools ask them to come, and that is the only way they can go into a school. Is the argument, therefore, that our teachers and headteachers are the problem? I do not think that they are. I have faith in our teachers and headteachers that when they decide to allow the armed forces to take part in activities within the school they are balancing their duty of care to the young people in that process.

The argument that the forces go into state schools but not in independent schools is a bit odd, because the vast majority of independent schools have combined cadet forces based in the school. Many of those CCFs have what we call permanent staff—regular soldiers who are employed by the Army—supporting the delivery of CCFs. They have armed forces personnel based in the schools.

The Convener: So, the figures are being distorted. The forces do not need to visit independent schools.

Michelle Ballantyne: They are there.

The Convener: Independent schools make up only 4 per cent of the education system, so if the forces are already there, that would not count as a visit.

Michelle Ballantyne: No, it would not count as a visit. You could argue that, in some ways, those schools' pupils are being influenced by the armed forces because the forces are permanently based in the school. Therefore, the petitioners' argument about state and independent schools does not hold water, at all.

In respect of what the activity is—careers awareness or recruitment—of course it is careers awareness. Anybody who visits a school from an organisation is promoting careers awareness. The word "recruitment" means that you are actively recruiting and signing people up. The forces are absolutely not doing that and are not allowed to do that. I can say that with absolute knowledge because I have been part of the system of being in a school with the forces talking to children. It is not about signing somebody up for the job. The process of recruitment is quite different: people have to go to the recruiting office and are encouraged to bring their parents with them, especially when they are young. Again, that

displays a degree of misunderstanding of how the system works.

The petitioners say:

"Students are not always encountering a balance of views on the armed forces."

I have received lots of letters from Quakers asking for support, some of which have been extremely balanced and very good, but some less so. However, I have been unclear throughout what they mean by "a balance of views". Schools address this through modern studies and through personal and social education. There is a lot of discussion about some of that.

I am slightly concerned at the petitioners' indication that they think that young people are not capable of making decisions. We, as a Parliament, have decided that 16 year-olds can vote—that they have the intelligence and the ability to rationalise and consider moral dilemmas and the wider aspects of what Parliament and the country do. We have said they are able to make those decisions. However, the argument in PE1603 seems to be that children cannot do that. We cannot have it both ways: we have decided, as a Parliament, that they are capable, so we cannot now sit here with the petition and say that they are not capable of making a decision when it comes to the armed forces. That is fundamentally hypocritical.

On there being insufficient consultation of parents and guardians, parents and guardians are aware when the armed forces come into the school. The children talk about it. If the forces come in, parents who are not happy about that can write to the school and say, "I am sorry, I do not want my child to take part in that". Parents are always free to do that.

The Convener: We need to watch that we do not spend too long on this.

Is there a mechanism by which people are advised ahead of visits and can then withdraw children?

Michelle Ballantyne: Some schools do that and some schools do not.

The Convener: Could a report reflect on whether there is some kind of mechanism? I certainly recall that very often parents were advised that such-and-such a group was coming in for a visit. It would be interesting to see whether it is possible to standardise that in the school system.

Michelle Ballantyne: Finally, on the lack of transparency, the teachers are there; the teachers see everything that goes on. One of the arguments is that the forces come back and do other visits. There has been absolute transparency

with the school, and the school has deemed itself happy to have the forces back again. There is transparency. If members of the committee are unhappy about it, they can visit a school and see that in action.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): We do not want to deny young people the opportunity of seeing another career as a possible option. We do not want to disadvantage young people by not allowing them to consider the opportunities to join the armed forces. Since 2011, that has been underwritten in the armed forces covenant for communities, which the Government and every local authority in the United Kingdom have signed up to and that therefore subsequently applies to schools. Head teachers have control over who comes to their school for career presentations. In my experience as a councillor in Argyll and Bute, there was no question about it—all schools had visit programmes and they all invited the respective services to visit.

I do not think that there is any targeting of state schools more than private schools, and the figures reflect that. There is fairness across all schools. Certainly, some services are slightly more enthusiastic when they visit. I had a case of that in Oban, but the issue was rectified quickly by the headmaster, so there was no problem. Parents always have the opportunity to opt out through the headmaster or teacher in charge of the programme for that school.

There will possibly be more visits in areas where there is more of a military presence. There is Faslane in the Helensburgh area, as well as Lossiemouth, Kinloss, Edinburgh, Leuchars and so on. I was at Leuchars only yesterday. There will be more knowledge of the armed forces in those areas, so there will probably be more opportunity for them to go to schools, and I do not think that we should restrict that.

One issue that I am concerned about is that the military should keep a record of their visits to schools. I am surprised that that seems to have slipped since 2011, and that needs to be looked at.

A head of steam has been built up on the issue by the petitioners. There is a lack of realisation of the good that the recruiting efforts do in helping children to see what is available to them. We should remember that there are an enormous number of jobs in the armed forces in non-combatant roles. In support, there is everything from cyber operations and dog handling to nursing and medical support. The success of the medical evacuation team in Afghanistan—I know this, because I was there—was down to people who had been recruited as nurses in Dundee from schools and who formed the major part of the air

evacuation team. It is an opportunity that people should not be allowed to miss.

Rona Mackay: To put an alternative view to what we have been hearing, and one that is also the petitioners' view, the armed forces make more visits to state schools than any other public sector organisation. There is evidence of the armed forces cold calling at schools; they are not always invited. I am extremely concerned that they also visit, on occasion, primary schools and special schools.

On recruitment, of course the forces are not going to sign up children there and then; it is a subliminal thing. No organisation would do that and that is not the point. It is indisputable that they are there to say what a good career choice it is to go into the armed forces. I am far from convinced that we should close the petition. We should certainly have a report and we need to get further information.

10:45

Angus MacDonald: I value the comments from Edward Mountain, Maurice Corry and Michelle Ballantyne, who have a background in the armed forces. I take on board much of what they say. However, attempts to shut down the petition are premature. The views that Edward Mountain put forward give weight to the need for the committee to compile and publish a report, to give justice to the petitioners as well as to the armed forces. I reiterate my request that the committee consider a report on the petition as a way forward, given the polarised views that there clearly are.

The Convener: I am in the happy position of not being polarised. I am struck by the fact that the Scottish Government seems to be content with where we have got to. In the evidence that we took from the Scottish Government, it felt that the balance is right and that there are safeguards. The issue is really about safeguards. There may be folk who think that there should be no safeguards, and there are other folk who think that under no circumstances should the armed forces be allowed to go into schools. There is a middle ground, which is where I feel the Scottish Government sits.

I am interested by that and by the sense that there has been movement and that it is useful for young people to be given proper advice on the range of things that the armed forces do. The discussion has been useful in illuminating that. I suggest that, on balance, the committee thinks that we should have a report. A lot has been put on the record today, but that would afford the opportunity to highlight a less black-and-white view of the role of the armed services. We can also explore further what those safeguards might look like and the extent to which the Scottish

Government feels that they have already been established.

Do we agree with Angus MacDonald's proposal that we should not close the petition but should instead provide a report ahead of doing so that highlights the issues?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: You look sceptical, Brian.

Brian Whittle: I think that we are questioning the judgment of teachers. I would close the petition if I had the choice.

Michelle Ballantyne: My choice would be to close it.

The Convener: That is a legitimate point to make but, obviously, we seek to build a consensus. It is important that we test the suggestion that schools are railroaded, although we recognise the autonomy of schools and teachers in making some of those decisions.

I thank Edward Mountain for attending.

Parking (Legislation) (PE1616)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1616, by John Shaw, on parking legislation. When we considered the petition in October, we agreed to ask the Scottish Government to notify the committee when the findings of a recent consultation on improving parking in Scotland were published, which was anticipated to be during autumn 2017. In correspondence with the clerks last week, the Scottish Government confirmed that publication has been delayed until the end of March.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Angus MacDonald: Given that the findings of the consultation have not yet been published, we should defer further consideration of the petition until we have sight of the consultation findings.

The Convener: Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Child Welfare Hearings (PE1631)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1631, by Maureen McVey, on child welfare hearings. We last considered the petition in October. Members will recall that the family law committee of the Scottish Civil Justice Council commissioned research on case management last year. One of the recommendations of the research was to use note sheets to ensure that information flows between sheriffs in situations where scheduling means that the same sheriff cannot remain with the case.

A sub-committee was set up to consider the research. At our meeting in October, we therefore agreed to ask the Scottish Government to provide an update on the sub-committee's consideration of the research. The Scottish Government's written submission states that the recommendation to use note sheets was rejected by the sub-committee, for a range of reasons as outlined in our meeting papers. The Government's submission also highlights that the Scottish Civil Justice Council agreed to carry out a consultation on the report by the sub-committee on case management in family actions, but that there is currently no timetable for that consultation.

The petitioner does not agree with the reasons that the sub-committee provided for the decision to reject the use of note sheets. The petitioner is also of the view that one possible solution to address the concerns raised in the petition could be to hold hearings in specialist family law courts in Glasgow and Edinburgh, as those courts may be better equipped to deal with adversarial welfare hearings.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Michelle Ballantyne: On a point of clarification, in suggesting that hearings are dealt with in special courts, was the petitioner suggesting that all people should travel to those courts? That kind of leapt out at me and I am slightly unclear on that.

The Convener: I am not sure, but we can ask about that. I am attracted to the argument about specialist courts, but there might be a question about whether specialists will be able to travel.

Michelle Ballantyne: That is the issue that I have. I absolutely support the concept of a specialist court, but the practical reality of that would mean that some people would be asked to travel potentially long distances, which would undermine the position and not support or help it. We have seen that with the closure of local courts in rural areas, which is causing intense problems for people. I therefore have some dubiety about that suggestion.

Brian Whittle: We could define a specialist court as the expertise in the court. I know that specialist family lawyers travel between courts. However, as Michelle Ballantyne has alluded to, having fixed specialist courts would exacerbate the issue.

The Convener: To be fair, my sense is that the petitioner is trying to find a solution since the solution that has been offered is not acceptable. I have to say that I found the argument against written notes—that it is all too complicated—totally unsatisfactory. We know that, if for example folk have to call the police consistently over a period of time because of a problem neighbour, one issue is

that they have to keep telling the story time and again. The petitioner's argument was that, in their experience, a lot of the information was not captured, so they had to tell the story again and again, which they felt was to the detriment of the young person whose welfare was being addressed. That is a concern.

Michelle Ballantyne: I understand what you say and, logically, that would be the thought. However, in my experience of child welfare hearings, we got quite bogged down with notes from meetings about who said what and whether that was correct. I therefore have some empathy with the response.

The Convener: The problem with the logic of that argument is that, if we cannot capture that information in written form, who is capturing it? The petitioner's frustration is that the story that they were trying to tell was never told properly, because it was never captured.

Rona Mackay: The issue promotes even further the argument for digital technology. That would solve it. If it is recorded, there is no need for notes. However, I suggest that that needs to be speeded up.

Brian Whittle: At least it allows for a transcript.

Rona Mackay: Yes—that is right.

The Convener: The issues will be a matter of dispute, anyway. The reality is that they are difficult issues, and it does not seem to me to solve them by simply not recording the fact that they are in dispute. There have been all sorts of arguments, but I feel that they kind of miss the frustration, which was about having to rehearse the situation again and again.

Michelle Ballantyne: Writing back and forth will not get us anywhere, because people will keep coming back with different views. If we want to pursue the issue, perhaps we need to have people in the room and have a conversation to explore the issues. I have to say that I am not sure that we are the right people to do it. Perhaps the petition can go somewhere to be explored in more depth.

It is complicated. Time is a big factor in a lot of cases. It is important to ensure that people come in prepared and well versed in each case. The situation is uncomfortable and there are lots of problems. I am just slightly doubtful about whether the committee will get very far on the issue by writing back and forth to people.

The Convener: We are not going to do that. It feels wasteful of time for a welfare hearing not to have to hand the evidence that has already been accumulated. Simply not recording it does not solve the problem with the complexities in the system. In fact, my view is the opposite to yours, as I think that recording would clarify.

Michelle Ballantyne: To be fair, I did not say that it would not. I said that, in my experience, there were issues with it, so I understand where the responses are coming from. I am not saying that they are right. My key point is that we need to give some thought to the issue. I recognise the issue, the petitioner recognises the issue and probably the judiciary would recognise it, but the question is where that issue needs to go to be properly discussed.

Brian Whittle: Personally, I am with the convener on this one. I do not understand why on earth the information is not recorded. I agree with Michelle Ballantyne that we do not want to write back and forward. I am interested to have somebody sit in the committee and tell me why not recording that sort of information somehow helps the judicial system.

Michelle Ballantyne: There are notes; it is not having verbatim notes that is the issue.

Rona Mackay: I am pretty sure that the lack of recording is down to a lack of technical ability in the courts right now.

The Convener: By recording, I just meant taking a note.

Rona Mackay: Sorry—I thought that you meant a digital recording.

The Convener: I do not even think that it should be a verbatim report. Why cannot a written note of what happened be produced to pass on to whoever will deal with the case next?

Rona Mackay: It does not need to be a lengthy case history.

The Convener: I suggest that we ask the Government for its view on the notion of fixed or moving specialist courts. It feels as if the petitioner is trying to move in order to be helpful. Perhaps we could get an update on the consultation on the report on case management in family actions. By having a sub-committee, it seems to me that the Scottish Civil Justice Council recognises that there is an issue. I am intrigued by that. Is there anything else we might do?

Michelle Ballantyne: Is it worth asking some of the larger charities that provide advocacy and support for children and child welfare cases? They will have a good view on it.

The Convener: We could maybe check what we have already done on that.

Michelle Ballantyne: I am behind the curve on that.

The Convener: I cannot recall, but we could maybe ask again whether it is an issue and, if it is, how we manage that without being overly burdensome while addressing the petitioner's

argument that not doing it is creating a different kind of burden. Is it agreed that we write to the Scottish Government about the specialist courts issue; ask for an update on the consultation; and perhaps consider what charities and others might say on the question?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Drinking Water Supplies (PE1646)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1646, by Caroline Hayes, which is on drinking water supplies in Scotland. The petition calls for a review of the role of the drinking water quality regulator for Scotland and for independent research into the safety of chlorination of drinking water.

We last considered the petition at our meeting on 26 October 2017. Submissions considered at that meeting reflected that there is no requirement or support for a review of the role of the drinking water quality regulator. However, we agreed to ask Scottish Water what measures it has in place to monitor the safety of drinking water in Scotland.

In its submission, Scottish Water explains that the purpose of chloramination is to ensure that drinking water remains free of harmful bacteria as it travels through the network to customer homes. As our briefing paper identifies, the Scottish Water submission focuses almost entirely on the specific issue of the drinking water supply in the Badenoch and Strathspey area. It does, however, set out some of the measures that it takes to monitor the safety of the water, including on-line telemetry analysis and “enhanced” sampling and analysis, in addition to the regulatory sampling and analysis process.

In her submission, the petitioner expresses a degree of dissatisfaction with Scottish Water’s submission. She sets out concerns about the disinfection process and the potential adverse health impacts of the disinfectant by-products generated through this process. The briefing note refers to recent correspondence to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee from the cabinet secretary, which highlights that one of Scottish Water’s priorities within its six-year investment programme is to maintain high quality drinking water.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

11:00

Brian Whittle: I have recently received a number of letters from Ayrshire constituents saying that they had a letter through the door saying, “Your water will now have this” without any kind of consultation or explanation. That worries me greatly. Obviously it also worries my

constituents greatly because they do not know what chloramination will involve over the piece. My long-ago background is in chemistry but I do not quite understand the implications of that.

The letter talks about “keeping the community on board” and “effective consumer engagement” but just writing to someone to tell them that their water is now going to have chloramination is not keeping the consumer on board. It raises some serious issues about the implications and implementation of changes within our water.

The Convener: Would your concerns be satisfied if we referred the petition to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, given that it is doing some work on water and water quality?

Brian Whittle: I think so. We should do that but I just wanted to put that on the record. The referral should say that such consumer engagement is apparently not happening.

The Convener: Thank you. Are there any other views?

Angus MacDonald: There is certainly a strong argument to refer the petition to the ECCLR Committee. However, I serve on that committee so I am aware of its workload and there is no work on Scottish Water or water quality imminent. Could we hold on to the petition to ask the Scottish Government to respond to the petitioner’s concerns first, then consider passing it to the ECCLR Committee? I am happy to try to move it forward at the ECCLR Committee if that is the decision of the Public Petitions Committee today.

The Convener: My understanding is that the ECCLR Committee is having the chief executive of Scottish Water in. Of itself, that would not necessarily be sufficient to address the petitioner’s issues but it might afford an opportunity to ask some of the questions. The other point is that we could do that, or the ECCLR Committee could do it; it is about taking forward the petition most productively.

Brian Whittle: It has to be taken forward in some manner or other.

Rona Mackay: I think so. The Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee might have more time to dig deeper into it than we do; it has been taking evidence on water so it fits well. I appreciate what Angus MacDonald said about workloads but I am not sure what more we can do if alternative work is being done in another committee. I would refer it.

Angus MacDonald: I am happy with that, convener, and happy to try to move it forward at the other committee.

The Convener: That is exceptionally helpful. We agree that we will refer the petition to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee for its consideration. Perhaps the clerks can ensure that all the comments on the petition, specifically the issues raised by Brian Whittle, are highlighted to the committee.

Literacy Standards (Schools) (PE1668)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1668 by Anne Glennie on improving literacy standards in schools through research-informed reading instruction.

We first considered the petition in November 2017, when we took evidence from the petitioner and supporters. Subsequently, we have received six submissions, which present two different and clear perspectives on the action called for in the petition. On the one hand, there are the submissions that acknowledge that there is a place for systematic synthetic phonics but say that it should be within a package of measures or tools to allow teachers to apply what they consider to be the most suitable approach for an individual pupil. The other argument, which has been presented by the petitioner and supporters, is that because of the limitations and “little official guidance” in the curriculum for excellence and the primary 1 literacy assessment and action resource, teachers are hindered in being able to fully consider the most appropriate approach for pupils.

In his submission, the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills says that he is

“not convinced it would be helpful to prescribe one particular approach to teaching reading.”

He does, however, acknowledge that there is a need for improvements to be made in literacy attainment levels. He indicates that, to address this, he has invited Education Scotland, alongside the General Teaching Council for Scotland, to develop a new self-evaluation framework that is designed to support teacher training establishments and to develop a shared understanding of what can be done collectively to secure improvements.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Michelle Ballantyne: Ironically, I am going to agree with the Deputy First Minister. I have been doing a lot of work on this stuff outside of the Public Petitions Committee and one system does not fit all by any stretch of the imagination.

Although the petitioner has some good points about phonics, systematic synthetic phonics is one type of phonics. It is one approach and I do not believe that it is right to put one approach down as

a way forward for reading. Different children learn differently. They need different things and isolating one method is not the way forward. It often takes a combination of methods to promote effective literacy.

We have quite a lot of evidence in the papers so I am satisfied a huge amount of work is being undertaken on this. A lot of the universities, including the University of Glasgow, are engaged in it, so I do not see the benefit of pursuing the petition. More work does need to be done but I do not think that this particular petition with its narrow approach is the right way to go.

Brian Whittle: After we heard this petition, I was surprised to be bombarded by people who had strong opinions on this. The argument was rather unexpected.

I agree with Michelle Ballantyne—the one-size-fits-all approach that seems to be being advocated by both sides of this does not wash with me. Perhaps there is a lack of research. I would quite like to seek the Deputy First Minister’s ideas. There is insufficient provision of research on the issue and I wonder where that research is going. As I say, the petition has had a strong reaction and it would be interesting to hear the Deputy First Minister’s idea of how we can move forward while being informed.

The Convener: I thought there was a bit of straw people being cut down in the argument. The papers from both sides show that neither side says that one size fits all; we should put it in context. I found the argument that, for young people who might not have the richest of vocabulary and the support that is required to interrogate words or to guess or try to make an intelligent assessment of what the word might mean, mechanical breaking down of the words makes sense.

I was really taken aback by the controversy that the petition generated. The Education and Skills Committee took evidence from people who are going through initial teacher education and one of the comments they made was they did not feel they get enough training on literacy and numeracy to support them in order to teach children. I would be quite interested in what they do with this. What is prescribed? What are the expectations of all teachers? Certainly one of the big arguments of the last period was that literacy and numeracy are not simply the responsibility of the maths and English departments. I would be quite interested in whether that kind of approach is contextualised into initial teacher education. I agree with Brian Whittle that we should be asking the Deputy First Minister the question about research into training.

Brian Whittle: It opened up another avenue for me in the general consensus that the current

teaching of English and maths works for 80 per cent of children, but that other 20 per cent might look for a different way of learning, and that speaks again to the educational support mechanism. Where does the teaching of English through phonics lie? Is it within general mainstream or is it with those children who respond better to that kind of need? How do we do that?

The Convener: The people who reacted to the evidence that we heard said, “Wait a minute, it would have to be in the context of other things and there would have to be other options”. On reflection, I was struck that, at the time, we all found the evidence very interesting. I suppose the question is, if the method is so self-evidently successful, why do people turn their faces from it? If it is so good, why would people who care about the education of our young people wilfully not do it? That is what I mean about the straw people argument. They are probably closer than either side has characterised. You would not just have one way of doing things; there are as many ways as there are young people and the needs that they have.

Michelle Ballantyne: It is about the limitations of a single method. Systematic synthetic phonics is about learning the letters and putting them together to make the sound, whereas the other side of the argument is about comprehension, not just words. Some studies and research have been done at the University of Strathclyde, where they are finding that, yes, they have learnt that and they can read it but then when you ask them, “What was it about? What happened?” the analytical side has been lost and they do not have the comprehension. The real concern is that children have to have that balance.

After hundreds of years of schooling, I find it odd that we are sitting here having this discussion about how to teach people to read. It is this thing about fashionable ways of doing it rather than saying that different things need to come together to make it work.

There is nothing wrong with systematic synthetic phonics in itself but the petitioner is saying that it should be the way we teach literacy. The evidence does not support that. It is one part of a puzzle and that was what the Deputy First Minister was saying.

The Convener: The only thing I would say in response to that is that, in their own evidence, the petitioner says that they are not saying it is the only option but they feel it is an option that is excluded. That is what we are trying to explore.

Do we agree to write to the Deputy First Minister, as has been indicated, and to write to the initial teacher education institutions to ask how they contextualise this kind of training?

Members indicated agreement.

Scottish Electoral System (PE1670)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1670 by James Cassidy, on reforming the Scottish electoral system to make it democratic and accountable.

At our last consideration of the petition, in October, we agreed to seek the views of the Scottish Government and the Electoral Commission on the action that is called for in the petition. The Electoral Commission’s submission sets out some concerns about the impact of any removal of the dual candidacy process and notes that the issue of dual candidacy has not been reflected as an issue in any of its attitudinal research conducted following each Scottish Parliament election to date.

The Scottish Government also observes that dual candidacy is not an issue that it has been contacted about recently. It refers to its plans to conduct a consultation, and our briefing paper confirms that the consultation ran from 19 December 2017 and closed at the start of this week, on Monday 12 March. In its correspondence, the Scottish Government indicates that, if responses to the consultation reflect dual candidacy as an issue, it will give the matter further consideration.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Michelle Ballantyne: I would close the petition.

The Convener: I should say that one party argued to legislate for this. Once the legislation was not agreed, because there was no appetite for it, there was a shift—certainly, in my party—because members felt that it was self-denying ordinance that was not present elsewhere in the system, although I think that we can see it in the Welsh example. It would be interesting to know why the Welsh moved to that position and then moved away from it again.

We have a choice. We could ask the Scottish Government for its timescale for publication of the outcomes of its consultation or we could simply close the petition on the basis that the Scottish Government will give us that information.

11:15

Rona Mackay: I am inclined to close it, because the outcome will be forthcoming and that will be the answer to the petition.

Michelle Ballantyne: It looks only at one side of the fence, if you like, because there are parties that do not put up any constituency candidates and, therefore, do much better on the list because

they are not affected by the multiplier of not having any constituency candidates. I do not know that it stacks it up in terms of what the electorate think. Whatever process we choose, there will be a problem with it in some form or other. It will never be perfect.

The Convener: It may be that, because we have a self-interest in the matter, it is more difficult for us to provide an objective way forward. Perhaps it is a matter for the Scottish Government. It has consulted broadly and the outcome must be within the guidelines of the Electoral Commission.

Michelle Ballantyne: The Electoral Commission is neutral in this, whereas we and the Parliament are not. If the Electoral Commission is satisfied, I do not think we can really argue with that.

Brian Whittle: It was an interesting thought process, and my conclusion was that it would drive a different behaviour in candidates on whether they would stand in a constituency or whether they would decide not to do that and would stay on the list. It would drive a different behaviour, and different kinds of candidates would be put forward in constituencies. It would open up a whole minefield.

The Convener: We did it. There is no perfect system, in my view—both systems have good and bad consequences.

Angus MacDonald: I have nothing to add, convener.

The Convener: Do you have a view on whether we should close the petition?

Angus MacDonald: I am struck by the fact that, as we are told in the committee papers, the petitioner has contacted only his seven regional list members of the Scottish Parliament. He does not seem to have contacted the Electoral Commission to make his views known, which I would have thought would have been one of the first steps to take. Of course, that option is still open to him. I am minded to close the petition.

The Convener: Do we agree to close the petition on the ground that the Scottish Government has indicated that it will give further consideration to the action that is called for in the petition should the matter of dual candidacy be raised as a significant issue in responses to its consultation?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We thank the petitioner for lodging the petition. There is always an opportunity to revisit the issue through a further petition if the consultation highlights such concerns.

Glue Traps (PE1671)

The Convener: The final petition for consideration today is PE1671 by Lisa Harvey and Andrea Goddard, on behalf of Let's Get MAD For Wildlife, on the sale and use of glue traps.

At our first consideration of the petition, in October 2017, we took evidence from the petitioners and agreed to seek the views of a range of stakeholders from the pest control profession and from animal welfare groups. As our briefing note identifies, the responses that we received acknowledge the concerns and issues that are raised by the petition. The submissions indicate support for restrictions on the sale of glue traps and their use by members of the public. The principal conflict between the submissions is about whether there should be an outright ban or whether glue traps should be available to professionals in the pest control sector.

The submissions from the pest control industry argue the need to keep the glue traps available for use in the profession on the ground of public health. They highlight that any professional in the pest control sector should be sufficiently trained and qualified in the use of glue traps. The British Pest Control Association highlights the fact that there is currently

“no clear definition of professional pest control operatives.”

The submissions from the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the British Veterinary Association and the Humane Society International UK indicate that they would ultimately like to see a total ban on the sale and use of glue traps and that, at the very least, any use of them in the pest control sector should be subject to strict requirements.

The petitioners welcome the fact that all the responses acknowledge the need to restrict the sale of glue traps and their use by the general public. They acknowledge the public health perspective that is presented by the pest control industry submissions but suggest that it is the responsibility of that industry to come up with new, humane and effective pest control mechanisms.

The Scottish Government outlines three options that it is currently considering on the use of glue traps and indicates that it would be interested to hear the committee's views on those options.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Rona Mackay: Personally, I think that these traps should be banned, but I would like to hear evidence from the minister and the cabinet secretary about them, because the issue may be affected by the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill anyway, as it is an animal welfare issue. It is a moving picture but, ultimately, I personally would

like to see them banned. Evidence would be good, so we could know where we are with the issue.

The Convener: Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: I found the evidence horrific. I respect the fact that professionals working in the field may be able to choose other options, but it would be interesting to see what they could possibly be. We can only accept that they have professional expertise, although the fact that the definition of a professional is vague is also an issue.

We are agreed to invite the Scottish Government to give evidence at a future meeting. That might not necessarily be the minister; it may be the officials who are operating in the field. If you would prefer to hear from the minister, we can simply ask for the minister.

Michelle Ballantyne: Why would the minister be the best person to give evidence on why a partial ban would be appropriate? I am slightly confused by that.

The Convener: I would be interested in hearing from either the minister or Scottish Government officials, but the minister might be an easier way to do it. It is simply to look at what the Government is doing, what options are open to it and what it perceives to be the strengths and weaknesses of each of the arguments.

Brian Whittle: A simple question for me would be how a professional in that particular arena is defined.

The Convener: That may be the kind of question that the Government is wrestling with, which makes it not absolutely convinced about the introduction of a total ban. We would not be precluded from taking evidence and presentations from other groups if that would be useful. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: That is the end of our public consideration of petitions.

11:22

Meeting continued in private until 11:28.

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