



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 24 January 2012

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE
1st Meeting 2012, Session 4

CONVENER

*David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP)

*Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab)

*Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Bill Walker (Dunfermline) (SNP)

*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Tuesday 24 January 2012

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 14:00*]

Interests

The Convener (David Stewart): Good afternoon and welcome to this meeting of the Public Petitions Committee. I remind everyone to switch off mobile phones and electronic devices.

On behalf of the committee, I record our thanks to Neil Bibby for his contribution to the committee, and I ask the clerk to send him a note of our thanks. I welcome Anne McTaggart, who replaces Mr Bibby on the committee.

Item 1 is declaration of interests. In accordance with section 3 of the code of conduct, I invite Anne McTaggart to declare any interests that are relevant to the committee's remit.

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): I direct people to my declaration of interests on the Scottish Parliament website. I also note that I am currently an elected member of Glasgow City Council.

The Convener: Thank you for that. Does Bill Walker want to say something?

Bill Walker (Dunfermline) (SNP): I declare that I remain an elected member of Fife Council.

New Petitions

Marriage (PE1413)

14:01

The Convener: Item 2 is consideration of new petitions. There is one new petition to consider today, which is PE1413, in the name of Amy King, on preserving marriage. Paper 1, which is the note by the clerk, refers members to the Scottish Parliament information centre briefing and the petition. I invite the committee to consider the petition and the briefing, and to discuss what action to take. As always, possible options are set out in the note by the clerk.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the petition that is before us today. It would be normal practice for me to argue that we should give it a good airing. However, given that the matter is subject to a Scottish Government consultation, of which we await the outcome, I respectfully request that we put the petition on the back burner until the Government has released the consultation result. We can then bring the petition back to the committee, along with the consultation response, for further discussion. If we do otherwise, we may pre-empt a useful and interesting debate that may take place once the Government has released the consultation result.

Bill Walker: I wish that John Wilson would not steal my speeches. I support what he said. This is a valid matter, but it has been subject to a very heavy consultation and the Scottish Government is considering it. It is a question of timing, and I do not think that now is the right time. We should perhaps advise the Scottish Government of our interest through some mechanism, find out what the outcome of the consultation is and consider the matter at that point.

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I was not going to come in on the petition, but I feel that, as the petition is before us and the petitioner is here, we should hear about it. There is no legislation at present, but a consultation has been conducted. After listening to the petitioner, we could then write to the Scottish Government to ask it what its thoughts are and what responses it has received. There is not necessarily a huge number of people for us to write to, but we could still write to the Scottish Government.

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): I note that the petitioner has, along with a huge number of organisations and individuals, fed into the consultation process that is taking place. Looking at the clerk's note and in relation to the possibility of seeking information, I think that, although we could write to the organisations that

are listed in the note to ask for their views on the petition, we could probably give their views here today—their responses to the issue that is raised in the petition are no secret. This is a particularly divisive issue, and people are generally either on one side or the other.

However, it would be pre-emptive to consider the petition before the response to the consultation has come out. We should write to the Scottish Government, notify it that we have received the petition and have decided to await the outcome of the consultation, and ask whether it would be so kind as to notify us of the outcome. At that point, if the committee so decides, we can pick up the petition and look at it further.

We should be aware that, if legislation is introduced as a result of the consultation, it will be subject to scrutiny by one of the Parliament's other committees. I would be wary of the duplication of effort that would occur if we considered the petition while another committee was scrutinising legislation on the issue. We should write to the Scottish Government with the request that I mentioned. We can decide what to do with the petition when we receive the response to the consultation.

The Convener: It seems to me that Mark McDonald has made a sensible suggestion that is in line with other members' views. Is my understanding shared by other members of the committee?

Sandra White: I do not want to split the committee and lead us to a vote, although I am at liberty to do so. If Mark McDonald's suggestion is the wish of the majority of the committee, I will happily go along with it.

The Convener: The issue is undoubtedly extremely important. As members have said, the Scottish Government has held a comprehensive consultation—more than 50,000 people have responded to it. I stress that in no sense are we putting the petition on the back burner. It is important that we await proper feedback from the Scottish Government. Once we have that, we will be perfectly at liberty to reopen the discussion and consider any of the various options that are open to us. I make that clear; I would not want there to be any suggestion that we are in some sense shirking our responsibility.

Bill Walker: We do not know what the Scottish Government will decide to do, if anything, so it would be appropriate to consider the petition at a later stage. We are not not considering it; it is just that the timing is not quite right. That is why I support what the convener has said.

The Convener: It is within the committee's power to take any action that we consider appropriate. We will keep the petition open and

write to the Scottish Government to say that we have received it. We want to get feedback from the Scottish Government on what its next steps will be and the response to the consultation. As Mark McDonald said, there might be legislation, which will go to another committee.

That is a summary of members' views. Do members agree that we should take that step?

Members indicated agreement.

Current Petitions

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

14:08

The Convener: There are six current petitions for consideration today. PE1124, in the name of Louise Robertson, on behalf of the League Against Cruel Sports, calls on the Scottish Government to ban the manufacture, sale, possession and use of all snares. Members have a note by the clerk, which is paper 2, and the written submissions. I invite members to comment.

Mark McDonald: The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs confirmed in November 2011 that it intends to publish its research “this year”. I do not know whether it was referring to the financial year to April 2012 or the 2011 calendar year. We should perhaps find out.

I realise that the petition has been on the go for a while, but it would be pre-emptive to close it before we have seen what DEFRA produces. When the DEFRA research is published, it will be appropriate for us to decide whether to pursue the petition or close it.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I agree. We have kept the petition going for a considerable time in order to get the DEFRA research. It is only fair to keep it open until we have the report.

John Wilson: I support Mark McDonald’s suggestion that we keep the petition open. I ask only that we write to DEFRA and ask when it expects the report to be available.

As I understand it, the report on the consultation was pulled together in 2010, and it would be useful to get an indication from DEFRA as to when it intends to publish the report—or if it intends to publish it at all. We are talking about keeping the petition open and waiting for the DEFRA report, but my understanding is that the report has been written and is awaiting a decision in another place. If we keep the petition open, I would like us to have a clear date to work towards, rather than continually deferring closure until the report is available.

The Convener: I understand from the clerk and from communication with DEFRA that the report’s publication is imminent—it depends what is meant by “imminent”, of course. We will certainly do what John Wilson suggests. He makes a good point.

Are members happy to continue to keep the petition open and await the DEFRA research but emphasise to DEFRA that we would like an early

response so that we can deal with the petition in the light of that research?

Members *indicated agreement.*

A92 Upgrade (PE1175)

The Convener: PE1175, in the name of Dr Robert Grant, on behalf of the Glenrothes Area Futures Group, is on the A82 upgrade—sorry, the A92 upgrade; that was a Freudian slip, I think. Members have a note from the clerk, which is paper 3, and the submissions.

I welcome Claire Baker MSP, the local member, who is here for the petition. She has taken a keen interest in it. Does she wish to make any comments and suggestions for action to the committee?

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank the committee for considering the petition.

People throughout Fife are greatly concerned about whether the A92 is fit for purpose. They are concerned about safety. We have had tragic incidents on the road in recent years and there is a real feeling that people are starting to lose confidence in it. They are also concerned about economic potential and whether the road is capable of supporting the development that is needed for growth and investment in Glenrothes and north-east Fife.

The petition focuses on two junctions in particular: the Balfarg and Cadham junctions. I acknowledge the hard work of local campaigners, who have raised a lot of support for the petition and worked hard to bring it to the Parliament. They have secured a Scottish transport appraisal guidance report into those areas, although I share their frustration about the lack of action that has followed that report and I know that they have some concerns about the STAG criteria that are used to appraise roads.

Local and community activists will continue to campaign for improvements to the road. They will be disappointed if today is the end of the campaign’s parliamentary journey, but I welcome the committee’s consideration of the petition and the detailed consideration that it has given the matter over recent years.

The Convener: I thank Claire Baker for that and ask her to stay with us for the discussion, which I throw open to committee members for their comments and views.

Nanette Milne: I appreciate the effort that the local community has put into the campaign. I am not particularly familiar with the road myself, but such roads issues are extremely important to local communities.

My only concern about keeping the petition open is that we have been round the houses with Transport Scotland and various other bodies and I cannot see where the petition can go. I do not know how other members of the committee will feel but, reluctantly, I suggest that we close it. I am open to suggestions from other members.

Bill Walker: I hear everything that Claire Baker says and agree with much of the feeling behind it. I am the local member at the Dunfermline end of the road but, unfortunately, I do not see what more we can do with the petition. Things are happening, albeit too slowly, and I do not know what more the committee can do, although it is sympathetic. Reluctantly, I agree with Nanette Milne and propose that we close not the road but the petition.

Mark McDonald: I reluctantly agree with Nanette Milne's and Bill Walker's comments. The campaigners deserve a great amount of credit for the work that they have undertaken.

However, the avenues that are open to the committee to pursue the issue are limited, if not closed off. With regret, I think that we must close the petition. However, in doing so, we must encourage the local campaigners to continue their campaign and wish them success. We all know campaigners in our constituencies who are campaigning for particular road improvements and we must appreciate and accept that the Government will select its priority areas for investment and work. I wish the campaigners success in future; I just think that the committee has reached the end of the road—we have gone as far as we can go.

14:15

The Convener: Thank you. Do other members want to comment?

Sandra White: I agree with others' comments and thank Claire Baker for coming. I think that this is the second time that she has come along to the committee—

Claire Baker: It might be the third time.

Sandra White: The third time—that is right. I thank her for the work that she has been doing in the area, along with locals and other local members.

I agree with Nanette Milne and Bill Walker. Lots of work has been done and the locals will continue their work. I know that they have been involved with local members and Government. We can only close the petition.

The Convener: I thank members for their comments—it is quite clear where the committee is going.

I thank Claire Baker for coming today; I know that Bill Walker has worked hard, too. The campaign will continue locally. I suggest that we close the petition and write to the campaigners to congratulate them on the strength of their campaign and thank them for all the impressive work that they have done on it. Do members agree?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you.

Youth Football (PE1319)

The Convener: PE1319, which was lodged by William Smith and Scott Robertson, is about improving youth football. Members have a note by the clerk, which is paper 4, a briefing from the Scottish Parliament information centre, and submissions. There was a helpful article on the RealGrassroots campaign in *The Herald* today. It was well written and put the arguments extremely well.

I remind members that I am a trustee of Inverness Caledonian Thistle Football Club.

Sandra White: I am not a member of a board, but I thoroughly enjoy football and I would like our young people to be trained up so that we can have a great national team and be as successful as some of the European teams are—FC Barcelona is one of my favourites and I would love to watch some of the Scottish teams play like that.

When I looked through the papers I was shocked by the contract issue. I am a lay person, so I did not realise that kids are tied into a contract for three years—the Scottish Football Association says that it is for a year—and that if they want out of the contract or back in again they must appeal to the secretary. There are dangers in that approach. I would dearly love our consideration of the petition to continue. We need to look into the issue, particularly the SFA's point of view, in greater detail.

I congratulate RealGrassroots on what it is trying to achieve. Such an approach is taken in other countries in Europe and we should perhaps take the good points from, if not emulate, what is going on. It is quite frightening to think that a young person can enter into a contract for three years and not be allowed to play school football or for other teams. I am concerned about the whole thing—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, the clerk is reminding me that the petition is not necessarily about young people playing for other football teams. We must think about the future of football in Scotland, and youth football is the start of that. I will listen to other members' comments, but I think that we need to investigate the whole issue, particularly in relation to the SFA and others.

Bill Walker: I declare an interest as a long-serving, longsuffering fan of Heart of Midlothian Football Club.

Sandra White put it well, and I am all for helping to develop football, too. There are many positive aspects, despite some of the negative stuff—I am thinking about recent behaviour. I am concerned that very young people are tied into contracts, even when there is parental guidance and so on. It is a big issue. We should continue our consideration of the petition and look into the issue a bit more.

Mark McDonald: As you know, convener, I am keen that we continue the petition. I found some of the responses quite interesting, particularly the response from IFK Gothenburg and what it said about the comparisons that can be drawn between the experience of young players in Sweden and that of young players here. In relation to the school football issue, which Sandra White raised, it would appear that in Sweden there is no objection to players continuing to turn out for their school team as well as for IFK Gothenburg's youth team, provided that there is some form of liaison between the club and the school on the timing of matches and so on.

I am disappointed that we did not receive a response from the Scottish Professional Footballers Association. Given that it is, essentially, the trade union for footballers, I would have thought that it would have had some comments to make on contracts and compensation. I wonder whether, in addition to pursuing the recommendations of Sandra White and the clerks and continuing the petition, we might write again to the SPFA to ask it for its response to the petition, because it is important that the organisation that works on behalf of professional footballers in Scotland has some input to consideration of the petition.

Nanette Milne: I am not sure how other members of the committee feel about this, but the submission from RealGrassroots makes a number of suggestions about people from whom we could take further oral evidence. I know that we have taken quite a lot of oral evidence on the petition, but perhaps it would be worth inviting some or all of those people to discuss matters with the committee.

The Convener: My view is that the petition would be an ideal one on which to hold some sort of round-table event. I know that our predecessor committee took evidence on the petition, but some things have moved on.

Although I understand the point that FIFA and the Scottish Football Association make with some strength—that football is their responsibility and that our job lies somewhere else—it is clear that

issues arise to do with the employment of young people, the European convention on human rights and contracts generally. Those are areas in which we have a responsibility, and my view is that we should take up the suggestion from RealGrassroots. We should, however, let the clerk look at the detail of its suggestion, because it might not be appropriate for us to take evidence from all the organisations that it suggests.

One person whom I think it might be quite useful to invite to give evidence is Henry McLeish. As the author of the review of Scottish football and a prominent former First Minister, I think that he would have a lot to offer in a round-table event. Would members feel comfortable if we continued the petition and got the clerk to look into the detail of whom it would be appropriate to invite?

John Wilson: I accept that it might be possible to hold a round-table discussion, but our predecessor committee had Henry McLeish here on 5 October 2010 and, 12 months ago, it held a round-table discussion involving the SFA, the Minister for Public Health and Sport and representatives of two of the major football clubs in Scotland, so we need to be careful about having another round-table discussion on the petition.

Although I welcome the suggestion from RealGrassroots about which people we could invite, I would prefer to see something in writing from the organisations concerned before we set up another round-table discussion. Developments are under way. As the convener rightly identified, the debate has moved on quite a bit, particularly with the McLeish review and the fact that the SFA's structures are changing to accommodate it.

I support the clerk's recommendation that we write to the SFA to ask what discussions there have been within the organisation on contracts and compensation, in relation to which Trish Godman put on record her commitment in the previous session. When our predecessor committee discussed the issue, a number of comments were made and it was clear that there was a lack of clarity from the SFA on what was happening on the ground.

Although we got feedback from two major clubs, several other clubs—including Hearts, which has been mentioned—were disappointed that they were not asked to give evidence at the round-table discussion. Several Scottish clubs have good youth development programmes. The issue is how we sift through that to find out what is happening and what opportunities young people are being denied or given to participate fully in football at every level in their life.

As I said, we should ask the SFA whether there have been any developments or discussions. We should also write to the Scottish Government to

ask how it monitors the use of the public funds that go to the SFA from the cashback for communities programme. When the SFA gave evidence to our predecessor committee a year ago, it said that there were issues regarding public money but that the SFA had to be separated from the political system. However, the SFA receives a substantial amount of money from the cashback for communities programme. It would be useful to find out how that feeds into the youth football programme. The wider point in the petition is about how we develop football in future, not only at the local level, but at the national and international levels. Those issues could be raised to try to take the debate forward.

Nanette Milne: I do not think that our predecessor committee heard from the Scottish Youth Football Association—I cannot remember, but I see no mention of it in the papers that are before us. That organisation would have a relevant input so, if we were to have an evidence session, I would like it to be involved.

Mark McDonald: A round-table session on the issue would be worth while, although I query whether we should invite all the people whom RealGrassroots has listed, as that would not necessarily give us the balanced discussion that we want. Some individuals on the list have a particular niche interest, whereas we want a wider overview of the situation. We should write to some of the organisations that have been mentioned, particularly those that have not yet responded. At a future meeting, we can discuss whom to invite to a round-table session.

The issue of youth development in Scotland is extremely important and has been set in stark light recently because of the high-profile transfers of Scott Allan from Dundee United to West Bromwich Albion and Jack Grimmer from Aberdeen to Fulham. Those transfers have raised questions about how youth football and youth development in Scotland can produce players to ply their trade in Scotland.

The convener mentioned that the SFA and FIFA had suggested that we should not pay too much attention to the issue because, in essence, it is their domain. I do not have the statistics at my fingertips, but I suspect that a tiny percentage of the children who are currently on the books at football clubs will ever actually make it in the game. The issue is about who is responsible for the wider development of those youngsters and who, in essence, picks up the pieces when those kids are put on the scrap heap by football clubs. It is absolutely imperative that we take an interest in that. We should invite people for a round-table session once we have written to the various organisations and discussed the responses at a future meeting.

The Convener: Mark McDonald makes a strong point. All members are heading in the right direction, in that the suggestion that we hold a round-table session is good in principle. However, there is a stage before that that involves sifting through the information and seeking written evidence. We agree that, as representatives of the Scottish Parliament, we have a locus in the issue that relates to the employment—or otherwise—of young people, the European convention on human rights and the generation of sport. As John Wilson said, lots of public funding goes into football. We are not here to put a downer on the football management bodies in Scotland. Individually, we all have great faith in football. However, the petitioners have raised good points and the petition is original and strong. I suggest that we consider it carefully in what will be an interesting round-table session. We will organise that with the help of the clerk once we have further information.

Do members agree that we should continue this strong petition, with a view to having a round-table session once we have received written information, and to pursue the points that have been raised?

Members indicated agreement.

Lochboisdale-Mallaig Ferry Service (Reintroduction) (PE1394)

14:30

The Convener: The next petition is PE1394, in the name of Huw Francis, on reintroducing the Lochboisdale to Mallaig ferry service. Paper 5 is the clerk's note and refers to the submissions. Members know that I have a particular interest in ferry services and particularly in the development of this service. The petitioners have suggested a potential short-term solution, which would involve using a spare vessel. I take the point that, after contracts are allocated in the future, that vessel might not necessarily be free, but the petitioners are asking whether we could have a pilot using the vessel while it is free at the moment.

I am quite tempted by the fact that there is probably an argument for the petition to be referred to the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee on the basis that it is looking at the ferries review, albeit in the short term, and we have referred previous petitions to that committee. However, I am quite keen to find out a bit more detail from CalMac Ferries and the Scottish Government about the use of the spare vessel, although it has been pretty strongly ruled out by a Scottish Government official. I would certainly welcome members' views on the next step.

John Wilson: I support the idea of referring the petition to the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee on the basis that, as I understand it and as you indicated, convener, that committee is looking at the ferries review. It would be useful to pass the petition on. If we hold on to it any longer, we might miss the opportunity to get some pointers from that committee to assist either in re-establishing the ferry link or in getting a definitive answer from the Scottish Government on its intention for the ferry link. If we keep the petition, we might miss the review and, based on some of the information that we have received from the petitioners, there is an opportunity to pilot or trial run the ferry so that we can see how it would operate in the short term, with a longer-term view to getting a ferry reintroduced.

The Convener: For information, the clerk tells me that the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee is doing a one-off evidence session on the ferries review with the transport minister. It is not doing an in-depth inquiry, but nevertheless it is looking, albeit briefly, at the ferries review.

John Wilson: If that committee is going to have only one short session with the minister—I thought that it was going to have a longer review—and there is going to be only one opportunity to discuss the issue with the minister, it might be advisable for the Public Petitions Committee to continue with the petition. We might be able to examine the issues for longer and give them more consideration. However, I am open to other suggestions.

The Convener: The Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee clearly has responsibility for ferries and we have previously referred similar petitions to it. Just so that members are not confused about the ferries review, I say that it is on-going and has a consultation period. If the petition goes to that committee, it will consider it in due course.

Sandra White: Convener, I agree with you. I take on board John Wilson's point, but the proper course is to close the petition and pass it to the strategic committee. That is the best way of proceeding. We could also write a letter to ask Transport Scotland to take note of the petition and perhaps use it as part of the consultation that it is going through at the moment, if that would be any better.

The Convener: Thank you. Do members agree with that course of action?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Technically we are not closing the petition; we are referring it to the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee under rule 15.6.2 for further consideration as part of that committee's subject remit. I am sure that that

committee will take cognisance of my point about there being a spare vessel that could be part of a pilot scheme on the route, albeit that the Scottish Government is not particularly agreeable to that. That is the factual position.

Staffordshire Bull Terriers (PE1396)

The Convener: The fifth current petition is PE1396, in the name of Ian Robb of Help for Abandoned Animals, in Arbroath, on the overbreeding and abandonment of Staffordshire bull terriers. Members have a note by the clerk—it is paper PPC/S4/12/1/6—and the written submissions. I invite comments from members.

Nanette Milne: This is an important issue, with all sorts of people having an interest in it and all sorts of concerns. I support the proposal that we suggest that the Scottish Government take a lead in establishing a working group on the issue, involving the petitioner and all the different representatives from the local authorities, animal welfare charities, the National Dog Warden Association, the police service and the veterinary profession. The Government should get all those professional people together to see whether some way forward on the issue can be found. It is obviously an increasing problem.

Mark McDonald: The suggestion that a working group be established has much merit. A range of issues needs to be explored in more detail. It has always concerned me that, when a breeding licence is issued, it is not breed specific; therefore, there is no way of keeping track of the number of dogs of a particular breed that are being bred by licensed breeders.

There is the potential for people to purchase a certain breed of dog from a licensed breeder instead of taking one that requires to be rehomed due to abandonment. That issue could be considered in more detail.

The suggestion of a neutering and spaying scheme has some merit. The discussion about having particular policies for council tenants is helpful, but it is post the event and we need to tackle the source of the problem.

Are we allowing people to breed dogs and purchase dogs from licensed breeders when it would be better if people rehomed dogs that had been abandoned? I accept that that is perhaps taking the petition off at a slightly different tangent. Establishing the working group would allow discussion with a wider range of stakeholders, and we should recommend that to the Government.

Bill Walker: I agree with what has just been said. The problem is that such steps could apply to other breeds. We are talking about Staffies, but all sorts of other dogs—I could probably list six or

seven breeds—should be included in the action. From my purchasing and rehoming of dogs over the years, I know what goes on. The working group could be part of something—not bureaucratic—involving other breeds as well.

Sandra White: I wonder how a working group would operate. Mark McDonald raised the issue of housing, but I have issues with what is proposed—with social work being involved and that type of thing. It is important that we consider the dogs' welfare and address a situation that has been happening for many years, but I wonder whether the working group would be too wide ranging if the petitioner and various other groups were on it. Perhaps we should write to the Scottish Government, asking it to consider a working group based on Angus Council's model, which appears to be a good example of best practice, and see what comes back from that.

I have concerns about getting housing and social work staff involved, as the proposed group's remit would be very wide ranging. It is suggested that the petitioner and others should be involved, but other people who work in local authorities or with animals in local authority areas might want to be part of the working group. I wonder whether it would be beneficial to write to the Scottish Government first, asking it to consider setting up a working group and what that group would entail.

The Convener: That would be possible. It is clear that the committee wants to continue the petition and look in detail at the possibility of a working group. Sandra White makes a good point in suggesting that we ask the Scottish Government to consider that initially before we contact all the other people who are listed in the suggested options. Does the committee agree to that step?

Members indicated agreement.

Bill Walker: Are there working groups for other breeds? That relates to the point that I made earlier.

The Convener: I understand that a working group would go slightly wider than one breed, although it would be helpful to get clarification from the Scottish Government before we take the next step.

Nanette Milne: I agree. If the Scottish Government does not want to set up a working group, there is not much we can do about it, but if it does, we could suggest some groups that we think might be part of it.

John Wilson: I agree that it would be useful to ask the Scottish Government to consider setting up a working group to look into the issue. On Bill Walker's point, it might be worth asking the Government to consider widening the remit of the

group, if established. We know that other breeds are being overbred in relation to the demand for them, which in many cases is exaggerated.

If the Government sets up a working group, it would be useful if it provided us with a copy of the group's remit and a timetable for recommendations.

The Convener: That is a sensible suggestion. Do members agree to take that course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will continue the petition and write to the Scottish Government outlining the contributions from members and the contents of the clerk's note.

Access to Insulin Pump Therapy (PE1404)

The Convener: The sixth and final current petition is PE1404, in the name of Stephen Fyfe, on behalf of Diabetes UK Scotland, on access to insulin pump therapy. Members have a note from the clerk, paper PPC/S4/12/1/7, which refers to the submissions. I should point out that Nanette Milne and I are the co-conveners of the cross-party group on diabetes and we have taken a particular interest in the petition.

I am concerned about the huge variation across health boards in the provision of insulin pumps and about the fact that there are health boards that do not provide any insulin pumps for young people. This is an excellent opportunity for the committee to have a round-table evidence session and perhaps do a mini-inquiry. The whole committee, or perhaps committee representatives, could go to Glasgow, which has particular problems in the provision of insulin pumps, and we could visit a rural health board that has similar problems. We could then invite some of the key players to give evidence, such as Catriona Renfrew, the director of planning at NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, who has particularly strong views on the issue.

A good development is that Nicola Sturgeon has set out what she wants to achieve, with the aim of providing insulin pumps to 25 per cent of under-18s and the overall increase to 2,000 pumps. The problem appears to be that, although the Scottish Government is laying down quite legitimate targets, health boards are choosing to ignore them completely. I am sure that Nanette Milne, with her medical background, will have some points to make on that.

There does not seem to be a debate about whether insulin pumps are verifiable. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence has made that clear and appears to be disputing the medical necessity of insulin pumps, which is quite a different argument altogether.

We need to look at the issue, particularly in the context of new developments from the Scottish Government and the huge passport problems in which there is one service in one health board and a poor service in another. I am sure that members will allow me my views on the issue, because I have quite a lot of experience in this area. It would be useful for the committee to travel to Glasgow, which has particular problems with diabetes generally and problems in the health board's approach to the issue.

Nanette Milne: I agree—that is a useful suggestion.

I welcome Nicola Sturgeon's recent announcement and her determination that more people should benefit from insulin pumps. The Government expects to announce by the end of next month how it proposes to strengthen its approach and assist health boards to achieve the goals. I want to keep the petition open and find out what the Government is doing. However, I would happily follow the convener's suggestions.

14:45

Bill Walker: I agree with what has just been said. I hate the phrase "postcode lottery"—I think that you used the word "passport" just now, convener—but, when the petitioners spoke to us, I was shocked by the idea that the availability of insulin pumps is so variable. That just seemed wrong.

Everyone, not just the Government, believes that the use of insulin pumps is a cost-effective measure in the long term and is a good example of prudential investment. In economic terms, the issue becomes a cash-flow problem, as money is required to pay for the cost of the initiative at the beginning of the process.

I would like to continue the petition and see whether we can get a solution to the issue.

Sandra White: I agree with what other members have said and particularly with what Nanette Milne and the convener said about holding a round-table session and sending out members of the committee to find out about the issues and report back to the committee. I would be happy to take up the cudgels for the Glasgow area, where we have particular problems in this regard.

I think that the cabinet secretary is going to announce that, by 2013, all under-18s will have access to insulin pumps. We need to have a look at that. We also need to keep up pressure on health boards, if the cabinet secretary is determined to ensure that that happens.

Perhaps we could write to the cabinet secretary for an update. It might be too early, of course. I do

not know whether that would be within the committee's remit.

I am happy to go along with the suggestion that we keep the petition open and send out members of the committee to find out exactly what is happening on the ground.

Mark McDonald: I note that the Government hopes to make an announcement by the end of February 2012. I think that we should wait until we have heard that announcement before writing to the Government.

The one thing that bugs me is that we wrote to six NHS boards but received only four replies, and one of those that did not reply was NHS Western Isles, which had the lowest percentage of type 1 sufferers on insulin pumps. That is the most important response to have. I would like us to write to that board again and emphasise the importance of a response. We need to find out why its percentage is so low and get its response to the questions that we asked.

The Convener: For understandable reasons, I would be quite keen to go to the Western Isles, if that is possible.

Anne McTaggart: It is quite concerning that the health boards are aware of what the cabinet secretary has announced and yet are ignoring it, in a sense. We should most definitely keep the petition open. Like Sandra White, I am interested in pursuing the issue in Glasgow, which I know has a low uptake of the pumps.

The Convener: The clerk will consider some of the practical details. If we decide to examine the situation in Glasgow and the Western Isles, do all members wish to be involved or do we feel that only one or two members of the committee, and the clerks, should take part?

Bill Walker: I am quite happy with representatives making those inquiries. Glasgow is not too far to go, but I would volunteer to go to the Western Isles, as I have not been there for at least 10 years. This is not a big committee, but it makes economic sense for only two or three members to undertake the task.

The Convener: The clerk suggests, rightly, that she should come back to the committee with some practical details. We will do some more homework, but the general principle is that we are enthusiastic about the petition and feel that we should undertake a mini-inquiry into the situation in at least two areas, which would involve either all the committee members or representatives of the committee. We will keep an eye on the situation and will have a form of round-table session at some point, involving some of the key players. Diabetes UK Scotland has made some

suggestions about whom we should invite to attend.

Anne McTaggart: Are we going to write to NHS Western Isles, as Mark McDonald suggested?

The Convener: Yes—we will follow that up. I think that the mini-inquiry will be useful. It is important for the committee to visit areas that perhaps have not been visited by committees of the Parliament.

Meeting closed at 14:50.

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