The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Thursday 1 October 2015

Session 4

Thursday 1 October 2015

CONTENTS

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE
15th Meeting 2015, Session 4

CONVENER

*Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP)
*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
*Adam Ingram (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
*Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
*Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Amal Azzudin (Glasgow Girls)
Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab) (Committee Substitute)
Morag Brown (Argyll and Bute Council)
Duncan Campsie (Glasgow City Council)
Derek Mitchell (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
Aspasia Papadopoulou (European Council on Refugees and Exiles)
Professor Alison Phipps (Glasgow Refugee, Asylum and Migration Network)
Gonzalo Vargas Llosa (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)
John Wilkes (Scottish Refugee Council)
Margaret Woods (Glasgow Campaign to Welcome Refugees)
Joanna Zawadzka (Fife Migrants Forum)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Katy Orr

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Thursday 1 October 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting in private at 09:15]

09:40

Meeting continued in public.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Christina McKelvie): Good morning and welcome to the 15th meeting in 2015 of the European and External Relations Committee. We have received apologies from our colleague Hanzala Malik, and we send him our best wishes. We also welcome to the committee his substitute, Claire Baker. Finally, I make the usual request for mobile phones to be switched off, as they interfere with the broadcasting system.

We move to agenda item 2, which is a decision on taking business in private. Does the committee agree to take item 5 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

"Business Bulletin"

09:41

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is consideration of our "Brussels Bulletin", which is pretty full this morning. I am happy to take comments, questions or clarifications from members.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Page 5 of the bulletin mentions broadband, which is one of the recurring subjects for the committee. You will note that the European Commission is launching a public consultation on what broadband should look like beyond 2020, and I wonder whether the committee might be tempted to submit a response outlining some of the thoughts and hopes that we have expressed on this matter over the past few years.

I see that the deadline for responses is 7 December and that those responses will be published by January. I very much hope that either individual members or the committee itself will submit a view, as it would be helpful and could make a good contribution to the argument.

The Convener: I do not think that it is necessarily a case of either/or—we could do both if people were so minded. The committee has certainly heard enough evidence to put something together. Willie, would you be able to work with the clerk on that?

Willie Coffey: I would love to.

The Convener: I know that you have been raising this issue for a number of years as a member of the committee, and the consultation gives us an opportunity to put our thoughts across.

Willie Coffey: Obviously members will have their own views, and they will be a valuable part of whatever the committee might say. We have said quite a lot on the matter over the past few years, and the consultation gives us an opportunity to shape the Commission's thinking beyond 2020.

The Convener: I am sure that we have taken enough evidence that we can draw on. We can certainly do that.

Willie Coffey: Super.

The Convener: Do members have any other comments?

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): On the proposal to establish an investment court system for the transatlantic trade and investment partnership, the bulletin says:

"The Commission will ... discuss the proposal with the European Parliament and with Member State governments. Following these discussions, the Commission will present the Investment Court System proposal to US negotiators as part of the TTIP negotiations."

Is there a timetable for that? Has anyone flagged up how that will progress?

The Convener: We can certainly find that out.

Roderick Campbell: Presumably the system will be put in place before the full TTIP agreement goes to the European Parliament and member states. Surely things must be happening quicker than that.

The Convener: Indeed. As I have said, we can find out and bring it back to the committee.

Willie Coffey: On page 6 under the heading "Employment, Skills and Education", there is an interesting little note on mobile workers. The European Court of Justice has decided that the journeys of workers

"without a fixed or habitual place of work between their homes and the first and last customer of the day constitutes working time."

I hope that that will have positive implications for many people in a variety of sectors who travel to work in those circumstances, and it would be worth following up what the timetable for that will be.

The Convener: We will keep an eye on that. I know that the Scottish Trades Union Congress and, I think, the Trades Union Congress are doing a bit of work on trying to identify the sectors and the groups of workers who are most likely to be affected. We could be talking about, for example, care workers or home helps who go straight from their own homes to somebody else's and then travel around all day.

As I have said, the trade unions are looking at the matter, but we can certainly find out more information about it. After all, we need to see what categories of worker fall within the scope of this decision. We can certainly chase up the work that I believe is being done on the matter.

Willie Coffey: Good.

The Convener: If members have no other comments to make on the "Brussels Bulletin", do we agree to share it with other committees? Are there any specific topics that we should raise with individual subject committees?

09:45

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I know that I am always going about fisheries, but I note that, under the heading in the bulletin "Environment, Climate, Rural and Fisheries", there does not seem to be anything about fisheries at all. I find that rather odd, given that a big fisheries bill is going through Europe at the moment.

The Convener: It is just the heading. There are headings for each area—

Jamie McGrigor: I know that but, as I have said before, I think that the bulletin is very badly set out. It was much better the way it used to be. I do not know why they do it this way—it is a much lesser report than it used to be.

The Convener: I see that Ian Duncan has been named as lead rapporteur—

Jamie McGrigor: I know—he was the person who used to sort out the bulletin. The heading refers to "Environment, Climate, Rural and Fisheries", but there is nothing about fisheries. That must be wrong. I do not know who is doing this.

The Convener: Okay. We can have a—

Jamie McGrigor: There is a big fisheries bill is going through Europe, and the bulletin ought to say something about it.

The Convener: If it is not there, we can ask for it to be there. We can request that information.

Jamie McGrigor: Is that always the heading?

The Convener: Yes.

Jamie McGrigor: I see.

The Convener: The headings in the bulletin are the portfolio headings.

Jamie McGrigor: There is also something about chemicals under that heading.

The Convener: It is grouped according to committees, and that is the name of the committee. If you require additional information on the fisheries bill, we can ask for it. That is the whole purpose of this item.

Jamie McGrigor: Well, I would quite like to know what is going on.

The Convener: Okay. I am sure that we will get a chance to talk to some people when we are in Strasbourg next week.

Jamie McGrigor: Obviously I keep in touch with people, too.

Willie Coffey: Just for clarification, I note that although there is an "Employment, Skills and Education" heading there is nothing about education under it. It is just a portfolio heading.

Jamie McGrigor: I take the point, but—

The Convener: We will find out the most up-to-date position on fisheries, Jamie.

Jamie McGrigor: All right.

The Convener: Are we okay with the "Brussels Bulletin", then? Shall we ensure that the other committees are informed about it?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: In that case, I suspend briefly to allow our witnesses to come in for our round-table evidence session.

09:47

Meeting suspended.

09:51

On resuming—

Refugee Crisis in the European Union

The Convener: Good morning and welcome back to the European and External Relations Committee. Agenda item 4 is a round-table discussion on the refugee crisis in the European Union. I welcome all our visitors—we are very pleased to have you all here and to hear about some of the work that you are involved in.

I will try to run this as an open discussion, so if you want to make a contribution, just let me know by putting up your hand or giving me a nod. We will start with introductions. In order to do them in as free-flowing a way as possible, we will go round the witnesses in the room before we come to Aspasia Papadopoulou.

I am Christina McKelvie. I am the convener of the committee.

Willie Coffey: I am the MSP for Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley.

Duncan Campsie (Glasgow City Council): I am from Glasgow City Council.

Roderick Campbell: I am the MSP for North East Fife.

Gonzalo Vargas Llosa (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees): I am from UNHCR London.

Adam Ingram (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I am the MSP for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley.

Joanna Zawadzka (Fife Migrants Forum): I am the manager of Fife Migrants Forum.

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): I am an MSP for Glasgow.

Derek Mitchell (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I am from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

Margaret Woods (Glasgow Campaign to Welcome Refugees): I am from the Glasgow campaign to welcome refugees.

Amal Azzudin (Glasgow Girls): I am from the Glasgow Girls campaign.

John Wilkes (Scottish Refugee Council): I am from the Scottish Refugee Council. I should note for the record that I also chair one of the sub-committees of the ministerial task force. I am here today primarily in my capacity as a representative of the Scottish Refugee Council, although I will be

happy to answer questions about the task force, if I can.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am an MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife.

Professor Alison Phipps (Glasgow Refugee, Asylum and Migration Network): I am professor of languages and intercultural studies at the University of Glasgow and co-convener of Glasgow refugee, asylum and migration network—GRAMNet.

Jamie McGrigor: I am an MSP for Highlands and Islands.

Morag Brown (Argyll and Bute Council): I am from Argyll and Bute Council.

Aspasia Papadopoulou (European Council on Refugees and Exiles): I am senior policy officer at the European Council on Refugees and Exiles in Brussels.

The Convener: Welcome to you all. We are delighted to have you here today.

I will open with a general question. Can any of our guests give us an update on where we are now? I know that Amal Azzudin and Margaret Woods have just come back from Lesbos, so it would be interesting to get their perspective on the situation there, but perhaps John Wilkes could begin by giving us an update on the present situation as regards the task force.

John Wilkes: Thank you, convener.

In Scotland, the response to recent events was kicked off by the First Minister's summit, which took place a month or so ago. It was attended by all the key stakeholders around the table, and all of Scotland's political leaders were present to express their support for what was happening and the proposals that were made. On the following Monday, the United Kingdom Government announced that the UK would take in 20,000 Syrian refugees from the camps around Syria rather than from within Europe over the next five years.

The Scottish Government has set up a ministerial task force to co-ordinate Scotland's response and to deliver a big scaling up of the operation to take refugees in through the resettlement process. The UK Government has said that the refugees who come in will be given five years' humanitarian protection status, which will afford them all rights and access to things such as work and the benefits system, if they need that.

The Home Office is the UK Government's determining agency for operating refugee resettlement generally. There is an on-going process called the gateway process, which routinely resettles about 750 refugees a year into the UK. That is mainly delivered through two clusters of local authorities in the north-east and north-west of England.

That is the model that has been used for the Syrian VPR—vulnerable persons relocation—scheme, which the Home Office has been using since January 2014, when it first said that it would take in a small number of Syrian refugees in particularly vulnerable categories. Until recent events, about 216 people had been brought into the UK using that scheme, in which the Home Office directly contracts with individual local authorities to bring in certain numbers of people. Scotland should be proud of the fact that it has played a major part. About a quarter to a third of 200 people came here as a result of Glasgow's efforts, and Glasgow should be commended for that.

The ministerial task force was convened very quickly to coordinate a good response from Scotland to the announcement that the country is committed to taking its proportionate fair share of the people coming to the UK—and more, if there is capacity in Scotland to do that. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has done a fantastic job in marshalling local authorities; many local authorities have already committed to taking part and are currently looking at numbers and so forth.

Many other agencies should be involved in thinking about what we need to do for people who arrive, not just to get them settled but to integrate them in the longer term. We need to think more carefully about that kind of thing. I am talking about agencies such as police and health; the third sector will also be heavily involved. As I understand it, the Scottish Government has committed £1 million to fill some of the gaps. I am not yet sure where it is spending that. It has also set up a website to co-ordinate some of the massive public response. My agency—I am sure that others round the table feel the same—has been really taken aback at the speed of the response and the warmth and generosity of individuals who have come forward offering all sorts of things.

We were charged by the Government to set up the website scotlandwelcomesrefugees.scot, which we did a couple of weeks ago. The website's purpose is to keep people informed about what is going on. It is also a place for people to register their interest and offers of support, which we direct to the appropriate agency.

More recently, the minister decided to create two sub-groups of the task force to look at two very important issues. The first sub-group is on the issue of accommodation, because without accommodation we cannot resettle people. That is co-convened by Margaret Burgess, the Minister for Housing and Welfare, and COSLA.

The other sub-group is loosely called integration. I have been asked by the minister to chair that sub-group, and one meeting has taken place so far. The group is supposed to look at everything else in the process and to work with all agencies and interested stakeholders round the table to think about how Scotland can make the best response that it can within the constraints that exist.

Obviously, the Scottish Government does not have control over the resettlement process; that still resides with the UK Government and the Home Office, although, as the Scottish Refugee Council has said to the Home Office, there is nothing to prevent the Home Office from delegating that responsibility to the Scottish Government.

The Home Office is also looking at how it will ramp up the current scheme to cope with thousands of people coming in. I note from meetings that I have attended in London that some of the Home Office's thinking is that the current scheme may not be scalable up and that there may need to be changes and adaptations to cope with those thousands of people. At one point, it was expecting 100 people a week to be coming through the system.

In Scotland, we have an opportunity to think about that and the sort of things that we might propose to do differently. Some ideas have been floated round, such as having some form of reception and induction step before people go on to local authorities. There have been other thoughts about things that we can do further down the process. That is all in train at the moment.

Clearly, there are financial discussions going on between the Home Office and local authorities. I am sure that COSLA and others will be able to give the committee more details about that. I would observe that the Home Office is still in the ramp-up phase. It is throwing a lot of people at the work, and I suspect that it will be a few weeks before it is fully in gear in terms of how it will cope.

The other factor is that it relies on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which is the international refugee agency. It identifies people in the camps, who are then put forward to the UK Government. I am sure that our colleague from the UNHCR will be able to give us more details about that.

10:00

The Convener: That is a good overview of what is happening in Scotland. Before I ask Margaret Woods and Amal Azzudin to tell us about their experience in Greece, I will ask Mario Vargas Llosa, from the UNHCR, to talk about the global impact and the local work that UNHCR is doing—linking in to what John Wilkes has just said—and then invite Aspasia Papadopoulou to give us some insight from a Brussels perspective.

Gonzalo Vargas Llosa: I thank the committee for inviting me and place on the record UNHCR's sincere appreciation of the position of the political establishment in Scotland. Long before that tragic picture of Alan Kurdi on the shores of Turkey forced many European leaders to take a more open and humane approach to the victims of the crisis, many senior politicians in Scotland had been asking for that to happen. That takes courage, and we appreciated that. In that sense, Scotland has led, not followed.

You are all very much aware of the extent of the crisis so I will not go into detail about numbers, but we are now past 500,000 arrivals in Europe through the Mediterranean.

During the past two or three weeks, there have been some positive developments internationally, including on the European political stage, such as the UK Prime Minister's commitment to resettle 20,000 people. However, the humanitarian actors and some of the political actors have been calling for a long time for some of the things that are now going to happen.

Of course, refugees are coming to Europe from many countries, but I will talk about the situation from the point of view of Syrian refugees, because the largest number of people who are coming across the Mediterranean are from Syria.

When we interview Syrians who arrive in Europe via the Mediterranean, we ask them to give us the main reason why they decided to undertake that perilous journey. They almost always say, "Because we have lost hope that peace will come to Syria soon or perhaps ever." They do not cite the possible state benefits that they will get in prosperous Europe, the fact that they have family members here or their hope that they might have better job opportunities. Of course, those are important factors, but the primary factor for people who are making the crossing today is that they have reached a stage at which they think that peace is not going to happen in Syria. If the international community and Europe want to see a reversal of the mass movement that is happening now, for people to stop crossing the Mediterranean and, eventually, for people to go back to Syria, that will simply not happen without peace in Syria.

Politicians at the international level, including those in Europe, have unfortunately failed in that absolutely critical area and have not put enough emphasis, time, effort, commitment, courage and leadership in trying to forge a political settlement in Syria. We have all been following the events of the past few days in the United Nations General

Assembly in New York and there seems to be more talk on the issue, but until a political settlement happens the crisis is not going to stop.

The second main factor that Syrian refugees cite when we ask them why they decided to cross the Mediterranean to Europe and risk their life in doing so is something else that I think many of us humanitarians have been saying for a long time, which is the conditions in the countries of asylum in the region—Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon—which, of course, have shown extraordinary generosity towards the refugees. However, now that we are into the fifth year of the war, the conditions for the refugees in those countries are getting worse and worse because the countries' resources have been overstretched and are totally exhausted. That means that refugees have difficulty in getting jobs and accessing basic social services such as health and education.

During the past four and a half years, international aid has been a safety net for many of those people. However, on top of all the other problems, international aid is simply not keeping up with the growing needs in the countries of asylum. Until a few days ago, the main instrument for funding the region was only 41 per cent funded, which means that many of the refugees have been living on less than half a US dollar a day.

If for one second we can put ourselves into the mind frame of a Syrian refugee, we will see that he or she has lost any hope that there will be peace in Syria, that he or she has stuck it out in Turkey, Jordan or Lebanon for four and a half years under the most difficult circumstances, and that, on top of all that, he or she feels abandoned by the international community, whose inability to fund programmes has meant a 40 per cent cut in food aid in some places. For a person in that state of mind, of course Europe seems like the only salvation, even if it means getting on one of those boats and risking their lives.

In the past few weeks, we have seen some positive developments and commitments, including from Europe and European countries, to boost aid to the region significantly. However, it is key that those commitments be quickly translated into actual contributions.

I will leave it there for the time being.

The Convener: Thank you, Gonzalo. Aspasia, do you want to give us an update from the European angle?

Aspasia Papadopoulou: Yes, thank you. Apart from the factors that Gonzalo Vargas Llosa has just eloquently described, I would add to the description of the global context the factor of the restrictions that we are currently witnessing in, for example, refugees' legal status and the possibility of their staying in countries such as Lebanon. People remain there without legal status, which means that they have no access to services and cannot send their kids to school, for example.

That all creates a situation whereby people cannot just stay there any more and a country such as Lebanon, which has been hosting refugees for years and years, becomes a transit country. All those factors have led to the substantial number of arrivals in Europe that we are currently witnessing.

The scale is quite significant but it is not just about the scale in absolute terms; it is about the fact that the response has been unco-ordinated and the arrivals have been uneven, with certain parts of the continent coming under substantial pressure, such as the Greek islands and further into the Balkans.

There has been a clear lack of a proper response, which shows that when it comes to sudden arrivals, the European asylum system is just not ready. There is a common European asylum system as regards the laws that are in place but when it comes to managing such a situation, the system is not co-ordinated and not ready.

However, as was rightly said earlier, there has been some traction. Member states have clearly shown an interest and there is momentum partly because of the panic about what to do with the situation but also partly because there is a realisation that the situation is going to continue. It is not a one-off situation for this summer and this September. It will go on for a few months or years until the conflict in Syria is resolved. A system needs to be put in place.

I will briefly remind everybody of the latest steps that have been taken at EU level vis-à-vis the refugee crisis. There have been numerous negotiations, particularly regarding the controversial relocation decision. Eventually, it was decided to relocate 160,000 people from Greece and Italy. Hungary was included initially but because Hungary does not want to consider itself as a front-line state, it remains to be decided whether a number of people will be relocated from Greece and Italy next year or whether people will be relocated from another member state facing particular pressure later on.

More money has been announced, particularly for humanitarian assistance. I am not talking only about humanitarian aid to the region, such as the Madad trust fund or the additional funding that has been announced for Turkey and the Balkans; emergency funding has been made available at EU level for European member states that are facing particular pressure.

There has also been an increased presence at sea, with more assets and resources being made available to operations Poseidon and Triton for rescue at sea and border management.

There is traction in the developments in setting up a system that will provide the framework for relocation, namely migration management support teams that will be deployed at the relocation areas, where hot spots will be set up. There will be a system of screening to identify people for relocation and then to identify those who eventually need to be returned. There seems to be traction in that set of developments but of course there is also the remaining need that pushes people to flee the region.

As regards resettlement, member states committed collectively to resettle 22,000 people, which is not enough when we consider the numbers who flee the region every day. It is estimated that approximately 400,000 Syrians need resettlement; resettling 22,000 people will not meet that need.

There is a need to reconsider substantially the solidarity mechanisms and the system that exists in Europe to support member states and to determine where an asylum application is examined and where the applicant may obtain a permit. There is a need for uniform stages across the EU, access to the labour market and so on.

10:15

Question marks arise around relocation, particularly around the lack of consent from the individual. In theory, the asylum seeker does not have a say in choosing the country to which he or she will be relocated. Family links are taken into account, but there are certain question marks around the measures that are used during and after the examination of the case. For example, if the asylum applicant does not co-operate in their relocation, will detention be used? Such questions are worrying for civil society organisations.

We want to capitalise on the momentum right now and ask EU member states to open up more safe and legal channels to enable access to Europe. It is not sufficient to try to tackle the situation once people have risked their lives and some of them have died on the way. It is more important to open up channels so that they can travel safely. That may include putting in place more flexible family reunification and resettlement policies, and other forms of admission such as humanitarian visas, private sponsorship and student visas. We continue to advocate for that approach, as a solution cannot be found by tackling the situation on the islands once people have gone through a horrendous journey. More support is needed before they take the boat.

The Convener: That leads us on nicely to the journey that Margaret Woods and Amal Azzudin have just undertaken to Lesbos. Perhaps you can give us an insight into your experience on the island, and inform us about what is happening on the ground; whether what we think should be happening is actually happening; and whether those of us round the table today can collectively find remedies for some of the challenges.

Amal Azzudin: Thank you for inviting me here. I came to the UK as a refugee 15 years ago, and going to Greece has opened my eyes to how horrible the situation is now. When I was a refugee, I did not have to go through half of what I witnessed in Greece.

We arrived in Athens on 17 September and met representatives of local organisations and community groups, who informed us about what was happening at that time and what had been going on prior to our arrival. We visited a refugee camp in Athens that is accommodating 750 people. It opened in August, but apparently it will close in December. That is ridiculous because it will be the middle of winter—where are people supposed to go? There are a lot of children and families in the camp, mostly from Afghanistan and Syria. People from Afghanistan are expected to stay for a few days before they move on, but people from Syria can stay longer.

We went to Victoria Square, which is a little park in the middle of Athens. There were many families sleeping on the ground, and they had no source of support; it was left to individuals to bring them food and water. We saw some people coming in to give support, and all the wee kids would run to them, but it was not enough. There were at least a few hundred people sleeping in the park. It is surrounded by cafes and restaurants, but we were told that the refugees have to pay €2 each time they want to use a toilet. That is absolutely shocking.

We were already very distressed by what we had seen in Athens, but nothing could prepare us—or anybody—for what we saw when we arrived in Lesbos. It was absolutely horrific. We met Eric Kempson and his family. They are British and have lived on Lesbos for 16 years and have been supporting refugees for about eight months now. What is happening there has been happening not just since the wee boy's picture was in the media. It is really sad that that had to happen for the world to see what was going on. That boy could have been saved—he would not have died if the right support had been there.

Eric Kempson took us round the coast to see what is happening and all we could see were life jackets. All I could think was, "Those are people's lives." He told us that the life jackets are supposed to cost between €40 and €60, but people are

being charged €100 each, even for the wee kids. Some of the life jackets that we saw were not even inflated, so if people had fallen off the boat that they were on, they would have drowned anyway. Eric told us that the people who made that dangerous journey were being charged €1,200 each. The wee dinghy boats were really horrible—they had 50 people sitting on them. We could see Turkey from where we were standing and we heard that there were 440,000 people in Turkey waiting to make that dangerous journey. We thought that it might stop during the winter, but we heard from the volunteers and the people who work on the ground that people will continue to come.

The following day, we went to where the boats arrive. While we were there, we saw three boats arrive with families on them and we helped people to get off. One mother from Afghanistan just gave me her five-year-old girl so that she could look for her other kids. She found her wee baby, which she thought had passed away because it was not moving. She started breastfeeding the child, and thankfully the child was still alive—[*Interruption*.]

I am sorry.

Margaret—do you want to go on?

Margaret Woods: Yes. It was very emotional. The situation in Greece is shocking. People were mainly moving through Greece, which is, obviously, very poor. The situation now is much worse, because the borders are being shut and people cannot move on. There is violence at some of the borders: there is police violence in Calais and in Hungary—the Hungarian border is now almost completely enclosed. How is that a solution for completely unarmed families with babies and children? In Europe, how can that possibly be a solution?

We saw people sleeping in the squares. They had been moving on, but now they will not be moving. That camp is going to close. We have identified three projects that are going to try to help with housing through the winter, but the problem that they face has multiplied numerous times just in the past fortnight. Tents and sleeping bags are useless in the winter, especially for children. The temperature does not fall quite as low as it sometimes does in Scotland, but it is low enough, and it lashes with rain. People will die from exposure and lack of food. The projects are trying to do something in an organised way. Local people come down and help, but some businesses are obnoxious about the situation.

As we all know, there are hundreds and hundreds of unaccompanied minors in Europe generally, and in Greece. We have crowdfunded; people have been enormously generous, but it is a drop in the ocean. One of the projects that we are trying to help has premises and a fund for people who are desperate, including people who need medical care. It is trying to help some of the kids and has said that it has helped unaccompanied children as young as 10. As members will know, because it has been discussed by the Parliament's committees previously, we are usually talking about youngsters who are 13, 14 or 15 when they get here; they are often from Afghanistan. In Greece, there are unaccompanied children as young as 10. In the confusion, many children become separated from their families. At some borders there is no facility—notably the Hungarian border—for registering refugees. Well-meaning journalists have been trying to help families to reunite with their lost kids by getting into places where the authorities are not letting families go.

There is an almost complete absence of non-governmental organisations or the European Union on the islands. I read a journalist's comment on what I was doing. I was at a reception centre giving out food; the centre was two rickety tables under a tree, two minutes from the sea. We were making Nutella and honey sandwiches and we had juice for the kids and water. The boats were coming in there or in the other bay. Hundreds and hundreds of people—including little kids—passed before my eyes in something like two hours. That is it: the reception centre is run by the family that has been mentioned and by people who take solidarity holidays and come from different parts of Europe, so its personnel changes every week. The centre spends roughly £1,000 a day on water, juice, pan bread that dries very quickly, and honey, jam and Nutella for sandwiches. What it does is crucial. People were asking whether they had to pay and whether they could take another sandwich—they could not believe that they were not being charged.

The state of some of the people was shocking. We would go up on to the road. To let the committee understand, until about a month or six weeks ago, when the temperatures were over 100ºF—I work in old money—it was a 65km walk to where people were supposed to register. Until about six weeks ago, there were no buses. People walked that distance—women, children, babies and elderly people—in that heat with the bottle of water that they had been given at the reception centre. The day when we arrived was the first day that doctors had been there. There were two doctors and a midwife, which was good, and they had little folding chairs. One woman was in a state of trauma. When we arrived she was wrapped in blankets and in quite a serious state, so it was good that doctors were there. They were all just ordinary volunteers. But this is Europe, and that is what we saw.

The situation in Athens is very serious. There are almost none of the proper plastic or wooden

shelters that can be used—I believe that they are reasonably cheap—that are the only things that would keep people warm and dry, and no one knows where they will come from. I have to tell the committee that half the cash that we took was used to bury people who had died on the boats that had gone down that morning, before we arrived. One of the 100 million things that the women in one of the little volunteer camps that we went to do is attempt to link relatives to bodies that have been recovered. One woman said that there were three funerals to pay for that week, so that is what they would use the money for, because they had bodies and relatives. They often have a body but no relatives, or relatives and no body.

The weather changed while we were there, so instead of there being a beautiful diamond sea, you would have thought that you were looking at the North Sea in December—you could have refilmed "The Cruel Sea"—yet that was just the start of autumn. The dinghies will not be launched any more—it will be the more rickety fishermen's boats, and some of them are falling to pieces.

I think that people will come as long as it is remotely possible to do so, but it will become more and more dangerous. I presume that for some months it will not be possible to launch boats, but everyone's opinion is that, as long as it is possible to launch a boat, people will come and people will die in that sea. If they get to Europe, look at what they face. They may be helped by people like me—I am not a professional aid worker and neither was anyone else. I could give out water and be nice to people. That is better than nothing, but that is all they get. When the people get to Athens, there are just wee local voluntary projects that are run by all sorts of humanitarian people. The people have often been, or are, teachers or social workers who volunteer in their spare time. The money is raised locally or by people like us. They thought that we were heaven sent, because we arrived with £2,000 and said that a few thousand pounds more was coming, but millions of pounds are needed.

10:30

What is the EU doing? It is one of the richest organisations in the world. There is no excuse now. Folk have been arriving in Greece for months—some of them to islands that are even smaller than Lesbos. There is now no excuse for not doing anything. The UNHCR buses are finally there so that people do not have to walk 65km, but the buses do not turn up every day, so we started to panic. Hundreds and hundreds of people had lined up for them—we were hoping that the buses would come and eventually they did, but we heard that the buses did not come the next day, so people started to walk. That is what we saw—that is what it was like. We did not see any boats going down. The buses came that day and no one died in front of us, so I suppose that we were fortunate. It was one of the most distressing and astonishingly appalling things that I have seen in my life. I never expected to see such a thing in Europe without some kind of major war going on here. It is inexcusable.

I wonder whether there is anything that the Scottish Government can do. A really small NGO from Denmark is supporting Eric Kempson and his family, who happen to have a house on the beach, which they have had for 14 years. Eric does a bit of artwork and sells his wee sculptures. The Kempsons are decent people. The boats started arriving and the family no longer has a normal life, although it is fortunate that every week a few folk from some or other part of Europe come and help them.

European money needs to be put in. I do not understand why Hungary has been allowed to build a fence all the way round its border. How many other countries would be allowed to build a wall all around their border? Are we going to have the whole of Europe with fences? I wake up in the morning and wonder how many other countries will build fences. Will every country in Europe have a fence round it? Why is Hungary being allowed to do that? Why are riot troops being allowed to wade in to women and children? Why are people being tear-gassed in Calais and at the Hungarian border? Women, children and babies are being tear-gassed to stop them trying to get through the border. Something has to be done.

Quite rightly, no one who is helping wants to take cash in hand. If you are raising money by public subscription, as we are, you want a paper trail. There is a little local shop that will take the money from people who are donating it, give them a receipt and then give the goods to Eric Kempson and his family and the people. That little NGO has a bank account in Denmark and will funnel funds of any kind. Although the NGO is small, it is properly set up. If the Scottish Government has any money, from any fund, that would be one way to help, because people are not going to stop arriving on that beach all the way through the winter and into the spring.

The little camp where the woman was organising the burial of bodies, and was trying to get more ground and proper shelter units has a properly set-up bank account. It is appalling to think that that is what people are working through. They impressed me enormously: they are absolutely genuine and they are not taking any money. They are ensuring that they cannot be accused of appropriating any money.

One person whom we saw could not walk—he had very bad injuries—but he would have been

able to walk if he had got medical care. There must be hundreds of people in that state.

I think about the little kids who are on their own. I was a teacher; I cannot imagine children of 10, 11 or 12—younger than the ones I taught—being on their own in a big continent. For the sake of common humanity, we need to do something, and we need to cut through the bureaucracy, where possible. We need to take a hard line with countries that are not accepting responsibility. This is not some major God-sent disaster in which a tornado has gone through and buildings have crumbled. It is simply human beings fleeing a situation that many of our Governments created. They are just people who could contribute much. That is what they are—it is not that some kind of monster has arrived. All that we need to do is process them speedily. There should be no question of people being sent to a country that they do not want to go to. How would any of us like that? It is ridiculous.

The Convener: Can you make sure that you give us the information on the NGOs that you have talked about? We will certainly make a recommendation, so it would be good to have that information to pass on—I see that John Wilkes has his ears open to this—especially to the task force.

I am interested in children's issues. I have been raising for a while the issue of the Syrian resettlement scheme not allowing family reunion. The minister and the cabinet secretary have been pushing the issue at joint ministerial committee meetings, and I believe that they also raised it last week at Westminster with a Foreign Office minister.

This afternoon, the Scottish Parliament will pass what I believe is world-leading legislation on human trafficking, which has specific measures that I have pushed for on trafficked children. I heard it reported a few weeks ago that trafficking rings are moving into the Greek islands, Athens and other places. Have you picked up any sense of that happening?

Margaret Woods: The people who were accused of trafficking were locals. When no buses were available for the refugees, local people used their own cars to drive them.

The Convener: So there was misinformation about that.

Margaret Woods: Local people were arrested for people trafficking. As Aspasia Papadopoulou—perhaps it was another panel member—said, if there were proper, safe routes, there would be no traffickers. That is the truth of the matter. We talk about tackling traffickers, but there would be no traffickers if routes were open.

I am cautious about the figures on trafficking. I read that one Sunday 50 cars turned up—it was like a blockade of cars taking people. They were all local people, and local people have been arrested for picking up children and pregnant women and taking them to Mytilene, the capital of Lesbos, where they can be registered. They were charged with people trafficking, which is ridiculous. However, that was how the laws were being implemented—they were not being implemented in a progressive way; anyone who was helping refugees was being punished.

Golden Dawn is the third biggest political party in Greece. On the Greek islands, but particularly in Lesbos, local people and businesses who helped refugees ran the risk of being threatened by Nazis with knives and guns. The situation was that dangerous: some people's lives were threatened, and in many cases, the police did nothing because they were somewhat sympathetic to the Nazis. It is a very difficult situation, and both Pinar Aksu and I were very distressed by it all.

We have been so pleased: people have been so generous with the little bit of money they give to our crowdfunder. We are doing it as an organisation, but loads of individuals are crowdfunding for the same reason. For example, people who are going out to Greece for a holiday are taking an extra suitcase with clothes and so on for the refugees. The aid consists of ordinary people from this and other countries taking extras and a bit of money with them when they go on holiday, spending days helping at reception centres and so on. That is what the aid consists of in one of the most progressive, industrialised continents in the world.

It is brilliant that ordinary people are doing that, but at the end of the day I was embarrassed when I went out there and said that we had some money, because it was about £1,000 or £1,500 for each of the projects, and they will go through that in no time.

The Convener: Okay. Thank you. Professor Phipps wants to come in. Claire Baker will come in after her.

Professor Phipps: I want to reinforce Margaret Woods's point about people trafficking and smuggling, the chaos around what those terms actually mean and how they are being used. I have been following the route from east Africa up towards the Mediterranean, how that is differentiated, how people are able to come to Europe safely and how much money that will cost. In fact, it costs about £15,000 to get the right kind of documentation and a route that might allow someone to get to Europe.

If people do not have that amount of money and are in the kind of situation that Gonzalo Vargas

Llosa described, things are far more complicated for them. People in that situation, particularly young people, are, in essence, indentured into the human movement trade.

Young people who have fled conflicts in different parts of east Africa—a large number of them come from Eritrea—have no means to make the journey, but they are brought along and tempted into coming by someone who gives them a tiny ounce of hope or even something as basic as food and water. They become part of the work of moving people until such time as they are believed to have worked their passage, at which point—we have seen this happening in Libya in particular—they are given the keys to a boat and asked to sail it across the Mediterranean.

When we as a country say, "We will stop this by stopping the traffickers," we need to remember that some of the people whom we are describing as traffickers are as young as 16—they have just been given a gun and the keys to a boat that they have never sailed before. We will stop the situation when we take direct action to intervene with sufficient aid; when we intervene to ensure that we stop the profiteering from the arms trade that keeps the situation going; and when we spend money on human protection rather than the vast sums that we spend—as we do at present—on border security across Europe. There are ways of redirecting our resources towards ensuring that the situation that Margaret Woods and Amal Azzudin have just described—which has been going on for decades now—can be stopped.

In 2007, the young girl who later—as a matter of public record—became my foster daughter was plucked out of the Mediterranean by an Italian rescue helicopter and taken to safe land on Lampedusa. There were many people on her boat—very young people—in a precarious situation. The poorer you are, the more desperate you are, and the more likely it is that you will end up in those dreadful situations.

There is a question of means underneath all this, and we need to be very careful in saying, "We're going to stop the traffickers." Stopping the traffickers is not the solution; the solutions lie much further down.

Claire Baker: We have heard powerful testimony from a number of witnesses this morning, and there are many issues that I am sure other members will want to pick up on.

What is happening in Greece sounds horrific. I noticed that Margaret Woods, in her description, did not refer to any of the UK or international aid organisations. That is not to suggest that the situation is their responsibility—it is the Government's responsibility—but we have heard no evidence of activity by organisations such as Save the Children and Oxfam.

Margaret Woods: They are not there.

Claire Baker: Do other people round the table know what sort of work those organisations are undertaking and what support they are providing?

The issues that have been raised this morning are so broad that discussing them can lead to a sense of powerlessness. It raises the question of what we, as MSPs and as a Parliament, can do.

Does anyone want to comment on aspects that are in our control? For example, what will the reception for refugees be like in Scotland? The issue of unaccompanied children has been raised already; I know that the convener has an interest in it. How is Scotland equipped to deal with some of the big challenges that are coming?

The Convener: That leads us on quite well to the next section. It is nice to see Derek Mitchell again; we have worked together on some of these issues for a very long time. Indeed, we took a trip to Ireland where we were given advice on how to integrate people in Scotland. It is good to have you here, Derek. You represent COSLA, which co-convenes one of the sub-groups in the task force and is a valuable and important member of that group.

In the light of Claire Baker's questions, can you give us a wee update on where COSLA is? I will then come back to discuss some of the individual organisations that are doing things. We are keen to consider the rural aspect, which is why Morag Brown from Argyll and Bute Council is here today, but Derek Mitchell can start.

Derek Mitchell: Thank you, convener. What I am about to say almost pales into insignificance in the light of the testimony that we have just heard. Claire Baker is right: we need to bring the discussion back to what we can do and—from my perspective—what local government can do and has done.

By way of background, there was a real impetus around the horrible image of the child that made it on to our television screens, and we were inundated with contacts from local authorities. There has been a whirlwind of activity since then. It may not seem that way, but that genuinely has been the case.

10:45

We are asking 32 local authorities specific questions about their state of readiness, what their response would be and how they would do things, and giving them 24 hours to respond. As anyone who has ever worked with 32 councils will know, that is not the easiest thing in the world for them to

do, but to be fair to the political and officer leadership in all 32 councils, they respond on time every time.

To get a political mandate for how we respond to this, we took papers through both the communities executive group and the leaders meeting last Friday. To be honest, I have found the responses heart warming. The 32 councils want to play a part. That is not to say that all of them will provide accommodation, because it might not be appropriate for some of them to do so. However, they are all committed to helping in any way they can. Our understanding from a variety of local authorities of what is going in their local communities is that a huge number of communities represented in those authorities are opening up their premises to provide food banks, clothes banks and so on. We have a weekly catch-up with Mr Yousaf and the Home Office on progress, and we are involved in all the different Scottish and rest-of-UK structures.

It seems almost petty to talk about money, but it is important for two reasons. For a start, the people whom we bring in from any camp must have an opportunity to settle in and integrate as much as possible. We also have a responsibility to host communities. In a load of areas, the public services that we would expect these people to need are not what they were 10 or 15 years ago, and we need to ensure that they are available. Our position, which we have set out in a very blunt way to the UK Government, is that there needs to be more money for the scheme than has been offered and that there should be less bureaucracy. Duncan Campsie and others might say a bit more about this, but I think that we and the Home Office spend a huge amount of time filling in forms and jumping through hoops to get money when the bottom line is that that money needs to get out into the communities to help these people settle in and integrate.

The issues faced by Syrian refugees who come to any part of Scotland will last for more than a year; indeed, some of the mental health issues might well not become apparent until after the first year, simply because there will be a range of other things to deal with such as getting a house, getting the kids settled at school and so on. As a result, we are looking at the potential for a multiyear deal, with the funding covering as much as possible of the five-year status that these people will have. Frankly, we still do not know what the financial offer is; for the past six or seven days now, we have been promised clarity. My understanding is that things are sitting with the Treasury and that David Cameron might have to put his foot down—here's hoping that he does so soon.

On top of the structures that have been set up, five local authorities had already signed up to the Syrian VPR scheme, and we have now invited the other 20 or so local authorities to be involved in an officer group under our tutelage. In fact, the group has its first meeting this afternoon, and I think that 32 councils are coming along to it. That is important, because it means that we can use the experience of the likes of Glasgow and others as a benchmark for local authorities and so that they can get information.

Some rural local authorities have been involved in the Afghan staff scheme. Because those authorities do not have varied multi-ethnic populations in their area, they can come up against a range of obstacles and difficulties. For example, two of the authorities could not source halal meat for the first fortnight, and two did not have a mosque where people can go and pray. Such practicalities need to be considered, and that work has been invaluable to others in taking the matter forward.

It is very likely that either by close of play today or first thing tomorrow we will be able to give the Home Office a list of local authorities that are ready to go now, which moves things beyond, say, people signing up to this or that. I think that when a lot of people hear us talk about committee structures, political processes and so on, they think, "What does that actually mean?" What it means is that we will give the Home Office a spreadsheet, which the Scottish Government will also get. Certainly in that timescale—within the day—people will be well aware that significantly more than half of Scotland's local authorities are ready and willing to take Syrian refugees before Christmas.

The Convener: You are testament to the fact that the wheels of government and civic Scotland—or civic wherever—can sometimes turn much more quickly than they usually do. We wish you the best with that.

Representatives from Glasgow have been here many times, given the relocation programmes that Glasgow has been involved in. I know Margaret Woods because, as a Unison steward, I got involved with the Glasgow campaign to welcome refugees many years ago. It would be interesting to get an insight from Glasgow. We will then hear from Morag Brown on some of the rural aspects, which pose both challenges and opportunities.

Duncan Campsie: As you say, Glasgow has been involved in a number of schemes. The Home Office approached the council in February 2014 and asked us whether we would assist with the Syrian VPR scheme. I think that that was on the back of the fact that we held the asylum dispersal contract from 2000 to 2011. We were also involved in the locally engaged staff assistance scheme for people who worked with the British Army in Iraq, and we were already discussing a

similar scheme for Afghans with the Home Office, so we had a bit of experience.

In February 2014, we said that we would have a look at the Syrian VPR scheme. We got into discussions with colleagues in health, education and social work, as well as with housing providers, the third sector and COSLA. At that stage, it was a wee bit unclear who would be coming to Glasgow. We knew that it would be families from camps but we did not know what condition people would be in—whether they would be going to the hospital or going to accommodation when they got off the flight. We asked the Home Office to provide us with the cases that it wanted us to take as we needed the full medical details.

Once we got the details, we went through them all with health colleagues. We decided that we could take the 63 families that the Home Office wanted to send us, although we ended up taking 55 families—a couple of problems with accommodation meant that we could not accommodate some people.

We spoke with the Home Office throughout the summer. That takes us back to Derek Mitchell's point about it taking a while to get agreements and funding in place. The first flights came in October 2014. I have been dealing with the Home Office for 15 years and I thought that that was pretty quick. It usually takes a lot longer, so I was caught on the hop a wee bit because of how quickly the Home Office had acted. The staff in the camps were able to get the visas through right away and then we got flights arranged. The first families arrived at the end of October. We took more families in November, December, January, March and April—I think that that is right.

The first families are coming up to their first year in Glasgow. They are all still here. They do not need to stay in Glasgow—they can move on as they have leave to remain—but we always advise people in any scheme to wait until their period is over and all their stuff is up and running. The kids are all settled in school—they will have been in school within four weeks of arriving in Glasgow. They all speak fairly good English now. They all have an accent like mine.

It is harder for the adults. They obviously miss their homeland, their culture and their families. Some have made the point that families are split up all over the place in different camps—some are in Germany. The adults continually ask staff about family reunion—we need to take that up with the Home Office. However, in general, they have settled in well. It is difficult to come to Glasgow—it is a totally different culture—but we always tell them, "Just take small steps. You will go forward, you will go back, but you will get there."

The adults are beginning to pick up English now. They have all seen doctors. There is no trauma yet, although I know that that could come later. People have not really spoken about their experiences—we will wait to see whether they do. They are integrating into the communities; they all have a personal integration plan that we go through with them.

We are about to get the ones who arrived first permanent housing, which is crucial. At the beginning, their housing is temporary, but we have a good relationship with the housing associations, which gave us flats. They are able to turn the temporary arrangement into a permanent let. People become a housing association tenant and keep all the furniture and white goods that we gave them, so that gives them a start. After that, when their English gets a bit better, they can think about getting employment and so on. There are positives that come out of it.

Therefore, we are already in discussions with the Home Office. Indeed, before the current crisis, we had been speaking to the Home Office about taking some more people from the camps. This week, we were sent a list of 63 cases of people who are in camps in Lebanon and Iraq and were asked if we could take them by the end of October. That might be a bit quick. We might be able to take some people by then, but we will have to discuss that with our housing providers. We have some housing available just now.

We need to speak to the Home Office about the funding. The scheme that is running just now is going to change, because it takes too long. We have a current grant agreement that the Home Office might want us to run with for the coming group. That would be fine by us, but I think that we really need to get clarity about the funding for local authorities.

I agree with Derek Mitchell that the funding must be a five-year arrangement. At the moment, there is a grant agreement for every batch of families that we take. That is no good. We need to be able to say that we can take X number of families over the five years and get funding to cover the necessary education and health services, as well as the support that people need. I cannot stress enough that it is not just about putting people in flats. You need to provide support, too, and that support is pretty intensive at the start. For example, we need to get people registered with doctors, or even treated in hospital if necessary; get their kids into school; get their biometric passports, which they need if anything else is to get done; get them bank accounts; and get their benefits from the Department for Work and Pensions. All of that happens in the first few weeks.

At the end of the day, the first families that we received seem happy enough. They have not forgotten about the past, but they are not experiencing the trauma that Margaret Woods talked about and they are settling in. We will continue to do our bit.

The Convener: Morag Brown can give us an insight into what is happening in Argyll and Bute, and then Joanna Zawadzka can talk about the challenges that people face when they get here.

Morag Brown: We have set up a refugee resettlement group, which is fully endorsed by the council. We have put that within our community planning framework because we know that we cannot do this on our own—we absolutely must work with our partners and our registered social landlords.

We have limited experience of taking in refugees. We have taken in families from Zimbabwe through our homelessness service, but the numbers are very small. Those people are still here and have integrated well, but that has taken place over a period of time. The situation that we are discussing now involves a considerable upscaling of what we have done previously.

It was important for us that we matched the scale of our response to the resources that are available. We have made a commitment to take a minimum of 20 families in the first instance. It is important to us that we give people a home, not just a house. We are fortunate—if you can call it good fortune—that our declining population means that we have an oversupply of housing, so that is not as much of an issue for us as it might be for others. However, the size of those houses might be a problem, as we have more one-bedroom houses than three-bedroom houses. We will have to be careful about how we match the houses to the families who are coming. We will speak to our RSL colleagues about that.

We have started round-table planning in the community planning partnership with the third sector, with the communities in which we are considering housing people, with social work, education and health services, with the police and with the local college. As you suggested, convener, there are real challenges for a rural local authority. For example, we do not have any mosques, and sourcing halal meat will be a problem. Biometric passports will also be a challenge. Our distances are extreme, and we have a lot of islands. It will be a challenge, but it is a challenge that we are absolutely up for. We want to do everything that we can. We need to look at the resettlement issues, but we also need to look at the integration side. We almost need to be running two plans simultaneously.

That is where we are. We have made an absolute commitment. Huge amounts of work have been done in our communities—people have been collecting funds and taking donations of stuff, and I know that money has been sent to Greece and other places. A huge effort has been made.

11:00

The Convener: It is absolutely heartening to hear that. There are key people round the table who you should network with. Glasgow activists who are involved in GRAMNet have a lot of experience.

I will bring in Joanna Zawadzka, from the Fife migrants network—

Joanna Zawadzka: It is Fife Migrants Forum.

The Convener: Sorry—there are so many forums and networks, and they all do extremely valuable work.

You might be able to give us an insight into some of the integration aspects, and some of the challenges and the resolutions to them. I hope that, after the meeting, you will link up with Morag Brown and give her some support as well.

Joanna Zawadzka: Yes. Over the past several weeks, we have been working hand in hand with Fife Council on a Fife welcomes refugees initiative, which is linked with a United Kingdom-wide initiative to welcome refugees. I highlight the importance of the role of third sector organisations and community groups in local areas, as they will be crucial in integrating refugees into communities. We are developing a volunteering and befriending project, which we hope will get a lot of local people involved. We speak to interfaith groups and we are planning a lot of events on cultural awareness and training for case workers and third sector staff.

It is important to mention that we need to think about two strands of work. We will be working directly with refugees who, at the beginning, will receive support from the local authority, but that will fulfil only their basic needs. The third sector will be there to fill the gaps, which is important. When we ask people who were refugees—some of them are our volunteers—what the most important thing was for them when they first arrived, they say that it was to feel welcomed. Other organisations that we have contacted have mentioned that the first and foremost thing is to keep people busy and active and in touch with the communities. We will have to develop a lot of activities before we can progress people to employability.

When I attended a meeting of the Scottish Syrian Association in Glasgow, one of the issues that was raised was that people do not have

confirmation of their qualifications and there is nowhere to confirm that. For example, if somebody is a doctor and would like to work as that here, how do we go about getting confirmation of their qualifications?

Are we doing enough to raise awareness and inform our communities about why people are fleeing their countries? One question is about whose responsibility it is to do that. Is it the third sector's or the local authorities' responsibility?

The resettlement of refugees needs to be carefully thought through. In our view, people need to be housed in areas where they can connect with other people. They need to be housed close to other refugee families or where they have links to support—they cannot be left on their own somewhere and spread out.

I also want to mention the debate in the media. There is a huge need for a truly independent press regulator, because lies in the press cost lives. There is evidence that the Independent Press Standards Organisation is not playing its role in controlling the media.

The Convener: Thank you very much. We have managed to hear from all our guests.

We are now extremely pressed for time, but I am prepared to allow another few minutes for questions. I know that John Wilkes has more to say, and I want to get an insight from Aspasia Papadopoulou, given what she has heard, and perhaps also from Gonzalo Vargas Llosa.

John Wilkes: I will try to be very brief. I think that Claire Baker asked the most poignant question. Given all the things that we hear and the experiences that Margaret Woods and Amal Azzudin have had, what can we do when faced with such a huge situation? It is very easy to get caught in that and think that we cannot do anything. We can do things.

For a start, the Parliament and the Government here can keep up the pressure on the UK Government. The number of people that it has committed to take—20,000 people over five years—is the equivalent of two or three boatloads of people who come over in a day. Germany is committing to taking hundreds of thousands of people. I know that there is a public opinion issue, but I think that it can be dealt with if it is properly managed and political leadership is shown. I am talking about the sort of political leadership that has been shown in Scotland, rather than the grudging approach that I would say has been shown at a UK level. Those are two things that parliamentarians can do, because public opinion may well shift. It is important that, if times get tough again, people keep making the argument that it is a humanitarian issue and not a migrant issue. Language is extremely important here.

There are other things that we could do that would help significantly. As has been said a number of times, we could ask the UK Government to review its family reunion rules. There are several thousand Syrians already in the UK who have been here with student visas or who have lived here for a number of years. Their position could be regularised and they could be allowed to bring in their families.

The fact that the family reunion process is currently viewed as an immigration process rather than as a humanitarian process limits the number of people who can be brought in. In the present situation, it is absolutely within the UK Government's policy power to change the rules on family reunion and make it much easier. If we could sort that out, we could bring in family members of people who are already living here and already established. That would help thousands of people.

We also need to be clear in the language that we use. Local authorities have outlined what the process needs to be and what the challenges are, but we also need to see the refugees who come not only as a burden. Many of them will have particular support needs, but many of them will come in with huge amounts of personal resources and skills. The first thing that they will want to do is get into the job market and support themselves. We need to capitalise on that image.

We also need to avoid getting into a situation in which we see Syrian refugees as good things at the expense of other refugees. We need to remember that there are other people in the UK asylum process who are continuing to come through as refugees, that all the various groups need to be considered and that one group does not need to be welcomed to the detriment of another.

How do we make all that happen? In Scotland, we have said that we will take 2,000 to 3,000 refugees over five years. We have a population of 5 million. If we could look at the way in which the process operates, co-ordinate it better and demonstrate that we can deal effectively with those who are first to arrive and settle them into communities in such a way that there is not dislocation and people are prepared, we could take a lot more. We would say that the current Home Office process is probably not the best route to scale up to deal with thousands of people. Duncan Campsie articulated very well the sorts of challenges that have to be addressed, but there is a whole infrastructure that supports that in Glasgow that is not replicated elsewhere.

I think that we need to think of new ways of adapting and changing the process to co-ordinate services, and COSLA and the local authorities will be critical to that. Some of the services that

Duncan Campsie mentioned are specialist services that do not operate everywhere. Only two post offices in Glasgow can deal with the biometric identity cards that are issued by the Home Office, which have to be issued to a person before they can do anything else. We need to consider how we can marshal some of the specialist services that the DWP has in relation to, for example, the issuing of national insurance numbers.

Those are some of the key tools that people have, and that is what we in the integration sub-group are going to be focusing on. We are going to look at whether there are any new ideas that we could use. If the Home Office could be persuaded to delegate the bit that Scotland does and the lump of resource that comes with it, I think that Scotland could come up with much more creative solutions that are tailored to the environment and the various agencies and organisations here. That might not happen, but those are things that I think that the Parliament and the Government here could do.

The Convener: I think that you are pushing at an open door on that.

Professor Phipps: Underneath the remit of resettlement, there are a number of things that the committee could usefully keep in mind as we look at how that process develops over the next five years.

My concern is about the differentiation. We have a group—the Syrian vulnerable people—who are coming in on a particular route. What does that do for the other people in the asylum and refugee processing system? We need to look at that question, as well as, as Derek Mitchell said, to work with different host communities. Those differentiations are very acute: they are about whether someone can work, where they live and a range of aspects that could breed resentment. If we are serious about new Scots integration, we need to look at that. That is the first point.

The second point is that we need to look at the five-year refugee status. We have learned a lot since it was brought in. We know that if people study for three and a half or four years—which is one of the things that young refugees do—it is very difficult for them to get a job in year 4 if it looks like their status will run out within the next 12 months. We are talking about people on refugee or humanitarian protection status who will hit that point in four years' time and therefore revert very quickly.

All the research shows that, as Joanna Zawadzka says, if someone cannot get a job and they cannot stay active, their vulnerability increases again. All the wonderful work that we have done on integration, with health services and, in particular, in mental health, will be reversed if we do not have a plan for what happens at the end of the four years. There needs to be a plan not only for those coming in on the Syrian scheme—the present scheme—but for all those who have refugee status. What do we do at that point to prevent people from becoming vulnerable again?

No one can learn another language in 60 hours of English as a second language support. We know what it takes to learn a language so someone can do their job well. It is the kind of training that we give to diplomats when we place them overseas. We know what it takes: it takes quite a bit. We could usefully revisit language policy in Scotland and look at what we mean by languages.

We are still quite hidebound by a set of language policies, not just for schools but for other areas, that is based—forgive me—on where middle-class people want to go on holiday. In respect of the grand problems that are facing us in society and worldwide, the languages that are being brought to us at the moment by people who are being resettled are very much the languages of the future, in terms not just of humanitarian aid but of international relations and trade. We really need to be thinking about that as part of our approach, because every single piece of research says that, once people have adequate housing and food, what they need is the language to be able to relate to other human beings.

Finally, to follow on from what Joanna Zawadzka said, the committee can really keep an eye on the discourse we use in public. Scotland—and the minister—is to be commended for the discourse that has been used so far. Research done on genocide describes the third stage of genocide as this:

> "One group denies the humanity of the other group. Members of it are equated with animals, vermin, insects or diseases. Dehumanization overcomes the normal human revulsion against murder."

What we have seen in the press and from the Prime Minister is the use of language that does precisely that. It equates other human beings to insects.

We really need to keep an eye on that. It is extremely dangerous. This is not just political correctness; it is about how we understand other human beings. We really need to focus on those aspects. It is vital to ensure that our public discourse in Scotland is careful and attentive to the research that has been done on how dangerous that kind of language is.

Willie Coffey: I thank colleagues—particularly Amal Azzudin and Margaret Woods—for their moving contributions. I commend the work going on in Glasgow and, as usual, I thank Glasgow and

of course Scotland for the efforts that are being made on this issue.

We are witnessing the end of a nation in Syria. I was just looking at some of the statistics. There were 22 million people living in Syria; 4 million are now abroad, 7 million are displaced, and another 1 million we do not know about. Three quarters of a million, or probably more, are dead. This is a humanitarian catastrophe, and the European Union has spectacularly failed.

I want to ask Margaret Woods and our UN and European colleagues what more should be done immediately. The rescue efforts in the Mediterranean are nothing short of a disgrace, given that the small navy of Ireland has rescued 7,000 people in the past few months. Other navies are not there—they are missing.

There is no co-ordination. Should it be a priority for us to get into the Mediterranean and rescue those people, or should we send European Union navies to take equipment for providing accommodation—which Margaret Woods mentioned—to places such as Lesbos? It is a real tragedy that the people of Greece and Italy, who are suffering themselves, are on the front line and are having to bear the brunt of the rescue operation.

Can you give us a message about what we should do? What message should we send not only to our Government but to the European Union? What is the priority? Is it rescue, accommodation equipment, food or medicine, or is the message basically, "Get your act together to rescue those people and save that nation"?

11:15

Margaret Woods: The first priority should be to open the routes. If safe routes are open, people would not need to take the perilous journeys, although I suppose there would need to be agreements. The ending of the mare nostrum scheme was just disgraceful, as is the fact that the boat from Britain that is currently in the Mediterranean is an operation Frontex ship.

We need proper search and rescue and proper immediate humanitarian relief in Greece, especially in Athens and the cities where people are going to be living rough over the winter. We need to speed up the process of allowing those people to have status somewhere.

The drastic disaster-end of the help is the bit that should not need to be done. If you sped up all the processes and allowed people to come safely, you would never need that bit, but right at this minute you do, because it is just all these wee organisations and people like me over there trying to house and feed people.

Those are the two priorities: we need to open safe routes and to speed up the bureaucracy to give people status in countries that are appropriate for them to go to and that they want to go to. The number of people involved sounds huge, but it is a tiny proportion of the European population, and these people bring so many talents and resources to us.

Where that does not happen, an immediate major-disaster operation must be put in place so that people do not die in the streets of the cities—not just in Greece but in Italy, France and Spain—or on the seas. The Mediterranean is becoming a grave: the day we went out there 40 people died, including one entire family and a newborn child. We have to stop that.

I do not know if that helps. We need safe routes to be opened immediately.

The Convener: We are seriously running out of time, but I want to bring Aspasia Papadopoulou back in as she has listened patiently to all the testimony so far.

Some specific European questions have been raised. Although you will not have all the answers, you might be able to give us an insight into some of the action that is being taken to address the concerns.

Aspasia Papadopoulou: I could not agree more with Margaret Woods. We have all stated that the answer is to provide legal channels so that it is possible for people to travel. It is so unfair that we can all take a plane to go somewhere and these people cannot do that.

There are many ways to provide such channels, and some member states have done that through various routes. For example, France has issued 1,500 humanitarian visas to Syrians in the past couple of years. People can go to the embassy in Beirut or wherever they are and get a visa for humanitarian purposes. That is not asylum—it is just an entry ticket. They arrive in the member state and then enter the asylum procedure. That process is already saving their life as they do not have to take the boat.

There are possibilities for family reunification. Right now, it might take two years for somebody to be reunited with their family in Europe, and the process costs thousands of euros, which they might not have. Perhaps we should make it easier and faster for people to be reunited with family members who already live in the UK, France or Belgium and who have refugee status. That is obvious, but it is made difficult.

Visa restrictions on people from certain countries could be lifted to allow people to travel. Of course, that could be only a temporary measure, but it would substantially reduce the

risks that people take as well as the risks to their lives.

There are the humanitarian forms of admission that Germany, Austria and Switzerland have used, which make it possible for family members—by which I mean not the nuclear family but extended family such as other brothers, sisters, cousins and so on—who are already living in the member state to help to bring their family members over. All that the country needs to do is provide a residence permit and access to the asylum procedure; people can also be granted temporary protection status, although in places such as Austria, they have been granted actual refugee status. What basically happens is that families say that they will take charge, and the state entities or authorities do not really need to do anything. That kind of expedited process can help people to get to their destination safely without having to travel in the ways that we have seen.

All those possibilities should be used. However, we have all witnessed the lack of political will. Certain member states have been more generous than others, and I have been saddened that other member states—especially eastern European states with their own histories—have become conservative and closed down borders.

I see that this session will expire in 10 minutes, which means that I will disappear from your screens, so I will say one more thing about some of the resettlement practices that we have seen in other member states. One issue that has been mentioned is how those who arrive in a country can lose the skills and qualifications that they might have or the study that they might have done before. We have heard, for example, of doctors and engineers arriving in a country without their diplomas in their bags. The question is how they can prove and then capitalise on their qualifications to ensure that they feel valued. It is quite distressing for, say, a doctor to have to do cleaning work; indeed, I am sure that we would all feel the same.

There must be—and there are—ways of supporting such people. For example, the University Assistance Fund in the Netherlands gives people loans and grants to enter the Dutch university system; they are given a short cut and perhaps do one or two more years at university along with a language course, which brings their professional profile back to what it was or allows them to adapt things slightly to their circumstances. Such an approach provides a way of allowing people to restart their lives, of giving them dignity and a sense of decency and of letting them feel valued and fulfilled instead of feeling a failure. That is very important for integration.

What has also emerged in other countries that have been resettling people is the need to combine language training with vocational training and access to the labour market. It is a waste of time for a person to spend a year just learning a country's language and then try to enter the labour market. In some cases, all of that is combined in one approach so that learning the language is seen as useful in preparing a person to access the labour market.

The bottom line is, of course, prepare, prepare and prepare—and that is true for both sides. We must prepare not just the housing, the NGOs and so on but the people themselves before they arrive. For example, information about their housing needs—say, the number of people in a family, the sort of house that they will need and so on—should be transmitted before they arrive.

Cultural orientation is needed not just to prepare refugees for the situation—for the cultural context and so on—that they will find when they arrive but to prepare structures and stakeholders in the host society. Such people need to see a video and learn a bit about what this means for people, where they come from, what they like to do in their spare time and what their music is like. Many things must be learned about how to connect the two sides.

A lot of countries have involved existing ethnic communities in such work. For example, a video that shows how Syrians who are already living in another country experience life there and what it feels like for them can be screened to people before they arrive. That helps them to prepare and to understand what the situation will look like. If people hear compatriots talk, that is more helpful than hearing someone from an organisation talk about how it feels, what it is like to live in an area, what community work is like and so on.

Many things have been said about the role of volunteers and the role of mainstream services—the work is not only for specialist services. It is important to involve not only schools and local authorities but churches, general practitioners and other stakeholders that are not the usual suspects. They also encounter new arrivals and will liaise and interact with them, so they need to be prepared.

It is important to consider that there needs to be immediate access to psychosocial support for Syrians, because they have undergone serious trauma. Even if they have been resettled—in which case they have not gone through the experience of taking a boat—going from their home country to Lebanon or Turkey will already have been traumatic. That should be considered when they are housed, so that they have access to such services nearby.

My connection will be cut quite soon, so I thank you very much for inviting me to join the debate.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Our connection will be cut soon, too, because members have to be in the chamber very soon after 11.30, so we cannot sit beyond that. On the committee's behalf, I thank you for the information that you have given us. If you want to share any more information with the committee, please get in touch with us.

I will give Gonzalo Vargas Llosa the opportunity to make the final closing remarks, but we have very limited time. Perhaps you can give us an overview. I have a list of starred items: the process of family reunification; funding; where the NGOs are; integration services; open and safe routes; humanitarian visas; and possibly a temporary lifting of the requirement for visas. If anything that should be on that list has been missed, please let us know.

Gonzalo Vargas Llosa: To wrap up the discussion, all that I will say is that the key is that European states will be able to manage the crisis once they agree that all the different mechanisms to address the problem are equally important and should be supported by all states. States have been picking and choosing, as if from a menu. They have said, "We do not like relocation; we prefer resettlement," or "All the aid should go to the refugees in the region". Some states say, "Search and rescue is okay," but others say, "No—in fact, it is not okay, because it is an incentive."

European states must realise that all those aspects are necessary and should be supported, and they cannot pick and choose. Yes, aid to the region is critical; yes, we have to make much more use of legal ways for refugees to get from the region to Europe safely, which include not only resettlement but the many other mechanisms that Aspasia Papadopoulou and other colleagues have mentioned; and, yes, relocation is also critical and should be supported. Whether the UK can opt in or out is not a legal issue but an issue of solidarity. Until all the aspects are supported by as many European states as possible, the issue will not be addressed.

The Convener: That brings us to a nice close, although the committee will not forget about the topic easily. There are probably some recommendations that we need to make following the evidence that we have taken and the pleas that we have heard this morning.

We invited the Home Secretary and representatives of the Home Office to the meeting, but diary clashes did not allow that, apparently. It would have been nice to get answers from them to some of the questions that have been raised. The committee will consider that.

I thank our guests not only for attending the meeting but for the work that you all do. We would not be in the position that we are in right now in Scotland without some of the crucial work that has been done over many years by some of the people at the meeting. As Aspasia Papadopoulou said, we must prepare, prepare and prepare. Margaret Woods has been preparing services, networks and organisations—like many others in this room—and has also been preparing all of us for how we should react when fellow human beings are in extremity. It is nice to see that we can all get around the table, agree a way forward and not only talk about it but do something about it. I thank you all for that.

11:31

Meeting continued in private until 11:32.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.scottish.parliament.uk

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
Is available here:

www.scottish.parliament.uk/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000
Textphone: 0800 092 7100
Email: sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk