



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 24 November 2015

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE
19th Meeting 2015, Session 4

CONVENER

*Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con)

*Kenny MacAskill (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)

*Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP)

*Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab)

*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (Ind)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Lewis Akers MSYP (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Beverley Bambrough (Community)

Karen Harvey

Martin Keatings

Yvonne Manning (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in Scotland)

Robert Mooney (Community)

Duncan Wright

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Catherine Fergusson

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Tuesday 24 November 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:05]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Michael McMahon): Good morning and welcome to the 19th meeting in 2015 of the Public Petitions Committee. I remind everyone present, including members, that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be turned off completely as they interfere with the sound system even when they are switched to silent.

Under item 1, I seek the committee's agreement to take in private item 3, on a new petition, and item 4, on the review of the petitions process. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

New Petitions

Compulsory Pet Insurance (PE1582)

10:05

The Convener: Item 2 is consideration of new petitions. The first new petition is PE1582, by Karen Harvey, on compulsory pet insurance. I welcome Karen to the meeting and I invite her to speak to the petition. She has no more than five minutes, after which we will ask questions.

Karen Harvey: Thank you, convener and members of the committee, for the opportunity to speak to you about my petition, which is on health insurance for pets becoming a legal requirement.

A requirement for third-party liability insurance for dogs was suggested a few years ago but was dismissed as it was felt that it would be an unfair tax on responsible dog owners. Pet health insurance is usually combined with coverage for third-party liability, so it therefore ensures that both we and our pets are protected.

Every year the Pet Food Manufacturers Association commissions a pet population report. In 2014, it was estimated that 46 per cent of households have pets—the totals include 9 million dogs and about 7 million cats—yet only 15 per cent of those households actually have pet insurance. According to Allianz Insurance, more people claim on their pet insurance than on their household or car insurance.

As with human medicine, veterinary medicine has advanced hugely. According to Sainsbury's Bank, which provides pet cover, vet fees are escalating at a rate of 12 per cent per year—more than six times the rate of inflation. Vets say that that is the result of the development of new drugs and medical technologies.

I have some rough figures, which I obtained from an independent online survey in October this year, of some ailments and the cost of treating them. A dog with cataracts costs £1,700 to treat; a cat with a broken leg costs £2,000 to treat; and arthritis treatment for older dogs costs around £6,500 over five years. In addition, the cost of treating cancer could be around £8,000.

The most up-to-date figures that I could find of animals being put to sleep due to their owners' inability to afford veterinary treatment were from a United Kingdom survey in 2012. The survey revealed that, in that year alone, 320,000 cats and dogs nationwide that could have been nursed back to health were victims of premature euthanasia. One vet has said that vets are in business to treat and save the lives of animals, not

put them to sleep because of cost. Eight out of 10 vets surveyed by Sainsbury's Bank said that they had seen pets endure pain because treatments were too expensive. In total, 2.5 million owners have turned down medical help for pets based on cost alone.

If the owner has insurance, that gives veterinary staff more treatment options when a pet is sick or injured and allows the owner to make an informed decision about the best course of action to take, always bearing in mind the animal's welfare.

When someone is choosing pet insurance, it is important that they consider whether the policy is right for their circumstances. Cheapest is not always best, but with careful research there are still ways of making savings. More practical help can be obtained from veterinary professionals, who are all used to dealing with insurance companies and will be able to advise on suitable policies and help with filling in the forms. I was also able to find unbiased help via the internet to find the best deals, so information and help are already out there.

During my research on the subject, it became clear that most people I spoke to were in favour of compulsory pet insurance but were concerned that insurance companies would take advantage of that and significantly raise the cost of their premiums. Insurance companies are regulated by two bodies—the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority. Insurance companies have a legal obligation to do things properly and, after speaking to the FCA, I know that the authorities have a duty to investigate any claim of unfair behaviour.

I spoke to various organisations, including the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Dogs Trust, the British Veterinary Association and an independent vet. Although the SSPCA was unsure how making insurance compulsory would work, it encourages new owners to insure their pets and gives 40 days' free insurance with new adoptions. It has apparently already had discussions with the BVA regarding some sort of affordable insurance scheme for pets.

The BVA produces a leaflet that advises of the benefits of pet insurance. The independent vet suggested that, if potential problems with monitoring and policing were addressed, compulsory health insurance would solve many welfare problems. The Dogs Trust always recommends that owners take out pet insurance, as it considers insurance to be an important part of responsible pet ownership.

I am aware that it would not be sensible to impose an immediate start to the requirement that all animals be insured. It would need to be a

gradual process, so it would probably work better to bring it in for pets that are born after a certain date, thus limiting the need for exemptions due to previous conditions.

There is no national health service for pets and our pets are often life-savers. They are certainly the best companions in the world, giving us unconditional love and loyalty. In return, do we not owe it to them to give them the same when they need it?

The Convener: Thank you, Karen. I find the petition particularly interesting. I had not given much thought to the matter previously. I am not a pet owner and am not up on such ideas, so I was not aware of any discussions that had taken place on the issue. However, I know that the UK Government consulted on potential insurance for third-party injuries caused by dogs—predominantly dangerous dogs. Have you investigated that? Why did the Government not introduce that measure? What reasons did it give for not pursuing it?

Karen Harvey: The Labour Government wanted to introduce such insurance, but it was quickly dismissed because it was felt that the only people who would take it out would be responsible pet owners, who were not the target that the proposal was meant to hit. The Government felt that it was unfair to responsible owners, so that is why it was dismissed.

The Convener: Who would we get to ensure that pets were insured? Who would do the monitoring?

Karen Harvey: The Scottish Government is introducing microchipping for dogs next year, so the monitoring and policing of insurance could run along the same lines. I have found out that the police and local authorities will have scanners for microchips. Perhaps the insurance details could be on the same databases as the microchip details.

The Convener: So you do not believe that there would be any additional bureaucracy or cost involved for public authorities. I can see why insurance companies may be interested in introducing compulsory insurance, because they would get payments that they would not otherwise get, but the cost to the public purse might be prohibitive, especially at a time when budgets are tight. Do you consider that to be the case?

Karen Harvey: No. If it ran along the same lines as the microchipping, that would not be the case.

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning. It is an interesting concept. However, you have alluded to the fact that the type of people who need the cover are those who can least afford

the treatment; they are also the group of people who will be least able to afford the insurance.

There is also an element of individual human rights here, in that we would almost be forcing another tax on people. I am opposed to forcing additional burdens on people. Policing the approach would not be easy either.

Finally, if somebody did not buy the insurance because they simply could not afford it, that would mean that we would deny them a pet. That would be unreasonable and unfair.

I find it difficult to support the petition on those grounds.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Good morning, Karen. How much does pet insurance cost on average? I have a pet cat and pay insurance for it.

Karen Harvey: There is no average cost. It all depends on the type of pet that somebody has and where they live. As with all insurance, the cost is based on risk, so there are many things to take into account.

I will give you an example. I have a golden retriever who is now 12 years old, and I have paid £42 a month for her insurance since the day I got her at six months old. That might sound like a lot but, as she is now 12 years old, she has quite a number of conditions, which we claim the insurance for. We claim around £200 a month for her medications and treatments. She is still a happy, springy dog who loves to go her walks and wags her tail. Had we not had that insurance, she would not be here today.

10:15

David Torrance: So you are paying roughly £500 a year. Families on low incomes who have pets would be forced to take out insurance. You said that there are something like 9 million dogs and 7 million cats in the UK. Would the proposal not force families to abandon pets? Would there not be a huge increase in that?

Karen Harvey: Not really. I am not suggesting that any existing pet owners would have to go out and take out insurance all of a sudden. It would be for new additions to the family, such as pups born after a certain date, for example. I know that microchipping is supposed to be done at eight weeks so perhaps it could run along those lines, with insurance being taken out when a pup is born.

It would not really be feasible to expect all existing dogs to be insured. There would be so many exemptions that that would not work. If the requirement came in for new dogs and cats or whatever, it would not mean an additional financial

burden for families. It might make a family think twice about whether they could afford to have the pet in the first place. If the requirement is approached in that way, I do not see that it will mean an increase in the number of abandoned dogs.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): Good morning, Mrs Harvey. The briefing that we have received on the petition advises that pet insurance is not compulsory in any other part of the UK. Have you made any attempts to look at the situation in any other jurisdictions or countries?

Karen Harvey: Yes, I have and I could not find any country that has compulsory pet insurance.

Angus MacDonald: Is there any indication that it is being looked at anywhere else?

Karen Harvey: I did not find any in my research.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (Ind): During your inquiries, have you looked into the inclusion of pet insurance in household insurance policies, rather than creating a whole new raft of insurance premiums for owners? Have you spoken to any of the major house insurers to see whether they might offer that as part of their wider package?

Karen Harvey: No. I did not think about it being included in house insurance. I spoke to pet insurance companies, which were not keen to give any opinion on the suggestion at all.

If someone has house insurance with a certain company, it was suggested that having pet insurance with the same company means that there are discounts to be had.

John Wilson: It is just that some household accidents are caused by pets—we see adverts showing cats running along the mantelpiece and that sort of thing. I just wondered whether anybody had done any work with the companies that provide household insurance.

You indicated that the legislation that was proposed at Westminster was dropped because it was thought that only responsible owners would take out insurance. Was that the only reason why it was dropped?

Karen Harvey: As far as I know, yes. That is what I discovered.

John Wilson: Only responsible owners will take out pet insurance—because they are responsible owners. The difficulty is with the figures that you gave of 9 million dogs and 7 million cats. We have the experience of dangerous dogs and the owners who are less than responsible and will not look after their pets or take them for treatment. We often hear the SSPCA talking about incidents at canal banks and railway sidings and so on, where dogs are abandoned or cats are put in sacks. Will

having compulsory pet insurance resolve such situations?

Karen Harvey: I do not think that they will ever be resolved. Unfortunately, we will always find that people do such things. It is the same with any law—murder is against the law, but people still do it. My proposal would not take that away completely, but I like to think that it would help. If a family gets a pet from a breeder, and the breeder is registered, they usually hand out four weeks' free insurance. It would be up to the breeder to inform whoever is monitoring the system about the new owner. The new owner's details would be on the insurance, so there would always be a register of who owned the dog or cat.

John Wilson: Should it be the responsibility of the breeder or the seller of the pet—whether it was a pet store or whatever—to make the new owner aware of the potential liabilities that they were taking on?

Karen Harvey: Yes, I think that that is a good idea.

John Wilson: You mentioned your golden retriever, which has medical conditions. We know that certain breeds have genetic abnormalities that could lead to medical intervention having to take place. Surely we could ask the breeders and the pet stores or other sellers of animals to make new owners aware of the potential cost of having a pet. This is the time of year when the slogan "A dog is for life, not just for Christmas" usually comes out, but surely we should be doing more to get sellers and others to make people aware of the potential financial liability if something happens to their pet.

Karen Harvey: Yes, I think that that is definitely a good idea. There are certain conditions related to some breeds. When someone takes out pet insurance, they have to research whether the conditions that their pet is liable to get are covered in the policy. That is quite easily done.

Kenny MacAskill (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP): I can see the logical argument for why everybody should have pet insurance. There is a good reason for having it. The issue is the bureaucracy and the difficulties. I assume that you are not suggesting making it a criminal offence not to have pet insurance and that it would be a civil matter.

Karen Harvey: Yes.

Kenny MacAskill: How, then, do you envisage enforcing the measure? We have difficulties enforcing the television licence, which is currently not paid by a lot of people even though that is a criminal offence. We had difficulties with the previous pet licence, at 10 shillings or whatever it was. How would the proposal be funded? How would it be enforced? We would be seeking to enforce a financial penalty against people who had

not taken out insurance because they did not have the financial wherewithal to do so.

Karen Harvey: As I said, I believe that it might run along the lines of microchipping. I tried to do a bit of research into the microchipping law, but I could not find out a lot of information about it. The database that exists for microchipping could be used for the information on insurance. There would also be a responsibility on veterinary practices. If an animal came into a veterinary practice needing treatment and was not insured, there would be a responsibility on the veterinary staff to report that to the authority that is looking after the matter. The staff would at least need to make the owner aware that the animal needed insurance. I think that there is 21 days' grace in relation to microchipping. We could do something like that and give people a grace period to allow them to acquire insurance. I believe that there is also a financial penalty in relation to microchipping. Perhaps that could work with the insurance as well, which might help with the funding.

The Convener: The discussion seems to have been about cats and dogs. Does the petition aim only at cats and dogs or are we talking about some of the more exotic pets that people get now? We do not microchip some of the things that people get from pet stores now.

Karen Harvey: That is right. For my purpose, we would have to start with dogs and cats. Small furries and things like that are different. Obviously treatments are not so expensive, advanced or in depth for small furries. As I understand it, people tend not to take their small furries to the vet unless they are really ill and, at that stage, there is not a lot that the vet can do anyway. I do not think that insuring them would be workable or feasible. It is the same with exotics. At this stage, I would start with dogs and extend it to cats.

Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con): Actually, I was going to ask the petitioner to define "pet" for the purposes of the petition.

I understand the idea and have done some very quick calculations. If there are 16 million cats and dogs across the UK, and 10 per cent of those are in Scotland, if your dog was an example, that would mean an £800 million cost in Scotland and £8 billion over time in the UK. I accept that there would be reductions as a consequence of scale, but I only have to say those figures to myself to understand that it is politically unlikely that any Government would seek to impose such a huge financial cost on the public. I do not see it as likely, I am afraid.

I am, however, interested to know what efforts the pet insurance industry makes to promote pet insurance directly to pet owners. Where do you

think that falls short if so few pets are being insured?

Karen Harvey: That is a good point. An advertising campaign might be beneficial and it would be a good idea to promote pet insurance. Pet insurance companies advertise through television commercials and so on, but perhaps more in-depth advertising to make pet owners aware of potential costs could be done. There are discounts to be had if people do their research. If people take out an all-of-life policy that covers their pet from the day they get it to the day it dies, I know from my experience with my own dogs and other people's pets that they will generally get back what they have paid into the insurance, and sometimes more.

Hanzala Malik: I have a couple of points to make about some of the evidence that you have given this morning. You suggested that veterinary clinics should report people who do not have insurance. The problem with that is that the very people who I fear will not take out insurance because they do not have money will not take their pets to the vet because they fear that they will be reported for not having insurance.

I also need to reinforce the point that we would deny a lot of people the pleasure of keeping pets and people simply would not take out the insurance, which would mean that they would put themselves in a position where they are breaking the law. That has all sorts of implications for where they could take their pets, such as whether they could go to the vet or take them to public places, and whether their movement with their pet would be constrained. All those things come to mind. There are far more negatives than positives in the idea, although the idea is an ideal one. Unfortunately, we are up against the people who generally cannot afford to pay and that is what suggests to me that we would be putting pets in harm's way rather than giving them a better quality of life.

10:30

Karen Harvey: You are right that there is always that risk. However, is that risk any greater than people not taking their pets to the vet anyway because they cannot afford the treatment?

Hanzala Malik: I think that it is, unfortunately.

Karen Harvey: You do.

Hanzala Malik: Yes. Sorry.

The Convener: We seem to have exhausted our questions. As I have said, your petition is quite thought provoking, but there are some practical considerations that have to be taken into account.

It is not really for the Public Petitions Committee to adjudicate on the petition's merits at the moment. We have to investigate the practicalities further, so we need to ask the Government, which would be responsible, what its views would be. You also highlighted a few charities that are already involved in the discussion and it would be useful to contact such organisations as the British Veterinary Association, the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals and some of the others that you named. We will collate the information that you have given and write to the SSPCA and the Dogs Trust.

Jackson Carlaw: I would also be interested in seeing whether any of the pet insurance providers would be interested in discussing with us how they go about promoting pet insurance and how much they feel that they spend on that. I would like to know about the relationship between that and the uptake.

The Convener: We could either talk to an individual company or an association of insurance companies.

Jackson Carlaw: Yes, whoever would be willing to give us some evidence. I would have thought that one would be typical of another.

Kenny MacAskill: We might want to check with local government because things such as compliance with the dangerous dogs legislation are administered through local authority dog wardens. It is a local authority responsibility and there would be implications for resources and costs.

Karen Harvey: Perhaps the dog wardens could be brought into it.

The Convener: I am sure that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities would have a view, given the local authorities' responsibilities.

We need to sound out a wide range of organisations about the petition and the points that you have made. We will do that, collect the responses that we get, and then get in touch with you and see what we will do with the petition when we have a fuller picture from the organisations out there. Thank you for bringing such a thought-provoking petition to us this morning.

Karen Harvey: Thank you.

10:32

Meeting suspended.

10:34

On resuming—

Accessible Rail Travel (PE1575)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE1575, by Alex Scott MBE, on accessible rail travel. Members have a note by the clerk, the petition and a Scottish Parliament information centre briefing, and will wish to note that, sadly, after lodging the petition Mr Scott passed away. In the circumstances, the petition is being taken forward by the Community trade union, which worked with Mr Scott on the petition. I welcome to the meeting Beverley Bambrough and Robert Mooney from Community, and I invite Ms Bambrough to speak to the petition, after which we will move to questions.

Beverley Bambrough (Community): All aboard is the campaign for accessible rail travel in Scotland. I will introduce myself and my colleague. I am responsible for education and equality in the Community trade union. My colleague Robert Mooney is a key activist in Scotland in the National League of the Blind and Disabled. He works in Royal Strathclyde Blindcraft Industries at City Building, and he is the chair of the NLBD committee for Community and a member of our national executive.

We thank you for scheduling consideration of our petition and ensuring that the wish of a lifelong friend and campaigner—to ensure that safer transport remains high on the agenda of the Scottish Government—is fulfilled.

Why have we come? It would be remiss of us not to mention Alex Scott MBE, a very special man to us. Alex Scott was a lifelong trade unionist and campaigner for the rights of disabled people, particularly in Scotland. Alex, who was blind, was an activist, a campaigner and a much respected member of the National League for the Blind and Disabled, which became part of Community in 2000. He campaigned tirelessly to make sure that we never lost the ability to look at not just the large, high-level things that affect our everyday lives but the small matters that are sometimes seen as trivial to those who might not contemplate the impact of decisions that are made at a high level. Those decisions can make small but meaningful changes. Above all, Alex wanted to make meaningful differences to the lives of Scotland's blind community.

The all aboard campaign is a perfect example of Alex's practical approach to campaigning. Tragically, it was to be Alex's last campaign, as he passed away earlier this year. However, we are proud to present the petition on his behalf. I am sure that Alex will be looking down on Robert and me and will be willing us onwards, to ensure that

we as a union continue to make a difference in people's lives.

I turn to the campaign. Rail travel in Scotland is not always accessible in the way that we would want it to be for all disabled people. Why is that? Multiple factors make navigating different train lines and routes difficult for people with physical disabilities, particularly partially sighted people. Take the different train manufacturers that design trains. Each manufacturer will have buttons and handles in different positions, both on train main doors and in facilities such as toilets. Imagine, for a moment, not having your sight and being unable to find that button.

Alex once told me a tale of a man who wanted to be independent, working and travelling regularly on public transport. He was a proud man, who one day was travelling on the train alone. He needed to use the on-board facilities and entered the toilet after searching for the button, albeit with a little help from a fellow traveller. All did not go well. The man felt humiliated at the end of the journey. He could not find the button to exit the toilet and was stuck in it for a considerable amount of time.

Alex always said that it was about us enabling people—about the small and meaningful things. Here is a thought: if we could get manufacturers to agree to put buttons in the same place on trains, that would be small but meaningful.

Despite some improvements to disabled access at train stations, the fact that ScotRail staff no longer wear high-visibility jackets on platforms can make it difficult for a partially sighted person to see them when they need them most. A simple change can make all the difference to a partially sighted person—that is about being small but meaningful.

Community's campaign is Alex's campaign, above all. What are we seeking? Community believes that the Scottish Government must take responsibility for ensuring that Scotland's rail network is accessible to all. Community has been working with colleagues in the Scottish Trades Union Congress disabled workers committee to promote the campaign. Recently we passed a motion at the STUC disabled workers conference calling on the committee to lend its support to Community—and to Alex—in lobbying the Scottish Government.

Specifically, the all aboard campaign has three key wishes to ask of the Scottish Government: for the Scottish Government to work with ScotRail and Community to standardise all buttons and signs across the rail network on both existing and future stock; for the Government to work with ScotRail to ensure that high-vis jackets are worn by all station staff—a simple thing that could be addressed more or less immediately; and for the Government to work with Community and other

disabled groups in Scotland to promote that work and campaign for better disabled access to Scotland's whole public transport network. Overall, we believe that undertaking that work in partnership with Community and other disabled groups will provide a safer, more equal and more accessible transport system for disabled travellers in Scotland.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I am not so much declaring an interest as informing people that I have had a discussion on the issue previously as the convener of the cross-party group on disability. The Scottish Accessible Transport Alliance had already raised the issue and we have invited the Minister for Transport and Islands to come to the next meeting of the CPG to discuss it.

Some of the issues that you raised came up as part of that discussion, which is why we wanted to invite the minister. Something that you did not mention is an apparent conflict due to the drive to have people using bicycles as much as possible. People are getting on to trains with their bikes to go to other destinations and the bikes are then taking up space that disabled people would otherwise have had access to.

Are you aware of that conflict between the Government's desire to get people using bikes more, which means more bikes being taken on to public transport, and the need to make trains more accessible to people who have mobility problems and other issues?

Robert Mooney (Community): I have never really thought about that before. I have a visual impairment and there are designated places on trains for bikes and there are designated places on trains for people with disabilities. I must admit that I, my wife, my son and my daughter-in-law all have quite severe visual impairments and I have never seen bikes as a major problem, to be honest. If there are going to be more bikes on the train as more people travel by bike and take their bikes on the train, that could probably cause a problem in the future.

The Convener: Do any committee members want to ask questions?

Hanzala Malik: I have no questions, just a comment. I think that it is a wonderful petition and it merits a lot of serious consideration. We should be writing to the Scottish Government to find out exactly what it is prepared to do to deal with the issues. It is an excellent petition.

Kenny MacAskill: Do you have any international comparators? In a lot of the countries that I travel in, certainly in western Europe, the facilities that are provided for everybody on train services seem quite a bit better. I wonder whether that is down to procurement. Certainly the rail

services in Germany and Spain that I have experienced in recent years seem to be much more regular, if I can put it that way. I do not know whether you have any information on that or know why that is.

Beverley Bambrough: I do not have any information or know why that is. I have a personal observation—I think that it is probably linked to how we procure things. We probably do not have joined-up partnership thinking when we are procuring things. If there is a multitude of different manufacturers, in order to bring some standardisation for the people who need to use the transport system, it would make logical sense to embed standardisation in every procurement process that goes through. When manufacturers were designing their trains, they would then have that one standard to work to. That would mean that everybody, no matter where they were in the UK, would be able to access the transport system.

10:45

John Wilson: We are talking about people who have visual impairments, but disability comes in a range of shapes and sizes. The convener has referred to issues for people who use wheelchairs or who have mobility problems. Have you had any discussions with other disability groups, apart from the STUC disabled workers committee, to look at what would be best for the wider community? We could propose changes for visually impaired individuals only to find out that people with mobility problems or wheelchair users have an issue because the buttons are out of reach or are in the wrong place to enable access for them. Have there been any discussions in the wider disability movement about the best placing of buttons and other fixtures in trains so that everybody can get the benefit of travelling on trains?

Robert Mooney: I think that the convener has already said that the matter has been raised at the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on disability. I am sure that it will have been raised there. As a frequent rail traveller who has a visual impairment, I think that part of the problem is that there are so many franchises in Great Britain and so many different companies, and they all use different types of trains. The issue is not just the toilets; it is the main doors and the doors going from one carriage to another. If you imagine for a minute having a visual impairment, you will realise that, when someone who is blind or partially blind goes towards a door, they have to feel for where the buttons are. For people in a wheelchair, the buttons are at a height where they can be reached and, if they can see them, that is fine. The buttons are not uniform. They are in completely different parts of the toilet cubicle and on completely different parts of the door, so people with visual

impairment have to physically feel round the door until they come across the button.

I have heard more than once about a blind person getting hold of the emergency button in the toilet and stopping the train. It can be embarrassing. Blind people quite often get locked in the toilet and cannot find their way back out, as Beverley Bambrough said. Not that long ago, I was with six or seven blind people travelling to London, and one of our colleagues went to the toilet. The train stopped, and our colleague then came back. A wee while after that, the ticket inspector came up and said, "Did your wee pal tell you that he's just stopped the train?", although he had not. It happens frequently. All we are looking for is a bit of dignity. It is very undignified.

John Wilson: It is not only blind people who stop trains because they do not know what button to press—Westminster ministers have been known to do that as well. There is clearly an issue, but I would like to work in conjunction with other disability groups to ensure that we get the right fit.

One difficulty is that some of the rolling stock in Scotland is more than 30 years old. The issue is how we retrofit that to make a standardised button system in trains, whether that is for getting access to the train or using the toilet facilities. With future rolling stock, we could certainly ensure that a standardised model is put in place, but retrofitting the rolling stock that is 30 years old would be difficult.

Beverley Bambrough: To go back to the question about whether there have been any overall discussions, it is worth noting that, in England, there are similar issues with accessibility to train stations and so on. There has been extensive discussion about staffing levels at train and bus stations to enable partially sighted and blind people as well as people with physical or mental health issues to access the transport system. The issue does not just stop with where the buttons on the trains are. We need a complete look at how we staff train stations to make things accessible to everybody.

The Convener: I have a question about high-visibility vests not being worn. It did not occur to me that that was the case. I travelled by train last week and I recall seeing staff in some English stations wearing high-vis vests, but you are right that, in Scotland, they do not. Have you been given an explanation for that, Mr Mooney?

Robert Mooney: I raised that issue initially because I had a problem with it. I have a pass that gets me free transport on trains but, when I go towards the barrier, I need to wait for somebody to let me through. Previously, I could see the person because they would have a high-vis vest on and I would head for them. Just recently, things

changed and the vests became dark blue. I could not see anybody to go towards and so I had to stand there for quite a while waiting for somebody to let me through. However, last week, they changed back to the high-vis vests.

The Convener: Right—somebody has obviously been listening.

Robert Mooney: That is in the two main stations in Glasgow—Glasgow Central and Glasgow Queen Street. I do not know about stations in Edinburgh or elsewhere. It has changed back in Glasgow.

The Convener: Members have no more questions.

There is a genuine interest in the issue. It is an on-going discussion, but there is no reason why the committee should not get involved and try to find out where we can take it. We certainly need to speak to Transport Scotland to find out its views. The companies that run the trains will also have a view, which means Abellio in Scotland. We also need to identify a couple of the manufacturers and write to them for their views. There are also the bodies that have an interest from the disability angle. It would certainly be useful to get SATA's take on the issue.

Do colleagues have any other suggestions?

Jackson Carlaw: It strikes me that, given that very little product is manufactured exclusively for the United Kingdom market, the manufacturers of buses or trains will produce units for the whole European Union and possibly more internationally than that. It would be interesting to find out whether our colleagues in the European Parliament have explored the issue. On the face of it, if we are looking for standardisation in the manufacturing process to facilitate access for those who are partially sighted, that commonality would have to happen at source and across the whole market for the product, not just here in Scotland. Frankly, it might be impractical to try to achieve that in isolation.

The Convener: Thanks for raising that point, Mr Carlaw. The deputy convener mentioned that when we were listening to the petitioners earlier. We certainly need to contact the European authorities to find out about the standardisation requirements in relation to the issue.

We will write to those organisations and collect that information. Obviously, we will keep the petitioners advised of the responses that we receive. We will take the petition forward as best we can to pursue the interests of the groups that you represent. Thanks very much for bringing the petition to us.

I suspend the meeting for a minute or two so that we can change witnesses.

10:53

Meeting suspended.

10:57

*On resuming—***Forth Circle Rail Link (PE1578)**

The Convener: Our next petition is PE1578, by Martin Keatings, on a Forth circle rail link. I welcome the petitioner to the meeting. He is accompanied today by Lewis Akers, who is a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament. I invite Mr Keatings to speak to the petition.

Martin Keatings: Thank you very much. I thank the committee for allowing me to appear today. The subject of the petition is a Forth rail link. I am a Borderer, so rail provision is an issue that is somewhat ingrained in me. It is a sore subject, particularly in Hawick, where I was born and raised. However, in Fife, it gives me a unique perspective and an insight into what happens when demand outstrips the availability of public infrastructure.

The damage done by the Beeching cuts was systemic and long lasting. In looking at the bottom line in terms of profitability, the UK Government neglected to anticipate the collateral damage that would be caused by removing viable rail infrastructure. The railway left and, subsequently, the mills could not get their goods out. The end result of that was mass unemployment in the Borders and, basically, a town dying.

That is an extreme example of what happens when demand outstrips the available infrastructure but, although it is not at the same level as in Fife, it is a perfect example of what will happen—albeit over a more protracted period—if transportation fails to keep pace with population growth.

The Forth rail link matters. The project would benefit not only Fife and Clackmannanshire but, indeed, any area north of Fife because of rail connectivity. It would decrease transit times and expand commuter access to Scotland's major cities. It would take around 10 per cent of freight off our roads and put it on to rail, which could only be good for the environment and congestion.

11:00

Let us call a spade a spade. The A907, which runs parallel to the west Fife villages, is the main road through Dunfermline. By all rights, it is a bit of a joke because of potholes, traffic lights and traffic jams. The A907 and the road system are an immediate turn off for visitors, commuters, local business and investment in the local area. My father is a daily commuter on the road and refers

to it by many names, none of which are repeatable in polite company.

The A985, which is the other main road that runs parallel with the west Fife villages, is the interjoining road between Kincardine and Rosyth. Consider the importance of that road. It is the main link road—the trunk road—between the motorway and the Forth bridges at one end and Kincardine and the upper Forth crossing at the other.

By all indications, we can reduce the freight on the roads by up to 10 per cent through transfer to rail. If we can do the same with commuters going back and forward to Stirling, Alloa, Edinburgh and Glasgow, it will help tremendously. We are in the process of building a brand spanking new bridge because the existing one cannot handle the capacity that is being pushed over it each day, so the end result of such a reduction would be to reduce the amount of damage to the new bridge, the old bridge and the road infrastructure.

The Forth circle rail link would be good for the environment, local business, local commuters and the local public. At the same time, it would be good for anybody to the north. It would be good for anybody in Clackmannan to get to Edinburgh or for anybody in Dunfermline to go in the opposite direction to Stirling and Glasgow. It would speed up transit times and it is just, generally, common sense.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

David Torrance: I put it on record that I attend meetings of the Levenmouth rail campaign.

Good morning, gentlemen. Does the proposal have the backing of Fife Council and the south east of Scotland transport partnership?

Martin Keatings: We have been talking back and forward with local MSPs and councillors, but Fife Council has done a Scottish transport appraisal guidance report on the link. That report is dated 2010. I believe that a STAG report has just been released on the Levenmouth railway and that one is pending for the St Andrews side of things, but there has been no update on the Forth rail link—or the Forth circle, as it is known in the STAG report—since 2010.

David Torrance: I am fully supportive of rail links in Fife. I know where you are coming from on that. However, rail is the most expensive form of infrastructure to put in. Is it feasible that Fife Council would put two projects forward to Transport Scotland—the Levenmouth rail link and the Rosyth one?

Martin Keatings: It is funny that you should mention that because, two or three days ago, I was at a Common Weal meeting at which the Levenmouth rail guys spoke. Based on their figures, I believe that the cost to viability ratio is

something like 1.1 or 1.2. Basically, they would get £1.2 for every £1 that was invested in that infrastructure. The addition of the Forth rail link, which would give the Fife circle direct connectivity to Clackmannan and on to Glasgow, would raise the profitability and viability of the Levenmouth rail link to something in the region of 2.2. Building the Forth rail link would almost double the cost to profit ratio and the viability of that line.

That is not to mention the fact that, although the projections are from 2010, it is projected that the Forth rail link would cost £2.2 million to run. It would provide about £2.06 million of revenue but, at the same time, the intrinsic benefits to Fife and the surrounding area would be closer to £2.4 million. Basically, that means spending £2 million a year with £4 million coming back in benefits.

I have always found that, with rail, one of the issues is that people tend to look at the bottom line and ask whether a particular line is profitable without considering the intrinsic benefits to the local area and everything else round about it. That is exactly where the Beeching cuts went wrong. It is exactly the same in Fife. The Forth rail link will give other projects a chance in the future. It will give them more viability, in terms of the ability to set them up properly. At the same time, it will give an opportunity to provide a much-needed commuter service and reduce strain on existing capacity.

David Torrance: How much dialogue have you had with Fife Council? As you know, new bids for infrastructure will take place in 2019. Fife Council will not be able to go with a wish list; it will have a list with their number 1, 2 and 3 priorities for infrastructure in the area.

Martin Keatings: I will be brutally honest with you. Trying to have a proper dialogue with Fife Council is like trying to get blood out of a stone. We have hit a few brick walls over the past couple of months. I have spoken to the local MSP—her name escapes me for the moment.

David Torrance: Her name is Cara Hilton.

Martin Keatings: We have been having a dialogue with Fife Council, but it has been limited. When we contacted Clackmannanshire Council—the proposal affects Clackmannanshire just as much as it does Fife—it said that we need to speak to Fife, then Fife said that we need to speak to Clackmannanshire. That is why we have lodged the petition with the Parliament. It needs direction from the national level. It needs the Parliament to bring both sides together. Everyone needs to get together in one room for a committee meeting to hammer out the issues and discuss exactly what needs to be done.

The communication that we have had with Fife Council, local MSPs and local candidates has all

been positive and I know that you are supportive of rail in the area. The dialogue has been positive, but it is not going very far.

Lewis Akers MSYP (Scottish Youth Parliament): I am the MSYP for Dunfermline in West Fife, which will be massively affected by the issues raised in the petition. I surveyed my electorate and 22 per cent disagreed that it would benefit tourism, which means that an astonishing 78 per cent of the people whom I surveyed said that it would benefit tourism. Seventy-eight per cent of people said that it would take travel off the roads, 89 per cent of people said that it would help them gain jobs and 100 per cent of people whom I surveyed support the campaign.

Two of the MSYPs in Fife, including me, were elected on the back of improving transport in Fife, especially railway links, so the issue is pertinent to young people as well as older people. It has the full backing of the Scottish youth parliamentarians in Fife. The Scottish Parliament's support for our campaign would make a massive difference.

David Torrance: If Fife Council does not take forward the proposal with SEStran and take it to Transport Scotland, it will never get on the agenda for infrastructure investment.

Martin Keatings: I am aware of that. It is, shall we say, a battle on many fronts. It is a new campaign—we are only six months out the gate. We have been talking about it for quite a few years, but it is a new campaign. We are chasing as many routes as possible. We want it known from day 1 that the Forth rail link will benefit a lot of people nationally—not just people in Fife and Clackmannanshire, but anybody north of Fife who takes the train.

We want what we are doing to be on record with the Parliament. Yes, we are chasing it up with Fife Council. The next step, based on the discussions that we have had with Fife Council, is to get the STAG report updated and move it through the council's procedures, to get it on the books. Obviously the issues affect Clackmannanshire, so we need to raise them with Clackmannanshire Council as well.

It is early days; we will admit that. It is just a case of getting everybody in the same room.

Lewis Akers: I will be contacting the MSYPs in Clackmannanshire, to see whether they can get a dialogue with their local MSPs, councillors and MPs on this topic and raise support from Clackmannanshire in the Scottish Youth Parliament. There will be dialogue between young people in Clackmannanshire and their elected representatives; it will not just be young people in Fife who talk to their councillors and MSPs. There will be a dialogue between Clackmannanshire

MSYPs and, I hope, Stirling MSYPs, as the issue is pertinent to them as well.

Kenny MacAskill: I have two points and I am seeking any views or clarification you have on Rosyth and freight.

I remember that years ago, at the time of the discussions on the construction of the Stirling-Alloa extension, proposals were made by many rail groups that it could be extended into Kincardine and thereby on to Rosyth. I just wondered where Rosyth stood in the grand scheme of things, given that that seems to be the logical extension of the Clackmannanshire line.

Equally, I have to say that a lot of the freight traffic that that proposal was predicated on was coal traffic for Longannet that was coming over the Forth bridge. The idea was that that traffic would be taken off the bridge and free up capacity on the bridge. Given the demise of Longannet, what is the capacity for freight, given the difficulties that we have had at Rosyth?

Martin Keatings: It is a bit of a double whammy. Longannet is going; it will be shut down and it is unfortunate that those people will lose their jobs, but it opens a wealth of opportunities for the area in regard to freight.

Going back to the Levenmouth extension, the rails are still there and the extension runs directly past Diageo, for instance, which is one of the biggest breweries in Scotland. At the moment, in terms of the freight capacity on that line, trains have to travel to Dunfermline and then reverse back down the line to go to Rosyth. There is already an extension running to Rosyth.

If a spur was put in, which is what plan A calls for—it is called the Crombie point—that would allow southbound commuter trains to run directly on to the Edinburgh south line to head towards Edinburgh. At the same time, it would give interconnectivity for the freight trains so that they could continue straight down at Rosyth.

The 2010 STAG report was clear on the point that the beach-head and the port of Rosyth are vastly underused as a direct result of transport capacity in Fife. The STAG report could not make that point any clearer, so that is another opportunity straight off the bat. We have freight provision there. The line will require some upgrades as regards passing loops for freight trains, but if we have the proper link in place—if we have the Crombie point in place—straight away the port of Rosyth could be used a lot more than it is.

I have had conversations with one of the representatives of Bruno Steinhoff, of Steinhoff International, which owns furniture retailers including Harveys. The representative spoke

highly of the possibility of being able to bring in items at the port of Rosyth, or at least that was the indication that they gave. There are the breweries and there is even Babcock International Group, for instance, which has a base at the port of Rosyth as well. It is all freight opportunity.

At the moment, we have two docks sitting empty because of the ferry crossing. They could be used for cargo. There is enough space there to expand. There is enough space there for us to put in industrial complexes and for people to be able to transport goods in and out of the port and straight north.

We might have lost Longannet and a lot of the freight traffic estimate was based on that but, at the end of the day, it opens up a wealth of opportunities in relation to being able to put other types of freight on that line. It opens up the opportunity to have a landing dock at Rosyth, which I believe is sorely needed. It is all about jobs and investment. The problem is that, currently, no company worth its salt will look at Fife and think that the transport infrastructure is up to the job.

It is a bit of a chicken-and-egg scenario: until we have the infrastructure, the companies will not decide to come to Fife and we will end up losing them. The perfect example is the new high speed rail link that is being built down south—HS2 and HS1. Make no mistake, we are in direct competition with our neighbours down south and if a company looks at the UK as a whole and says that the infrastructure down south is better than it is here, that is where they will go. We will lose factories and we will lose trade and investment for freight because our infrastructure is simply not up to it.

To go back to the original question, I say yes, the freight traffic estimate was based on Longannet, but the wealth of opportunities that such a development would open up is overwhelming. A lot of companies that ship from down south would rather bring their goods straight into Rosyth, right into the back of a wagon and away north on the train.

11:15

Hanzala Malik: I am a great supporter of building and infrastructure in Scotland and I genuinely believe that local transport is crucial to securing industry and jobs. I am interested to know what support you would get from Fife Council and I would like you to demonstrate which industries would welcome the opportunity to engage with that work. There are a lot of farms out there and it would be nice if you could do a bit of legwork to support your petition for the future. I would like to see the petition go forward and build

on the foundations that you have laid. You should not just assume that it is a hard challenge.

You have repeatedly said that freight is available so let us prove it. Let us get some companies that will indicate that they are interested, at the very least.

Martin Keatings: It is funny that you should mention that. I do not have the STAG report with me, but appendices A, B, C, D and E list the responses of businesses in Fife to the consultation. Most of them are positive about moving their workforce and their goods.

As I have already said, I agree that the campaign is just out of the gate and the legwork will be done. We will contact companies in Fife and ones that have expressed an interest in possibly coming to Fife.

Hanzala Malik: That would help your case a great deal, but you will also have to lean on the council. That will be an important element of your campaign.

John Wilson: Good morning and thank you for your petition. In the discussions that you have had with various MSPs and local authorities, has there been any discussion of the use of the Forth circle line once Longannet closes? One of the reasons for the reinstatement of that line was to allow coal freight to get to Longannet. The line passes through towns, but from Alloa to Longannet no stations were built.

Has there been any indication that Fife Council is prepared to review the STAG report? Is SEStran prepared to review the whole situation of the line? A lot of public money was spent on recreating the line to allow coal freight to go primarily from Alloa into Longannet. Has there been any indication that the opportunity that will be created if and when Longannet closes will mean a real benefit to communities along the line after 2016?

Martin Keatings: I will go back to the STAG report. I understand that it is from 2010 and that it needs to be updated.

The report contains four different options. Option A was modifications to the existing line. Option B was to use the line as is. Option C was partial line usage with supplementary buses. Option D was basically just to use buses.

Everything from environmental impact assessment to cost analysis says that getting the line up and running and making changes to it would cost more; the figure was about £56 million. However, it is the old story: if you are going to do it, you might as well do it right.

The STAG report contains every single part of what would need to be done to the line in order to make it viable. The beauty is that, because

Longannet re-established the line and operated it as a coal line, and because a lot of work was done to maintain it to keep the coal trains running, the modifications that would be required would be less than they were back when the STAG report was done.

The STAG report calls for £56 million, but I think that £8.7 million of that is for contingencies, so we are talking about an overall bill of around £48 million to re-establish the railway line. However, the railway line already runs through each of the villages. All that we are talking about is the establishment of platforms. Remedial work would be done to the line to upgrade it from a 35mph to a 60mph track and to include passing loops for freight trains.

Option A, which is preferred and makes most sense, is to build the spur for southbound trains to Edinburgh. However, that would use an existing rail line and it would not change any direction or any of the foundations that that line sits on. It would mean nothing like that. It would be a simple case of putting in signalling and a few passing points and building the spur. An existing resource would be used and expanded on to make it economically viable for passenger and freight services. The two together make that option more than viable.

I cannot tell members what the interest is like in the local area. The interest is overwhelming—it is as simple as that. Two or three buses are needed no matter where people go from the west Fife villages, unless we are talking about Dunfermline. Maybe a bus and then a train or two buses will be needed just to get to Edinburgh. We were joking about that in the elevator coming up here. I had to take three buses to get here because we do not have a rail link in my village, which the proposal would deliver.

I cannot stress enough that existing infrastructure would be used and improved on. With the spur, the existing infrastructure would simply be taken and made better, more economical and more viable for the local area. Any other subsequent projects would be made more viable, as well, of course.

The entire options are detailed in the STAG report; it just needs to be updated. I will have conversations with Fife Council about getting the STAG report updated. I believe that the Levenmouth report has just been updated for the second time.

John Wilson: I am aware of the rail movements on the line. I think that there are around 24 rail movements a day just related to Longannet and 2,300 tonnes of coal are transported in every movement. The capacity to put rail passenger facilities on that line would therefore be greatly

enhanced if and when Longannet closes. The opportunity to put in passenger stations to allow the line to be fully utilised does not take much thinking about. I also know that the number of freight movements that come out of Rosyth do not amount to the number of movements of coal, so it is clear that there are opportunities there. We will see how we can take the proposal forward.

Martin Keatings: The passenger services are not new. Extending the Glasgow to Stirling service would be all that would need to be done. That would be an extension of existing services. Maybe one or two extra trains would be run, so even the expenditure on rolling stock would be greatly reduced by the building of the new extension to Alloa. The service that already runs there would be used; it would simply be extended to Dunfermline or southbound to Edinburgh.

Lewis Akers: As we see it, we are not just looking at the short-term view that it is a lot of money to spend on a rail link. It is not just about the short-term view; it is about the long-term gains that we will get. If people in the west Fife villages want to go to university in Stirling, Edinburgh or Glasgow, for example, going there will take two or three hours on the bus. The proposal would mean that people could travel directly to universities from the west Fife villages, so their horizons would be opened up. I do not think that anybody on the committee could oppose that. The proposal would open up people's employability horizons and open up the Stirling, Clackmannanshire and Glasgow markets for employment.

As I said earlier, 78 per cent of people agreed that the proposal would broaden their horizons.

As we know, rural poverty is a big issue. I am on the transport, environment and rural affairs committee of the Scottish Youth Parliament, which highlighted that bad public transport is a big problem in relation to rural poverty. The petition suggests a solution to real problems that people have. The Scottish Parliament quite often takes decisions that might change people's lives, but people do not see those decisions. This proposal is tangible and would transform people's lives in the villages of west Fife. At the moment, those people are pretty much isolated from employment, education and even something as simple as a social life.

Martin Keatings: I agree with Lewis Akers. You do not realise the strain.

I have a unique set of circumstances. My mother has secondary progressive multiple sclerosis. I can assure you that getting on a train is much easier than getting on a coach. The low-liner buses rattle, squeak and take forever to get where you are going. Access to trains would be essential.

Cairneyhill is slightly larger than most of the other villages. A lot of the smaller villages, such as Culross, Valleyfield and—I am trying to remember the one with the doctor's surgery in it; I will get slapped by the local constituents for not remembering the name of their village—get cut off by snow. This is a perfect example. In 2008, there was a massive snowfall and the west Fife villages were completely cut off. You could not get to the doctor's surgery or the local pharmacy—you could not get anywhere. There is no problem for the train, though. A little bit of track clearing and away it goes. Our proposal would give priority access to those people and enable them to get out of their villages during the winter.

It happens quite regularly that those villages are cut off and, because they are classified as small villages, the response time is nowhere near what it would be in major metropolitan areas. In Cairneyhill, for instance, it took Fife Council two weeks to send a gritter round the street where I lived. I was in one of the bigger villages. For the smaller villages, it was even worse. It really takes its toll. We are talking about access to universities, schools and workplaces, as well as access for business people to come up here and talk about trade and investment in the local area. We are basically talking about the movement of every person and every bit of freight—everything in the local area. Our proposal has real tangible value.

The Convener: I do not think that there are any more questions. It is not for me to argue the pros and cons of your case. We have to find out what level of support there is for the petition and which issues this committee would have to take into consideration.

I am interested in the discussion about expanding Rosyth as a freight terminal. I and John Wilson are involved in a campaign against the imposition of a freight terminal in our area. If Rosyth wants one, I can tell it where it can find one. This is all part of the national planning framework. Work has been done on freight by the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee, which considers transport. That committee looked at the issues and Rosyth did not seem to me to be a high priority—I do not think that a feasibility or business case had particularly been made. We must examine exactly what capacity there would be for expanding freight transport in the area. It is not really for this committee to establish that. We need to find out the views of the local community, the business community, the transport authorities and what have you in relation to the viability of the business case for the link.

I am open to suggestions from colleagues.

David Torrance: Can we write to the local authorities involved to find out their position on the proposal and how much support they would give

it? That is vital because, if the proposal is not one of their priorities, it will never reach Transport Scotland or get to the funding stage at the Scottish Government.

John Wilson: I suggest that we write to Network Rail and ScotRail.

One of the arguments that was often used, particularly by transport ministers, against putting passenger transport on that line was that the rail line from Alloa to Longannet was designed for coal freight, not for passengers. However, it would be useful to find out from Network Rail and ScotRail what opportunities are opened up by Longannet closing and the line being freed up to put in the stations that the petition suggests.

11:30

Martin Keatings: I have been in communication with Abellio on the matter, and I got the one-line response that it will implement whatever it is directed to implement by the Scottish Government.

The Convener: It is only the franchisee, so I do not think that we should contact Abellio.

Hanzala Malik: We are now at the stage of—

The Convener: We are just asking whom we should contact.

Angus MacDonald: I have had direct experience of local representatives not pushing cases on to SEStran agendas. I would therefore be keen to hear whether SEStran has been approached by Fife Council and whether the matter has been on the agenda so far.

Martin Keatings: The STAG report was produced in conjunction with SEStran.

The Convener: We will investigate that. Are there any other suggestions from the committee of whom we need to speak to in order to establish the merits of the petition?

Members: No.

The Convener: Okay. We will make a start by contacting the organisations that have been mentioned and we will let the petitioner know what responses we get. We will see where we take the petition from there, but we will keep you advised on the information that we receive and the discussions that we have. Thanks very much for speaking to the petition this morning.

Martin Keatings: Thank you.

Lewis Akers: Thank you.

The Convener: I suspend the meeting for a few minutes to allow us to change witnesses.

11:31

Meeting suspended.

11:33

On resuming—

School Libraries (PE1581)

The Convener: Our next new petition is PE1581, by Duncan Wright, on behalf of Save Scotland's School Libraries, which is on school libraries—believe it or not. I welcome Duncan Wright to the meeting. He is accompanied by Yvonne Manning, from the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in Scotland. I invite Mr Wright to introduce the subject to us, after which we will ask questions.

Duncan Wright: Good morning, everybody. I will make three main points, as a lot of what we will discuss is covered in the petition. I will first give a bit of background on why we are calling for a national strategy for school libraries in Scotland.

We firmly believe that school libraries are unique in their ability to support teaching and learning and that they should be the central resource of every school, open every day and staffed by a professionally trained librarian. We believe that all learners should have equal access to a qualified school librarian.

Currently, there is no national strategy and, unfortunately, young people in Scotland are subject to a postcode lottery with regard to the level of school library service that they receive. That is resulting in educational inequality. I will highlight the situation regarding school libraries in some areas of Scotland.

Schools in Glasgow share one librarian between every two schools; Renfrewshire has only seven librarians across 11 schools; in South Ayrshire, library assistants have replaced professionally qualified librarians; and in Fife, school librarians who have retired have been replaced with library assistants, which I think is a hidden cut. As for Dumfries and Galloway, the librarian at Dumfries academy retired and was not replaced, and responsibility for the library was given to the head of English instead; moreover, I believe that Lockerbie academy currently has no librarian.

Within the past financial year, East Renfrewshire Council has proposed moving to a model of sharing one librarian between two schools, and Falkirk Council has proposed a 50 per cent reduction in the number of school librarians and closure of the centralised school library service. Most recently of all, Argyll and Bute Council has proposed the deletion of all 10 school librarian posts.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing comments that the number of school library staff fell in 2012 but that since then the number has remained relatively stable. However, the data neither tells us how many of those staff are professionally qualified librarians nor shows how many of them are shared between schools.

I hope that our initial petition has already highlighted the positive impact that a school library can have. The report “Impact of School Libraries on Learning: Critical review of published evidence to inform the Scottish education community” sets out a considerable body of international evidence showing the impact of school libraries including—and maybe most important—positive attitudes towards learning and higher examination scores. However, I must point out that the report made it clear that, in order to have that impact, schools need a qualified, full-time librarian who is proactive and has managerial status.

In addition to the research that I have already submitted, I draw the committee’s attention to the junior certificate school programme support service demonstration library project, which was set up in Ireland. In 2001, the Irish Minister for Education and Science provided funding for that project as part of the early literacy initiative, and 11 schools that were identified as serving socioeconomically disadvantaged communities were given funding for a fully resourced school library, managed by a professionally qualified full-time librarian. Over a three-year period, the project underwent a major evaluation, the main findings of which included: significantly improved reading scores among the students at the schools in question; continually increased book borrowing by students; evidence of better attendance; improved levels of concentration; and increased interest and motivation among students. The official report on the project, “Room for Reading”, which was published in 2005, said:

“the findings demonstrate over and over again, that well stocked, well managed school libraries, with access to books through structured library programmes that are directed towards the learning needs and interests of even the most reluctant and hesitant readers, can have impacts that are very significant.”

Perhaps I can finish by giving the committee an idea of our vision of a national strategy or at least where we think such a strategy should begin. We welcome the recent publication of the national strategy for public libraries in Scotland. As school librarians, we work closely with our colleagues in the public library sector, and this would be an ideal time to launch a framework for a national strategy for school libraries in Scotland.

In that respect, we think that four initial steps could be taken. First of all, there are no definitive figures on the number or proportion of schools that have a school library and a professionally qualified

full-time school librarian, and we recommend that the education department ensures that such information becomes part of the annual data submission from schools.

Secondly, we recommend that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning considers examining in greater depth the role that school librarians and school libraries play in supporting pupils’ literacy levels, enjoyment of reading, information literacy skills and access to knowledge, as well as their self-esteem, confidence, and sense of safety and wellbeing in the school community.

Thirdly, we ask that the cabinet secretary publicly welcomes school libraries’ demonstrable contribution to educational attainment and discusses with Education Scotland the prospect of embedding school libraries into its inspection framework.

Finally, we recommend that the cabinet secretary has a member of staff acting as lead for libraries to support the work of headteachers and school librarians in delivering positive outcomes for pupils.

School libraries are not just about shelves of books, computers and the issuing and the returning of books. A good school library with a full-time professionally qualified librarian is all about a relationship and a culture. A good school librarian can put the right book into the right child’s hand at the right time.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Mr Wright. I open up the discussion to committee members. I think that you have made a very powerful and persuasive argument, but there are some issues that still have to be examined.

Kenny MacAskill: I am persuaded of the merits of school libraries. Given that we are facing financial pressures, would there be any merit in dovetailing the national strategy with the schools strategy, certainly in respect of new-build schools? I once visited a new school that was being built in the north-east of Scotland where the library was going to be available to the public and not simply the school. It is a bit like the situation with school sports facilities—why should facilities not remain open out of school hours if they are built in a manner that allows that? Could or should libraries, certainly in smaller communities, be not simply for the school but for the community?

Yvonne Manning (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in Scotland): There are many examples of school and public libraries being shared in community schools. That approach makes sense and it can be successful, although it depends on the staff. That takes me to the argument that we are making about professionalism and having professional

librarians in facilities. Such a library will have the same children and young people but just in a different context. School librarians and public librarians sometimes work in profoundly different ways in delivering the best service for our children and young people. However, especially in Aberdeenshire, there are examples of community library facilities within schools. Obviously, they are different uses and such facilities are open to the public of all ages as well as for young people in the education service.

Where that approach is well planned and is not just something stuck on the edge of an existing facility—new-builds can be a good example of that—and where consideration is given to the professionalism of the staff, it really works and it makes sense.

Hanzala Malik: As this is book week, the petitioners are here at the right time, because people are in the right frame of mind. You have made some very good suggestions. As an ex-councillor in Glasgow City Council, I know that some libraries there are in the wrong locations because people have moved on and housing schemes have developed elsewhere, so access to a lot of libraries is not as good as it ought to be. I feel that our schools could play an important role in providing library facilities to local residents and, more important, to the students. Kenny MacAskill is absolutely right that we need to look at that more closely, because it helps to deal with financial issues around buildings and, more important, it helps with the location of buildings. Kenny MacAskill used the word “dovetail”. If we can dovetail services, that is ideal.

I totally agree that libraries play an immense role in educational attainment for youngsters. I have been to many countries overseas and I have found the lack of libraries and the impact that that has on citizens to be quite marked. You are absolutely right that we need to look at the issue. I know that libraries are primarily the responsibility and jurisdiction of local authorities, but they need help with that. They do not have all the resource to be able to deliver what we are asking them to. It is a very tall order. The Scottish Government needs to intervene to support local authorities in that and we need to look at the issue more strategically. I totally agree with the petition and I think that we should take it forward to try to achieve that goal.

11:45

Duncan Wright: I welcome those comments. A strategic overview is exactly what is required. I do not think that local authorities understand the issues.

On the issue of dovetailing, I agree with Yvonne Manning that that works, but it is important to

remember that it is not a one-size-fits-all solution. It must be done individually for each school. Public libraries offer a wonderful service to a completely different set of people from those who are served by school libraries. You might have a bookbug session with some 18-month-old babies, but it would be difficult to have a class of teenagers in at the same time. However, there is scope for dovetailing. I know that the system works well in Aberdeenshire, which Kenny MacAskill visited.

Hanzala Malik: I do not want to suggest for a moment that local authorities do not understand and appreciate the challenge that is faced—as an ex-councillor, I can assure you that they do; it is just that that they cannot face that challenge by themselves.

On the issue of managing a school library, as you say, the school library is not just another classroom. I am talking about having a proper library facility in an area that everyone can access.

Yvonne Manning: On the issue of dovetailing services, as Duncan Wright said, we work closely in partnership with our public library colleagues. Public libraries face a challenge with regard to engaging teenagers. School librarians know those young people; that is their community. A national strategy for school libraries would help to increase the dovetailing of services and would enable us to see where the strengths are in each sector, so that greater partnership working can take place for the benefit of young people.

The Convener: I note from the information that we have before us that you have received quite a lot of high-profile support for your petition from people such as Christopher Brookmyre, Val McDermid and Ian Rankin. However, I was particularly struck by this comment:

“As Head of English in a school which closed down its library, I know what a devastating impact this had. I also know what a difference the restoration of our library has made.”

Can you give us an idea of the impact of a school library being closed down? You talked about the benefits of having a library, and I think that there is an assumption that there are benefits. However, can you quantify those benefits? Can you show statistically the difference in the attainment levels and so on between schools that have libraries and librarians and those that do not?

Duncan Wright: I do not think that any statistical research has been done. The Dorothy Williams report, “Impact of School Libraries on Learning”, has been quoted numerous times. It took various pieces of information that are available and made a case for school libraries, but I am not sure whether any statistics are available.

I am a school librarian and I know what would happen if I was not in the school. I know how

classes would suffer. There would be no author events, no one would be teaching information literacy and there would be less emphasis on the teaching of reading for pleasure. Further, there would be no safe haven for pupils who feel that the school playground is a scary place. The value of having somewhere that pupils can go that is safe and is a place where they can get away from what happens in the playground is almost unquantifiable.

School librarians have a huge knowledge of the curriculum, and are able to offer additional support to our teaching colleagues, who have been quite open about how much pressure they are under at the moment. As soon as a member of the support staff is taken away—particularly the school librarian—another issue is created.

The Convener: I take that point. The provision of school libraries and librarians concerns quality as much as quantity.

Jackson Carlaw: A thought has occurred to me as I have listened to you speak. Is the reduction in service in relation to librarians a consequence simply of cost reduction as a result of the council tax freeze or whatever else is causing straitened circumstances in local authorities, or are you articulating a concern that there is a broader growth of a lack of understanding of the value that librarians bring to the educational service? Where does the balance of the issue rest?

Yvonne Manning: It is an interesting thing that, if people are getting a service, they do not really need to know in detail what I do as a librarian. However, local authorities' backs are against the wall, especially in relation to education services, and they have a much smaller percentage of people that they can target to save money because of the protection of teachers, so it is really important that people understand what we do. At present, people are just thinking about the pounds that they need to save.

The situation in which our school librarians and our school library services are being removed, or certainly degraded, is a result of the budget savings that local authorities need to make. However, because there is no national strategy, the local authorities do not fully understand the implications of the decisions that they are making, and they will not know what they will miss until we are not there. That is frustrating for us, and that is why we lodged the petition.

We want the decision makers in local authorities, who have to make these decisions because of the budget savings that are required, to really understand the implications of what they are doing. They should not see us as easy targets, or as discretionary services.

Jackson Carlaw: So the answer to my question is both. The lack of understanding and the absence of a national strategy, which has accelerated that lack of understanding, are, in the face of pressures, making the librarian service too easy an option within the difficult decisions that have to be made. That is where you are coming from.

Yvonne Manning: Yes.

Jackson Carlaw: Thank you.

The Convener: A well-argued case has been put to us this morning. How do colleagues suggest we take the petition forward? Who should we speak to in order to progress it?

Hanzala Malik: It is clear that a national strategy is needed. That has been missing for a long time. As I said, as a councillor in a local authority, I felt that libraries were vulnerable. I remember that there was a strike once and somebody said, "Well, we won't need to worry about that strike." That was a negative attitude. It is important to have a national strategy.

We should write to the Scottish Government to ask it how it feels about the issue and whether it believes there would be merit in putting together a national strategy. COSLA is another organisation that we should consult, because it represents a lot of the local authorities and it might have an opinion to share. We should ask COSLA whether it believes that there would be merit in having a joint strategy and whether the Scottish Government should engage with the local authorities to put together something that would be effective.

We must have a national minimum standard of libraries in our cities and villages, but that can happen only if the Scottish Government gets involved.

Jackson Carlaw: What Hanzala Malik says about the absence of a national strategy is valid. It occurs to me that we might also draw the petition to the attention of the Scottish Youth Parliament because it seems to me that, given the direct relationship that it has with young people, it would be a positive thing for it to become involved in providing support for the campaign and lobbying councillors and politicians more generally on it. The issue is important and, notwithstanding the work that we will do, it would be good to communicate its merits to the Scottish Youth Parliament as well.

The Convener: I absolutely agree with that.

Duncan Wright: His name escapes me, but we had a brief conversation with one of the MSYPs. I can pass his name to you later, if you like.

The Convener: I think that Jackson Carlaw's point is that the committee should bring the matter to the Scottish Youth Parliament's attention and get it involved.

Duncan Wright: Absolutely. Super.

John Wilson: I suggest that we write to the Educational Institute of Scotland to get its views on the petition. We heard today that reductions in school library services have an impact on educational attainment and on teaching staff.

We should also write to Unison Scotland, because I believe that it represents a number of school librarians. It might be able to give us up-to-date information on the impact of potential cuts to the library service and on how many school libraries are being staffed by unqualified librarians. Their role is still valuable, but it might not be as valuable as that of a qualified professional librarian. If we write to Unison, it might be able to give us some of those details.

The Convener: There is a School Library Association. Is it already supporting the petition?

Duncan Wright: Yes. It is fully behind the petition.

The Convener: We will take the petition forward. As I said, you made a strong and persuasive argument and we will pursue the matter as strenuously as we can. We will keep you updated on the responses that we get and have dialogue with you about taking the petition forward. Thank you for coming along this morning and for bringing the petition to the committee.

As we decided earlier that we would go into private session to discuss agenda items 3 and 4, I close the meeting to the public.

11:55

Meeting continued in private until 12:19.

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