



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee

Wednesday 26 October 2016

Session 5



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 26 October 2016

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RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE
7th Meeting 2016, Session 5

CONVENER

*Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Mairi Evans (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)

*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)

*Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)

*Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD)

*Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab) (Committee Substitute)

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con) (Committee Substitute)

Humza Yousaf (Minister for Transport and the Islands)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee

Wednesday 26 October 2016

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:02]

Transport Update

The Convener (Edward Mountain): Welcome, everyone, to the seventh meeting in session 5 of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. Everyone present is reminded to switch off their phones. Apologies have been received from Rhoda Grant and Peter Chapman; Alexander Burnett and Neil Bibby are substituting for them. I ask them to declare any interests that may come up during the course of the meeting.

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): I thank the committee for having me; it is a pleasure to be a substitute for Peter Chapman, given the overlap of many of the subjects with the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee that I sit on. It is good to see another committee in action, and I refer the committee to my entry in the register of interests.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I have no relevant interests to declare.

The Convener: We will move straight on to agenda item 1, which is to take evidence from the Minister for Transport and the Islands on the issues within his portfolio that relate to the committee's remit. It is hoped that this session will provide the committee with an overview of the key current and forthcoming projects, policy initiatives and developments within the Scottish Government.

I welcome the minister to the meeting. I also welcome Michelle Rennie, Bill Reeve and John Nicholls, who I believe is standing in at the last moment. I invite the cabinet secretary to make an opening statement.

The Minister for Transport and the Islands (Humza Yousaf): Thank you, convener, although you have just promoted me to cabinet secretary. I shall not take that promotion just yet, I do not think. I am pleased to be here at my first appearance at the committee.

The programme for government, as set out by the First Minister, provided details on our wide-ranging transport commitments to growing a productive, sustainable economy with more jobs, and indeed fair work. Transport is, of course, key to that. I will briefly focus on some key areas.

In 2016-17 we will continue to deliver a range of network improvement works through our key rail projects, including the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme, the Aberdeen to Inverness line, the Highland main line, the electrification of the lines to Stirling, Dunblane and Alloa and the redevelopment of Dundee station. However, as the committee will be aware, the independent Ernst & Young report goes into detail about some overruns that are associated with those projects. That is not a situation that I am content with; in fact, it is one that I am extremely dissatisfied with. I will speak, and have spoken, to the United Kingdom Government railway minister about that. In my opinion it is not acceptable that Network Rail is able to overrun without my having in my hands—and the Government and the Parliament having in their hands—the levers to do much about it.

I was pleased, though, to see in August that the work on the Queen Street tunnel was completed on time—ahead of schedule in fact—and on budget. That was an unprecedented project in terms of both the engineering and the scale of the operation required to keep people moving by diverting services via the underground platforms during those works.

There has been a substantial programme of investment in road improvements and maintenance and that will continue in the coming year: the £1.4 billion of investment in the road network will include work to dual the A9 and the A96, as part of the Scottish Government's commitment within the £315 million Inverness and Highland city region deal. We are taking forward plans for a single-carriageway road connecting Inshes and Smithton in the Highland capital. The programme of investment also, of course, includes the completion of the Queensferry crossing, which for a short period of time is the largest free-standing balanced cantilever in the world. The bridge is expected to be fully open to traffic by May 2017. The M8, M73 and M74 motorway improvement project will be complete by spring 2017 and the Aberdeen western peripheral route and the Balmedie to Tipperty project will open to traffic in winter 2017.

It would be fair to say that there are some challenges facing the bus service industry, with patronage over the years having declined. I am committed to working with the bus operators, with passengers and commuters and with community transport providers in order to reverse that trajectory of decline. Part of that will be making travelling on buses easier and part of that is securing nationwide multimodal smart ticketing. In the coming years we will also start work to deliver three months' free bus travel to those receiving the new jobs grant, as well as free bus travel for modern apprentices aged under 21.

I come to ferries. Part of my role has involved travelling around the islands, getting to know the communities on Scotland's 93 inhabited islands. Travelling to the islands has never been so popular. Tourism has increased greatly, partly due to the roll-out of the road equivalent tariff—RET. Later this year we will publish a new study considering potential arrangements to reduce fares on ferry services to the northern isles. We also recently, in September, published Scotland's first accessible travel framework. Having travelled on the ferries, I know that there is a lot of work still to be done to make them more accessible for disabled travellers. I am sure that the committee would agree that those with a disability have the same travel rights as anybody else. I am looking forward to progressing the accessible travel framework as part of my agenda.

Then there are, of course, the environmental challenges that we face. In terms of transport, we still have work to do in order to ensure that we are also contributing to wider Government efforts to reduce CO₂ emissions. We are making sure that we continue to drive the use of low-carbon vehicles, such as buses. We are trying to incentivise the use of electric cars, with the roll-out of electric vehicle charging points across Scotland—we have a record number of those across the country. We are also maintaining record levels of investment in cycling and walking for the duration of this parliamentary session.

I will update the committee on a few aspects of the transport portfolio since June. I point the committee towards the fact that I announced a review of the national transport strategy during the historic transport summit in Dumfries and Galloway. That review will be completed within this parliamentary session and is much overdue. It will set out the kind of transport network that we want in Scotland in 20 years' time and how we will get there. It will identify the best way to address those strategic challenges and realise the opportunities along the way.

I will conclude with these points, convener. Safety is absolutely paramount across the transport modes that we use. Therefore, a lot of work, a lot of detail and a lot of my attention is going into making our roads safer. Figures last week showed that road casualties reported to the police fell by 3 per cent between 2014 and 2015. The figure is now the lowest since records began. Road deaths were down 42 per cent compared to the 2004 baseline, but I think it is fair to say, and I am sure that the committee will agree, that one fatality on a road is one fatality too many, particularly where young lives are involved. We will support the member's bill that proposes that seat belts become a legal requirement on all dedicated school transport in Scotland.

The winter preparedness launch took place earlier this week to ensure that during periods of difficult and challenging weather our roads are maintained safely, people travel safely and that we mitigate any disruption. This year, for the first time, it will be possible to monitor gritters live as they go around the country treating our trunk roads network. I think that that will allow people to plan their journey well in advance.

My final point is that the transport job certainly comes with its challenges. We are seeing some of them in terms of ScotRail's performance, which I do not find to be at an acceptable level, and I am certain that we will talk about that. There are, however, challenges across the portfolio. If we get transport working for the people, businesses and communities of Scotland, we can help our economy grow and also tackle some real issues around the social isolation, deprivation and inequality that exist in our country. I am committed to doing that and, of course, I welcome the opportunity to take questions and hear some feedback from the committee. I thank you, convener, for this opportunity.

The Convener: Minister, I say at the outset that this meeting was set up with the expectation that the review of the major rail projects would be available to the committee. Fortunately, you have managed to give us the executive summary, but we have not been able to see the rest of the report, which I believe is to be published this afternoon. We also received correspondence from Network Rail as late as last night. We will ask questions based on the executive summary that you have provided, but in the knowledge that we are disappointed by not being able to consider the whole report.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Since I will ask questions about rail, I will declare an interest, in that I am the honorary president of the Scottish Association for Public Transport and the honorary vice-president of Railfuture UK. Those positions are in my register of interests.

If some of my questions are outside the remit of the witnesses, or indeed are answered in the report that we do not yet have, it would be helpful if they could be answered later in writing; or I could be referred to this afternoon's report.

I will start by looking at how Network Rail manages projects, or perhaps at its shortcomings in doing so, and ask what may be an obvious question about standards. Companies that deal with Government—and I have experience of this—normally have to qualify for quality management standard ISO 9000 or ISO 9001. Is that the case when Network Rail is working with Government?

Humza Yousaf: I will address the convener's point first, if I may. I will look into the reasons why the report was not given to you in advance. Once the committee does have the full report, I would be amenable to being called back. Indeed, if you write to me I will make sure that your questions are answered. The executive summary provides a good level of detail on what the full report has to say.

10:15

In answer to the member's question I will look at the exact intricacies of what he is asking, but I will say this much. As somebody who has taken up the job in the last five months, I am astounded by the lack of leverage and control that the Scottish Government, Parliament, and indeed this committee, have over Network Rail, even though, of course, it is the Scottish taxpayers' money that is going into these major rail infrastructure projects. That is why, and this will hardly be a surprise to the member, I would call for the full devolution of Network Rail and particularly the devolution of the infrastructure projects. Major rail infrastructure projects for Scotland are decided, and discussions around the development and design all happen, in the corporate centre in London. I do not find that acceptable at all.

As long as Network Rail stays within the debt cap that is agreed between the Scottish Government and the UK Government there is very little that can be done. That was detailed in the independent Ernst & Young report, which talks about the fact that Transport Scotland, and by default the Scottish Government, lacks effective commercial leverage to penalise or reward Network Rail and to drive project performance. That is not acceptable to me, so I have raised it with the UK Government railway minister. I know, in fairness to the UK Government, that it faces the same issues, in fact to a worse degree, in that the debt cap has been breached so projects have been cancelled and scaled back. We are not at that stage, but for me the reclassification of Network Rail has thrown up some challenges that have not been adequately dealt with.

Stewart Stevenson: As the minister mentioned reclassification, I will ask a financial question. Does reclassification affect the operation of the Barnett formula, now that Network Rail is no longer independent of Government but on the Government's balance sheet?

Humza Yousaf: Going into the next control period we need certainty about how future rail projects will be funded, so I asked the UK Government's rail minister, Paul Maynard, that exact question, about whether we can get some certainty about how projects will be funded in future considering reclassification. I have not yet

had an answer, but in fairness to the UK Government minister, the meeting was last week and he promised to write to me on that issue. When he does, I will be happy to share that answer with the committee.

Stewart Stevenson: I will return briefly to the subject of standards. I referred to ISO 9000 and ISO 9001, which are quality management standards. There is also ISO 21500, which is the project management standard. It is comparatively new. If you are not aware of the answer to this, can I at least encourage you to press the UK Government to require the Office of Rail and Road—ORR—to adhere to those standards or some other publicly auditable standards, so that we have a baseline against which their project management performance can be measured and compared with those who do conform to those standards as measured?

Humza Yousaf: I am certainly happy to have that conversation with both the Government and the ORR. It is fair to say that Network Rail's insistence is that many of these projects have overrun because of compliance issues. The ORR completely disagrees and, without putting words into the ORR's mouth, it does not accept that the compliance standards that it has requested from Network Rail have been any different. In our meetings with the chief executive and the chair of Network Rail, however, they have suggested that there has been some difference in terms of the compliance requirements for them. There is a disconnect between what has been said to me by the ORR and what has been said by Network Rail. I think, however, that the member's suggestion of using a standard that should be acceptable across all the stakeholders who are involved in major rail infrastructure projects is eminently sensible.

Stewart Stevenson: We are where we are. In that context, how is Transport Scotland seeking to manage the major rail enhancements that Network Rail is responsible for, particularly in light of the concerns about delays and increased costs?

Humza Yousaf: The recommendations in the report are key to that and we have already started to take some of them forward. Having a major rail projects board across the portfolio is key. It will look at each of the projects in the control period, at the governance, at where there might be potential slippage and at issues and obstacles, and make sure that Transport Scotland and I have an overview of that. That is what we will do. That is one of many recommendations in the independent report and it is fair to say that we welcome and accept them all. For me, there is still a question mark, though, over how much leverage we can have when Network Rail is not directly accountable to this Government, this Parliament and indeed this committee.

Stewart Stevenson: Nonetheless, minister, while we may lack the leverage at present, are you satisfied that we are in a position to identify the shortcomings, so that we can make others aware of those shortcomings and, through others, exercise leverage if we cannot directly do so ourselves?

Humza Yousaf: Yes, I am. Let me make it clear that, although Network Rail infrastructure projects are not devolved, and I will be seeking that devolution, that does not mean that I will tolerate any further slippage in terms of additional costs and timescales. That pressure has been put on Network Rail. We will work closely with it and other stakeholders to ensure that we get best value for money for the Scottish taxpayer. The member is absolutely correct, the lessons that we have learned, which are summarised in the executive summary and detailed in the full report, are lessons that we would happily share with our partners across the United Kingdom. The compliance issues and the electrification issues are not unique to Scotland by any stretch of the imagination. They have had serious impacts on rail projects right across the United Kingdom.

The Convener: I will give you a wee break from Stewart Stevenson, who I know has other questions that he wants to ask. I will ask you a question. Following the reclassification of Network Rail in 2014, the ORR published a report in October 2015, in which it intimated that it had written to Network Rail in March 2015 and that it was clear that Network Rail was missing milestones—36 per cent of the milestones that were laid out were missed—and it went on to raise various issues. No doubt you will have seen that report and acted on it. What has Transport Scotland done to ensure that those milestones are constantly monitored? It seems to me that, if things are not being achieved, you as a client should put in extra monitoring. What extra monitoring is in place and what extra reporting was there to the minister?

Humza Yousaf: EGIP is an example of a project for which there was additional monitoring. I will get the detail to the convener on that but, to summarise, establishing a client group and being involved in and chairing the project board allowed Transport Scotland to have more of a say in and to closely monitor how that project was developing. That is a good example of what we should be doing across our major rail projects. That would not have stopped and has not stopped cost overruns from happening. What frustrates us is the delay in information being communicated from Network Rail about potential slippages, compliance issues and issues with electrification, which have come far too late in the day for Transport Scotland—the client, as you quite rightly say—to be able to act. That is not an acceptable

way of working and I have said to Sir Peter Hendy and to Mark Carne, the chief executive of Network Rail, that closer lines of communication are key. I think that there is an attitude among some elements of Network Rail that, so long as it is not breaching the debt cap, overruns are a natural part of what it does.

The Convener: In fairness, I understand what you are saying, but in a commercial world, if you see that milestones are being missed and errors are being missed, it is beholden on you not to rely on the supplier to supply the information; it is for you to get the information from the supplier.

An example that was given to the committee was that a question arose as to whether some European designation required a particular bridge or gantry to be inches higher and Network Rail delayed on making the decision, which caused an overrun. I want to know that the Government and the ministers who are responsible for this are paying close attention to the detail, because it is fine to blame the person at the bottom but sometimes the blame must start at the top. Do you have a comment on that?

Humza Yousaf: Yes, absolutely. There are things that Transport Scotland can do to ensure that we are closely monitoring every single project that has been funded by Scottish taxpayers' money—that is why we have established the portfolio-wide projects board—but we rely on Network Rail as the contractor to ensure that the estimates that it gives at the design stage and the developmental stage are well detailed. I am not a transport expert, but I do not think that it is acceptable for Network Rail to come back to us years later and say that compliance issues that I think we should have been sighted on well in advance—at design stage, at early stage—are now costing an extra X million pounds.

I would go as far as saying that, if it was not for the interventions by Transport Scotland and the Scottish Government in realising that things were not going as well as they should have been with EGIP, we would not have reached the position of having this report and information detailing to us where the cost overruns are happening. I make it clear from the outset that that is not an acceptable situation. I do not find what has just happened and what is detailed in this report to be acceptable. There are most certainly improvements that Network Rail has to make and I think that there are questions there for the ORR, but if the question is whether there are things that we can do better in Transport Scotland and the Scottish Government, I would say that there absolutely are, which is why we are taking action through the portfolio-wide projects board.

The Convener: In the final part of the executive summary of the report to which I referred, the ORR states:

“On the basis of our findings, we cannot be satisfied that NR is doing everything reasonably practicable until:

- the EIP is sufficiently finalised; and
- there is evidence of improvement following effective implementation of the finalised EIP”.

Were you and the Government satisfied that the enhancements improvement plan was finalised and that the improvements were appearing? If they were not, the ORR report does not seem to have been actioned.

Humza Yousaf: I am confident that the measures that we have put in place will give us a greater level of scrutiny and will allow us to monitor much closer each and every single one of those projects. If you are asking me whether I can nail my colours to the mast that each of those projects will be done on time without any further delay and without any slippage, I can answer that the work that we have undertaken to do that should mean that these projects come in on time within the new budgets that we are discussing with Network Rail but, until I have full devolution and until we have leverage over Network Rail, there is no way that I can absolutely confirm that.

Stewart Stevenson: The projects board is a key part of what oversight we are going to have in future. It appears that a lot of the problems arise from failures to understand the technical issues that are associated with projects on the part of Network Rail. Does our projects board here have the capabilities to engage at that technical level and understand the issues early enough to rein in and control Network Rail and to interact in a way that will make things better in future?

Humza Yousaf: Yes, I am sure that it does, but I do not think that the problem was that the engineers did not understand that certain compliance issues had to be adhered to. I think that there are some serious questions—and the recommendations in the report reflect this—about the project governance and about whether engineers were being listened to and whether what was done in past projects was applied to future projects. I think that it is in and around governance where a lot of these issues can be addressed, so I do not think that the knowledge of Network Rail engineers—I am not saying that members are suggesting that of course—was the issue. People know about the compliance issues at the ORR and the compliance specifications that the ORR sets out. It is our job now and with the major rail projects board to ensure that those compliance issues are factored as early as possible into the developmental stage of major rail

infrastructure projects to avoid the situation happening again.

Stewart Stevenson: I suppose that the final question is whether the fact that there are cost increases in the projects that we are undertaking will diminish our ability to undertake other rail projects.

10:30

Humza Yousaf: The debt and borrowing cap that is agreed between the Scottish Government and the UK Government has not been breached, and there is some headroom despite the cost overruns identified by the report. Of course, as the member suggests, those cost overruns do have an effect on future budgets, so it would be incorrect to say that they will not have any effect. They will have an effect on future payments as we make the debt repayments. Yes, there is the possibility that the cost increases will have an effect on future budgets. How that manifests itself will be a matter for future spending reviews and future discussions.

The Convener: I have two more questions. One is on the executive summary that you kindly gave us. It identifies various things to do with attitudes and the way things are reported to Transport Scotland. I would like to push you on how you are going to combat those, now that they have been identified.

Humza Yousaf: As I have said, the first thing that we have not wasted any time in doing is to establish the major rail projects board, which will look not just at one project in isolation but across projects and at the scope of the projects. It will be for me to examine the report in detail and work with Transport Scotland about what we can do. Certainly having a closer relationship and understanding with Network Rail will be key, notwithstanding the discussion and the argument about devolution.

One of the most important lessons to learn is how we do our high-level output specification—HLOS—process in the future. I do not think that how that is done currently is suitable for Network Rail as a reclassified body. Asking for early cost estimates years and years before a project is even near construction and then being surprised when there are cost overruns is not a sensible way of moving things forward. I am immediately instructing a review of how we do our HLOS process for control period 6 and then control period 7. There has to be a better way of doing it. In my discussions about that with the UK Government railway minister, we barely diverged in our opinion that the current way of doing major rail infrastructure projects simply is not suitable for the circumstance that we find ourselves in now.

The Convener: That neatly leads me on to this question. Do you have a timetable for that review and when can we expect the next tranche of HLOS to be put forward for the Parliament to look at?

Humza Yousaf: I am discussing that at the moment with Transport Scotland, but once we define the timetable I am more than happy to write to the convener and make sure that you have that.

The Convener: It is important that we understand that programme, so we can start to monitor it.

If there are no other questions on that, Gail Ross would like to ask a specific question on the far north line, without getting too tied into a constituency issue.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Good morning, minister. It would not be me if I did not ask you a question about the far north line. I draw the committee's attention to my entry in the register of interests and the fact that I am joint vice-president of the Friends of the Far North Line. ScotRail has recently published its performance improvement plan and it mentions the possibility of timetable adjustments on the far north line. That either fills me with dread or fills me with hope, given that currently the journey from Inverness to Wick takes four and a half hours. Can you ensure that there will be no further timetable degradation—and, in particular, no increased journey time—on the far north line as a result of that?

Humza Yousaf: As the member will know of course, timetabling is a matter for ScotRail, but I will certainly press the case with ScotRail. In my opinion, the performance of the far north line has not been at an acceptable standard at all. I have seen the performance figures. I have spoken to those involved in the Friends of the Far North Line and know that they feel that rail services on the line have been neglected, and I can understand why they would feel that. I have spoken to ScotRail about the performance of the far north line and it assures me that it understands that its performance on the far north line has not been at an acceptable standard and that it is therefore keen to work with stakeholders to improve that. I will certainly communicate that message. I do not want to see any further diminution or degradation of the timetable or indeed any more delays on the far north line and I am happy to press that with ScotRail.

I am, I think at the member's insistence, due to meet the Friends of the Far North Line in the coming period, so I look forward to hearing from it about some of the improvements that it thinks can be made to the line.

Gail Ross: The Network Rail Scotland route study laid out four key interventions for the far north line and I know that the Friends of the Far North Line will be bringing that up as well. Can I get an assurance from you that you will at least give those some consideration?

Humza Yousaf: Yes, I am open minded about them. I know some of those improvements and indeed other MSPs, including some of those round the table, have mentioned some of them. As we go into control period 6, notwithstanding what I have just said to the convener about how we do things differently, I think that that presents an opportunity for future investment in our railways, and the far north line should absolutely be part of that consideration. I am not closed minded at all but, at the same time, the member will understand that there are competing demands for investment in our railways and, therefore, I have to weigh those up with the costs and the benefits that they might bring.

The Convener: I have also written to the minister about the cancellation of trains on lines where they go through and do not stop at stations. We all get letters on that—I am sure that the deputy convener and John Mason do—and I ask the minister to bear that in mind. It is very frustrating if your train goes past the station that you want to get out at without stopping.

The next question is on the Borders railway and is from John Mason.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): As we are all making constituency points, I will just say that the cuts on the Airdrie to Bathgate line have not been acceptable.

However, my questions are on Borders rail; I have three points to make on it. I think that everybody accepts that Borders rail has been a big success, but there have been challenges along the way. I will start with the challenges. I also co-convene the cross-party group on rail in the Scottish Parliament and we are looking again at the matter. Two points have come up. The first was that the rolling stock is far too old and was never going to be suitable for the line. Do you accept that, and what is going to happen about it?

Secondly, there was a considerable cutback in the number of double-track sections on the line, which means that if anything goes wrong it is very hard for ScotRail to recover from it. Will you comment and can you reassure us on those two points?

Humza Yousaf: Sure. My first point is the same as John Mason's opening remark: Borders rail has been a success. Parliament had a members' debate yesterday led by Christine Grahame MSP, whose constituency contains part of the line, about the adopt-a-station scheme. Every member who

spoke, across the political spectrum, started their remarks by saying that Borders rail has been a great success that has carried 1 million-plus passengers in its first year. It is the longest new rail line in a century after 50 years of campaigning from grass-roots campaigners to reopen the line. We know that re-establishment of the Borders railway has been a real success—notwithstanding that there have been performance issues. ScotRail is fully aware of those. I have asked for an improvement plan on that, and improvement is already under way.

The Scottish Government specified what we expect from the new rail service, in terms of the frequency of the service. It was then for ScotRail, which won the bid, to procure the appropriate rolling stock. I will say about the 158s that there have certainly been problems, many of which have been caused by the 158s' radiators overheating, particularly on hot days, when the trains are going up steep gradients. I accept what John Mason has said: such things should be and should have been considered by ScotRail, which accepts that performance on the Borders railway has not been to the standard that we as a Government expect, and which it expects of itself.

ScotRail has started work to improve the situation, including work on the radiators to make sure that the technology is updated, that blockages are removed and so on. Also, every train will be met at the platform by an engineer so that it can be looked at there and then. The £40 million refurbishment of and improvements to the rolling stock and infrastructure will be incredibly important to driving up performance. We should, to an extent, focus on the rolling stock, but we should also focus on performance issues related to, for example, axle counters and signalling problems, which are being addressed as we talk. I will not misquote Christine Grahame from yesterday's members' business debate, but she made the point—as did Rachael Hamilton MSP—that in the past month and a half Borders rail has been improving and they have had fewer complaints in their inboxes. That is anecdotal evidence from those MSPs, but I think that the improvements that ScotRail has been making are starting to bear fruit. I will be keeping a close eye on that.

The second point that John Mason asked about was double-tracking. I read an interesting article by David Spaven, the rail consultant, on that very issue. He was critical, as others have been, of the forecasting methodology that we and Transport Scotland use, and said that if it had been predicted that there would be as many passengers as there are the layout of the line might have been different. I have taken that on board and asked the team to review the forecasting methodology. In other rail projects it has worked, but clearly some of the estimates were way off for parts of the

Borders railway. Forecasting—as the word suggests—is obviously not an exact science, but the amount by which some of the figures were off was, to me, disturbing, so I have asked for a review of how we will forecast in the future.

I will move on. I have just had a similar discussion with Gail Ross. I have met the campaign for Borders rail, which has suggested improvements including passing loops and double-tracking. We have a control period coming up for the HLOS process, and I am always open minded and will continue to have discussions with stakeholders about how we can improve performance.

John Mason: Thank you for that. You touched on forecasting, which was going to be my second point. The feeling is that it seems that underestimating of the number of passengers who will use a line in a project is a regular occurrence. I think that that is true of the Airdrie to Bathgate line—on which numbers have been better than was forecast—and it is true of Borders rail. I know individual stations do not always meet expectations, but the overall level seems to be better than forecast. I am encouraged by what the minister says about forecasting, because future projects might be held back if passenger numbers are underestimated. There is the problem with Borders rail in that it cannot cope with the number of passengers.

Humza Yousaf: I share John Mason's concern. I hear communities up and down Scotland putting forward their cases for railway infrastructure projects in their communities. Each is as passionate as the campaign for Borders rail. For me it would be wrong to dismiss them because our forecast was really far off, which is why I have instructed that a review take place.

Again, I reiterate that forecasting is, by its nature, not an exact science, but there are lessons to be learned. Notwithstanding that, I reiterate that Borders rail has been a great success and is something that I think all of us should be celebrating.

John Mason: My third and final point is that Borders rail has been a success. More passengers are wanting to use it, so one of the answers to the problems has to be longer trains. Can you give us a timescale for when we might get three-car trains instead of two-car trains?

Humza Yousaf: Yes. We will increase capacity on the line as electrification progresses and cascading of rolling stock across the network takes place. We are already investing in refurbishment of trains and by next year, in 2017, there will certainly be additional capacity on Borders rail, initially on peak services. John Mason makes the point that success should be a driver to

ensure that increased numbers can continue to use the line.

10:45

The Convener: I will ask a follow-up question. Have you set a target date in the near future to see whether there has been quantifiable improvement so that you can report back to the committee—specifically to John Mason—on when improvements will be achieved?

Humza Yousaf: I monitor the public performance measures—PPMs—daily. I go online and I look to see where improvements have and have not been made. The committee will be aware that I expect questions on ScotRail's improvement plan for the network as a whole; I am looking towards the end of the year for that in order to give ScotRail some time. It understands the strength of my feeling on its performance and the serious consequences of its performance not improving, but it would be remiss of me not to give it time to make improvements. I will do that and I will update the committee as regularly as it wishes. We are hearing anecdotally from constituency MSPs in the area, and the Borders specifically, about improvement, but it is not quite to the standard that I would like.

The Convener: Thank you. ScotRail's performance was made abundantly clear in a piece on STV this morning. Mike Rumbles has some questions on that.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): Thank you, convener. It was mentioned that we have received the ScotRail performance improvement plan, but we have not—we have received the summary. I asked the Scottish Parliament information centre to ensure that we got a copy of the full plan. I will quote its response:

"You asked if SPICe could obtain a copy of the full report of the performance improvement plan sent to Transport Scotland by ScotRail. Only the summary document is available."

You said in your opening remarks that you do not find ScotRail's performance to be adequate. The committee cannot do its job if we do not see the report that was sent to you. I will quote from the summary that we have from Phil Verster, who is managing director of the ScotRail Alliance. He says:

"Our train service punctuality and reliability has moved from just above 90 per cent to 89.6 per cent in recent months. That drop of just under a percentage point is why Transport Scotland have asked us to produce this plan to bring it up to the level they and we expect it to be."

I find that to be astonishingly complacent. It does not chime with the comments that you have just made that you do not find performance to be acceptable. Phil Verster seems, in the remarks

that I have just quoted, to be suggesting that the only reason why you have asked for the report—of which we have only the summary—is the fall of 0.4 per cent in punctuality and reliability. I cannot understand why the committee does not have the information that you have.

Humza Yousaf: I will reassure Mike Rumbles if I can, because I think that he raises some very valid points. It is not normal practice for such an improvement plan to be published, but campaigners, MSPs and others called for it to be published, so a version has been published. On why information has not been published, I will check to find out whether that is because of commercial confidentiality or sensitivity, and I will get back to Mike Rumbles. The point is that the improvement plan that is online details the improvements that ScotRail will make. They are some of the key improvements that we expect.

I will try to delve deeper into the valid point that Mike Rumbles has made. It is a contractual obligation to meet the PPM target throughout the franchise. The targets increase year on year. The PPM is—again, as I am sure the member is aware—on the number of trains that arrive at their destination within five minutes of what is timetabled. Statistics are certainly important because they help us to measure performance.

All I have to do is look at my Twitter feed to see that people are complaining largely about capacity issues during peak hours. Capacity is also measured, but such measurement does not necessarily chime with the PPM, which measures punctuality and reliability, as the member knows. There are also issues around capacity, so the plan details not just how there will be improvements to the PPM figure, which is important, but how we will ensure that we work on the capacity issues that are making commuters' journeys uncomfortable.

I have spoken to ScotRail: it is under no illusion about the strength of my feeling that its performance is not acceptable and will have serious consequences if it does not improve. PPM is part of that; it is a measure but it is not, for me, the only measure of success and good commuter experience on our railways.

Mike Rumbles: I am frustrated. We hear what you are saying to us now—it is fine: you are not satisfied with ScotRail's performance. I have quotations from you from the press in which you indicate that very strongly. However, here is the circle that I cannot square. Phil Verster, the managing director of the ScotRail Alliance, has produced the summary of the ScotRail performance improvement plan. It is quite clear from what he has said, which I read out, that he is under the impression that he has been asked to produce the ScotRail performance improvement plan only because his company has failed by 0.4

per cent. That does not square with what you are saying to us now, so I want to be sure that the message that you are giving us has been given to ScotRail.

Humza Yousaf: That is a valid point. I cannot speak on behalf of Phil Verster or ScotRail, but I can say, from the discussions that I have with him, that he understands that this is not just about PPM. For example, when I went to the ScotRail offices in Glasgow at Atrium Court, I was taken into what is called the control room, where ScotRail is measuring a variety of criteria on the passenger commuter experience, from capacity to cleanliness of toilets on the train right the way through to PPM figures.

Some of the recent investment that has been made in rail—the Government announced £100 million of capital stimulus, £3 million of which is coming to our railways—is not just about performance and improving PPM, although that is important to us. Some of it is for addressing the capacity issue, so—without putting words in his mouth—I would say that Phil Verster is very much aware that I expect him not just to reach the PPM target, although it is important. That is a contractual obligation that I do not want to move away from, and which ScotRail is not far from reaching. In the coming autumn and winter period it will still be a challenge to meet its contractual obligation. You will understand that one of my priorities will be to ensure that it meets that contractual obligation—that is why we give it money to run our railways.

Aligned with that, Phil Verster and ScotRail understand that I expect immediate, medium-term and long-term solutions to the capacity issues that are frustrating so many commuters every day. Some of that has already been dealt with through additional trains on the Glasgow suburban route and the plans for high-speed trains. I reassure members that it is not my belief that ScotRail is complacent. It understands the seriousness with which I have made this approach and the seriousness of the consequences if performance does not improve.

Mike Rumbles: I will make one small point. The minister has spoken about Borders rail. I travel to Aberdeen: the trains that were painted specially to advertise Borders rail—the bigger and more modern 170 engines—are running to Aberdeen. I assume that they were specifically designed for the Borders railway but are not being used on it. Do you have any comment on that? Borders rail is using the 158 engines.

Humza Yousaf: The company is operating three-carriage to six-carriage train formations. I can look at the specific issue if Mike Rumbles wishes that, but I am confident that 158s and 170s are used on Borders rail. Notwithstanding that, I

am still unsatisfied about the rolling stock issues on Borders rail, so we are working to make improvements.

Mike Rumbles: I have a final brief comment. What you are saying to us is fair enough, but I go back to the point that ScotRail is giving us the impression that what you are saying to it is not what you are saying to us. That is all I am saying.

Humza Yousaf: I do not get that impression at all when I speak to ScotRail. If you have ScotRail before the committee I am sure that it will absolutely confirm that it understands the seriousness with which I expect it to take performance issues. It is not just about the PPM. It is an important contractual obligation, but there are also capacity issues and reliability issues—skipping of stops was mentioned earlier. Those are all issues that I want ScotRail to tackle.

The Convener: It is clear that in the not-too-distant future we will have to look again at the matter. It is unfortunate that there has been a gap between speaking to ScotRail and to the minister; to have spoken to the two closer together would have been helpful.

Neil Bibby: My first question is on targets on which clarification would be helpful. Phil Verster has talked about a PPM of 90.3 per cent. In the chamber on 22 September in an answer to me the minister said the public performance measure target is 91.3 per cent. The franchise agreement says that from the first day of the fifth franchising year onwards the PPM target is 92.5 per cent. It would be helpful to get clarity on what the PPM target is today. We also know that a number of targets in the franchise agreement PPM benchmark tables on improvement plan performance level, breach performance level and default performance level have been redacted. Information on those targets would be helpful.

Humza Yousaf: I do not think that any of the figures that were mentioned by Neil Bibby are incorrect, neither were those that I gave or those on where the breach happened. It must be remembered that PPM is monitored daily; on top of the PPM figure is the moving annual average figure that is often also used. I have seen in the press—I am not accusing Neil Bibby of this—journalists using the MAA figure and comparing it to PPM, which is not correct.

I clarify that on the specific question Neil Bibby is absolutely right: the contract puts obligations of increased PPM figures to be met by ScotRail—by Abellio. The contract expects a PPM of 91.3 per cent by the end of 2016-17, so the railway period is also the end of the financial year. We called for an improvement—I instructed that an improvement plan be brought forward when the PPM was at 90 per cent. A fall of 1 per cent below the expected

PPM for the contract can trigger the improvement plan. That is why I triggered the improvement plan. The PPM figure is different to the moving annual average, which takes into account the average in the year before that specific period. That way it is able to take into account, for example, seasonal variations—winter or autumn figures might be different to summer figures. That is where we are. I expect the improvement plan to get ScotRail to the contractually obligated point.

On Neil Bibby's second point, I have, I hope, both in my public statements and privately to ScotRail, made it clear that performance is not at an acceptable or contractually obligated standard, and that there will be very serious consequences if that performance is not improved. The member highlights and alludes to some of those consequences. The target for year 2 is 91.3 per cent, as I have mentioned. The improvement plan is meant to get ScotRail to within 1 per cent—90.3 per cent. If the figure goes down to 87.3 per cent that will be a breach, and if it gets to 84.3 per cent that will be a default. Three consecutive periods of default can result in termination of the contract. Let me leave no doubt about that—it is an option that we have.

In fairness, I suspect that it is not an option that I will have to use. I have looked at the improvement plan and I have seen the commitment of the ScotRail team to improve. I will give them time to do that, now that they have the performance plan, while also monitoring daily how things are improving.

Neil Bibby: Thank you for that answer. You mentioned improvement planning and the fact that you monitor PPM on a daily basis. The improvement plan was submitted on 16 September but in the four weeks after then, punctuality was worse than in the four weeks prior to its submission. My question is—and I think that passengers would be keen to know this—whether you have full confidence in ScotRail and its improvement plan.

11:00

Humza Yousaf: Yes, I have confidence in the improvement plan. I have to give ScotRail the time and space to act on that improvement plan, bearing in mind that the target of 91.3 per cent is for the end of the financial year 2016-17. I am not here to excuse ScotRail's performance, and I do not find it acceptable. However, we are going into the winter period, and the moving annual average seems to have stabilised in the last period at 89.67 per cent, as you alluded to.

I checked the PPM for the current period—we are only 10 days into the current period; the periods are 28 days long—and it is 90.6 per cent

so I am going to hold off judging how well ScotRail is doing. I will give it time and space, now that it has put forward an improvement plan, but I reiterate that if performance worsens, there are some very serious measures that I can take, and I will take them if necessary.

Neil Bibby: You say that you have confidence in the plan but if passengers are to have confidence in the plan they need to know when the improvements are going to happen. If they are to take the reassurances seriously, they need guarantees. How will they judge the success or failure of the improvement plan? Will the PPM target of 91.3 per cent be met by the end of 2016-17, or will passengers have to wait longer?

Humza Yousaf: I do not want passengers to have to wait longer to see improvements. I expect improvements to be started and to be seen on the railways immediately. Some of the improvement works are starting—indeed, some have started already. Capacity is an issue that I am frequently asked about and which regularly comes up on my social media feed. There are medium-term capacity solutions in terms of high-speed trains, which will come to us later on in the franchise, but some capacity improvements can be made immediately.

For example, on the Glasgow suburban route, seven new trains are coming on to the network. We have four already, and the other three will come on gradually by the end of 2016. That will mean 1,500 additional seats every day on that very packed commuter route. Therefore, I hope that some improvements are already being seen.

You are absolutely right that some improvements are more medium and long term. For example, there will be 23 per cent—almost a quarter—more capacity by 2019. However, I do not expect commuters to have to wait to start to see some of the improvements. I would like to thank commuters for their patience and tolerance. We are striving for a PPM figure of 90 trains out of 100 arriving within five minutes of timetable, but I accept the point that even with that PPM figure, there can still be inconvenience to passengers when trains are 60 seconds late. That is an issue we have to look at as well.

Neil Bibby: Do you think that ScotRail will hit its PPM figures by the end of this year?

Humza Yousaf: The improvement plan is for 2016-17, so I expect ScotRail to hit the PPM by the end of 2016-17. That is why the improvement plan has been put in place. It is for ScotRail to come up with its own internal targets. I know that it understands the severity of the issue—you only have to pick up the newspapers over the past few weeks to see that it is feeling the heat. Although the target is for the end of 2016-17, I will assess

how the improvements are going at the end of the calendar year, and if I am not satisfied we will continue to have very robust discussion with ScotRail.

Neil Bibby: As Mike Rumbles said, only a summary of the improvement plan has been published; we have not seen the full improvement plan, which was submitted to the Government on 16 September. Therefore, neither passengers nor the committee can see the full range of changes that are to be made. There has been talk of trains being classified as “golden” trains. We do not know what golden trains are—or what non-golden trains are.

An interesting point arises following on from Gail Ross’s question about timetable changes. There are set to be significant timetable changes, but can you confirm that none of the planned timetable changes will result in longer scheduled journeys for existing services?

Humza Yousaf: If I am not addressing the issue that you are asking about—if I am grasping the wrong issue—please come back to me. Of course there is disruption with some of the changes that are being made because of the electrification programme that we are taking forward, in the same way that there was disruption when we had to do necessary work at the Queen Street tunnel, for example. However, we can communicate when those works are taking place and the effect that they will have on commuters’ journeys, and we can work with commuters to ensure that their experience is still as smooth as possible. There is never a convenient time to do works on our railways. Railways are constantly busy—they are more popular than ever. We will absolutely try to minimise any disruption.

The key measures that ScotRail is taking are detailed in the improvement plan. I am more than happy for you to write to me or directly to ScotRail, if required, to ask for details on the golden trains, for example. I want to minimise disruption for our commuters—I do not want them to see any further increase in the disruption to their journeys. Therefore, I am very robust in my response to ScotRail in terms of the improvements. However, even if the improvement plan is implemented 100 per cent and the targets are met, that does not mean the end of the story. There are still improvements that have to be made above and beyond the improvement plan to make the commuter and passenger journey a much better experience.

Neil Bibby: Transparency is very important, and passengers would welcome additional information around timetable changes, golden trains and the other proposals.

You have told us that what is happening is unacceptable. You are aware that 20,000 passengers have signed a petition calling for action on the railways. We have seen overcrowded trains, delays and cancellations. Just two years ago, the Scottish Government said that this was “a world-leading contract”. Does the Government still believe that?

Humza Yousaf: I remember that Kezia Dugdale asked the First Minister that question at First Minister’s question time, and I refer you to the First Minister’s answer. Yes, the contract gives us the ability to have a railway that leads on these islands and beyond, in Europe and more widely. Yes, there are challenges on the railways, and I want to tackle them and improve performance. As my predecessor described, the real revolution, which will take place when we get the high-speed trains—the longer, faster, greener trains—will absolutely be the envy of many commuters elsewhere.

That does not take away from the fact there are major challenges that must be tackled. I am focused and determined to tackle them, and I know that Transport Scotland and ScotRail are looking to take them on. Although the passenger survey shows that satisfaction with the railways in Scotland is at a greater level than in other parts of the United Kingdom, that does not satisfy me because I want it to be better than it currently is. I met the campaigners the member referred to—of course, I did not meet all 20,000 of them, but I met a group from 38 Degrees—and they told me how the performance issues were affecting their journeys to college, their journeys to apprenticeships and their businesses. For me, regardless of whether the passenger survey is telling me that performance is better than that across the UK, if it is still affecting people in their everyday lives, that is an issue and I am determined to tackle it.

I believe that, with the franchise that was awarded to Abellio, we can have a railway service that works for the communities and people of this country and provides a great service. We are not seeing that currently, but steps are being put in place. I am determined to work with ScotRail and others to improve performance on the railways.

The Convener: Minister, you have now heard from two members of the committee that they would like to see the supporting document behind the executive summary. That is a clear request. I ask that we liaise after the meeting on ensuring that it is available to the committee—subject to commercial confidentiality.

Stewart Stevenson: I have a very straightforward, simple question. Is Transport Scotland’s service quality incentive regime—SQUIRE—for monitoring a wide range of issues in

the network and its operation still in use and thought to be of value? It was once described as a world-leading monitoring system.

Humza Yousaf: I will answer that question in a second.

In terms of the request from the convener and the committee, I view the improvement plan not as a summary document but as the key improvements that ScotRail wants to make. All the information that has been passed to us might not be in there, and I will check the reasons for that and will liaise with the convener to see what can and cannot be published. The measures that are highlighted in the document, which has been made public for the first time, are the key improvements that we expect to see from ScotRail.

Stewart Stevenson asked about SQUIRE. It is still used and, as he knows only too well, it assesses many criteria, from infrastructure right through to the cleanliness of the toilets and so on. There are financial penalties if there is a failure to meet those criteria, and any penalties are reinvested in the railway.

A number of weeks into my role as minister, Kevin Lindsay, ASLEF's main person in Scotland, approached me to say that he did not think that SQUIRE was tight enough in terms of auditing when it comes to having a second employee on a train. I said that I would endeavour to see whether we could tighten the regime, and we have done that. I am always happy to take advice and feedback from all sources on where we can improve our monitoring regime. However, SQUIRE remains the leading auditing and monitoring regime, and it has resulted in financial penalties being issued because the very high standards that we expect to be maintained on our railways have, at times, fallen below expectations.

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Good morning, minister. We now move from trains to planes.

The Convener: No—I want to stay with trains. I thought that you were indicating that you had a train question.

Richard Lyle: I thought that we were moving on to planes.

The Convener: We probably will but first I want to see if there is anything further on trains. One further question that I think it is important to ask relates to the headlines this morning that say that the public sector is ready to take over the ScotRail franchise. What contingency plans does Transport Scotland have in place to provide ScotRail services as the operator of last resort? Are there any longer-term plans for public sector provision of ScotRail services?

Humza Yousaf: As a political party, our manifesto contained a commitment to enable a public sector bid, and the legislative framework is there for that to happen. We are already having internal conversations about how we would put in place the structures for a public sector bid. I am committed to doing that, and we should have the structures in place by the time of the break clause. That is not to say that the break clause will be implemented, but of course we have to be prepared in that circumstance.

Essentially, the operator of last resort would end up being the Scottish ministers, and there are mechanisms in place to take the contract forward if it was terminated early. I can give people confidence that our railways would continue to run if the contract for the franchise was terminated before it had run its course. However, I do not see us going into that territory, as I have already said. There is an improvement plan, and I will be looking to make sure that that plan is acted upon and that we get the necessary PPM figures back up and see improvements in our railways. We have the option of using the operator of last resort, although I do not expect to be running our railways in the near future. However, we have committed to facilitating a public sector bid.

The Convener: So contingency plans are in place.

Humza Yousaf: Yes.

The Convener: As there are no further questions on rail, we move on to aeroplanes. I call Richard Lyle.

11:15

Richard Lyle: Thank you very much, convener.

The Scottish Government bought Glasgow Prestwick Airport for £1. Can the minister give us an update on the implementation of the Glasgow Prestwick Airport strategy vision and on progress towards returning the airport to profitability and eventually returning it to the private sector?

Humza Yousaf: I can. The airport's position is challenging, there are no two ways about it. We are committed to getting it back to being profitable and back into the private sector. A number of avenues are being pursued on that front.

Members will know about some of the work that has been done on the spaceport. That is an exciting programme. We are waiting for clarification from the UK Government—I am sure that it is coming—on what the licensing regime around a spaceport will entail, what, if any, capital expenditure will come with that and so on. That discussion is on-going, so there is potential with regards to the spaceport. While we are doing that work, we will continue to attract routes to

Prestwick. Ryanair has recently announced that it has increased its footprint at Prestwick.

In addition, members will have noted that a memorandum of understanding has been signed between the Scottish Government and the owners of Heathrow when it comes to expansion. The announcement was made yesterday about the third runway at Heathrow, and part of our discussion with the owners of Heathrow is about the potential for basing a logistics hub at Prestwick, which would bring additional jobs.

As reported in the press recently, a conversation is taking place between a high-level international consortium and Prestwick, again looking to secure the airport's future. That work is progressing. We have also done work at Chevron—the lease of the 747 hangar—which will bring jobs to Prestwick. We are pursuing commercial opportunities as well as other opportunities, such as through the spaceport and the third runway at Heathrow. I am not saying that the situation is not challenging, because it is, but we are pursuing a number of avenues and as soon as we are able to return Prestwick back to the private sector and make it commercially profitable we will do that.

Richard Lyle: If anyone was interested in buying Prestwick, who would they contact in the Scottish Government?

Humza Yousaf: I do not know whether that was a direct request from the member, but Keith Brown is the cabinet secretary—

Richard Lyle: Actually, I am being serious. Someone approached me last week and asked that question, and I just want to double check that it would be yourself.

Humza Yousaf: The cabinet secretary, Keith Brown, leads on Prestwick, but he and I work very closely. An interested party could, of course, have discussions with a Government minister, but in the first instance they should probably contact the management team at Glasgow Prestwick. I can furnish the member with details about that.

Richard Lyle: Thank you.

The Convener: Minister, we have some questions on Heathrow, which we will put to you straight after we have dealt with Prestwick, so we will try to stick to Prestwick for the moment. I think that Gail Ross has a question for you.

Gail Ross: I do. With regard to the strategic vision, the capital plan does not include the cost of replacing the existing primary radar, which I believe has to be done within the next five years. Can you give the committee an indication of what alternative finance options are currently being investigated?

Humza Yousaf: I will be more than happy to write to the member to furnish her with some of that information, because I do not have the full details on the specifics of the radar.

Gail Ross is right in what she said. Significant capital investment is still needed for Prestwick, regardless of whether we end up going down the route of a spaceport or a commercially viable airport, and that need is being met by the Scottish Government. We are committed to doing that so that we can make Prestwick a profitable airport again.

As I said, I will furnish Gail Ross with the specific information that she asked for on the financing of the radar.

Gail Ross: Thank you.

Stewart Stevenson: I want to ask a question or two about the fifth freedom. Prestwick went into decline in the mid-1970s because the UK Government revoked the fifth freedom that allowed Pan Am, KLM and SAS to make intermediate stops at Prestwick. That is what the fifth freedom is about.

I think that there are still restrictions in relation to freight. Is it possible to check whether the fifth freedom restrictions are causing a problem? For example, I know that, for a while, freight was being flown into Prestwick and then being trucked down to Stansted and put on another plane, when that plane would, of course, have been perfectly able to go all the way and drop off and pick up at Prestwick.

Humza Yousaf: Listening to Stewart Stevenson is always an education, so I will go back and check on the freight issue. I am not aware of the fifth freedom restrictions to which he refers.

To go back to his initial point, my parents, for example, have a great emotional attachment to Prestwick. They came here as immigrants from the subcontinent and Prestwick was the airport that they landed at before Glasgow airport existed. Quite rightly, people want Prestwick to be successful and that will require freight being part of the mix, along with the military operations that are there and any other opportunity that can be pursued to provide commercial viability.

As far as the specifics that Stewart Stevenson asked about are concerned, I will be back in touch with him. I do not know whether that restriction on freight exists.

The Convener: Could you clarify something for me, minister? I did not quite hear all of your answer. Do you have a target date for returning Prestwick to the public sector?

Humza Yousaf: I said that we want to do so soon as possible.

The Convener: Okay.

Unless there are any other questions on Prestwick, we will move on to Heathrow, on which John Finnie has some questions.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Good morning, minister. If I heard you correctly, you said earlier—commendably—that we still have work to do on CO₂ emissions. We know that aviation is the fastest-growing source of greenhouse gases. How is the Scottish Government's extreme enthusiasm for a third runway at Heathrow compatible with the aims of the Paris agreement?

Humza Yousaf: I thank the member for the question and commend him for pursuing this agenda over a period of time.

In my opening remarks, I said that, as transport minister, I know that I must make sure that I and my department shift our weight when it comes to the very ambitious targets that we have on CO₂ emissions. It will not come as a surprise to the member to hear me say that there has to be a balance. A choice was going to be made about airport expansion at Gatwick or a third runway at Heathrow and we chose to support the Heathrow option because of the clear benefits to Scotland, not just in terms of route development, but because of the additional jobs that it will create and the opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises that it will give rise to.

I will make a couple of points. First, a variety of studies have been done for the Airports Commission and it has been shown that Heathrow expansion would not breach European Union air quality law, nor would it necessarily impact on the meeting of the carbon targets that the UK has set itself or the international agreements that we have signed up to, as long as it is offset by other action. I think that that is the key point.

We are ambitious for our airports to secure long-haul routes, and they have had great success in that. For example, Edinburgh and Glasgow airports have great connectivity with the middle east. Three carriers now fly to Scotland from the middle east: Qatar Airways, Etihad Airways and Emirates. The airports want to achieve penetration into the west coast of America, the subcontinent and the far far east. We share that ambition of connecting Scotland globally, but we must ensure that, if we do that, we offset it through other measures that ensure that we are helping in the effort to reduce CO₂ emissions.

The position is similar to that on the air passenger duty cut, which I know that the member has set views on. As we know, the APD plans are subject to strategic environmental assessment, and they will be published for consultation in 2017. Realising that everything that we do across

Government has an environmental impact helps us to understand the extent to which we have to offset that in other areas. We must do that and, as a member of the Cabinet sub-committee on climate change, I am committed to establishing how transport can contribute to that mitigation. We do not know what the full impact of the expansion of Heathrow will be on routes to Scotland and more widely. That will be up to market competition and the discussions that are held as the new runway at Heathrow is constructed.

John Finnie: I acknowledge the work that has been done and the fact that there has been good cross-party consensus on climate change, but if the situation is challenging at the moment—you have acknowledged that it is—how much more challenging will it be if there are 260,000 additional flights a year?

You have talked about offsetting the proposed measures. Can you give any indication of how they will be offset? Can you tell us what Scotland intends to do to offset even a proportion of the additional flights? This is not a Scottish issue, a UK issue or a European issue; it is a global issue. If we are to meet the challenges of the Paris agreement, even a very modest global addition is significant. You and the Scottish Government enthuse about all the additional routes to and from Scotland.

Humza Yousaf: We should remember that Scotland is leading from the front. Globally, we have leading climate change targets, and the member is aware of the progress that we have made on the overall targets. We take our global leadership role very seriously, but that does not mean that we do not want to be ambitious. I am not saying that the member is not ambitious—of course he is—but it is possible to want our businesses to be globally connected through aviation at the same time as ensuring that we meet our climate change commitments.

The member is absolutely correct to say that the climate change effort is an international, global effort. I go back to the Airports Commission study that said that, as long as there are offsetting measures, EU air quality would not have to be breached.

You asked me specifically how we can offset the increase in flights. First, we have to look at what this Heathrow expansion means for Scottish emissions, because we do not yet know the full detail of the additional routes that might be coming to Scottish airports. We will factor that in as and when those discussions happen, but there is plenty that we are looking to do on transport, from incentivising the use of electric vehicles as people's private cars—a lot of work is going into incentivisation through our grant and loan schemes for electric vehicles—to making sure that

our bus fleet meets the Euro 6 standard and has the cleanest engines and the vehicles with the lowest emissions. We are also doing work to provide cleaner ferries. We know that the vessels that are being procured at Ferguson's commercial shipbuilder use hybrid technology. Right across the transport portfolio, we are ensuring that we are doing what we can to contribute to the reduction of CO₂ emissions.

Where there are transport initiatives that might increase emissions, as with our support for a third runway at Heathrow, we must ensure that, as a portfolio, we work harder to offset those.

John Finnie: There has not been much discussion about the £10 million for the route development fund. Can you give any more information on where the routes would be developed and which additional sites would be connected to Heathrow?

Humza Yousaf: It is far too early to say. A couple of the discussions that we have had with Heathrow have been very positive. It is understood that we want connectivity with Heathrow not just for Glasgow and Edinburgh but across the country. Airports such as Dundee, Inverness and others already have connections to London, but there might be an option there in the future.

John Finnie: What other airports?

Humza Yousaf: Inverness, Dundee and so on. They have—

John Finnie: Would any new airports have flights to London?

Humza Yousaf: No. Those airports have flights to London, but we are talking about Heathrow specifically. Those airports would have to have discussions. It is far too early a stage in the discussions about Heathrow to say exactly what slots will be available and what routes might be provided, but we have made it clear in our discussions that, at the very least, we expect Scotland to benefit proportionately from the new opportunities that exist.

As far as route development and international long-haul route development are concerned, I mentioned some of the markets that I know of that Scottish airports are very keen to attract, which include the far east, the subcontinent and the west coast of America, where we do not currently have the penetration that we would like to have. Again, we are in the very early stages of the process. I remind the member that construction is not expected to begin for another few years.

John Finnie: I would like to ask about the term "short haul". Perhaps I am a bit confused and did not pick up correctly what Mr Brown, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work, said. He asserted that additional long-haul flights to

Scotland could reduce the number of short-haul flights within the UK, but he went on to add that, of course, people flying to Scotland would wish to fly onwards to London Heathrow.

What is the balance there? It is clear that if you have £10 million for route development and a further incentive of a £10 reduction per passenger, there will be a significant rise in flights to and from Scotland.

Humza Yousaf: I think that the member is right when he uses the word "balance". As a Government, we are trying to achieve a balance. People want to be connected to hub airports such as Heathrow, Schiphol and Dubai for a variety of reasons. They want to visit those cities and then make their onward journey, and the hub airports give them a range of other travelling opportunities.

There is a balance to be struck between connecting to those hub airports—Heathrow's role as a world-leading hub airport is important—and being able to attract direct long-haul flights as part of the Scottish Government's ambition, which is shared with the airports and is one that we strive for.

11:30

John Finnie: Some assurances have been given to the Scottish Government about the money that would come to Scotland in the event that construction at Heathrow were to go ahead. What does that say about the integrity of the procurement process that would apply at Heathrow?

Humza Yousaf: I think that there are opportunities. It will not surprise the member to learn that, when a construction project of the magnitude of the one that is proposed at Heathrow takes place, our interest is to ensure that as many Scottish SMEs as possible can benefit from that. I do not think that anybody would begrudge them that opportunity. We expect the procurement process to still be an open process, but we expect that a certain portion of the supply chain will be ring fenced for Scottish companies. As far as we are aware, it is possible for that to be done but, within that framework, we cannot dictate which Scottish companies must be able to procure and win those contracts. That will be part of an open, competitive tendering process.

I do not shy away from the fact that we had very robust and long discussions with Heathrow over the opportunities for Scottish SMEs. I make no apologies for the fact that we managed to secure what we have managed to secure from Heathrow for Scottish companies.

John Finnie: I have one final question.

The Convener: I do not want to interrupt your flow too much, but it is helpful if you look at me occasionally, because other members want to come in. Please ask another question, but then I would like to move on to the next person, if I may.

John Finnie: Certainly—I am sorry, convener. My final question is on the 16,000 new jobs that have been trumpeted by the Scottish Government, often without mentioning that that is by 2050 and from new capacity. Can you give any breakdown at all of how those jobs would be configured and where they would be created?

Humza Yousaf: We are in the early phases, but we have spoken about the fact that we expect logistics hubs to be based in Scotland. We have mentioned the amount that we expect Scottish companies to be able to procure in construction and through the supply chain—there will be jobs that are associated with the supply chain. There will undoubtedly be jobs that are associated with the addition of long-haul routes and short-haul routes and the opportunities from that. Job creation will also come from what we spoke about for Prestwick and from the ability for Prestwick to be involved in manufacturing.

I do not have an exact breakdown of the 16,000 jobs. They come from the overall picture of jobs that are likely to be created from the Heathrow expansion; a portion of those—as you said, it is 16,000 of them—is to be realised in Scotland. That is a good commitment that I think that members will welcome.

John Finnie: I need to clarify what you said—did you refer to a portion of the 16,000 new jobs?

Humza Yousaf: I said that a portion of the overall 180,000 jobs that will be created because of the Heathrow expansion—the portion is the 16,000 figure that you rightly cited—would be in Scotland.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I have a quick supplementary on route development, which you mentioned. The feedback that I have got from sitting in meetings with airlines and airports on proposing new international routes is that it is very much up to the airport to present the business case to the airline and not the other way round. What specific measures is the Scottish Government taking, and what are you, under your portfolio, working with other ministers on, to support airports in Scotland to build feasibility studies and robust business cases for new international routes?

Humza Yousaf: That is a good question. Part of why we are keen to have an APD cut—the exact mechanisms for and nature of that cut will be decided by my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution, Derek Mackay, and close conversations are happening with airports

and the aviation industry, as you would imagine—is that it would be a further incentive.

On what the Scottish Government can do, in my previous role as the minister with responsibility for Europe and external affairs, I was involved in many of the discussions about bringing in the Qatar Airways flight to Edinburgh airport. I met the chief executive of Qatar Airways in Doha, at Gordon Dewar's request, to facilitate some of the discussions.

We can add value primarily through our agencies; marketing by VisitScotland and the marketing of a route in a country are hugely important. I know that that was hugely important to Etihad Airways. When we first discussed bringing Etihad to Edinburgh, the marketing of the route was essential to the company. That means being able to provide money, which of course has to be state-aid compliant and so on.

The provision of money for marketing is key for airlines. If we can give any other assistance, it must be within legislative boundaries. I have a good relationship with our airports, so I would more than welcome such conversations.

Stewart Stevenson: Much of the benefit to Scotland of a third runway at Heathrow is predicated on access to landing and take-off slots, which are commercial items that are bought and sold. In the past 10 years, a pair of slots have been sold for £100 million. They have huge commercial value.

For Glasgow and Edinburgh, there are train options for travel to London, but for Inverness and Aberdeen, the only realistic travel options to the south and beyond come from connecting at Heathrow. At the moment we have services there, although when British Midland was taken over by BA, we saw what can happen: Virgin ended up with slots on the condition that it operated services to Edinburgh and Aberdeen, but that was for only three years and, the moment that the three years were up, the slots were reallocated. The slots still have a huge value.

The new runway will be a short-haul runway of 2.2km that will not be capable of taking big transatlantic planes. Will you continue to press the UK Government for one of the planning conditions for the new runway to include dedicated peak-time landing and take-off slots for Inverness and Aberdeen, for which that is vital? Are there other ways in which we can protect access to slots not simply for three or five years but in the very long term? That is vital to those two significant airports.

Humza Yousaf: The member articulates better than I possibly could the importance of trying to secure those slots, and he also presents well the challenges, because there is a competitive market, as he demonstrated in mentioning the sale of two

slots. We are in continual discussions with the UK Government about protecting slots for Scottish airports—the ones that the member mentioned and others. There is not yet certainty over that, as I think he understands, but those discussions will continue.

The Convener: We will come down to ground now—we will stop talking about aeroplanes and move on to bicycles and cycling.

John Finnie: I have a brief question on the cycling action plan for Scotland—CAPS. There has been a lot of commendable progress and some positive promotion, but Cycling Scotland's second progress report on the plan says that we are very unlikely to achieve the targets by 2020. It recommends a year-on-year increase in expenditure on cycling until expenditure reaches 10 per cent of national and local transport budgets and it recommends a renewed focus on the development of segregated on-street urban cycle infrastructure.

As I said, there has been progress. Will you please tell me how you intend to take those recommendations forward?

Humza Yousaf: I welcome the member's acknowledgement of the progress that has been made and I commend the Green Party for pushing the agenda in Parliament and making sure that it is high up the Government's agenda. In particular, the member will not begrudge me saying that his colleague Alison Johnstone played a leading role in some conversations. I reiterate that we are seeing record investment in active travel.

I will take a couple of the issues that John Finnie mentioned from the CAPS review. It is challenging to meet the 10 per cent vision, which is aspirational. I would not like us to scale it back, because it is important to have ambitious visions. We have seen some progress, as the member said. I will not bore him with the statistics, but one statistic that I will pull out is that we have seen an increase in journeys by bike to work, although it is not at the level that it should be at—the figure should be higher. I would not roll back the 10 per cent vision; I want us to continue to work towards it while recognising challenges.

I want us to continue to invest, and I will give reassurances on that. We are talking—euphemistically—about financial constraint; we know that we have the autumn statement due and a spending review from the Scottish Government on the back of that. We will certainly see what the financial position will be, but I give the member a guarantee that, if extra expenditure is available, I will fight for a portion of that to come to active travel. The agenda is hugely important and we must show leadership on it. The 10 per cent target should be maintained.

John Finnie referred to the request from some for 10 per cent of the budget to be allocated to active travel. I wish that the situation was as simple as that, but it is not, because of the various contractual commitments that we have from the ScotRail franchise, the CalMac franchise, the dualling of the A9 and the A96 and many other projects. Those contracted projects alone are in the billions of pounds. It is not simple to just whack off 10 per cent of a budget and say that it will be spent on active travel, but I can promise that the record level that the member talked about will be maintained through the parliamentary term. If there is an opportunity for me to pull at the purse strings of the former transport minister, who is now in charge of the money, I will certainly take it.

My final point, which John Finnie articulated well, is about the importance of cycling infrastructure and, in particular, segregated cycleways. I was delighted to announce the winner of the community links plus competition, which was south city way in Glasgow. I was delighted because it is only 10 minutes from my house, which of course had no bearing on the decision. That is an ambitious project and it is going in the right direction. Segregated cycleways are an important part of realising our vision.

John Finnie: You have talked about commitments, which are understood—not least those of the two dualling projects. We have heard representations that modest changes, for instance, to the existing system on the A96 whereby roundabouts are used would greatly reduce costs over using more complicated junctions. If you could reduce costs on that, you could direct more savings to forms of active travel, such as cycling. Will you undertake to look at that, please?

Humza Yousaf: I will certainly look at any evidence that is put to us. If there is any way of saving money, you can bet your bottom dollar that, as a Government, we will try to do that without compromising the integrity, safety and viability of our projects—those caveats are important. I am not a civil engineer and I do not have such a background, but I have found in my transport job that, even when a solution seems simple, it can often be more complicated. However, I undertake to look at what is proposed.

When it comes to major trunk road infrastructure projects, it is important to realise that we consider active travel. The M8, M73 and M74 improvement project provides a good example of that from the cycling and walking infrastructure that is going alongside that. Can we look to do more? There is no reason why we should not explore other avenues when it comes to infrastructure projects.

We are at the early stages of some projects—for example, the A96 project, which is due to be completed in 2030, is progressing through the

design phase. If we can supplement the active travel initiatives in such projects, we should be open minded about that.

Neil Bibby: You mentioned a cycle project that is near your home. On the other side of Glasgow, there is another cycle project—the bears way project in East Dunbartonshire. The Scottish National Party Government in Edinburgh has a policy of promoting cycling, but SNP councillors have rejected that expansion in East Dunbartonshire. Would you like to comment on that?

11:45

Humza Yousaf: The member would be the first to be up in arms—rightly—if I tried to overturn decisions that a local authority had made. We trust councillors to make the decisions that are pertinent to their local wards and to the councils that they represent.

Notwithstanding that, I think that segregated cycleways are an important part of realising our vision for active travel journeys and for 10 per cent of journeys to be by bicycle by 2020. On the back of not just the bears way but a couple of other examples, we could work more closely with local authorities to ensure that they help us to realise our ambitious targets.

The member will understand that I cannot intervene in individual local planning decisions, and he would not expect me to do so, but I put on record my commitment and my belief that segregated cycleways are an important part of realising our vision, and I commit to working more closely with local authorities to see how we can help to achieve that. I have the active travel summit coming up in a week's time, when I hope to give more information about how I will look to do that.

The Convener: Before we come on to trunk road projects, we will talk about the national transport strategy.

Jamie Greene: We have spoken about a large number of transport means, and it is apt that, as we come towards closing the session, we should look at the national transport strategy in general. On one of the committee's off-site days, a theme that came up often was that there should be a joined-up approach to transport, and I wonder whether we can touch on that.

Will you confirm that the national transport review will be comprehensive and all-encompassing in looking at a number of areas of transport, including matters such as ticketing, payment methods such as smart cards and how services connect and join up together—for

example, how ferries connect to trains and how trains connect to buses.

This committee is the connectivity committee as well as the rural economy committee, and we must stress the importance of rural connectivity. In rural areas, transport is not just for getting people from A to B; it has social repercussions in connecting our villages and towns across Scotland. Will you confirm what the review will cover and outline the timetable for it, how the public will be consulted and how external stakeholders can take part in it? That would be most helpful.

Humza Yousaf: The member articulates well some of the challenges that we face and some of the opportunities that we could realise if we get the review of the strategy right. It is a funny thing—when someone is appointed as the transport minister, they do not become an expert in transport overnight. My approach has always been to listen to the experts as much as I possibly can and to gather expertise from them.

One of the big issues that have come up—particularly in rural areas—is connectivity through different modes of transport, which the member just mentioned. Getting off a ferry then getting a train and then a bus to where someone needs to get to should be a lot simpler than it currently is. I hope that part of addressing that will be smart ticketing; the roll-out of smart ticketing in Aberdeen and Dundee is leading the way on such initiatives. There is still a lot of work to do and I am committed to the national roll-out in phases, which will be incredibly important.

I stress something that the member said. There is a reason why I, as a junior minister, sit under the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Connectivity, Fergus Ewing. Some people might think that my job pertains more to infrastructure, and there is an element of that—I also have a close relationship with the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work, Keith Brown—but there is a deliberate reason why I am under Fergus Ewing and his cabinet secretariat, and indeed the committee, which is that we realise how important transport is to rural connectivity as well as to the other connectivity issues in that portfolio.

As for the specific question about the review, I give an undertaking that the review will have as wide a scope as possible—it will be a real meaty review. That is why it will be over two to three years. I have not detailed the timescales, on which we are still having conversations, but I would welcome feedback from members.

As I have said, the review will take place throughout the parliamentary session because I need it to be detailed. Could I do a review in 12 months? I am sure that we probably could do that,

but I would not like to do it, because such a review would not be comprehensive. The review has to require engagement. At every meeting that I go to, people give me ideas about what should be in the national transport strategy review. Can I encompass them all? Probably not, but I will absolutely try to take as many of those transport priorities as possible with us as part of the review. It will be important to do that not only from a sectoral point of view but from a geographical point of view.

The period between now and spring 2017 is for what is almost pre-engagement that we are doing before the actual engagement as part of the review takes place. As I said, I am already meeting stakeholders—passengers, commuters and our transport operators, as well as regional transport partnerships, leaders of councils and so on. I am meeting all those individuals and organisations to see what their priorities are and to hear from them, but if the member ever wishes to sit down with me to talk about what he thinks the priorities should be, I will more than welcome that.

Jamie Greene: I am grateful to the minister and I am sure that some of us would be happy to meet him.

I would like to ask a short, selfish question. You may be aware of the reports that Troon is bidding for the Arran ferry to replace the Ardrossan route. Do you have a view on that?

Humza Yousaf: I do and I have made that view public. We continue the work that we do with the Ardrossan task force, and a good amount of work has been done. However, it would be an abdication of my responsibility if I did not look at every option that came to my table. South Ayrshire Council and Associated British Ports have made an approach. North Ayrshire Council and Peel Ports, which owns the Ardrossan facility, came to me to say that the ferry should stay at Ardrossan. I have also been to Arran. I have met the various organisations, community groups and business forums, and elected members—from John Scott right the way through to Kenny Gibson—have approached me to say why they think the ferry should go from their terminal.

At the moment I am not closed minded. I realise the significant challenges but also the opportunities that the route can present. The Ardrossan task force's work will continue. Ardrossan is and remains the port for the ferry, but it would be remiss of me not to consider other options that come under my nose.

The Convener: Richard Lyle has a brief question.

Richard Lyle: Yes. On Monday I was asked by a senior citizen why they cannot use their travel

pass on the trams in Edinburgh. Can you answer that question or can you get back to me?

Humza Yousaf: Yes, I will get back to you. I am trying to remember, but I think that I have some correspondence from you on that specific point. If it is not from you, it is perhaps from another MSP. We are looking at that issue in terms of the national concessionary travel scheme, and it is constantly under review.

Richard Lyle: I am sure that it would let more people go on the trams. Thank you.

John Mason: I have a quick follow-up question. You mentioned smart cards and some concern has been expressed that Strathclyde might go off and do its own thing while the rest of the country does something else. Are we happy about that?

Humza Yousaf: I would not be happy if that was the case, but I had a conversation with Strathclyde partnership for transport senior management a couple of weeks ago. Without putting words into their mouths, they understand the vision that we have for a national smart card to be rolled out. There were some discussions about the e-purse that is used, but I have to say that my discussions with SPT were constructive and I hope to continue them in that constructive manner, so yes, it would be a source of frustration for me if there was a separate system. It would not make any sense for there to be one system in one part of the country and a different system in other parts of the country, but that was not quite the intimation that I received from SPT.

The Convener: We move on to major trunk road projects, and there are two specific questions. Alexander Burnett will lead on the first one.

Alexander Burnett: Thank you, convener. My question is about the Aberdeen western peripheral route. It is good to see progress up there and I personally experienced the improvements at Dyce the other day.

However, a number of problems have been caused by contractors around the route, ranging from watercourse pollution, runoff, flooding, damage to dykes and fencing and other environmental damage. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency is concerned about the problems, so it has raised an enforcement notice. Certainly, the residents and people who have been affected by the problems have on-going concerns. Would the minister like to comment on what he is doing about those concerns? I think that the residents have asked to meet the minister so that he can respond to them.

Humza Yousaf: The important thing to say about the AWPR is that we are still scheduled to open on the date of winter 2017. The member

understands that it will also mean real benefits to the communities that he represents. It is a project that we are rightly proud of.

Every transport and infrastructure project comes with its complications and the member has mentioned some of them. Some can be mitigated with the appropriate amount of foresight while some come up as the construction phase goes on. I am more than happy to send the member a note about what we are doing to mitigate the specific complications that he has spoken about.

I have no problem with meeting local groups or, indeed, wider stakeholders to hear their concerns. I am more than happy to discuss that with the member. Generally what I hear about the AWPR is fairly positive. We are keeping an eye on some things but I am more than happy to meet with the appropriate stakeholders.

Alexander Burnett: Thank you very much.

The Convener: Richard Lyle, the last time I gave you the floor on this subject, you took quite a long time and I am very conscious that the minister has given us a lot of his time today.

Richard Lyle: I will try to be brief. Minister, when you started your statement, you said that we are spending more than £1 billion on roads. You are actually spending £500 million of that £1 billion in my area or areas beside mine. Can you give the committee a brief progress update on the M8/M73/M74/A725 upgrade? I also thank you for allowing me to visit those areas with you a few weeks ago.

Humza Yousaf: I was delighted that you were able to join me to visit a project that will have a significant impact on travel between Glasgow and Edinburgh and, indeed, on some of the surrounding towns and villages.

First, I thank all the local residents for their forbearance. A construction project inevitably leads, unfortunately, to disruption so I send my personal thanks to the residents in your constituency and the other constituencies that have been affected for their forbearance and patience. As somebody who uses that route himself, my thanks go to them.

Secondly, my thanks go to those who are working on the project. We are still due to open in spring 2017, as Richard Lyle saw when he visited the project with me. That visit was particularly enlightening and the member will have seen that a large portion of the workforce are EU citizens, which again demonstrates the importance of EU citizens and their contribution.

The projects are on budget and on time, which are the two things that any transport minister wants to hear of infrastructure projects, so that is good. We are certainly making good progress, but

where there are issues I am, as I say, open-minded to hearing about them from members or groups and organisations in the community.

Richard Lyle: I am happy to hear you say that, minister. I am in constant dialogue with the Scottish Roads Partnership and Transport Scotland about acoustic barrier fencing. I was told that none would be constructed. However, it is on the M8 about 300 yards away from the Maxim business park Dakota hotel, and it is 300 yards away from the properties past the Bell's bridge that might be affected. On the A725, the road is a quarter of a mile away from the properties affected, but I am still not getting an answer to the question of why we are not getting acoustic barrier fencing. That is all on the M8.

On the M74, the only acoustic barrier fencing that has been erected is by new developers who are putting up new houses, but properties at the rear of Burnacre Gardens, which is right on top of a hill about 10 yards above the M74, are not getting acoustic barrier fencing.

I have sent you something like 10 letters in the past couple of weeks—those might be the letters you are thinking of—but I still have no answer.

Humza Yousaf: I was going to give my answer to that correspondence. There are thresholds that determine where noise barriers and noise mitigation measures should be implemented, and if the noise level rises by 1dB above those thresholds then of course noise barriers are provided.

There is also on-going monitoring, so that, after construction and the opening of the project, monitoring will be done after one year, five years, 10 years and 15 years, so there are opportunities for noise mitigation measures to be put in place if they have not already been put in place.

I must emphasise that, if thresholds are breached, mitigation is required. I will go back and look at the exact examples that Richard Lyle gave, but the likelihood is that mitigation was put there because thresholds were breached. If, as he seems to be indicating, he believes that not to be the case, then I can look to provide him with some of the data and the statistics around that.

12:00

Richard Lyle: Minister, a few minutes ago, you gave a commitment to visit an area in Aberdeenshire. My area is 37 miles down the road from this place. You gave an original commitment to me to visit the St John the Baptist primary school, the only primary school in Scotland that I know that lies beside a major motorway. That commitment was rescinded, but not by you. I am asking for a commitment that you will visit

Burnacre Gardens and St John the Baptist primary school with me in order to highlight the problems that have been highlighted to me. I will finish here, convener, by quoting the SRP, which said that the project will mean

“a better quality of life for road users and local communities”.

The people that stay at Burnacre Gardens and the pupils who use St John the Baptist primary school are not getting a better quality of life. They are getting more noise.

The Convener: Minister, before you answer the question, we have a long way to go and I very much appreciate that this is an area that Richard Lyle feels passionate about, so a simple undertaking that you would be prepared to visit the site with him would be extremely helpful in expediting the rest of the business that we have in front of us today.

Humza Yousaf: Okay. In that case, yes, of course any visit with my colleague Dick Lyle is one that I would be happy to take up.

The Convener: Thank you very much, minister. John Mason has some questions about the accessible transport plan.

John Mason: I will keep it to one question as time is probably against us. On the accessible transport framework and the whole issue of accessibility to transport, I see stations being improved with ramps and things, which is great, but I see others where not a lot is happening. Most of us accept that the Glasgow subway will never be fully accessible and some people feel that since Waverley station was upgraded, it has become less accessible for people. I suppose that I am looking for a commitment on accessibility to public transport. I know that it is not going to happen overnight, but is it a priority for you?

Humza Yousaf: It is a huge priority and you are right to say that it will not happen overnight. The accessible travel framework is a 10-year framework but the important part is that it was designed by people who have disabilities for people who have disabilities. I have to confess to the member that I was pretty shocked at some of the testimonials I heard from people when we were doing the launch. For example, there was an unacceptable situation whereby people who have a physical disability were having to shuffle on their backsides down stairs in the middle of a busy railway station because the lift was broken and nobody had told them. It is unacceptable that someone has to do that to get to a job opportunity, for example, and the lack of dignity that was imposed upon those people because suitable facilities were not in place was unacceptable.

There are lots of measures in the accessible travel framework. I am very proud of it, but I will only continue to be proud of it if it actually realises the changes on the ground that we are very committed to making.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. The final area that we are going on to discuss now is the Laurencekirk junction and two members have questions. I am sure that the minister is well aware of the background to petition PE1236 that has been around on and off, I think, since 2005. It would help the committee if you could give some undertakings to the people who are going to ask the questions so that, when we come to consider the petitions after your evidence to the committee, we have a clear understanding of your position. Mairi Evans has been sitting very quietly and is ready to speak on it.

Mairi Evans (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): Thank you, convener. This is the last issue that we will look at today, but it is by no means the least.

The minister is aware that this has been a long, on-going issue in my constituency. I very much welcomed the announcement that was made earlier this year. I believe that that was in part due to all the hard work that was done by the petitioner, Jill Fotheringham, whose petition we will discuss next, as the convener mentioned, but also by MSPs. Mike Rumbles has campaigned on this issue, as did my predecessor, Nigel Don; Aberdeenshire Council and Angus Council have worked hard on this as well. Of course, the safety concerns are on-going but the lack of a grade-separated junction has also significantly inhibited development in Aberdeenshire and in Angus.

Despite the announcements that have been made by the Government, there is still a lot of concern among my constituents and people living in the area that the work may not go ahead; people are not exactly sure of the plan. I asked a parliamentary question about this back in June. I ask the minister today for that categorical assurance for the people in my constituency that the junction will go ahead, and for an idea of the timescale. When can the new junction be delivered and where are the plans sitting at the moment?

Humza Yousaf: I can confirm that we have not only committed to the grade separation at Laurencekirk but announced £24 million for its design and construction, so we are putting our money where our mouth is. That is incredibly important for us, for all the reasons that the member has articulated better than I could possibly have done.

I join Mairi Evans in thanking for their efforts campaigners such as Jill Fotheringham, and the

other MSPs whom she mentioned from across the political divide, who have pushed this agenda for a much-needed grade separation at Laurencekirk.

As Mairi Evans may be aware, we appointed design consultants in September, which means that we are now stepping up the work to deliver this much-needed scheme. As she also knows, there is a lot of work still to be done. I am conscious of the time, so instead of going through the detail I will ask my colleagues to write to the member, and any other member who has an interest, about the general process for infrastructure projects, bearing in mind that many of the members here are new or, indeed, would just like that information.

I can start to go through that, but I must emphasise that I cannot give you an exact timescale of when the work will take place. That is because within the statutory process if there are, for example, objections to a certain part of the scheme there may well be a need for further consultation, further discussion, local inquiries and so on. I cannot tie us down to an exact timescale, but I can tell the member the process that such a major infrastructure project has to go through.

The Convener: If your officials direct that information to our clerks, I can make sure that it is issued to committee members. I understand that there are processes and that objections can cause delays, but all concerned would find it helpful to have some target dates, subject to a fair wind, for when they will see shovels on the ground. I think that committee members and everyone else is realistic enough, and one understands that there is a process to go through and that there can be knock-on effects.

Mairi Evans: That is exactly what I was going to ask for. It would be helpful to know what the indicative timescales are if there are no objections. I understand completely that objections can delay such projects by a number of years, depending on their nature.

Is the Government taking a strategic look at road and rail in the Angus North and Mearns area, given that a lot of major developments are happening with the Montrose south regeneration? The port there is doing incredibly well, too, and we also have the planned investment from GSK. There is huge growth potential in the area and I want to ensure that that strategic look is happening.

Humza Yousaf: Of course, I will pass that information to the clerk. The target for the draft orders, all being well, will be 2019 but I am reluctant to nail that to the mast because, as I said, there could be objections and other factors.

On the wider transport issues in the area, there are a few opportunities. There is a review of the

national transport strategy, from which will follow the strategic transport projects review. That document pertains to the major infrastructure projects that we are looking to do on our trunk roads, so there is an opportunity there as well.

There are also the conversations, which are at a very early stage, that are happening with the local authorities in that area about potential city deals and region deals. If the member wishes to feed into that, there are opportunities to look at the transport needs of the area that she represents.

Mike Rumbles: The campaign for a grade-separated junction at Laurencekirk was never a party-political issue. I want to put on record the support I got at the time, as a local constituency member, from regional members who also supported the group. The issue is only about saving lives.

However, we are in exactly the same position that we were in 11 years ago. Jill Fotheringham was Jill Campbell at that time—that is why the names have changed. We got an agreement from Nicol Stephen, one of the minister's predecessors as transport minister, that the grade-separated junction would be the very next junction to be built after the junction at Forfar had been completed. We had a 50mph limit and speed camera at Forfar. The 50mph zone was meant to be a temporary measure, with a speed camera at Laurencekirk, until that grade-separated junction had been built. That temporary measure was introduced 11 years ago and the original petition was dropped.

I do not want to go into details, but other transport ministers then decided that there was not a programme and that there was no commitment to start the project. That is what prompted the petitioner to relaunch the petition in 2009. We are now in exactly the same position. We all understand the delays that can happen once a project starts, but the key issue here is not the end date. The key issue is for the minister to give the green light to the go-ahead start date. That is what everyone in the north-east is holding their breath for. If the minister could just give a commitment to a start date, that would be tremendously helpful.

Humza Yousaf: I hear what the member is saying and what Mairi Evans said previously. Coming from the area, you are well able to represent and articulate the feelings of the local community. People do not want another false dawn only for the project to be pulled, so let me feed that information, as I will endeavour to do, through the convener. As I said, there is a target date for draft orders in 2019, but let me see—with all the caveats that you well understand, if I may emphasise that point—whether I can put in some information. You are absolutely right to say that there might be some scepticism if people have

seen false starts before; I can see why that might be. We have made a commitment in terms of the finances involved, and I hope that the fact that we have done that, and that design consultants have been appointed, will give people some reassurance. However, I accept what the member says.

The Convener: Thank you. I am sure that you will not be held absolutely to the dates, but we look forward to getting that information.

Do you wish to say anything to close the session? I also have a few things to say, if I may.

Humza Yousaf: Thank you, convener. I found the session very valuable and it has covered a lot of the portfolio. There are a number of things on which I will endeavour to get back to the committee; my officials will have taken note of that, but I am always here to take feedback questions.

On the issue on which we spent a significant amount of time, I reiterate that I want to see improvements in our transport; in particular, my immediate priority is to see improvements on our railway network, where the standard is not acceptable. We will continue to work with all the stakeholders—primarily with ScotRail, but also with our passengers and commuters—to realise some of those improvements. There are a lot of issues for me to consider, and I am open to coming to the committee any time the convener and committee members wish me to do so.

The Convener: I would like to thank you, minister, and your officials for coming with you. You seem to have been able to answer all the questions with only a few notes passed along the chain. We have asked for further information on some issues and I am grateful that you have said you will supply that information. The clerks will be in contact with your department to make sure that we get that information and we will work together on it.

When we met in the corridor yesterday you said that you were looking forward to coming to the committee. I said that I hoped you were not looking forward to it too much. You have been here for two and a quarter hours. I thank you very much for your time, and we will take you up on the offer to follow the development of the issues that we have raised today at a later date.

12:14

Meeting suspended.

12:18

On resuming—

Public Petitions

A90/A937 (Safety Improvements) (PE1236)

The Convener: The next item of business is consideration of two public petitions. Petition PE1236, by Jill Fotheringham, is on safety improvements to the A90 and A937. The petition was previously considered by the Public Petitions Committee, and the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee. The Minister for Transport and the Islands has given us an update on the Laurencekirk junction and I direct members to the supporting papers. In light of what the minister has said to me, until we have the further information that the minister has volunteered to let the committee have, it is appropriate for me to suggest that the committee should allow the petition to remain open and consider it again once we have that information from the minister. Does anyone have any comments?

Mairi Evans: I agree. As Mike Rumbles said, the previous petition was closed in expectation of developments. Until we see things progress a bit further and get that extra information from the minister, it is important that we keep the petition open.

The Convener: Does the committee agree that we will keep the petition open?

Members indicated agreement.

Protecting Wild Salmonids (PE1598)

The Convener: PE1598 is by Guy Linley-Adams, on behalf of Salmon and Trout Conservation Scotland. This is the committee's first consideration of the petition. Members have a paper that provides details of consideration by the Public Petitions Committee. I invite comments from members; I will want to make a comment, so I remind members of my entry in the register of interests, as I am involved in wild fisheries.

Stewart Stevenson: The issue is important and we need to understand the Scottish Government's position. A lot has gone on. We have got the Scottish Environment Protection Agency's position and those of various other people, but it is important that we know what the Scottish Government's position is. I suggest that the next step is for us to ask for that and keep the petition open until we receive it.

The Convener: Do all members support the view that we should write to ask the cabinet secretary for his opinion and further advice on the matter? In the meantime, the petition will remain open.

Jamie Greene: I have a quick question on a procedural issue. From reading the notes, I believe that SEPA identifies this as a matter of animal welfare rather than of the environment. What implications does that have for any other case that might come up? I am not talking just about salmon lice but, for example, puppy farming, which is an animal welfare issue rather than an environmental issue. Are we setting a precedent by acknowledging receipt of the petition?

The Convener: There are two sides to the petition. Wild fish are being affected as well as the caged salmon, but the particular point is that the wild fish are being affected as a result of the farming of salmon.

Jamie Greene: Is that the default? Because the issue affects a wild animal, that is where we cross the line.

The Convener: The cause of the problem lies within the committee's remit. Aquaculture falls within the remit of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, which is why the petition is before us. Are you happy with that?

Jamie Greene: Yes, that is fine.

The Convener: Are we all agreed that we should write to the minister to ask for further information?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: That concludes today's business. I would like to go into an informal private session to explain to members about the meetings that I had yesterday. It will take no more than five minutes.

Meeting closed at 12:22.

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