EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 22 January 2008

Session 3

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE
2nd Meeting 2008, Session 3

CONVENER

*Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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*Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP)
*Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
*John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
*Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP)
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Keith Brown (Ochil) (SNP)
Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con)
Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Julia Amour (British Council Scotland)
Professor Stephen Blackmore (Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh)
Janet Brown (Scottish Qualifications Authority)
David Caldwell (Universities Scotland)
Professor Sir David Edward (Royal Society of Edinburgh)
Councillor Corrie McChord (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
Iain McTaggart (Scottish Council for Development and Industry)
John Paterson (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
Martin Reid (Scottish Development International)
Philip Riddle (VisitScotland)
Sandy Taylor (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
Leon Thompson (EventScotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Dr Jim Johnston

ASSISTANT CLERKS

Emma Berry
Lucy Scharbert

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Tuesday 22 January 2008

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:00*]

Scottish Government's International Strategy

The Convener (Malcolm Chisholm): Good morning and welcome to the second meeting in 2008 of the European and External Relations Committee in this third session of the Parliament. In particular, I thank all our guests for turning up this morning to give evidence.

The first item on the agenda is what we are calling a round-table discussion, which means that we will try to make it less of our usual formal interrogation and more of a conversation. That said, no doubt we will slip a few questions in from time to time.

It might be best if the witnesses introduce themselves and their organisations, after which we will ask some questions to get the ball rolling.

Philip Riddle (VisitScotland): I am the chief executive of VisitScotland, Scotland's national tourism agency, which is responsible for maximising the economic benefits of tourism to the country.

David Caldwell (Universities Scotland): I am the director of Universities Scotland, which is the representative body for all Scotland's universities and other university-level institutions, such as Glasgow School of Art and the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama.

Janet Brown (Scottish Qualifications Authority): I am the chief executive of the Scottish Qualifications Authority, which is responsible for all Scottish qualifications, except degrees.

Martin Reid (Scottish Development International): I am the director of group services in Scottish Development International, which is responsible for international economic development as part of the joint venture between Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish Government.

Iain McTaggart (Scottish Council for Development and Industry): I am the general manager of the Scottish Council for Development and Industry, which is an independent membership-funded organisation.

Professor Sir David Edward (Royal Society of Edinburgh): I am the international convener of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, which has been developing significant relationships with academies in Europe, China, India and Pakistan, particularly with regard to scientific research exchanges.

Professor Stephen Blackmore (Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh): I am the director of Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, which works in many countries around the world, particularly China.

Leon Thompson (EventScotland): I am EventScotland's corporate communications manager. EventScotland is the national events agency, which seeks to attract major events to Scotland.

Julia Amour (British Council Scotland): I am deputy director of the British Council Scotland, which is responsible for helping to connect Scotland with the world through educational and cultural relations.

The Convener: Indeed, and I know that today your organisation is having a very interesting conference that I hope to attend later.

Thank you for your interesting and stimulating written submissions. I will set the ball rolling with a general question: how successful has the existing international strategy been? That question will obviously form the starting point for the Scottish Government's revision of the strategy over the next few weeks. Who wishes to make an initial response?

David Caldwell: I will volunteer.

The strategy has been fairly successful, and in particular we have been happy to associate ourselves with the policy's move to internationalise lifelong learning in Scotland. That extremely important initiative extends beyond universities to embrace colleges, and it builds on the recent success of universities and colleges in extending their international activities. That said, although we can be relatively satisfied with what has been achieved so far, there is virtue in revisiting any strategy and finding out whether it can be improved.

Janet Brown: We might as well stay with the educational side of things. From the SQA's perspective, the two strands of the international strategy have been very useful in ensuring that we benefit Scotland through links with countries that have potential economic value. For example, we have been significantly active in China not only in raising the profile of Scottish education but in highlighting the quality of the Scottish people and the benefits to China of working with us on economic matters.

We have also found the strategy useful in highlighting Scotland's place in the world and in showing that it is a good place to get involved with. That has allowed us to work with other emerging nations in Europe and Africa on, for example, developing their education systems.

The Convener: The comments have been quite positive so far, but you can criticise the strategy, if you feel so inclined.

Iain McTaggart: The strategy has been successful in galvanising more effective co-ordination of activity which is, of course, all to the good in setting objectives that Scotland can work towards.

However, wider knowledge of the strategy's existence and purpose has been somewhat lacking among organisations that are not necessarily in the business of strategic thinking but are able to contribute to commercial objectives. Although great progress has been made in the education and tourism sectors, more work needs to be done in the business sphere to let companies know that we have a sense of direction and to show them how they can participate in the process and contribute to its overall objectives.

Philip Riddle: As Iain McTaggart has pointed out, the strategy has been successful for the tourism sector. There have, for example, been very significant increases in the number of international visitors—if one takes that as a marker of success—and VisitScotland and the tourism sector have, in general, used their relatively limited resources to very good effect.

However, two aspects could be improved. First, we could make better use of our very strong brand and share it across more areas of Scottish business. Secondly, we need more partnership. We are a small country in an extremely competitive world, but we have great assets, not least of which is a very well known brand. However, we have to manage and develop that brand properly, use it in different areas and galvanise partnership among, for example, tourism, business, investment and education. Although we are making an impact at the moment, such an approach will give us the clout fully to realise our potential.

The Convener: We will pick up on the issue of Scotland's brand, but I wonder whether I can shift the focus slightly and ask the witnesses to highlight general ways in which the strategy might be developed and improved. Once the framework has been established, we can go through the suggestions topic by topic.

Sir David Edward: The Royal Society of Edinburgh would like to emphasise the importance of language teaching and learning to any international strategy. It is true that it is easy to communicate in English and that it is the usual language of international conferences and publications, but it is not the language of day-to-day life in other countries. If a scientist goes to work in a laboratory in another country, the people in the laboratory will frequently make every effort to talk to him or her in English. However, he or she will be left on their own when everyone retires to the coffee shop or the pub, because there people will speak in their own language. If you cannot join in those conversations, you cannot participate fully. Indeed, a Foreign Office lawyer who became ambassador to Lithuania set out to learn Lithuanian, which is not an easy language, and had an enormous influence in Vilnius simply because he could take part in conversations at social events.

We have to emphasise the importance not just of learning languages but of the willingness to learn languages and of the skills that are necessary to acquire them. We also want to emphasise the importance of using our home-grown resources—we have a large number of speakers of Chinese, Indian and Pakistani languages and now, for example, a large number of Polish people. We could use them—we sense that they are not currently used. It is important to view language teaching and learning as an essential part of any international strategy.

Julia Amour: Professor Edward's comments underline the need for the strategy to be multistranded—it currently is, but we need to move on to the next generation of ideas about how we plan for the long term. One of the things that the British Council manages on behalf of the Scottish Government is the programme of language assistants in and out of Scottish schools. In the past few years, that has included for the first time assistants in Chinese and Urdu.

We have also talked about the ways in which—as Professor Edward mentioned—we can use migrants from new states in the European Union to help our next generation of workers and learners to understand the new environment in which we live, and to communicate in the language of the people who are in our European neighbourhood rather than simply rely on English. We will not necessarily see the dividend from that until the next generation of adults comes through, but we need to think about that in the long term. We have tried to get that message across in our evidence.

We have an opportunity now to build on the current strategy and develop greater focus. There was evidence of good practice in the China strategy group, which was convened to enable us to consider how we all share our agendas in that important market. The evolution of the strategy

should give us the opportunity to be more on the front foot with regard to the countries and themes with which we want to engage. Philip Riddle made the point about it being a big world out there—we need to prioritise, and focus our messages.

The Convener: Does anyone else have any introductory remarks?

Professor Blackmore: To pick up on that last point—particularly with regard to the strategy as it relates to China—I feel that focus is important, but there are several kinds of focus. The previous strategy focused on particular cities and provinces, and although that made sense on one level, a focus on subjects or activities—my interests, for example, relate to science and the natural environment—might have been more helpful. West China, for example, was not featured heavily in the previous strategy and yet, in terms of its similarity in many ways to Scotland and its natural environment, it is of particular interest. Although we have to focus—that will be important—we might do it better in relation to particular strands of activity rather than geography.

With regard to measures that have been successful so far, many of us have found the presence of a first secretary for Scottish affairs in Beijing extremely helpful and supportive. We can do more to build on that and engage more—particularly in advance planning for visits—in order to do better in the future.

The Convener: Several topics have already been raised—branding, language teaching and focus. I was going to pick up on one of those, but I see that Martin Reid wants to come in.

Martin Reid: I will make a couple of additional comments in relation to presence in overseas countries. SDI is represented in several countries throughout the world. The distinct advantages that can be gained from having people on the ground to facilitate overseas visits by Scottish companies that have a view to potential internationalisation of their businesses, to facilitate ministerial visits and to encourage foreign direct investment into Scotland is clear to us and to our partners. The expansion of overseas offices within SDI's area has drawn some benefits for Scotland over the past year or two.

10:15

The Convener: We have established that people believe that there are strong foundations in certain areas, but we are particularly interested in how matters can be developed. Alex Neil will introduce and follow up on the topic of branding.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): My impression is that we are all fairly au fait with what we are trying to achieve in terms of the international strategy. We have specific targets—Philip Riddle wants to increase the tourism numbers and spend by 50 per cent; David Edward talks about knowledge transfer in relation to the RSE; the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh has targets in relation to exports and technology transfer; and there is the selling of education and qualifications. We are all clear about what we are trying to achieve.

However, we are less clear about the image and branding of Scotland. As someone who has lived in the States and spent a lot of time in Europe, particularly eastern Europe, I do not think that there is an overarching image of Scotland. Depending on who you talk to and where you talk to them about, the image could be anything, including whisky, "Braveheart", the Loch Ness monster and the scenic beauty of Scotland. If you talk to people in the university sector, the brand is usually the universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, St Andrews or Aberdeen, whereas if you talk to people in industry, often the industry that they work in formulates their view of Scotland.

Is there an overarching image or brand that we should unite behind? We had Scotland as the best wee country in the world, which made the blood creep, and wisely we dropped it. In the United States, Florida promotes itself as the sunshine state, although we might not be able to copy that. When you think of California, you think of silicon valley and sun. I lived in New Hampshire, the theme of which is "Live Free or Die". Is there an overall branding image like those that encapsulates the message that we are trying to get across about Scotland in the 21st century?

Philip Riddle: That is a big, big question, and to a certain extent we wrestle with it every day.

Alex Neil: I am looking for a big answer.

Philip Riddle: How long have we got? First, we must differentiate between brand and image. Image and icons are just aspects of the brand manifestation—branding comes first and it is important that we get that perspective. There is common ground that applies to all of Scotland, and it starts with the essence of the brand. We have to remember that we do not own the brand—the brand is owned in the minds of the people to whom we promote and talk. We have a view of the brand, but the brand is also in the minds of the people of the United States and other countries. If we research that and look for common factors in the minds of people all over the world—in this country, south of the border and in the rest of the world—we find a common view of Scotland, and that is extremely powerful, because that is the brand. People would pay hundreds of millions of pounds for the kind of brand that we have.

Images of Scotland reflect the essence of the brand—it is enduring, it is human and it has existed for a great length of time. People see values in the brand—when they think of Scotland they see pride, innovation and integrity. If those different aspects are put together in what we call a brand wheel, we get a common basis, which we can interpret in all sorts of ways. We take the essence of the brand and interpret it for each market. For example, in relation to active sports, our advertising in the south of England is all about high activity, lots of events and festivals, and lots of things to do. In the United States, we advertise a bit more conventionally—as you might think—with a bit of tartan, a picture of a castle and pipers on the esplanade. However, those approaches are not contradictory as long as they come from the same base, that is, the values of the country and the people, and how others see us.

We can define that approach, extend it and use it across a great many platforms. We do not do that as well as we could, but there is great potential for the future. However, it is not a question of having one logo or one way of presenting Scotland. It is about digging down into the essence of what people really feel about Scotland and reflecting that back in all sorts of different ways.

David Caldwell: I agree. The issue is complex, and you are unlikely to be able to reduce the message to a single slogan. If you are lucky, you might come across an effective strapline. I think back to "Glasgow's Miles Better", which was famously effective but, to be honest, such straplines do not turn up all that often. More often, we see deficiencies in them, as Alex Neil saw in the previous strapline for Scotland.

Philip Riddle hit the nail on the head when he drew attention to the fact that we have to represent diversity. There is not a single, monolithic, uniform Scotland. There are a number of good things about Scotland. The universities are keen to portray the image that Scotland is a modern, innovative nation. On the whole, we believe that the traditional part has been well sold and that we need to emphasise that Scotland is a modern, innovative, go-ahead nation. However, like others, we recognise that there is diversity within Scotland and we need the flexible branding that Philip Riddle described in order to meet the different needs.

Janet Brown: I agree with Philip Riddle and David Caldwell. We need to accept that not everyone understands or has inside them the core base on which we should promote Scotland. Communicating that and agreeing on our core base and the core values that we want to project would help all of us.

From an education perspective, we want the modern and the innovative as well as the values that are steeped in history and our reputation as a solid country. We need to explore that, ask what our base is and ensure that we all buy into it. That is probably the way to go.

Professor Blackmore: A couple of other qualities are important in relation to the brand as it is perceived in other countries. One of them is excellence and quality, be it in our landscapes, in science or in our education system. That is key to going forward because, particularly in the emerging economies around the world, people are looking for partners who have that excellence. I regard it as being firmly embedded in the Scottish brand. When we look to the future, we can single that out and develop it.

Sir David Edward: The "Braveheart" branding tends to destroy Scottish practicality and the element of scepticism. There is a tendency to talk about the Edinburgh enlightenment as a great historic thing. I remember Principal Burnett at the University of Edinburgh saying to me, "Please do not talk any more about the Edinburgh enlightenment." On the other hand, it did represent a desire to find things out rather than take things for granted, and a desire to be sceptical about received wisdom. We ought to emphasise that part of the Scottish character more as a counterpart to the "Braveheart" image.

Iain McTaggart: As a small nation of 5 million people, Scotland is incredibly fortunate to have such a strong image around the world. When we travel overseas, we are always warmly received wherever we go. Much of that welcome is built on traditional notions of what Scotland is about, but it gives us incredible capacity and leverage to update people's knowledge about Scotland. We can talk about our history of innovation, but also about our future in innovation.

I agree with Janet Brown's point that it would be useful to spread notions about Scotland's values around the players within Scotland so that we are consistent in the messages that we send, as appropriate, to distinct audiences.

Alex Neil: Are any of you involved in the new Saltire Foundation? Perhaps Martin Reid can tell us more about it. Is its purpose to promote Scotland and its alumni?

Martin Reid: I am not directly involved, but I could find out more about it and come back to the committee.

I take the opportunity to comment that, from the business point of view, it is important that we do not go too far down the road of having a soft image around bagpipes, shortbread and so on. We need to get the message across that Scotland is a serious destination for business. Where we

have overseas networks such as globalscot, we must engage them in promoting the brand.

Others have commented on the good values for which Scotland is known. They are critical, and we should certainly not throw them out, but we need to ensure that we have appropriate branding. As others have said, we need to choose the right type of branding, depending on the market that we are aiming for, for example tourism needs slightly different branding from economic development.

Alex Neil: There is no doubt that the "Braveheart" image is attractive in the American market, but does it fly in the face of the image of a modern, 21st century, scientific, knowledge economy that you are trying to portray?

Martin Reid: I do not think that it does. We need to consider the market that we are trying to penetrate and play to its expectations. We can blend brands and work together more co-operatively and effectively. A lot of good partnerships already exist, but we have a lot of scope and many opportunities to increase partnership working and consider what works in particular markets. The American market is different from the Asian market, for example. VisitScotland takes different approaches in those markets and so do we, but that is not to say that the approaches are in any way exclusive. We can blend them effectively. There are plenty of opportunities, and plenty of discussion can take place about the possibilities.

We need to study the marketplace, decide what we are trying to get from it and brand appropriately. However, equally, we need to ensure that there is a clear distinction between the brands so that we do not put across a confused message. One of the potential difficulties that we face is that SDI is primarily an overseas brand. Many people in Scotland probably have not heard of SDI as a brand, but it is well known overseas. However, local authorities, for example, want to go overseas as well, and there is potential for conflict and confusion in the marketplace. We need to remove that confusion and try to pull together as many of the branding issues as we can. However, where brands complement each other, we should allow them to do so.

Alex Neil: By the way, we should congratulate Philip Riddle on appearing in the new year honours list.

The Convener: We should indeed.

Philip Riddle: Thank you.

I reinforce Janet Brown's point. One of the biggest mistakes that we can make in branding is to get a concept of a brand and what we think it should mean, then run away with it and lose touch with the reality on the ground. Nation branding must always realistically mirror what is happening in Scotland. We do not do enough internal brand promotion. We are good at external brand promotion, but we have to make sure that the brand is understood internally. Glasgow did that well with the "Glasgow's Miles Better" campaign, which was all over Glasgow, because the people were asked, "Do you believe this in Glasgow? If you don't, there's no point in pushing it out to the rest of the world." It is crucial that the brand mirrors the reality.

10:30

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): I wonder whether we should be targeting age groups as well as markets. Are you looking at that as well? It seems to me that young people are probably less interested in tartan and kilts than in MTV and Franz Ferdinand. Twenty or 30 years ago, when I taught in the United States, my students used to ask me whether we had electricity in Scotland; now, they would ask when the Franz Ferdinand concert was going to be on. Perhaps age has a role to play in the marketing of Scotland.

Julia Amour: It is absolutely correct that we have to tailor our proposition to the target market with which we are dealing. The British Council Scotland tries to do that by establishing educational and cultural relations through popular culture as well as through other things in which young people are interested, including the big global issues of our day such as climate change and international development. Scotland has a great deal to offer in all those spheres.

With the evolution of its international strategy, the Scottish Government has an opportunity not only to think about the common values that underpin the work that the bodies that are represented around the table can do internationally, but to help us to work up the distinctiveness of our proposition in each of the areas. The British Council Scotland has a network of officers in 110 countries, who are working with our partners to say that Scotland is a partner that other countries should work with because we are doing something distinctive in the different areas—in climate change, in education and in governance, for example. The new version of the international strategy could usefully expand on that.

David Caldwell: I strongly support the notion that differentiation by age group is extremely important.

Earlier, we were asked in what way we would want the international strategy to change. I would want it to focus more clearly on certain themes. One of those themes, in relation to which the age

factor becomes extremely important, is people. It looks as though the population projections for Scotland are a little healthier than they were a few years ago, but that is primarily a result of our being successful in attracting people from outwith Scotland to settle here. There has been a modest, much smaller rise in the indigenous Scottish birth rate, but the truth is that the change in the projections is mainly to do with our attracting people—above all, talented people—to Scotland.

As we highlight in our written submission, the age group in which we are succeeding in attracting increased numbers is 18 to 25. Those people are being attracted primarily to study in Scotland, but a significant proportion of them choose to remain in Scotland. They will ensure that our population profile is healthier in the future than it would otherwise be.

We must have a strong focus on people and the effect on the Scottish population of the international strategy that we are adopting. I hope that the theme of people will be central to the strategy.

The Convener: We will pick up on that thematic focus in a moment and, possibly, contrast it with the geographical focus. Alasdair Morgan has been waiting to open up the discussion on language.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): Yes. I was prompted by something that Sir David Edward mentioned. I am surprised that the story of our ambassador to Vilnius learning Lithuanian is worthy of mention. I would have thought it a prerequisite that an ambassador to Vilnius should know Lithuanian—but there you go. One learns something every day, I suppose.

In this country, there is a huge difference between the number of people who start to learn a language—who open an elementary French book, for example—and the number who come out at the other end able to conduct a basic conversation in that language. There is a huge wastage there, which is perhaps not surprising given that we do not share a land frontier with any other country in which people speak a different language.

I have two questions. First, should we target the languages that we teach more on what we think our specific language needs are, or should we just rely on the fact that people who are trained as linguists generally will be able to pick up more readily whichever language is required later in life?

Secondly, within the education system, is there any way in which we can encourage people who are not specialising in language to realise that they will perhaps need to know another language later in their careers? For example, someone who is going to be a botanist may need to speak Chinese; someone who is going to be a physicist may need to speak Russian; and someone who is going into financial services may need to speak German, as they will have to go to Frankfurt. Is there some way in which, within the schools and universities systems, we should make the necessity of those links more obvious to people?

Janet Brown: You are absolutely right. The traditional English speaker does not take up languages easily, as it is easy for them to go anywhere in the world and speak only English. First, there is a need to target language. In Scotland, there is increasing activity to get Mandarin out there. However, the challenge—which has been mentioned before—is the number of teachers who are available to teach Mandarin. Lots of schools want to provide such teaching, but the infrastructure needs to be put in place to support any language that we target. It is important to consider what we need to do and how we should target it.

Secondly, the curriculum for excellence, which is coming along, will provide an opportunity to ensure that people understand that they need to have another language. The broadening of the curriculum will allow additional awareness of the world, including awareness of the need to be able to communicate not only in terms of a business conversation, but at a personal level, and the benefits that such communication brings. The architecture of the curriculum for excellence will provide an opportunity to include teaching about Scotland's place in the world. We have a window of opportunity for adding that in, and it is extremely important that we do.

Sir David Edward: It is important to distinguish between the acquisition of language skills in general and the acquisition of knowledge of a specific language. English is an unstructured language, whereas many other languages are highly structured, and it is particularly difficult to get through to English-speaking schoolchildren the importance of learning structure. That is about the acquisition of language skills rather than the learning of any particular language.

I return to my earlier point about the need to use our indigenous resources, so to speak. It is important that children realise that languages are fun as well as drudgery—failure to recognise that is part of the problem. If we have a considerable number of children in our schools whose first language is not English, we can use them to make languages fun. That will promote the acquisition of language skills and get rid of one of the great problems of English speakers, which is that they are hesitant about using another language because they feel that they do not know it well enough to speak it. We should use our indigenous speakers of other languages more, simply to create the notion that it is fun to learn languages. For example, about a year and a half ago, the

RSE held a language day at which one of the most dramatic things was a video of children in a Kilmarnock secondary school playing blind date in Japanese. However, the people who promoted that project had their funding withdrawn.

Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): I wonder whether we have the notion in this country—I mean the whole of the United Kingdom—to sell the idea of the need to know another language. I am thinking particularly about Mandarin. There are many Cantonese speakers from Hong Kong in Scotland, especially in Glasgow, but there are very few Mandarin speakers.

Two weeks ago, I tried to enrol my daughter, who is Chinese, in a Mandarin course in Glasgow. We have an enthusiastic potential teacher, but the problem is that the need for another language in later life—for commerce, education or whatever—is not sold to the population. I am a firm believer in that need. I have been in America more than I have been in China, but I have frequently been to China to do business, and I know that, to get the best deal and the best price, speaking a little bit of the language goes a long way, no matter how good the interpreter is.

I am frustrated that there is no drive from the top. As Janet Brown said, because we all speak English, we can communicate almost anywhere, which makes us lazy. Given the emergence of China and the potential for our country in China, we should promote the hard need for the language. It is ridiculous that we could find only two people to take up Mandarin in Glasgow. Saturday was the latest date to enrol for that course.

Professor Blackmore: I was one of the children who are useless at languages and I wish that it had been otherwise. I spent some of my school years in Hong Kong, where we were not taught Cantonese, so I learned little of it. Years later, I am unlearning that because, as I travel in China, I need to speak Mandarin—even in Hong Kong, I am surprised to find.

An important issue is that most Chinese speakers who live in Scotland speak Cantonese. When we arrange events, we sometimes find it difficult to cross the boundary between the fact that most Chinese speakers who are established and settled here speak Cantonese, whereas the students who come to Scotland today and the people who will settle in the future are and will be predominantly Mandarin speakers. That is a challenge.

The issue comes down to schools. Some wonderful initiatives are taking place, although there are the problems that you identified. One aspect of Chinese is that the written language is universal and cuts across the different dialects. Learning about Chinese characters and the language is a culturally rich experience. That leads me to the point that what is required is not as simple as learning a language; it is a better understanding of culture around the world. However, in the case of Chinese, taking those two aspects together works effectively. That issue is a priority and we cannot start young enough.

Julia Amour: Professor Blackmore is right to say that there are many good initiatives around. The British Council has money from the Scottish Government for partnering and exchanges with Chinese schools. However, the issue is much wider than language learning. Janet Brown was right to say that the Scottish Government has a strategic opportunity to internationalise the curriculum more generally through the curriculum for excellence values. We are talking to the Scottish Government about the possibility of using language assistants in other bits of the curriculum to raise the awareness that intercultural understanding is a competence that many people will need to make their way in the world in the future, as we become more globalised. We need to move away from just language learning and get the issue into the curriculum as a whole.

Iain McTaggart: Language and cultural skills give us a competitive advantage. One downside of English becoming the global business language is that everybody else around the world is becoming multilingual and multiskilled whereas, in general, we have just one language. That competitive advantage is a significant economic factor.

I very much agree that we do not sell the idea of having another language. We need to give young people a vision of what that can do for them and why it is important. Young people who grow up in this country have insufficient exposure to languages. I am a linguist and I am frustrated when I watch the television news and cannot hear President Sarkozy speaking French for longer than a soundbite before he is overdubbed. The attitude that another language is not worth listening to makes it meaningless. We need to counteract that by selling the idea that such skills will always give young people a mobility advantage in their future careers.

10:45

Irene Oldfather: I agree. In the European Union, many students speak several languages. I am embarrassed when I go to Brussels, because many of my colleagues can converse easily in French, German, Spanish and English. Such capability seems to be built into the system.

Many people in Europe tend to learn languages in primary school, which relates to a point that Sir

David Edward made. By the time that children are 12 and in secondary school, they are self-conscious about speaking a language and making mistakes. Such teaching comes at the wrong time. We are working back to beginning to teach languages in the primary sector, but that happens for only about half an hour a week. Do we need to target our resources right back in primary schools and to make learning fun?

I know of the partners in excellence project that Sir David Edward mentioned. It produced a James Bond film in French, which was wonderful. The idea was to pilot the project and roll it out throughout Scotland. The project was piloted and was a wonderful success, but the funding was withdrawn. We need to teach languages a bit more innovatively. When we find good projects that work, such as partners in excellence, for goodness' sake let us fund them instead of withdrawing funding. Do people feel that the primary sector is important?

Janet Brown: Early exposure to language in primary school works quite well. It is important to make that fun and conversational. I agree that English is not structured and that other languages are very structured, but putting in too much structure early is difficult. Language in play at primary school is interesting. I have spent much time in the States, where my children learned Spanish from the day that they started school. We were in Texas, which is why Spanish was taught. My children were comfortable with having little chats in restaurants. They did not say much, but the language became an interesting game for them. That is valuable, but making teaching too structured too early could be a turn-off.

If we are to introduce other languages, we must think about the ultimate target and how to make people want to take a language as another piece of armour that allows them to do what they want to do and not as an alternative career path. I am not a linguist—I dabble—but a scientist needs to be able to do languages, too. We are not dealing with a choice of turning people to language. That should be just another tool to enable people to have the career that they want. Learning language early in a fun way helps that, but we should not make that too structured, as that would be dangerous. That is my personal opinion.

Martin Reid: We can teach primary school kids another language for half an hour a week in the class, but that will not get us very far, because their level of exposure will be far too low. The minute that they come out of a class, they are back into the English-speaking school environment.

Parental support is important. I bought the BBC's "Muzzy" videos—

Irene Oldfather: So did I.

Martin Reid: I bought them so that my kids could learn Spanish for their holidays. My son is nine and my daughter is seven. There may be personal differences between them but, even at their ages, how they entered into the spirit of learning the language and having a bit of fun was different. My son was that bit older and more self-conscious about the language and trying different things, whereas my daughter was happy to sit on the sofa with me for an hour while I mispronounced words and she corrected me, for example. It was great. She picked up the language really quickly. On returning to the videos after a two-week gap, she retained what she had learned. An element of dipping in and out was involved. However, she needed that parental encouragement to keep her going and to keep her interested.

The emphasis cannot be placed entirely on schools and educational institutions. A tricky issue is that we must consider how to bring language learning into the home environment and encourage our children to think that it is fun to experiment with languages and that it would be good if they could order a pizza for mum and dad when they are on holiday.

Those are just personal observations. The age issue is important—the earlier that we start, the better. It is important that we provide support at home by encouraging kids to experiment and to be relaxed about making mistakes—they should not worry if they get it wrong, but should just try again.

The Convener: Thank you for all your comments on that issue. I am sorry to keep moving you on, but I said that we would return to the thematic focus. Someone mentioned geographical focus versus thematic focus. Until now, the focus has been geographical, so I want to know people's thoughts on having a thematic focus and on whether a thematic focus is necessarily contradictory to a geographical focus or whether the two can be combined. Some of you have already commented on that, but clearly it is a big issue for us and for the Government, so further thoughts would be welcome.

Philip Riddle: It is a cliché to say it, but the world is now a very small place—geographical boundaries are much less significant than they used to be. If you are selling something and are looking at the international strategy in terms of promotion, you are far more likely to decide to promote to socioeconomic groups than to national groups or even age groups. A themed promotion, for example, for youngsters in Belgium, England and the United States would probably hit the same kind of things for all those countries across one socioeconomic group. The promotion would be different if we were trying to hit more mature

people in those countries, who are looking to come to Scotland for slightly different reasons. Undoubtedly, the future is about understanding who you are trying to reach and what you are trying to reach them with. It is about having different themes and tailoring what you want to sell to a particular market grouping.

David Caldwell: I am sceptical about geographical focus. I can see that there are practical reasons for it in respect of formal Government involvement in Government-to-Government agreements, because there is a limit to the number of those that can be resourced. However, it would be a mistake to be restrictive with regard to the overall input from Scottish institutions and organisations. I say that with great conviction because we have looked at the huge diversity of international connections that universities make: they connect with the majority of countries in the world, which is a strength rather than a weakness.

The small countries, too, are important. Of course we should have clear engagement with the major emerging economic giants, such as China and India, but there are smaller countries to which Scotland can make a large contribution. The relationship between Scotland and Rwanda is developing well, and the Rwandan president visited Scotland a month or two ago. Visits to Scotland by heads of states of other countries are relatively unusual, so that visit is a signifier of the closeness of the relationship that has developed between our two countries.

Alex Neil: I hear what David Caldwell is saying about not focusing too much on individual countries, but in respect of our international strategy is it not right to say that there are three geographical dimensions? By that, I mean Scotland within the British isles, if I can put it that way; Scotland within the European Union; and Scotland within the wider world. At the moment, I suppose that the strategy within the British isles would not, technically, come within an international strategy. I take your point about not focusing exclusively on China, India or anywhere else, but for the purposes of our discussion, do you agree that the strategy has three dimensions? Education is affected by that, in respect of what is happening in educational development at a European level.

David Caldwell: I agree. Perhaps we can get round the United Kingdom problem by referring to Scotland's external relationships rather than its international relationships. Scotland has an important set of relationships that it wants to develop within the framework of the UK; a different set of relationships that it wishes to develop in the context of the European Union; and a different set again that it wishes to develop in the wider international world beyond Europe. There are good constitutional and contextual reasons why the nature of those relationships should be different. It is valid that the international strategy discriminates between those different levels of engagement, which are necessarily different in type.

We should encourage all those forms of international engagement to flourish. I agree that there is virtue in our having more dialogue, so that we understand the shared core values that we are promoting and—again, I reflect a point that has been made previously—make the relevant connections between business, education and tourism, because those can be mutually supporting. If we have a sensible dialogue about them, they can be more than the sum of their parts.

Professor Blackmore: The challenge, which is not easy, is to achieve an international strategy that opens doors rather than potentially closes them and which can support developments in many areas.

On China, the previous strategy focused on Beijing, Shanghai, Shandong, Guangdong and Hong Kong, all of which are major city regions of spectacular economic growth. That focus downplayed the importance of relating to parts of western China, in which the rural economy is still much more important and a different stage of development is taking place. In many ways, there are perhaps easier parallels to draw between aspects of life in Scotland and in western China.

I do not know how we can create a facilitating framework that will enable activities to flourish. However we define our focus, it needs to be one that does not take away from other possibilities, close doors or become unduly restrictive.

Sir David Edward: Alex Neil spoke about the division of the strategy into three parts. Another area on which we need to focus is the emerging democracies that aspire to be part of Europe. The John Smith Memorial Trust does a lot of work there, and a body with which I am connected—the International Association of Business and Parliament, of which the Scottish Parliament and Business Exchange is a component—does a great deal of work in Georgia, Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine. Those are not developing countries; they are emerging democracies. We have not only an interest but a duty to devote attention to those countries.

Janet Brown: I agree. From an educational perspective, we can add value in those countries as they develop.

When we choose focus areas, we should be careful not to try to shoehorn in things that do not fit. For example, there is a strong focus on the USA. That is appropriate for higher education and

potentially further education, but for other aspects of education it is not a good fit. We must understand that there are some areas that we should be working in across the piece in Scotland, whereas with other matters we should not try to shoehorn everyone into the same bucket.

11:00

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD): At present, the geographic focus has been on the US and China. Is that the right strategy or should we be looking at other countries in the world, such as India or Canada? In Europe, should we be focusing on the countries from which we are getting migrants, many of whom will go back, either in a few years' time or later on? For example, there might be opportunities to develop better links with Poland. We had an indigenous Polish community in Scotland before the migrants started to come in. Perhaps we should consider how to develop such links. Do the panellists have thoughts on those issues?

Martin Reid: You are probably already aware that SDI's agenda involves a geographic and a sector focus. We focus heavily on the US and Asia—India is a growth area—but we have a strong European focus as well. I make the distinction that the target areas may well differ depending on what an organisation's agenda is. SDI is very much about economic development and driving the high-level agenda to grow the Scottish economy, whereas an organisation that is involved in international development, for example, will consider different markets, countries and targets. We must be clear about the purpose of each organisation that is covered by the international strategy, so that we retain a focus and do not muddy the waters by trying to encapsulate everyone's agenda in a snappy little catchphrase or one-liner that does not fit anyone. One size does not fit all in this context; we all have slightly different agendas, which are all perfectly legitimate and worthy in their own right.

We need to have clarity on the purpose and duty in relation to Scotland of the various organisations to which the international strategy relates. SDI has a highly specific purpose. We have a deliberately geographic focus, to the extent that we know where the opportunities are in the marketplace. Within that, we have decided to follow Scottish Enterprise's sectoral breakdown and to focus on areas such as food and drink and energy. In the longer term, we will keep an eye on that and will move with the markets in identifying where the priorities and opportunities for Scotland lie. However, SDI's priorities and focus will not necessarily be the same as those of other partners in the strategy.

Iain McTaggart: I, too, come at the geographic versus thematic debate from an economic development perspective. I hope that the strategy will have as a theme maintaining a strong commitment to enhancing the global competitiveness and preparedness for global activity of the Scottish business base. The global connections strategy is obviously a fundamental part of that.

Such an approach goes beyond distinct geographic boundaries. For obvious reasons, there has been a focus on China and the United States with regard to business opportunity, but we should remember that, as has been mentioned, there is a Scottish resource throughout the world, which we must capitalise on as effectively as we can. There are other important markets, such as India and the new Europe. I feel that the new member states of the EU have not been sufficiently flagged up in recent years as offering prime opportunities for Scottish business. For many Scottish companies, those countries will be easier to access and to maintain relationships with than China will be, so we must ensure that we do not have too many eggs in one basket and that we have leverage for flexibility in the markets in which we get involved.

Sir David Edward: My first point is that, because Europe is cheaper to access, as a result of the services of companies such as Ryanair and Globespan, it is much cheaper to interchange with most European countries than it is to interchange with China, for example.

Secondly, such exchanges are already taking place in business and universities and between scientists. Given that exchanges are being engaged in all over the world, there is no point in Government trying to direct, control or micromanage what participants are up to by imposing strategies. Government should not say, "That does not fit our strategy, so we will not support or encourage you."

I will give an example of why we must not focus on only a few countries. Last week, a delegation from the Pakistan universities was in St Andrews to develop a programme for joint PhDs. A number of the most innovative minds in the world are in Pakistan. We should not focus too much on India and forget Pakistan on the ground that it is dangerous country, because Pakistan is just as important as India from a development point of view and is liable to produce just as many benefits for us. That illustrates the importance of not focusing too heavily on particular geographic areas.

I am equally sceptical about having too strong a thematic focus. The danger is that we will cut off people who are involved in interesting and productive work simply because it does not fit our

preconceived notion of what the themes should be.

Julia Amour: It is vital not to try to control all the activity that is under way. As Professor Blackmore said, we need to have a framework that enables and facilitates.

It would be extremely useful to map the range of Scottish interests in the various territories and thereby produce a gap analysis that would allow us to determine whether our interests are being pursued in those areas. The British Council is working on migration issues in Scotland, into which communities from EU accession states have come in large numbers for the first time and are starting to live together. Work in that area is not mentioned explicitly in the existing international strategy, but such work is being done to develop our understanding of Scotland's place in the world in the new reality. I am sure that other panellists could provide any number of examples of similar activities. That would be a useful thing for the next generation of Scotland's international strategy to achieve.

David Caldwell: I want to respond to a point that David Edward made. I, too, am sceptical about having themes that are too rigid. My concept involves three extremely broadly based themes: people, innovation and partnership. Those are broad enough themes to encompass a wide range of activity. I am sceptical about making the themes more specific than that.

To return to the geographic issue, I reiterate that the Government might have to limit the number of countries with which it establishes direct relationships because it cannot sustain more than a certain number of those, but I warmly echo Julia Amour's point that, rather than seeking to control all activity, the Government should seek to enable. It would be extremely helpful if the Government took a serious look at the existing international activities of various organisations in Scotland—not just those that are represented at today's meeting—and asked itself how best it can support those activities to deliver additional value and thereby achieve the aspiration of getting people in the wider world to have the perception of Scotland that we want them to have. It is very much a question of opening doors rather than closing them and of enabling rather than controlling.

The Convener: As we have covered some of the big themes, I now offer my colleagues an opportunity to ask more specific questions—but first, Ted Brocklebank has a follow-up question.

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It is my impression that sometimes we in Scotland are not savvy enough in getting ahead of the game and identifying where areas of development are likely to be. I would be interested to hear the panellists' views on that.

When I worked in China for a few months 12 or 13 years ago, I got the strong impression that British and Scottish firms really had not got it, possibly for geographic reasons. Australians, Americans and people of other nationalities were there, but there was little British interest. That concerns me, even though we are now there in large numbers for good reasons.

We have talked about India quite a bit. It is obvious that, like China, India has a huge capacity for economic development. We have the representation that we need in China, but do we have it in India? The Prime Minister was in India yesterday; he takes the view that United Kingdom Ltd needs to be in India. Are we a little late going into India?

Many years ago, I went to Athabasca, in Alberta, Canada, where I looked at the potential of tar sands and what might happen if oil prices ever reached a certain level. We all now know that Athabasca has taken off in a huge way and that Canada will be extremely important. Have we been savvy enough? Have we been quick enough to get into places and establish partnerships and deals that we should have established?

Janet Brown: The issue that Ted Brocklebank asked about is a bit out of my field, but I think that he is right. Scotland's businesses need to consider where the market is going and the future emergence of areas. We have talked about innovation, which must take place. We must raise the level of innovation throughout Scotland and look at where that is going to happen. Those two issues need to be linked together, but we do not link them together enough in Scotland. It is arguable that more interest needs to be taken in that matter from a sector perspective, especially in light of our expertise in the energy industry.

Professor Edward: Perhaps we should put things the other way round. Governments tend to focus on what should happen; they do not spend enough time finding out what is already happening on the ground. Data for an enormous area of activity simply do not exist for the Government to focus on.

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I have found the debate to be useful. It is clear that the witnesses have a wealth of experience of the issues that the committee is considering.

I am interested in the engagement between the organisations that the witnesses represent and the Government. I am thinking in particular about a point that David Caldwell made earlier. Perhaps the international strategy has helped to improve activities that the organisations that are represented around the table have undertaken,

but it would be useful to find out from the organisations, particularly the member-led representative organisations, what engagement they or their members have had with the Government. Do you sit down and have regular dialogue with Government officials to develop the international strategy? Where is that dialogue going? Do you have a view on the structure of the discussions? What are they like? Can you influence the agenda as well as you would like to? Your concerns may have many similarities, but your priorities are different. I would be interested in hearing a wee bit more about such things.

Iain McTaggart: The SCDI, which is a member-led organisation, has had good engagement with the Government. There was extensive consultation on the international strategy; obviously, we included our members in that consultation. However, since the publication of the strategy, we have not had on-going dialogue with the Government, which we would certainly welcome. There is a lot of benefit to be had from the SCDI and other intermediaries bringing the views of people on the ground into the scenario.

One of our areas of activity is our work with the UK Government and UK Trade and Investment. That is rapidly changing and perhaps what is done is not always aligned with Scottish interests. There may be an opportunity in the Scottish strategy to encompass more organisations, to ask what is being done to serve the Scottish interest, and to align aims even more with our objectives and ways of working through partnership. Dialogue on such matters would be welcome.

The Convener: Irene Oldfather has a related question, which could be answered with the question that John Park asked.

11:15

Irene Oldfather: Several of those at the table will have been involved with the Scottish international forum, which was set up by the previous Executive. I must take some responsibility on behalf of the committee for what happened to that forum. We conducted an inquiry into promoting Scotland and recommended that the forum be disbanded because we thought that it was very large, that it met on a very ad hoc basis, that it was not clear about its objectives and that it had no clear focus. I understand that it has now been disbanded. What are your experiences of that forum? A number of you will have been involved with it. Is something like it needed? We suggested that it should be disbanded but also that some other way of bringing people together should be considered.

David Caldwell: I attended at least one meeting of the Scottish international forum and found it to be useful; similarly, I have found a number of other events with international themes that have been held at the Parliament to be useful. Indeed, Alex Neil chaired the most recent such event that I attended, at which a distinguished visitor from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development gave an excellent presentation. It seems to me that opening itself up to people and exposing us all to ideas from international visitors and people with things to say about international issues is one of the best things that the Parliament does.

I have no strong view on whether the Scottish international forum should continue. However, I am anxious that such activity should continue, because it is valuable to share ideas on international themes.

Julia Amour: The Scottish international forum represents a phase that we had to go through. We have now had a few more years of working in such modes and are starting to discover ways of focusing on issues when we need to do so and then bringing people together in wider forums when that is appropriate. In the autumn, the Scottish Government called a meeting of cultural sector organisations, which was more helpful in focusing on issues that we could act on. I echo the point that David Caldwell made. Such things are part of a framework or picture. We must have such conversations but we must also have conversations with breadth across sectors. There are signs that the approach to bringing together organisations is becoming more sophisticated.

I turn to John Park's question. As we speak, our conference on Scotland's place in the world is taking place in Our Dynamic Earth. We hope that that will be a contribution from the British Council Scotland to engaging with the Scottish Government and other players in Scotland to consider how Scotland should find its place in the world and focus its efforts. With our network of representation in 110 countries, we offer access to a unique resource for the Scottish Government and other bodies in Scotland—that has been recognised in our involvement with the international lifelong learning strategy working group, for example. We are keen to continue such engagement at a strategic level on other themes in which the British Council has expertise.

The Convener: A related question is the extent to which the witnesses' organisations have been formally asked for their views. Obviously, the witnesses are feeding their views into the process now, and I am sure that the Government will read the *Official Report* of the meeting, but I am not clear about the extent to which their organisations have hitherto had a formal opportunity to feed in their views to develop the new strategy.

Stephen Blackmore now has around three questions to answer.

Professor Blackmore: I was involved in the Scottish international forum. I found it useful to meet people from different sectors of life round a table. The forum was helpful in beginning a process of bringing people together and building up a team to approach international issues. However, forums are set up as talk shops and will not necessarily produce hard and specific outputs. The forum was helpful, but such things have a limited lifetime. The question now is how we should go forward and build on the work of individuals and organisations that are perhaps better networked in order to deal with issues.

We at the botanic garden made contributions in several areas through the Scottish international forum, particularly with respect to China. However, one of the outcomes that disappointed me was that the resulting policy documents that were produced by the officials were confidential documents that I could never see, which meant that we were engaged in a rather one-way process. Obviously, that was not as helpful from my perspective as it might have been.

We are contributing and we are in contact with the officials. A development that I strongly welcome is that the officials are also engaging across sectors much more actively than previously. That is a good thing because none of our organisations sits in one area, although we might have a main focus. For example, our botanic garden is very much part of tourism in Scotland and we are working to develop tourist attractions in China. Our organisations are not compartmentalised and it is important to tap into that network of people, but I do not think that a forum is necessarily a good use of people's time.

Sir David Edward: On the RSE committee that I chair, there is always someone from the Europe division and someone from the office of the chief scientific adviser, which provides a route of communication. On the other hand, it is important that, if the Government is using bodies such as the RSE as partners, it must accept that they are autonomous bodies and that it cannot direct or control them. The Government can encourage those bodies to do things but trying to micromanage what they are doing or demand that they meet realisable short-term targets is not the way to create a partnership with them.

Alex Neil: I agree with the point about the undesirability of the Government trying to micromanage organisations, particularly independent ones. However, is there a need for a small strategic steering group to develop international strategy on an on-going basis? It seems to me that, once a strategy is developed, it tends to get filed. Although there are organisations such as SDI, VisitScotland, EventScotland and the RSE all doing their bit, no one is bringing together that work, and identifying the gaps and so on, on an on-going basis.

Rather than a forum, which I think of as just a talking shop, is there a case for having a body at governmental level—perhaps chaired by the minister—to think at a strategic level about where we need to up our game?

The Convener: I see that David Caldwell is nodding.

David Caldwell: Yes. The key phrase that Alex Neil used was "at a strategic level". There is potential usefulness in a small body of that sort, if it is operating at a genuinely strategic level and considering the big issues and not getting into the fine detail. If I have a criticism of the way in which the work on the internationalisation of lifelong learning is going, it is that it is going too far in the direction of a detailed action plan instead of focusing on a limited number of broad objectives and leaving people to get on with making their contribution towards meeting those broad objectives.

Gil Paterson: The thing that I noticed was missing in the written submissions was any reference to the British embassy service. I thought that the subject would come up during today's discussion, as most of the organisations that are represented here do work abroad and would need help in opening doors. Do any of our witnesses have any comments to make about how Scottish institutions and businesses interact with the embassy service?

Professor Blackmore: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has given us a lot of help and support in many countries around the world, especially in countries in which we have longer-term projects, such as Yemen. The support of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office team in those countries has been essential in opening doors for us and getting permission for us to conduct research and undertake the kind of projects that we do in those countries. That support has been particularly helpful in China. As I mentioned, the creation of a first secretary for Scotland gives a strong and supportive focus to our activities.

More widely, last year, I personally led a couple of delegations that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office funded to consider scientific opportunities in south China. The science and technology teams that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office funds in China are extremely helpful. I often find myself pointing people in that direction, as I know that that resource is immensely helpful. Indeed, successive ambassadors in China have steered their staff

and, sometimes, funding towards projects that we have been doing in China.

I find the embassies to be hugely useful and always willing to help.

Iain McTaggart: The Scottish Council for Development and Industry works closely with British embassies—particularly with commercial services—when we are organising trade visits to overseas markets. In general, we have found the embassies to be good and helpful. However, UK Trade and Investment, which is the primary agency at a UK level, has had a restructuring and has a new strategy that involves putting a lot of its eggs into China and India. A lot of resource is disappearing from the European markets, which means that there is not the same kind of access to commercial support that there has been in the past. More and more of the work is chargeable and there are often quite steep charges for small companies.

The service is good in some respects, but there are definitely some missed opportunities. Recently, some of our visitors from British embassies in central European markets have been complaining about their lack of resources. They are not allowed to promote their markets now because it is not part of the strategy. In such instances, Scotland might need to step in and promote our companies more vigorously if we feel that there are opportunities for them.

Gil Paterson: Is there a British strategy to look after the bigger companies, which would mean that Scotland would be disadvantaged as, by our country's very nature, our operations tend to be smaller?

Iain McTaggart: In China, for example, the day-to-day commercial services for trade missions and so on are now allocated to the China-Britain Business Council, which is a separate organisation from the embassy in China, which looks at bigger, strategic issues for larger companies.

Martin Reid: SDI's experience of working with UK ambassadors in the embassies has generally been positive. We need their assistance on occasion and we generally do not encounter any particular difficulties in working with them.

We will be interested to see how the appointment of Robin Naysmith in Washington works out in terms of co-ordinating Scottish Government activities in that part of the world. We have a direct co-ordinating line—rather than a management line—into Robin Naysmith in Washington. That is another relationship that will develop in the coming period and we will watch that carefully.

The Convener: Robin Naysmith is coming to talk to the committee in two weeks, so we will pick up some of those points with him.

Janet Brown: As we are coming to the end of this part of the meeting, I would like to mention the Commonwealth games, which no one has mentioned so far. We need to consider the implication of the Commonwealth games for the international dimension to Scotland's affairs. All our organisations will have thought about the benefits that we can gain from the games, but we should also think about the benefits that Scotland can gain. A co-ordinated effort in that regard is important.

The Convener: I am conscious that there will be a lot of things that people will want to mention before we come to the end of this part of the meeting, so I will give everyone a last word in a minute. First, however, Ted Brocklebank wants to ask a question.

11:30

Ted Brocklebank: How well is the strategy working, given that we have to review it? The submission from the Scottish Council for Development and Industry states:

> "Some parts of the strategy, for example in 'Scotland's strategy for stronger engagement with China', include targets with timescales for evaluation. In this case, there is a five-year strategy leading to targets to be achieved by 2010. There is a danger that Government's propensity to review strategies means that original targets and objectives may change, and that evaluation of outcomes will be fudged or lost."

Is that a general feeling among participants?

Iain McTaggart: The point that we were trying to get across in our submission is that there is a value in publicising the outcomes of initiatives as they happen rather than waiting for a five-year target to be met. We have not heard much about the progress of various initiatives in the strategy. Our plea is that that information should be provided more regularly and be more consistent with individual major activities. We should not have to wait for a five-year outcome; things might move on in that time. The goalposts might have shifted.

The Convener: Janet Brown highlighted the Commonwealth games as an important forthcoming event. Another is the year of homecoming, for which EventScotland now has responsibility. Does Leon Thompson want to comment on that or on any other aspect of EventScotland's work?

Leon Thompson: Major events play an important part in raising Scotland's international profile and growing its reputation abroad. Over the past four or five years in which EventScotland has

been in operation, we have punched above our weight in attracting major events to Scotland. We have worked to deliver the existing major events strategy and its vision of making Scotland one of the leading events destinations by 2015.

In many ways we are already at 2015, in that we have secured the Commonwealth games and the Ryder cup for 2014 and we are looking at events such as the rugby world cup for 2015. Securing events of that magnitude brings a number of benefits, not least of which is raising Scotland's international profile. One reason Scotland proved to be so successful in winning the Commonwealth games bid was our strong and recognisable brand. That undoubtedly helped to secure the games for us. We need to keep building on that by delivering a successful Commonwealth games that take us on to the next level.

The year of homecoming is a slightly different concept altogether. With events such as the Commonwealth games we are trying to show a very modern Scotland, whereas with the year of homecoming we are obviously trying to engage people—principally the diaspora—through the strand of ancestry. In doing that, we are changing the brand slightly in focusing more on those traditional elements that are perhaps not quite so important in our other areas of work. However, the common theme in all that activity is securing benefits by raising Scotland's international profile, obtaining economic benefits and ensuring that the event provides a legacy, such as the increased participation in sport or the setting up of successful business clubs as a result of the 2014 Commonwealth games.

The Convener: I am reluctant to draw the discussion to a conclusion before giving everyone a last chance to speak. Do any committee members want to ask a last question?

Ted Brocklebank: I have a final question for Leon Thompson. Can he allay some concerns about next year's year of homecoming? As he will know, there was some criticism towards the end of last year's Highland year of culture and some fears have been expressed about the success or otherwise of next year's events. Can he put our minds at rest on that?

Leon Thompson: Absolutely. We are now in the delivery phase of homecoming 2009, which was handed to EventScotland to deliver in November last year. We have a team of people embedded within EventScotland who are working exclusively on the homecoming project. They are currently pulling together what will be an inspirational programme of events and activities that will engage with the Scottish diaspora and others who have a love of Scotland. We are working closely with VisitScotland colleagues who are responsible for marketing the year of homecoming, in which the events will play a key part. We are working on that. There is a lot of activity that is coming together very nicely.

The Convener: Are there any other final questions?

Alex Neil: I want to make a point. It is not a question. This has been an extremely helpful and informative session, but I think that we need something similar with the private sector. We need to hear from the likes of the Scotch Whisky Association and major exporters such as the Weir Group because, with all due respect, today's panel—although it has not been exclusively from the public sector—has been heavily dominated by public sector agencies. I think that we need to hear from the private sector as well.

The Convener: I am conscious of the fact that we have not managed to cover all the areas, including the new front that Alex Neil has just opened up. The written submissions that we have received and the oral evidence that we have heard have been very useful, but we have not been able to cover all the bases. If people have an issue that they want to tell us about but have not had an opportunity to do so, it is only fair that we provide that opportunity now. I will not go round the table and insist that everyone say something, but we will certainly be pleased to hear now from anyone who has an issue that they feel should have been covered.

David Caldwell: I would like to say a little about the themes that I mentioned. I will try to compress what I want to say. I will not say any more about people, because I have said what I wanted to say about that.

One aspect of partnership, which we discussed, is making connections between the different sectors so that we get added value. The other important aspect of partnership, which we did not talk about much, is the reciprocity of the partnerships that we should form with the people we work with internationally. It is critical that such partnerships should not be perceived to be unequal. There must be benefits on both sides. Reciprocity in partnerships is vital.

My final theme is innovation. Innovation must be central to the strategy because Scotland's future depends on continual innovation. If we simply carry on doing what we do now, China and India will soon be able to do them as well and more cheaply. The future of the Scottish economy and of Scotland more widely depends on our always being at the cutting edge and always innovating. We currently do very well. As we reminded the committee in our evidence, Scotland produces 1 per cent of the world's knowledge with 0.1 per cent of the world's population. That is a very good share, but the conclusion that we should draw

from that is that 99 per cent of the world's knowledge is generated outwith Scotland. We need international partnerships that enable us not just to assimilate the benefits of the knowledge that we generate here but to understand the knowledge that is generated elsewhere. We genuinely need to form international partnerships so that we can reap the benefits of the knowledge generation that happens outwith Scotland. I believe that innovation must also be a central theme of the strategy.

The Convener: Thank you. Does anyone else want a last word?

Sir David Edward: I just want to mention that bodies such as the Royal Society of Edinburgh can sometimes do what Government bodies cannot do. For example, the RSE has signed a memorandum of understanding for research exchanges with Cuba. It is not easy for a Government to have formal relations with Cuba, but it is possible for bodies such as ours to have relations that would be politically inconvenient for Governments. That should be borne in mind.

The Convener: Does anyone else want to have a final word?

Philip Riddle: Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I would like to pull a couple of strands together. Two major issues have come out in the discussion, particularly in relation to international promotion. One of those is a desire not to have the heavy hand of government everywhere, or not to expect the Government to be on top of everything and directing everything. I think that we all agree with that. The other issue was well expressed by David Caldwell: our belief that we can do things better by mutual support and by converging to use the power of Scotland overall to increase the impact of any strategy. Those two forces could be contradictory, and it is important to think about where we exercise them.

There are three elements to promotion: what and who you want to promote; the strategy you use for promotion; and the delivery of that strategy. Alex Neil referred to the first—the objectives—which is an issue for all the different bodies in Scotland. As Alex Neil said, we all have very clear objectives. That is the freedom—that is where we should all be making up our own minds. The other end—implementation of the strategy—is a professional issue, and different ways of doing it can be found.

The area for convergence is the strategic area, which is founded on the brand of Scotland. The common surface of the brand—the essence and values rather than the imagery or the straplines—is where the convergence should be. I recommend that that is where we concentrate our ideas about achieving that two plus two equals five for the future.

The Convener: That was extremely useful. I thank those who gave written evidence, and everyone for their oral evidence.

11:41

Meeting suspended.

11:46

On resuming—

Transposition of European Union Directives Inquiry

The Convener: I apologise to our witnesses; they have had to wait rather a long time, but they will have seen how interesting the previous discussion was. I am sure that we will have another interesting discussion now. I hope that it will not be quite as long, although there is plenty of time to hear from Councillor Corrie McChord, the vice-president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; John Paterson from Renfrewshire Council; and Sandy Taylor from Argyll and Bute Council.

Councillor Corrie McChord (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): We have a cast of three representing one organisation, so I trust that it will not be as long. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament's inquiry into the transposition of European directives; it is an important piece of work for governance issues at European and domestic level.

In the past, local government's main focus in European initiatives has been structural funding. In the past two or three years, COSLA has been much more concerned about influencing policy and strategy, and constitutional issues, in Europe. Perhaps more than at any other time, there is an opportunity for local and central Government—by which I mean the Scottish Government—to work together. We have found an open door recently on domestic issues, and we hope to develop that with regard to European and indeed international issues. We feel that we need to develop team Scotland as the way to go in Europe.

I have been involved in European issues for at least 12 years through the European Committee of the Regions. The relationship with the Scottish Executive and the Westminster Government, and how we work together, has sometimes been frustrating, not only for local government but for MSPs. I trust that that is all in the past now—I will not say too much about it at this point. There have been examples of good practice and examples of not so good practice—my professional, technical colleagues can go into that much more. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth said that there is an historic opportunity for national and local government to develop a cohesive agenda. We hope that that common-purpose agenda extends to European as well as domestic issues. Of course, we are fully signed up at the domestic level.

We have a meeting with the convener next week on arising issues, particularly the marine bill. COSLA was involved in the bill at an early stage. The blue paper on maritime policy in Europe is one of the issues that are coming up for us. It is important that we involve ourselves in the scrutiny process as well as the legislative process. We hope to develop relationships not just with the Cabinet and the Executive but with the committee's scrutiny process. That is important.

Our relationships with committees have been intermittent in the past. I hope that our relationship can be more structured in taking European policy forward.

It is also important to say that Scottish local government has been well served in the initiation and introduction of policy in Europe through our COSLA office in Europe and by other organisations such as the Committee of the Regions and maritime regions bodies—we have worked with a plethora of organisations. However, that influence tends to peter out at the end of the process. The continuum is important. When it comes to transposition, we do not know an awful lot about what is happening. If there is no will, that can extend to yourselves—MSPs are not always particularly well informed about transposition by either the Westminster Government or the Scottish Government. It is important that we develop that.

The continuum in the transposition of directives is important. COSLA probably has emerging policies, but they emerge from our experience of specific directives rather than form a general policy. There was a period of difficulty with the waste electrical and electronic equipment directive: I do not think that the way it was implemented served Scottish business well.

I do not want to say a lot more. As I said, we are well represented in Brussels and we would like to develop that representation through to the transposition process. We are, we hope, a major stakeholder because we have to implement and regulate a lot of the legislation. However, we want to be more than a stakeholder—we want to be part of governance, and we believe that there is an open door on that. We hope to develop relationships with the Government and the Parliament through the committee.

I do not want to say a lot about sections 57(1) and 57(2) of the Scotland Act 1998, principally because I do not know a lot about them. I do not think that any of us does at this point. However, on section 57(1), I believe that we have the resources, capacity and knowledge in Scotland. There will be few occasions when we need to look to other parts of the UK for the resource, capacity or knowledge to implement a directive.

Marine legislation is a case in point—I understand that the committee will discuss that later today. Scottish legislation on marine policy has been debated recently, and the UK Prime

Minister has said that it will be introduced at UK level at some point. COSLA has also been involved in discussion in Europe on a blue paper. That will present a lot of challenges considering sections 57(1) and 57(2) and other aspects of how and when any legislation is introduced, but the issue provides a good starting point for working together in taking legislation through.

That is all that I want to say at this point. I would hope to direct most of the technical questions to my colleagues who are beside me today.

The Convener: Thank you, Corrie. We certainly look forward to continuing engagement with you on the issues. I will ask the first questions on engagement with the Scottish Government before we move on to questions from Irene Oldfather. You are obviously looking forward to that engagement, considering your new arrangements. Will you comment on what has happened hitherto? To what extent have you been engaged in the transposition of directives? Have you had more engagement with the directives that local authorities are responsible for implementing, or have you had a more general engagement on directives?

Councillor McChord: We have not had engagement at the transposition stage. As I said, we have been very well served in the early initiation of policy, although there have been difficulties. MSPs and local authorities were frustrated when our stakeholder partners such as the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage were pulled away from supporting issues through thematic strategies and directives at initiation level. COSLA tried to encourage that through MSPs when we had support, but we had some difficulties with the Executive. That was a problem—and it is why I say that the continuum is important—but I trust that that is behind us now.

At the transposition stage, we have little political effect. We would hope to develop that through some stakeholder forum. I keep going back to this, but the WEEE directive has been a particular difficulty—my colleagues could comment on that. Politically, there is no real engagement at the end of the process.

Irene Oldfather: COSLA set a high standard when it set up an office in Brussels before the rest of us did. The Parliament looked to that high standard when it considered having representation in Brussels.

Corrie McChord mentioned team Scotland, which is important. Are there links between our representation in Brussels and yours? Both teams must be trying to identify similar issues in the context of transposition and the need to flag up as early as possible in the process difficulties that might be particularly relevant to Scotland. Is there liaison between officers? How might there be better engagement towards the end of the process, not just at Government level but between COSLA and the Parliament?

We have asked other organisations about that and it has been suggested that when we set out our work programme we should issue on the internet an invitation to stakeholders to comment on areas of interest or relevance to them. Perhaps more formal engagement with you would be welcome.

Councillor McChord: Our relationship with the Parliament's European officer is new, but I hope and trust that it is developing. We might have more information on that at next week's meeting. The relationship with local government has been frustrating, particularly at Schuman—I think that I have described to the committee the difficulty of the building. Scotland House had a reception for local government on one side of the building, with a buzzer, and a reception for the Scottish Executive and Scottish Enterprise on the other. It seemed to be a case of ne'er the twain shall meet.

We are building a team Scotland culture and we are in the best setting to do business in Brussels. I hope that we can develop more formal links, not just at government level but for stakeholder organisations such as SEPA and SNH—I mentioned them because my experience is primarily in environmental matters, but there are other stakeholder organisations.

The Convener: I am told that meetings take place quarterly.

It would be helpful if you could give an example of a directive on the development of which you thought you were consulted meaningfully.

Councillor McChord: One of my colleagues will comment on the WEEE directive or on the directives on foodstuffs and animal health.

John Paterson (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I was involved in the implementation of the WEEE directive when I represented COSLA at UK level. There was a relationship between officers at Scotland level, but most discussions took place in London at UK level, where the devolved Administrations were represented through their branches of the civil service.

There has been regular consultation at Scottish Executive level through formal written consultation, informal discussions and stakeholder groups, but there were issues to do with the Executive's role at UK forum meetings, which were driven and chaired by the then Department of Trade and Industry. Some local views were perhaps not strongly represented at UK level by the Scottish Government. There was a reliance on

individual stakeholders, including COSLA, to articulate their views.

The Convener: Have you been consulted as part of the review of the transposition process that the Government is carrying out?

John Paterson: I am not a full-time official of COSLA, so I do not know whether that consultation has come through.

The Convener: Perhaps you might have more information on that next week.

Councillor McChord: We will clarify the position next week.

12:00

Sandy Taylor (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I will relate a positive experience about our work with the previous Scottish Executive on the transposition of directive 98/83/EC, on drinking water quality, which relates to issues that the committee hopes to consider, such as why action is taken in Scotland that is not taken elsewhere and the concept of adding value to a European directive's requirements. The instrument amended existing legislation on the subject by addressing problems that are associated with E coli, which are particularly important for Scotland, and changes that had been made to the World Health Organisation guidelines.

I cited the example because COSLA and others in local government were engaged in the process from the outset. We worked on a collective basis to secure significant improvements in the legislation—improvements that were over and above the basic improvements in the EC directive. The particularly important element of the example is that Scotland now has an improvement grant scheme under which people can get financial assistance to improve their water supply. Of the four countries in the United Kingdom, no country other than Scotland has that provision.

The private water supply improvement grant provision is unique to Scotland. In addition to securing the grant for domestic and business premises, we were able to take the process to fruition two years before other countries. Whereas the legislation has been in place in Scotland for two years, England put it in place only last year and has no grant provision—the directive has simply been transposed. Northern Ireland has yet to do that and has no grant provision in place as yet, although it hopes to do that.

Clearly, in transposing the directive, the Scottish Executive took significant regard of the need to deliver one of its key objectives—improving the health of the people of Scotland. Indeed, it used transposition as a vehicle by which to do that. The example is important. The Government not only achieved its objective but sustained and supported business by enabling an improvement for which significant expenditure is required. By making the flat-rate grant available to business, we are supporting business in Scotland.

Alasdair Morgan: We seem to have two different experiences: Mr Taylor is very happy with the result of a directive, whereas Mr Paterson takes a different view. I am paraphrasing what you said, Mr Paterson, but I think it was that Scottish Executive officials did not represent the COSLA view strongly. Is that correct?

John Paterson: I said that they could have articulated our point of view more strongly and proactively. I said that too much reliance was placed on us, as stakeholders.

Alasdair Morgan: Am I to take it that we are talking not about institutional failure but about it being the luck of the day which Scottish Executive officials happen to be dealing with a directive in which you have an interest? If not, what is the reason for the different experiences?

John Paterson: My involvement was from February 2003 to July 2007. During that long period, a couple of attempts were made to implement EU legislation, both of which did not proceed—we saw only false starts. During that time, the Scottish Executive made the representations at most fora, but its level of involvement appeared to suggest that it had only a watching brief.

Sandy Taylor: I hoped that I got my message across, but clearly I did not. There are UK Parliament transpositions in which we try to influence the outcome for Scotland and there are Scottish Parliament transpositions, such as the example that I gave, where we are better able to do things—

Alasdair Morgan: I like the example.

Sandy Taylor: I was trying to get across the way in which the Scottish Parliament can use the process to its advantage.

Alasdair Morgan: It is a win. I will paraphrase again what you said: when we do it up here it is okay, but when we have to go down to London it is a mess. I will settle for that.

Gil Paterson: I think that you were talking about a UK-wide instrument that affected Scotland adversely. I think you said that officials were not inefficient or ineffective, but that they had not come to the fore and stated Scotland's position. Is that what you were saying?

John Paterson: That is a fair assessment. The relationship between the Scottish Executive and the lead department of the civil service—it was the DTI—was such that the DTI was organising and

running the whole implementation process. The Scottish Executive tended to attend those fora with a watching brief; there was not much proactive articulation of the views that we were looking to be expressed at United Kingdom level.

Gil Paterson: Is there a need for a formal mechanism whereby we can ask for an issue that is pertinent or important to Scotland to be debated properly before implementation?

John Paterson: There should be a Scottish forum that collates and articulates the Scottish view at UK level.

Gil Paterson: I might just be landing this question on you, but since you have had that experience, you might have come up with some kind of idea of a mechanism that would work effectively and be fair to all parties. Have you any suggestions?

John Paterson: Obviously there is the issue of duplicating work that the DTI was doing. There is no need to do that, particularly at Scotland level, but it would be useful to have some form of Scottish stakeholder forum where our views are collated and articulated, perhaps in a single, coherent paper that the DTI could have fed into the UK implementation process.

There have been attempts to do that: there were Scotland-level fora that involved the waste and electronics industries, local authorities and the enterprise community. There was a lot of disquiet among those groups about how the process was working and whether their views were being represented to the DTI. There was certainly a need to say at a UK level some of the things that some stakeholders were saying, whether it was convenient for them to be heard or not; Scotland has a duty to represent those views with a single voice.

The Convener: That is an interesting example. Iain Smith wants to ask a question, but I have a brief one to ask first. Are you talking about a reserved area, a devolved area or a mixture of the two?

John Paterson: My understanding is that it was an environmental issue, so it was devolved. A decision was taken somewhere early in the process that the issue would be UK-led and that there would be a single UK scheme.

Iain Smith: That was my point.

The Convener: Okay, sorry. We have been looking at these issues, so the example was useful.

Alex Neil: In summary, the quicker we are independent, the better.

Corrie McChord, in your introductory remarks you said that the process seems to work okay until the point of transposition and then it tapers off—I think that that was the phrase you used. We are grappling with what we can do in Scotland to improve transposition and compliance. Is there a need for some kind of Scottish Government unit to work with local authorities and other organisations, including Government departments, to ensure that the transposition process is smooth, to build up experience of transposition and compliance and, if you like, to shadow the compliance unit in Brussels?

Councillor McChord: I do not think that I used the words "taper off". If I was going to use a metaphor, it would be a brick wall.

That kind of experience is valuable. While we are not arrogant enough to say that we are the fount of all knowledge, we should be involved where we can add value to the process—sometimes it is not about the minutiae—and where our partners or colleagues in the other public services such as SEPA and SNH can add value, they too should be involved.

A lot is going on around the Lisbon reform treaty that is implicit in subsidiarity at the local level. The Guimarães declaration was quite explicit on subsidiarity, and not just to local government—we have to remember our communities as well. There is a subsidiarity role to play in how we devolve a view of the world to our communities. That is mostly about developing and encouraging a culture, which is more important than formal structures.

Alex Neil: Have you spoken to local authorities in continental Europe about how they handle transposition?

Councillor McChord: That probably happens at officer level quite a lot.

Alex Neil: If there is any feedback on that, it might be useful for us to have it, because it might contain best practice that we could adopt here.

Councillor McChord: Absolutely. That is valid.

Iain Smith: From the evidence that we have taken from you and others, it does not seem that there is a uniform view about transposition. Some directives are transposed relatively well—with adequate consultation of stakeholders and proper account taken of specific Scottish needs—but others are not so well transposed. Would you find it helpful if, when a new directive or new regulations came from Europe, the Scottish Executive or the Government was required to produce a memorandum on how it intended to transpose the legislation? The United Kingdom has a number of options—primary legislation, secondary legislation or section 57 of the Scotland Act 1998—for transposing directives for Scotland. One issue is that, at present, there is no clear

indication of how, when and why decisions are taken about which route to take. Would it be helpful if the Government gave an early indication of how it intended to transpose and whom it intended to consult?

Councillor McChord: Yes—from a political point of view, it would be very helpful. In COSLA, we carefully considered the good transposition guide that was issued, but the problem is that it has not been coherently applied. Perhaps my colleagues from the professional side want to comment.

John Paterson: Such an indication would be useful, for example so that everyone was clear from the outset why a certain part of the civil service was leading and how we would engage in the process. As I mentioned, the DTI led on the WEEE directive, and the Scottish Executive's role was not clear in the beginning. Our understanding evolved through meetings in which we were able to work it out.

The Convener: Councillor McChord, is the transposition guide to which you referred the UK one?

Councillor McChord: Yes. The UK Government issued it at the beginning of last year or the back end of the year before.

The Convener: We just wondered whether there was a Scottish one that we did not know about.

Councillor McChord: No, there is not—not that I am aware of.

Ted Brocklebank: Would there be any benefit in the Scottish Government reporting to the Scottish Parliament early in the transposition process? Would it make any difference?

Councillor McChord: It probably would make a difference, but it would be up to the Parliament to impose that procedure. My understanding is that, at the moment, the Scottish Government does not need to go to the Scottish Parliament to talk about transposition issues before a directive is implemented. I may be wrong, but that is my understanding.

The Convener: I think that you are right, but we are examining the issue.

I am curious about the EU services directive. Will you be consulted on how the Scottish Government intends to implement it?

Councillor McChord: We hope to discuss it as a matter of concern. MSPs and local government have been successful and up to date in tempering the implementation of and the co-decision process on some parts of the directive, but local government still has concerns, particularly about the shared services agenda and public-private partnerships. We hope to keep a keen eye on that.

Irene Oldfather: That is probably an example of a team Scotland approach, where we have worked with MEPs and others to influence the agenda in the lead-up to the directive's implementation. In some areas, we have been reasonably successful.

Have local authorities in COSLA highlighted to you examples of differential implementation where gold plating has happened in Scotland but not in other member states? That is one issue that we have been considering. Aligned with that is the European Commission's better regulation agenda, which you will know well, and the idea of using more framework legislation and simpler legislation, which would allow the flesh to be put on the bones at a local level. I assume that COSLA would welcome that, because the legislation would be simpler to start with, it would be more relevant to particular member states and we could highlight the potential pitfalls early on.

12:15

Councillor McChord: Yes, indeed. I support thematic strategies, which have raised the level of understanding of EU legislation in Scotland and made it much simpler. For example, previously, soil was not legislated for on its own; it was just a creature of different parts of European and member states' directives.

One directive that is coming up and which I keep mentioning is the marine directive. How it is implemented will be important for Scotland and for our role in Europe not only as a major fisheries nation but as an oil-supplying nation. A range of issues is involved.

On gold plating, I am sure that my colleagues are well aware of the issues.

Sandy Taylor: Rather than talk about gold plating, I will pick up on what Irene Oldfather said about better regulation and framework legislation. For food and other regulated areas, the EC makes regulations that are absolute; it does not issue directives that we in Scotland or the UK can freely interpret and apply. An operational problem flows from that, because we are often given little or no notice of legislation, so the systems and infrastructure that are required to support the enactment and delivery of the legislation are simply not in place.

More important, Europe, Scotland and the UK seem to say the same thing—that the issue is better regulation, not less regulation—but, in practice, Europe seems to do two things: it generates more rather than less legislation; and it issues regulations as opposed to directives, which denies the UK and Scotland the opportunity to

apply the legislation sensitively and appropriately in the communities with which we work. In addition, there is a cultural difference between the UK and the EC, because EC legislation does not allow for risk assessment.

Some of what members have said is about considering measures as early as possible to ensure that they can have the most favourable impact. Regulating business in Scotland is about deciding whether we need to regulate and, if we do, deciding what we do practically, for example in terms of environmental health and trading standards. Most local authorities have adopted a strategy such that we do not regulate small businesses at all; rather, we work with them and provide them with support, information, guidance and training—we provide an input rather than impose an administrative burden. Europe does not allow for that way of relating to business. It does not allow alternative ways of securing the same end. Instead, we must carry out inspections and assessments. In effect, when the regulatory services in Scotland are trying to reduce the burden on business, the application of EC law requires us to take the opposite step of imposing an administrative burden.

That was quite wordy, so I apologise.

The Convener: No, it seems to be an important point.

Irene Oldfather: Mr Taylor's point about regulation is important for local authorities and other organisations, and I thank him for making it. When we took evidence from the Commission by videoconference, I asked what the balance was between regulations and directives, and how it had changed over the years. The Commission said that it would send us the relevant statistics. I hope that we have them so that we can verify statistically Mr Taylor's clear perception, which others presumably share, that directives allow more flexibility.

On another point, everyone says to us that we should influence the process upstream and early. Clearly, Corrie, you have your unit in Brussels to do that. How do you use that unit to feed information back to local authorities? How do you pick up concerns from them so that you can influence the process at an early stage?

Councillor McChord: There is an iterative process. The issue is added value and where we can have influence, rather than the minutiae. When an issue arises that is of importance to Scottish local authorities, we consult them all and collate their responses. If there is time, and if the issue is important enough, we take it to the convention or to a leaders meeting—that is important to us. The process involves the whole of Scottish local government. Responses come back to us and are collated. That is the normal process.

It might be useful to give an example of another approach to gold plating, using the WEEE directive, to provide balance.

John Paterson: During the development and implementation of the WEEE directive, it was always agreed that there would be no gold plating. That was repeatedly said at all the fora that I attended. On the choice of lead department, we expected the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to be the natural home for such environmental legislation, but the DTI was chosen to push it forward, because it was decided that the DTI would better serve the interests of industry. That was reflected in how the legislation was implemented—it ended up without very much gold plating. If anything, there was the opposite of gold plating.

Iain Smith: One issue that has been raised in evidence is the belief of some people—perhaps Scottish Executive civil servants in particular—that the Scotland Act 1998, which requires all regulations to be compatible with Community law, somehow restricts flexibility in implementing European directives and regulations in Scotland. I am not entirely clear why that view is held. From your dealings with the Scottish Executive in implementing European legislation, do you believe that there is a view in the civil service that Scotland is inhibited from more flexibly implementing legislation?

Councillor McChord: We have found the same story in reaching our agreements with the Scottish Government on governance and constitutional issues. It is a matter of commitment and will. The cabinet secretary with responsibility for constitutional issues, John Swinney, says that things can be done, to a certain extent, but if we ask a civil servant they say it is not possible.

We need to consider such issues carefully. We have a totally different legal system, and we are very much growing as a devolved nation. I hope that we will take on more powers. That seems to be in the interests of every party in the Scottish Parliament. We need to work out such issues to our benefit and to the benefit of the people of Scotland. Doing so is not impossible.

The Convener: That was extremely useful. I am sorry to have kept you waiting, but it was worth waiting for. I am sure that we will make good use of your evidence. I look forward to meeting some of you again next week.

European Union Budget Review

12:23

The Convener: Item 3 is consideration of correspondence from the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture and a paper from the clerk on the EU budget review. Do members have any comments on the clerk's paper?

Alex Neil: We should accept its recommendations.

The Convener: Are members happy with the recommendations, which mean more letters to the minister?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: I will tell her who recommended that, Alex.

European Union Maritime Policy

12:23

The Convener: Item 4 is on correspondence from the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture and a paper from the clerk on the EU maritime policy. Do members have any comments on the clerk's paper?

Alex Neil: I recommend approval.

The Convener: Do members agree to the paper's recommendations?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Meeting closed at 12:24.

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