



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 26 October 2022

Session 6



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CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE
14th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Murray Fleming (Scottish Taxi Federation)

Jenny Gilruth (Minister for Transport)

Steven Grant (Unite)

Robert McLean (Scottish Taxi Federation)

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab)

Fran Pacitti (Transport Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lynn Tullis

LOCATION

The Adam Smith Room (CR5)

Scottish Parliament

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 26 October 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:32]

Continued Petitions

Island Community Representation on Boards (PE1862)

The Convener (Jackson Carlaw): Good morning, and welcome to the 14th meeting of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee in 2022.

The first agenda item is consideration of continued petitions. The first of those is PE1862, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce community representation on the boards of public organisations that deliver lifeline services to island communities, in keeping with the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018. The petition was lodged by Rona MacKay, Angus Campbell and Naomi Bremner on behalf of the Uist economic task force.

We last considered the petition on 4 May, and we thought that it would be useful to invite the Minister for Transport to provide further evidence. I am delighted that we have the minister, Jenny Gilruth MSP, with us today. I think that we are joined remotely—[*Interruption.*] Oh—she is with us now. Sorry. We also have Fran Pacitti, the director of aviation, maritime, freight and canals at Transport Scotland. I could not see the small type on her nameplate—once her job description is on there, there is little room left for her name. I welcome the minister and Ms Pacitti.

Members have a number of questions that they would like to explore. We are happy to move straight to them, unless there is anything that the minister particularly wants to say before we do.

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): No. I am content to move on.

The Convener: I expect that it will be a relatively short evidence-taking session, because we are focusing on the issue in hand, so I thank you for your time.

I invite David Torrance to lead the questioning.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Good morning, minister. Do you agree with the former Minister for Transport, Graeme Dey MSP, that

“It is neither tenable nor credible that”—[*Official Report*, 7 September 2021; c 94.]

island residents are not represented on the boards of organisations that provide lifeline services to their communities?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not think that I have seen the quotation in context, and I would be grateful if the committee could share it with me. However, I recognise the need to do more in relation to islander representation on boards, in particular. The matter obviously predates my time in office but has affected island communities in recent months. In a number of my interactions with island communities on different matters, predominantly in relation to ferry services, it has been raised consistently.

I should make the committee aware that one of the petitioners, Angus Campbell, has been asked to lead the consultation work in relation to project Neptune, so he is involved in some of the wider work to consult island communities on the governance and provision of ferry services. Some of that work might examine directly the issue that the petition is considering. However, on the principle of the member's question, I agree that there is more that we need to do in that respect.

In addition, last month, I updated the Parliament on two different appointments. Morag McNeill has been appointed as the chair of Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd. Murdo MacLellan has been appointed as a non-executive director on the CMAL board, and he is an islander. That is progress, but I recognise that more needs to be done, and I am committed to working with Angus Campbell and others on how the Government delivers that.

The Convener: For information, I advise the minister that the source of Mr Torrance's quotation is a members' business debate from September 2021, led by Alasdair Allan, on reserved seats on boards for islanders. The minister was replying to Alasdair Allan in that debate.

Jenny Gilruth: Thank you.

David Torrance: Minister, you have suggested in written evidence that there are alternative ways for island communities to engage with public bodies other than through places on boards. Are those alternatives really fit for purpose? If they are, why do island residents continue to press for a voice on the boards of relevant public bodies?

Jenny Gilruth: That is a fair observation from David Torrance. As he highlighted, there are a range of different ways in which islanders can get involved in some of the board activity more generally, without necessarily sitting on the boards of the public bodies themselves. A good example of that is the CalMac ferries community board,

which is chaired by Angus Campbell, who is one of the petitioners. Since January, I have worked closely with Angus on a number of issues with the Clyde and Hebrides ferries network. That board is a good example of how islanders' views can be taken into account, and there is not just the communities board for ferry services; a plethora of different boards exist in our island communities, particularly in relation to ferry services.

The committee might be aware that, in my update to Parliament on 8 September in relation to project Neptune, I outlined an alternative approach to resilience in relation to ferry breakdowns on the network, which looks to engage with a wide range of organisations as and when there are prolonged periods of disruption on the Clyde and Hebrides network. Members will be aware of some of the challenges that have occurred in recent months.

For example, over the recess, I convened a resilience meeting. That considered engaging a number of different representative boards on the relevant island communities—not just people who work in CalMac and CMAL, but people who live in our island communities. As the minister, I hold a responsibility to engage with island communities when there are sustained periods of disruption.

There are other forums in which islanders can have their views taken into account. One is the ferries community board, which I mentioned, but other boards and mechanisms exist in island communities.

There is a requirement for us to consider what more can be done. There are upcoming appointments to the David MacBrayne board—I discussed that with Fran Pacitti prior to the committee—and the process for those appointments will be shared with me later today. I am keen to safeguard the capacity to make progress in the future. I have given examples of two recent appointments that have evidenced progress in the past year, but it is important that we continue to drive that progress as a Government. I look forward to receiving further information on those new appointments later today, and I would be more than happy to share with the committee further detail of what that process looks like.

David Torrance: Thank you for that, minister.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Minister, in your written evidence, you talk about individuals needing the “skills, knowledge and experience” to ensure that a board does its work. However, that might limit the number of individuals who are able to participate in the process to those from a specific circle or a specific location. That causes some difficulty. Is there an opportunity for training to influence that process, so that individuals can be given extra support that

gives them the chance? Otherwise, you will exclude individuals from the pool when it might be advantageous for them to get the chance to participate.

Jenny Gilruth: Absolutely. I recognise that we can do more in this space in relation to training and supporting the development of the skills and expertise that are required for such appointments. Fran Pacitti might want to say more on why that is so important, but I recognise that there are challenges in that respect.

Before I came to give evidence, I was not aware that the committee was all male. I look at it and wonder whether there might be more that all parties could do on female representation in the Parliament. There is a challenge for the Government in delivering that, and there is always a challenge for political parties in matters of representation. Fran may wish to say more about skills and expertise and about the current expectation of how the bodies would engage with and support the development of skills in the future.

Fran Pacitti (Transport Scotland): We recognise the challenge that you have highlighted. In previous recruitments, when we have sought to encourage applications from island communities, we have found that the combination of what can be specific technical skill sets and a geographic restriction, or the need for a knowledge of island communities, has limited the pool of applicants.

To counteract that, we have adjusted the approach. As you will see in the advert for non-executive directors for the David MacBrayne board, which will be published in the next few weeks, we have made it an essential criterion of one of those roles—essential, rather than desirable—that applicants have a good understanding or knowledge of the issues affecting island communities. That will allow us to widen the pool of applicants that we attract.

We have been far more proactive in how we publicise the roles and make people aware of the opportunities, so that we are promoting those opportunities not only in the well-worn professional press or media. We are advertising the roles in the Gaelic language, we are encouraging local authorities to disseminate the opportunities through their community frameworks, and we are getting the Scottish Islands Federation to help us in promoting those opportunities. We are encouraging island residents, in our routine engagement with them, to stimulate interest and awareness of the opportunities so as to encourage people to apply.

Jenny Gilruth: We are advertising on the vessels, too, are we not?

Fran Pacitti: We are.

Jenny Gilruth: That is quite important with regard to the opportunities that are available to island residents.

Alexander Stewart: Thank you.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): The particular focus of the petition is on Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd. It generally asks that there be representation from islands on public bodies with a responsibility for lifeline services to islands, but, looking at the detail of what the petitioners seek, the particular focus relates to HIAL. I appreciate that the minister has responded quite a lot in relation to ferries, but I think that the focus is very much on HIAL.

What the petitioners have specifically suggested, as far as I can see, is that three seats should be allocated for specific island groups—the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland—without excluding other island groups. I have just checked the web to see the size of the HIAL board, as one does not want to have boards that are overwieldy in numbers. The Cairngorms National Park Authority board, for example, has 25 members, which is too many, in my humble opinion. The HIAL board has only eight members, I think, although perhaps I have got that wrong—if I have, I apologise. Given that HIAL has a relatively small board, as far as I can see, an awful lot could be gained by adding the island voice.

I have not raised the issue with Inglis Lyon, and I am sure that, if HIAL representatives were here, they would say that they engage—and they have procedures for engaging with islands, of course, as we have heard before. I just wonder whether we could get a specific response, either today or after reflection and consultation with HIAL, which would be only fair to HIAL. I have not raised the matter with HIAL, nor have I raised it with you, minister, but it seems to me that what the petitioners are specifically asking for has a certain rationale and force behind it and could be accommodated without making the governance of HIAL unwieldy or cumbersome. It could add quite a lot of accountability and scrutiny, as well as a feeling of belonging on the part of people in the islands, who feel very remote and detached from things from time to time, as you will know, minister.

Jenny Gilruth: I am prepared to be wrong about this, but my reading of the petition is that HIAL is being used as an example of lifeline services to island communities and that the petition is not focused only on HIAL.

I think that, in relation to lifeline services to island communities, we are really talking about three boards: CMAL, David MacBrayne and HIAL. HIAL's board has six members, I think—not eight. If we were to add three members to it, its

composition would alter significantly. I am not saying that I am against the proposal—I am sympathetic to it—but Fergus Ewing is right to say that I would like to speak directly to HIAL about it. It is a relatively small board. In fact, the membership of all the boards is relatively small. Some of the challenge therefore relates to how we can recruit people with the skills and expertise that Alexander Stewart was asking about while, at the same time, assuring islander representation.

09:45

I am happy to write to HIAL on the point that Fergus Ewing has addressed. I am not sure that I agree with the petitioners that three members of that board should come from island communities, given that it currently has only six members. However, we can do more to formalise islanders' voices on the boards, to ensure that they are properly heard and that their views are taken account of.

Fran Pacitti may want to say more about that, as she met HIAL last week.

Fran Pacitti: There are six non-executive members on the HIAL board at the moment, and there is an opportunity for us to recruit a successor to one of the incumbent non-executive directors in the coming months. We will apply the same principle that we have applied in relation to the David MacBrayne and CMAL boards—of seeking to encourage island representation to the extent that we can.

I commend HIAL for all that it does in its community engagement. In all 11 of the airports that it operates, it dedicates a significant resource to understanding the issues that affect the communities. However, that operational engagement—that discussion with island representatives on the operational issues that affect their specific communities—is no substitute for having that engagement at the strategic level and that customer focus at the board level.

I agree with the principle, and, from discussion with the HIAL chair, I know that there is an acceptance of it, so we will take that forward. As with all board recruitments, we will have to look at the composition of the board—the number of members and the total skills requirements—so that we get the right balance of skills to address the organisation's strategic challenges at the time of recruitment.

Fergus Ewing: Thank you.

Convener, to do justice to the petitioners, it might be helpful if we shared some of the detail of their proposals. I have skimmed those here; I have not gone into them fully. Maybe we could copy them to the minister. Then, if she has any

comments further to what was a generally positive response, we could see what those are.

The Convener: We can certainly do that. The information is in the public domain, but we can make sure that the minister is aware of it.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank both witnesses for coming today. What does the selection procedure for the boards of Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd, David MacBrayne Ltd and Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd look like, and how is it determined? Obviously, there is a power structure in terms of who picks the people who go on those boards. How does that process work in practice?

Jenny Gilruth: I am happy to allow Fran Pacitti to talk you through the process. As the minister, I will need to sign off some of those appointments, but it might be best if Fran talks you through the technical detail of the requirements of the application process itself—for example, how candidates are sifted.

Fran Pacitti: The positions on all three boards are ministerial appointments—ultimately, the decisions are taken by ministers. They are regulated appointments, which means that the recruitment process is subject to the “Code of Practice for Ministerial Appointments to Public Bodies in Scotland” and is overseen by the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public life in Scotland. That ensures a degree of impartiality in the process.

The starting point for any of the recruitments is identifying the skill sets that are required on the boards. Those will change over time, depending on the particular challenge that each organisation faces. We will have in place a skills matrix for each of the boards, which we will review to identify the skills that are needed. We recognise that those include a knowledge of island life and that island representation needs to be at the forefront of the board’s consideration. We will use that matrix to identify the number of positions that need to be filled and the particular skills required for the vacancies that have arisen, and we will agree those with the ministers and with the ethical standards commissioner.

In some instances, the ethical standards commissioner asks that there be a representative on the recruitment panel. That is a matter for the commissioner, based on the sensitivity of the recruitment. For example, there was an independent panel member for the recent CMAL recruitment, and there will be one for the forthcoming David MacBrayne Ltd recruitment. The minister will sign off the recruitment panel.

Typically, the recruitment panel has a representative from Transport Scotland on it, who represents ministers as the shareholders’ interest

in the recruitment. If it is considered appropriate by the ethical standards commissioner, there is also someone who represents the commissioner’s office, and a third panel member might ensure that there is diversity in the panel and that it contains particular skills and expertise. For example, when we are looking for someone with particular maritime knowledge or other skills, one of the panel members will reflect that requirement, so that we can adequately test it through the recruitment process.

In recent rounds of CMAL recruitment, we have sought to include island representation on the panel so that there is a fair assessment of the candidates’ understanding of issues affecting island life. We have been supported in that process by Malcolm Burr, who is the chief executive officer of Western Isles Council. He has brought a great deal of insight to the assessment of applications and has offered us invaluable advice on improving how we market and increase awareness of the opportunities that exist.

We run the process that is set out by the commissioner’s office. We advertise, we accept applications, we sift the applications and we test at interview. The panel makes recommendations to the minister, who has an opportunity to meet candidates should she wish to do so. Ultimately, it is a ministerial appointment, but those steps and measures are in place to ensure that the process is as transparent and inclusive as possible and to ensure that, although every one of these appointments is unique, there is consistency and transparency in how we appoint.

Paul Sweeney: It seems like a rigorous process for ensuring technical competence. I guess that there is a tension between the ideal of having representation and the fact that that is severely limited because of the population base that you can draw from.

I wonder whether there is a way of providing continuous professional development not just for the transport-related boards, but more widely across Government. For example, I am dealing with significant issues with community housing association boards in Glasgow, and there is a tension with the regulator, which says that a lot of the boards do not have the necessary technical competence, which creates pressure to take control away from communities. Is there a wider cross-Government approach to improving CPD opportunities for people who are eager to participate but who perhaps do not have the technical ability that is necessary to pass the selection panel?

Jenny Gilruth: The issue of a cross-Government approach does not sit with me, as the Minister for Transport. I am not sure which minister it sits with. I will take that idea away and

speak to officials about how we can better deliver that, because I recognise the tension that Paul Sweeney has identified.

There tend to be demographic and gender elements to board appointments, and, if we do not get the right people into those posts, it skews the representation of the public. There is an ask of Government around public appointments and how we can upskill the population and empower people to apply for those positions. I will take the matter away and speak to officials about taking a whole-Government approach. The responsibility does not sit with me, but I recognise the tension between getting the necessary skills and experience and taking cognisance of, in this instance, islanders' views on the delivery of lifeline services.

The Convener: Thank you, colleagues. That was very constructive. Thank you both for attending, minister and Ms Pacitti—I suspect that I got the pronunciation wrong the first time, in my confusion.

09:54

Meeting suspended.

10:00

On resuming—

Taxi Trade (PE1856)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE1856, which was lodged by Pat Rafferty on behalf of Unite the union, on support for the taxi trade. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to protect the future of the taxi trade by providing financial support to taxi drivers; setting up a national stakeholder group with trade union driver representatives; and reviewing the low-emission standards and implementation dates. I am delighted that we are joined this morning by Steven Grant—with audio only, regrettably—on behalf of Unite, representing the petitioner, and by Robert McLean and Murray Fleming on behalf of the Scottish Taxi Federation. Good morning to you all, and welcome to the committee.

We have heard and collated quite a lot of evidence on this subject, so members have a number of questions. If the witnesses are happy for us to do so, we will move straight to those questions. By way of introduction, I will ask a general question. The situation is fluid, as I know from talking to taxi drivers in my local authority, East Renfrewshire; it has moved on even since we last considered the petition a few months ago. Our witnesses might like to outline briefly the main challenges that currently face the taxi industry, given that the situation is now very different from

what it was when the petition was submitted in early 2021.

I come to Mr Grant first—because we cannot see you, we will have to hope that you speak up and speak clearly.

Steven Grant (Unite): Good morning, and thank you for listening to me today. I am sorry about my camera issues. Basically, the issues facing the taxi trade are currently critical; we really are fighting for our survival. We are looking at a low-emission zone being enforced in June 2023, which comes in the midst of a dysfunctional new and used taxi market as well as a situation in which financially distressed operators are just coming out of a pandemic and are now into a cost of living crisis. That means that, even if the vehicles were there to buy, they do not have the money to invest at present.

We also feel that it is unfair that the roll-out of the LEZs in Scotland is not synchronised across the four major cities. Glasgow is starting early in June 2023, in comparison with mid-2024 for Dundee, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. We feel that the roll-out should have been synchronised by the Scottish Government, in order not to discriminate against Glasgow. We really need extra funding—that is always welcome—but we also need time to recover and to get through the cost of living crisis. We also need to see the electric taxi market mature and charging infrastructure appear on the streets at the capacity that we need.

We feel that the situation would be much better if we were to transition to electric vehicles in one step, rather than going down the retrofitting route. That would allow the net zero ambitions to be met in one transition, and it would probably be a much better strategy in the long term.

The Convener: Thank you. Would Mr McLean and Mr Fleming like to address the question?

Robert McLean (Scottish Taxi Federation): Yes—I am from Glasgow Taxis Ltd, and I am currently treasurer of the Scottish Taxi Federation. To build on what Steven Grant from Unite has just said, I will pick up on a few points. First, the second-hand market and the availability of vehicles for fleet owners are such that we are pretty limited in what we can buy.

Over the past few years, a company called Cab Direct, a division of the Allied Vehicles Group, in Glasgow, was able to produce a vehicle that was converted in Glasgow. It was based on a Peugeot at one time and, latterly, on a Ford Transit-type vehicle, a Tourneo, which it converted into a six-seater, wheelchair-accessible vehicle that was utilised by the taxi trade. However, come the advent of the necessity to meet the Euro 6 standard for the low-emission zone, it stopped producing any vehicle. Although the Transit was a

Euro 6 standard vehicle, it stopped producing it. It was unable to get the donor vehicles from Ford to continue with that.

The other vehicle that we had a chance to use was the Mercedes Vito. Again, it was a diesel Euro 6 standard-compliant vehicle. However, again, that is now in very short supply. Over the past couple of months, we have moved away from the automatic vehicle to a manual vehicle with a 1.7 litre diesel engine. It is probably still chipped in such a way that is powerful, but Glasgow has some fairly steep hills, such as Montrose Street, North Hanover Street and so on, so it can be a fair old task to take four or five people—or indeed six, which these vehicles can carry. Therefore, the availability of that type of vehicle is fairly restricted.

The next one that is available, which is the one that will probably become the main vehicle, is made by the London Electric Vehicle Company. It is a hybrid-type vehicle, currently priced at £64,500. That is with a £7,500-reduction through a UK grant. It is more than £70,000 in its original iteration, so it is expensive to buy. The only support available for purchasing that vehicle is the Energy Saving Trust's interest-free loan, which, over six years, works out at £888 per month. I am sure that most people appreciate that that is a fair old chunk of money.

In theory, you do not have any fuel costs, but we all know that the cost of electricity has increased. Drivers certainly have to pay to charge the vehicle at home and most street-side charging points now charge some sort of fee. Indeed, if you go away from the conurbations of Glasgow, Edinburgh and the bigger cities, you will find that it can be as much as 80p per kilowatt at charging points provided by BP and those types of places, which now see it as a revenue stream in place of the carbon fuels that they have traditionally supplied us all with over the past 100 years or so. To that end, if there was support in relation to the LEVC vehicle or the Euro 6 standard vehicles that are available, that would be a huge assistance.

A number of vehicles that are capable of being converted are being taken up from London. The only issue that I and the trade in general see with that is that, in London, the owner of that vehicle has been given £10,000 to decommission it from the London market so that the London market can hit its targets for the ultra-low-emission zone. Those vehicles, which are shipped all over the UK—not just to Glasgow—and which have had £10,000 of public money spent on them, then arrive in Glasgow, Birmingham or wherever, where they are converted to use liquid petroleum gas or undergo the retrofit exhaust change, which makes them capable of meeting the Euro 6 standard.

In Scotland, the Energy Saving Trust provides support for the payment for that. For the retrofit

exhaust, about £5,500 to £6,000 is available by way of the grant, and the owner of the vehicle pays £1,500. The last figure that I saw for conversion to LPG was about £13,700, of which £12,000 or so is paid for by the Energy Saving Trust. Therefore, across the UK, £25,000 to £35,000 has been given by way of grants for each of those vehicles, but they are still old vehicles. They are still 12, 13 or 14 plate vehicles, so they have already been well used in the London market. They might already have done more than 150,000 miles by the time they arrive in the other cities, where they are converted with an expectation of getting some sort of life out of them over another 10 to 15 years.

Public money would have been better spent to support, as I believe Manchester has done, a grant of £20,000 to an owner who is prepared to purchase the LEVC model. Taking £20,000 off of that £64,000 top price would be a good reduction back down to where the market was with the Mercedes and the Ford at around £40,000. A lot of things can be done there.

The trade is in a really difficult position, not least because of some of the impacts of the pandemic and the dearth of drivers. I am just back from America, and even there people are crying out for workers in the hospitality industry, and I know that that is the case across Scotland. We are very closely aligned with the hospitality industry, and we work closely with events at venues such as the Hydro. Large numbers of people come and go to those concerts.

We enjoy a very good relationship with nearly all the big hotels in Glasgow, whereby we are the provider of transport for them, and it is disappointing to let those customers down. We simply do not have enough cars on the road in the evenings and for the night-time economy in particular. We do not have enough cars only because we do not have enough people to drive them. The cars are available, but we do not have the drivers to drive them.

I realise that that is a slightly different topic, but it impacts the whole trade. The trade needs support in a number of areas to get drivers in. As a company, Glasgow Taxis has just run a four-week advert on STV to highlight the attractiveness of the flexibility of being a taxi driver or a taxi owner and operator, and the potential that is there for people to come into a good job. There is a living to be made, but having coming out of the pandemic, we are now in an economic crisis in which the cost of road fuel and fuel for home utilities has increased, as well as the potential to charge an electric vehicle on the back of that. There are a number of concerning factors there.

My last point is that it is an ageing trade. We are predominantly in our late 50s and 60s; the

average age of owners of Glasgow taxis is 59 and the average age of a driver is 54. Fewer and fewer people are coming into the trade from the youth market. Investing £64,000 over six years for anyone aged over 60 is a huge consideration, not least because a lot of the guys do not have health insurance. None of us knows where our health is going. There are lots of factors there, there is a lot of worry and anxiety and there are lots of serious considerations about the economics of the trade.

I will close there, sir, and pass over to Murray Fleming, who might want to add a couple of pointers to—[Inaudible.]—side of the picture.

The Convener: That was very comprehensive, and you have touched on a number of issues that we want to explore. Mr Fleming, would you like to add anything further to Mr McLean's comments?

Murray Fleming (Scottish Taxi Federation): No. Robert has covered most aspects. The low-emission zone expectations on the back of Covid, the capital investment that is needed and the Scottish Government's wish to retain wheelchair-accessible vehicles in the manner that we have become accustomed to in Edinburgh and Glasgow will require funding. I also share the view that the funding for LPG and retrofits is misguided. Investment in new vehicles would be a far better course of action.

The Convener: I worry a little when you say that it is a horribly old profession at 54 and 59; I am 63, so I do not know what that says about my prospects. You raise three very specific areas. We have some areas of questioning that we want to address, but I hope that, during the course of the evidence session, we do justice to all those issues.

Paul Sweeney: I will preface my comments by referring members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a member of Unite the union.

As I represent Glasgow, I recognise a lot of the points that have been made, particularly the controversy over the low-emission zone restrictions that are planned for introduction next year. I understand that Glasgow City Council recently announced that enforcement of the LEZ will not apply to certain taxis until 1 June 2024, which is, in effect, an extension of one year. Is that sufficient time to allow non-compliant vehicles to be retrofitted with emissions reduction systems or fully replaced?

The Convener: Mr Grant, can I come to you first? Would you like to comment on that?

Steven Grant: Yes, absolutely. A year's extension is not enough time. The vehicles that are being talked about are Euro 4 standard or lower—the TX1 and TX2 models, the Peugeot E7

and the Mercedes Vito—which are not suitable for retrofitting as they do not have a retrofit solution. They will get a year's extension. Any vehicles for which there is a retrofit solution will have to have that done by June 2023. Even as it is, meeting the date of mid-2024 is a serious ask.

10:15

We feel that there needs to be a rethink, as has happened in Manchester. The mayor of Manchester realised that the plans that had been made pre-pandemic had to change because they would not work following the pandemic. In my eyes, and the eyes of our union, there really needs to be a rethink. The plan is just not workable in its present form.

The Convener: Mr McLean, I assume from your contribution a moment ago that you take a similar view. Do you want to articulate that?

Either Mr McLean or Mr Fleming can come in.

Robert McLean: Sorry—I was waiting on the microphone.

There is an issue with the retrofit equipment as well. The primary supplier is a company called Cybrand, which allows third-party engineers to install that equipment in vehicles in Glasgow and, presumably, when it comes to it, in Edinburgh. I can speak for the Glasgow market—the situation is supposedly active and on-going, but it is actually not active, because it is proving very difficult to get the kit from Cybrand. The company can provide the hardcore engineering part that converts the exhaust, but the Energy Saving Trust insists that, along with that piece of hardware, there is a piece of software that is known as telematics—a black box, as the insurance companies call it. That allows the movement of the vehicle to be monitored by the EST to ensure that it is still being used as a taxi and that what the EST has funded through the grant money is still fully operational.

The telematics aspect is proving impossible to get at present, and therefore Cybrand is currently unable to fit quite a number of vehicles. That is proving difficult and challenging at this time. It has had the effect of kicking things down the road, as the vehicles that are currently in the process of being funded by the EST are not going to get their equipment installed for some considerable time. That has had a knock-on effect on all the other operators and owners who are trying to hit the mark.

In Glasgow, the vehicles have to be registered by next Monday, 31 October. Owners and operators have to declare that they are going to go ahead either with a retrofit or an LPG solution, or with a new vehicle purchase. As I explained earlier, with regard to the availability of new

vehicles, the LEVC is now probably the only model that is available. There are only two dealers in Scotland: one in Edinburgh and one that started operating in Glasgow as recently as two weeks ago.

You can see the challenges that the trade has faced, not just through the pandemic and as a result of it but over a period of three years in which the ability to buy vehicles, and their availability, has proved a real challenge.

The Convener: Mr Grant, I understand that you would like to add something.

Steven Grant: A significant number of vehicles have retrofit solutions, but that is only on paper. A lot of those vehicles will be structurally compromised long before the actual retrofit technology has ended its life cycle. We see a lot of operators scrambling to change those retrofittable vehicles to a vehicle that is structurally sound and that will last for the life cycle of the retrofit. Those vehicles are not available, however, because the used market is completely dysfunctional at present. Vehicles for retrofit that we would say are structurally sound, and which will last for the duration of the retrofit technology, are simply not available.

Paul Sweeney: You have described significant constraints such as the age profile, the financial crunch that is involved and the risks that are associated with people reaching the end of their careers having to take on a huge amount of financial leverage. The Scottish Government, in response to a written question that I lodged some months ago, indicated the three main schemes that the Energy Saving Trust is administering on its behalf.

The first is the switched-on taxi loan scheme, which offers interest free loans of up to £120,000, but I think that we heard a response mention a cost of servicing that of £800 to £1,000 a month.

The second is the low-emission zone retrofit fund, which provides

“80% grant funding to replace existing diesel engines to meet the Euro 6 standard for driving within a LEZ. The grant provides up to £10,000 per wheelchair accessible taxi installing re-powering technology, or £5,000 per taxi installing exhaust after-treatment systems.”

The third is the low-emission zone support fund, “which is available to eligible microbusinesses and sole traders (including taxi operators)”

and provides

“a £2,500 grant towards the safe disposal of non-compliant vehicles as an incentive.”

Those are quotes from a response to a written question that I received on 6 January 2022.

You mentioned that the Manchester scheme has a £20,000 grant, so in the context of the three options that the Scottish Government has provided, would you suggest that enhancing the retrofit fund to provide a grant towards new purchases could be a satisfactory solution?

Robert McLean: That is a very valid point, Mr Sweeney. As I said in my initial presentation, it is about the current use of public money and where it is spent.

You spoke about the £2,500 scrappage scheme. If an owner or operator takes advantage of that £2,500 to buy a vehicle that is newer than the one they have—it only has to be one year newer—and then their new vehicle hits the mark to have some other retrofit solution added, the £2,500 they received would be deducted from any subsequent grant that they are paid. That means that, if a person gets £2,500 and for a vehicle that is scrapped or taken off the road in Glasgow, and then they go and get a retrofit exhaust fitted to a newer vehicle, their £5,000 grant would be reduced by £2,500, which means that £2,500 would still be the maximum amount that they would get to put a newer vehicle on the road that hits the mark for Glasgow low-emission zone compliance.

The 80 per cent grant funding that you mentioned relates to LPG conversion. At the moment, that is running at about £12,000 or just over that will be grant funded by the Energy Saving Trust, with the balance paid by the owner. That conversion is a complete repowering solution that involves removing diesel engines from old taxis and putting in fairly decent petrol engines and the parts that go with the exhaust to make them compliant with the Euro 6 on LPG powering. After the conversion, vehicles start on petrol and convert themselves to LPG once running and then continue to run on LPG.

As you might be aware, for about a month, sourcing LPG was particularly challenging in Glasgow—I am not sure about Edinburgh. We had guys running to Kilmarnock and Hamilton to try to source LPG. As you can imagine, by the time they got back, their availability of fuel to operate in Glasgow was significantly reduced.

There are a lot of issues and challenges around the retrofitting of old vehicles—whether that involves repowering them or retrofitting exhausts—and by far the best solution is to make available a decent, funded scheme that allows people to get into the market and buy a newer vehicle, and they do not even need to buy a brand new vehicle. For instance, I have a two-year-old Mercedes, which is a fully compliant vehicle, but if I got a grant to buy a new vehicle, I would buy a brand new one and make mine available on the second-hand market. That would mean that

somebody who has an even older vehicle than mine could take advantage of mine at a much better price and that we could see Glasgow hit the mark for fully compliant vehicles.

The last thing that we want is to lose the fleet in Glasgow. None of us is against low-emission zones; everyone fully supports the health aspects and everything that will be done, but Glasgow cannot lose the fleet overnight. It will not lose the fleet on 1 June, but it will lose a huge part of it, and that is a worry.

Paul Sweeney: You seem to have a clear set of asks. Have you presented a counter-proposal to Glasgow City Council and, if so, has that been well received or has the council ignored what you have tried to say about a reasonable set of counter-measures to what is clearly quite a blunt instrument which has already caused a 20 per cent reduction in the number of licences in the city?

The Convener: I will come to the witnesses in a minute, because I want to explore this area, too.

What sort of reception have you had from Glasgow City Council with regard to exploring your arguments? The comprehensive if technical arguments that you have been making about the availability of vehicles relate to specification as well as the structure of the financial support for the alternatives that you think would be best. I say that as someone who spent 25 years in the Scottish retail motor industry and who found from time to time that, with regard to technical specifications—this was a real issue—the associated difficulties and practicalities were not always understood by policy makers, who were keen to drive towards a particular objective. Like Mr Sweeney, I am interested in knowing with whom the discussions are taking place and how you feel the arguments are being received.

Mr Grant, you might want to touch on that and the previous question.

Steven Grant: The main people in Glasgow City Council with whom we have been discussing our counter-proposals have been councillors such as Anna Richardson, who is no longer in position, and Angus Millar. However, I am afraid that our arguments have fallen on deaf ears. The council wants to implement the LEZ in June 2023, come hell or high water and despite all our protestations and concerns.

The Convener: I just want to explore that point. You have detailed quite specific technical specification and availability issues with regard to the ability to comply. What has been the response to that reality?

Steven Grant: It seems as if the council does not want to understand the issues that we have.

As I have said, it wants to push ahead with the LEZ. There has been some mitigation—those with older vehicles that cannot get the retrofit solution are being allowed an extra year—but it is just tinkering at the edges. We have explained the issues that we have with retrofitting; as I have said, there are vehicles that, on paper, might look as if they can access such a solution, but the fact is they will not last the duration of the retrofit technology. As a result, the owners of those vehicles will still have to go out and purchase a vehicle—if they can—so they are in the same position as people who cannot get a retrofit solution.

All I can say is that, despite the numerous meetings that we have had with Angus Millar and the Green councillor Jon Molyneux, we feel that they are not listening and that, come hell or high water, this is going through.

The Convener: Mr McLean and Mr Fleming, do you want to respond to Mr Sweeney's question and my codicil?

Robert McLean: Indeed. I will let Murray Fleming give a quick update on the Edinburgh side afterwards, but as far as Glasgow is concerned, back in late 2019, before Covid even happened, we as a company compiled a presentation called "Death by a thousand cuts" in which we showed that, over the next 10 years, the taxi trade would suffer to such an extent that Glasgow would probably be left with no trade at all as a result of all the things that I mentioned earlier, such as the lack of drivers and the age of vehicles. Initially, we gave that presentation to a couple of councillors, the licensing department and a number of other key stakeholders in Glasgow City Council. Along came Covid—and things changed significantly.

We have been continuing to give the presentation, culminating in our doing so to Susan Aitken, the leader of the council. The elections came and went in May. Susan and her team were back in, and Anna Richardson, who was keen to listen but who was very stuck in her ways in relation to the low-emission zone and where it was going to go, was replaced by Angus Millar. We got an audience with Mr Millar, spoke to him and gave him the presentation. All the while, Glasgow has still been hell-bent on ensuring that the LEZ will go ahead on the date on which it has always said that it would.

The council is clearly eager to please the Scottish Government in so far as it wants to hit the mark to be the first council to do this and to meet the 2030 energy efficiency target as laid down by the Scottish Government. By that time, the sale of any internal combustion engines will have been stopped.

That would all be fantastic, but the vehicle that I have talked about costs £64,000; it is a hybrid, which means that it still has a petrol engine. If we invest £64,000, is there any guarantee that, at some point, Glasgow will not look to become zero emission, rather than low emission?

All those things are factors in the background. Glasgow City Council will listen, although it will not necessarily act on what it hears. People can get an audience and they get a chance to speak and have their say, but the council will continue doing exactly what it is doing.

10:30

Murray Fleming: In Edinburgh, we have the 2024 deadline, which is helpful. It is important to note that Edinburgh has an age limit: the vehicle must not only comply with the Euro 6 standard but be 10 years old or less. There are guys in Edinburgh who have taken the Cybrand product and converted their vehicles. That only has one year's extension, in effect, although we are seeking to get an extension to 14 years. LPG vehicles already have an extension to 14 years, which seems rather unfair, bearing in mind that a Mercedes Euro 6 will have to go off the road after 10 years.

We have accepted the policy, but the approach that councils are adopting is that it is Government policy, there is simply no scope for change and the deadline is there, come what may. A lot of people in the trade have older vehicles and, once they get to the 2024 deadline, they will walk away, and there is no one to replace them—no one is prepared to take the funding on board.

The Convener: Do you want to say more, Mr Sweeney? We can then move on to Mr Torrance.

Paul Sweeney: Thank you for that insight, Mr Fleming. It seems that the financial solution sits with the Scottish Government as regards the Energy Saving Trust products that are offered via the Government. If we are able to present a counter-proposal to the Government, that could potentially offer a way to deal with the intransigence that you have experienced at a council level. It seems that there is not much appetite for moving any further in terms of the deadlines, but perhaps there could be a remedy here that is similar to the financial remedy that Manchester has reached. Could we perhaps consider taking that forward?

The Convener: I think that leads into your general question, Mr Torrance.

David Torrance: Yes—thank you, convener, and good morning to all the witnesses. In written evidence, the Scottish Taxi Federation argues that the current taxi and driver licensing regime under

the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982 is no longer fit for purpose. Why do you think that, and how best could the system be brought up to date? Just to let you know, I was on the regulation and licensing board at Fife Council for 20 years.

My question is aimed at Murray Fleming and Robert McLean.

Robert McLean: That act was passed in 1982; here we are, all these years later—40 years later—looking at legislation that has a bit of catching up to do, particularly in relation to technology. When the 1982 act was passed, it was all very traditional, in that a private hire car was a private hire car simply because it was not a taxi. What is a taxi? A taxi is a vehicle that can pick people up on the street, sit at a rank and take people from a rank. It can also take called-for hires, like a private hire car, but a private hire car cannot—sorry, should not—do the other aspects that I have referred to: picking up on the street or at a rank.

Along come mobile phones, and things start to change a little bit. People no longer have to go to what is called the minicab office in London, or the private hire car operator's office up here, to await the arrival of a private hire car. Likewise, people do not have to go to a phone box or stand in the street, look for the orange light and hail a cab in the traditional way. Along comes the mobile phone, so people can phone the company. That changes things significantly. Lo and behold, the mobile phone becomes a smart phone and, all of a sudden, we have apps, which those of us who were born in the 1950s never had any knowledge of—and some still have no knowledge of them. Particularly in our trade, we are reticent to change and to acknowledge those changes. Anyway, we have apps, and along come disruptors in the app technology who are not transport providers, but technologists. Along comes a company called Uber, which is probably the biggest disruptor in the market in Glasgow and Edinburgh. Uber arrives with its very slick ads and hundreds of millions of pounds to waste and to throw at and lose in the trade, which has still never made a penny of profit.

We tried to emulate that. As recently as last month in Glasgow, we tried to put in place a fixed pricing structure, as a result of some work that we did through Scotpulse, a national survey company. We surveyed the people of Glasgow to ask what they would like to see in their local public hire cab company. They said that they would love to see the meter being taken away, as it causes real anxiety.

I do not know if you have ever sat in the back of a black cab when it is stuck in traffic coming from Ibrox and there is an event on at the Hydro. When you come to the squinty bridge, you can sit there for 20 or 25 minutes before you eventually get

over it. The meter is ticking away, and the poor customer in the back is looking at it, saying, “Am I going to have to pay that?” The reasonable drivers will say, “Look—don’t worry about the meter, pal. We’ll get that sorted once we get to Central station”, or wherever they are going. However, less scrupulous drivers might just leave the meter running and—as they are entitled to do—charge the person exactly what it says.

All those things have created a real issue in relation to how we operate those taxis. As you know, in the city we have to operate every hire on the meter—the meter must be engaged. A fixed price is never going to be an option at this particular time, certainly not until the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982 either gets an upgrade and recognises technology or, in some other way, recognises that there have been significant changes in how the trade operates over the past four years and hauls itself into the 21st century to sit exactly where we are now in relation to those aspects.

Murray Fleming: I concur with Robert McLean’s thoughts. To come back to the meter, it is there to protect the public, but the first thing that these other companies do is ensure that their vehicles do not have a meter, which allows for the escalation of fares when it is busy. Very often, at busy weekends, the black cab trade now sees itself at a disadvantage, earning less than a sector that has had far less capital investment. I come back to the point that if you want a wheelchair-accessible fleet, some form of assistance has to be offered.

The Convener: I am not sure that all the committee members will have had that experience specifically coming from Ibrox, but I am sure that we have all sat in a cab with the meter running.

Mr Grant, do you want to come in?

Steven Grant: I agree with the points that Murray Fleming has made. We also have big issues in Glasgow with satellite council areas licensing private hire vehicles that are working almost exclusively within Glasgow city. We see that in particular with vehicles from South Lanarkshire now working in the west end of Glasgow, which contravenes the 1982 act. That is a huge problem—there should be some sort of geofencing in place to stop them doing that. There needs to be an update in that regard.

Alexander Stewart: Thank you, gentlemen, for your comprehensive comments. You have identified—there is no question about it—that the industry is in crisis and that, without the proper support mechanisms in place, we will see the demise of some of it. We have already seen reductions as a result of the pandemic, and you

talked eloquently about the demographics and the age profile situation.

The Scottish Government has to give you support mechanisms. We have touched on some of the grants and the areas in which proposals have been made. However, do you believe that there is room for more incentives to ensure that the sector can be supported? If those grants are not sufficient or not equivalent to what is happening elsewhere, you will be at a disadvantage in comparison with other locations across the United Kingdom. The Scottish Government has a role and responsibility to act to support you.

It would be good to hear, therefore, what more you think could be done by the Scottish Government and what it should be looking at, perhaps thinking outside the box, to try to support you and do what is required.

As I said earlier, and as you identified, if that does not take place sooner rather than later, there will be sections of the community that no longer have the support mechanisms for taxis that have been enjoyed in the past.

The Convener: That is an invitation for a wish list, gentlemen. I come to Mr Grant first. We are slightly short of time now, so I ask everybody to be a little bit concise.

Steven Grant: One thing that we asked for was a dedicated taxi team in Transport Scotland, as it does not currently have such a team. The buses have a dedicated team. We can see the disparity between the grant offerings for buses and those for taxis. Buses have been given grants of around 40 or 50 per cent to change from diesel to electric. At the moment, there is a scrappage scheme available for taxis where you can get £2,000 for scrapping your old vehicle; if you put that against the £65,000 cost of an electric vehicle, it comes in at around a 4 per cent grant. That is a tenfold difference between the available grants for buses and taxis. I have to think that that is because there is little understanding of the taxi trade, so a dedicated team in Transport Scotland would help enormously.

The Convener: Mr McLean and Mr Fleming, could you be brief?

Robert McLean: The points that I outlined earlier probably cover better use of available public money. Of course we would welcome more being made available, although we all understand entirely the on-going economic crisis and the number of demands that are being placed on the resources of the Scottish Government and local authorities.

Purchasing a wheelchair-accessible vehicle—a black cab or whatever you want to call it—is a

significant investment, not only for the owner and operator but for the city and the people who rely on those vehicles. We are trying to reduce the number of cars that come into and frequent city centres, so let us make better use of the cars that we allow in, including private hires, black cabs and the companies that provide transport for people and ensure that people still have freedom of movement to enjoy those cities and go to events, shop, eat or whatever they want to do.

Let us make sure that we have a fleet that is commensurate with what cities, and presumably the Scottish Government, want in order to ensure that wheelchair-accessible vehicles are available, and that there is funding support that ensures that we can maintain the trade.

Murray Fleming: We need a more targeted approach to the funding of new vehicles and suitable second-hand vehicles that have a reasonable operating lifespan left. Stop wasting money on retrofits, which is throwing money at old vehicles that are unsuitable from the outset.

Fergus Ewing: Good morning, gentlemen. I want to ask about your engagement with the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government told the committee in October last year—more than a year ago—that

“Officials will make contact with the Petitioner to discuss engagement between Transport Scotland and the Taxi sector”.

What was the outcome of those discussions?

Steven Grant: We had a meeting with Jenny Gilruth and laid out the issues that we faced. All that came out of that was a modest increase in the grants for retrofitting—there was nothing else groundbreaking. We called for the Government to put the brakes on the timeline—the enforcement date is far too soon, considering everything that has happened—but the Government did not want to pause it. Jenny Gilruth was at pains to suggest that it is within Glasgow City Council’s gift to delay the enforcement date of June 2023. Basically, she washed her hands of the issue.

Fergus Ewing: When did that meeting with the transport minister take place?

Steven Grant: I cannot give you an exact date, but it was around two to three months ago.

Fergus Ewing: After the meeting, could the witnesses send us the detail on the points that they have made? I suspect that I am not alone in thinking that they have laid out a strong set of arguments, and I would like to see in black and white the figures that they have mentioned and study them in a bit more detail.

It seems that you are the Cinderella of the public transport sector in the way that you have been

treated. You are trying to do the right thing, but are being told that you must do the right thing by the state. The state has a responsibility to assist you to do that without forcing your members out of business or imposing the unreasonable financial burden that you have described.

You have persuaded me that you have made a statable case, but I would like to have those figures in writing, and I therefore make that request. Specifically, could you share with us details of the Manchester alternative and how things are done there? One of the witnesses said that Manchester provides a more generous scheme to enable assistance by way of grant finance for the purchase of a new vehicle, rather than—as the witnesses have argued—throwing money away on retrofitting old vehicles that are ready to go to the great car cemetery in the sky.

If the witnesses can provide more evidence, the committee might want to consider how it can help them to advance the petition. Time is agin us, so it would have to be done quite quickly. I hope that that is a reasonable request.

10:45

Paul Sweeney: I want to supplement Mr Ewing’s call for more evidence or helpful information. You mentioned the wider impact on the economy. Anecdotally, I can attest to significant issues in Glasgow that have been felt by businesses in the night-time economy, which are not getting the sort of trade that they used to get because people say that it is too difficult to get back home, and therefore the city is a ghost town at night. There are massive queues at taxi ranks next to train stations—people sometimes wait for about half an hour for a taxi out of George Square, and that is midweek. Places that hold big events, such as the Scottish Event Campus, are also feeling an impact on their ticket sales.

You mentioned the manufacturing base. We had a healthy ecosystem in manufacturing taxis at Allied Vehicles Group in Possilpark, employing more than 600 people in skilled manufacturing. You mentioned that the only product available is from a Coventry and Shanghai-based manufacturer called LEVC. There is a wider economic impact, both on the taxi supply chain in Scotland and on the night-time economy in major cities such as Glasgow.

If the witnesses could furnish us with more evidence—perhaps Unite could commission work or we could try to find ways to build up the picture—it would make for a more compelling argument.

The Convener: I am concerned that we are almost out of time, so I suggest that the clerks liaise with our witnesses on some of the areas

where it might be helpful to get more detailed evidence and information. I am sure that they will be very happy to co-operate—I will allow them to confirm that in a second.

My final question relates to something that Robert McLean touched on. We asked all local authorities what the effect of the pandemic had been, and about half of them responded. The general response was that in the wake of the pandemic there had been a 20 per cent reduction in the number of available cabs. I have heard that there has been a bit of a recovery from that in my own local authority area, but Mr McLean said that, in Glasgow, the cars are there but the drivers are not. It has been suggested to me that some local authorities are underresourced when it comes to processing applications from those interested in becoming drivers.

Mr McLean, can you confirm that you are happy to provide further information on that? When you say that you have the cars but not the drivers, is that a question of the attractiveness of the proposition or is it about the time that it takes people who want to enter the profession to get a licence?

Robert McLean: I will be as quick as I can with my answers to your questions.

To work in the public hire trade, drivers have to pass the topographical test—which is called “the knowledge” in London—and the new Scottish Qualifications Authority certificate in the role of the professional taxi driver. People need to get over those two hurdles before they can even apply to become a taxi driver.

In response to our presentation, “Death by a thousand cuts”, Councillor Susan Aitken agreed with our suggestion that Glasgow City Council could remove the topographical test and allow drivers to be an apprentice for a year. They could drive the taxi and learn their way around the city—let us face it, most people use their sat nav or mobile phones to navigate—and then sit the exam with a much higher chance of passing and of being of more use in the trade. However, when she went back to the council’s licensing and regulatory committee with that suggestion, it was thrown out.

We are where we are: we still have the topo and the SQA certificate, so we still have to jump those fences and go through those hoops to get a driver into a taxi.

Going back very quickly to a previous point, I have to say that the STF has had no communication with any Scottish minister or, indeed, the Scottish Government. That said, I attend two short-life working groups that are also attended by the Energy Saving Trust—Derek McCreadie is the main representative of the trust,

and I regularly talk to him. However, there is no one higher up or at finance level.

The Convener: Mr Grant, do you have any final comments that you would like to make on behalf of the petitioner?

Steven Grant: It just seems to me that Glasgow City Council—or, at least, its licensing department—is underresourced. We can be waiting up to a year and a half to get a physical driver’s licence badge out to a driver; similarly, it can take up to a year to get a taxi operator licence out. There seems to be a shortage of staff to deal with licensing applications.

I also think that drivers have been doing a lot of reflection throughout the pandemic and have left the trade to look for a better work-life balance. There was an oversupply of vehicles, and it was very difficult for someone to make a living unless they put in serious hours, so a lot have jumped with the demand for drivers in other sectors.

The Convener: I thank you all, gentlemen. The committee very much appreciates the evidence that you have given, and it has certainly justified our decision to have this round-table discussion this morning. There are a number of issues that we will wish to pursue, and we look forward to your further assistance in that respect.

I suspend the meeting for a few moments.

10:51

Meeting suspended.

10:52

On resuming—

Adult Disability Payment (Eligibility Criteria) (PE1854)

The Convener: We move on with our consideration of continued petitions. PE1854, on reviewing the adult disability payment eligibility criteria for people with mobility needs, was lodged by Keith Park. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to remove the 20m rule from the proposed adult disability payment eligibility criteria or to identify an alternative form of support for people with mobility needs.

When the committee last considered the petition, it agreed to ask the Scottish Government to engage with stakeholders on the review of the adult disability payment. The Scottish Government has now confirmed that engagement with relevant stakeholders will be included in the remit for both stages of the ADP review. We also have a further written submission from the petitioner, which calls

on the committee to seek further evidence from stakeholders and to report directly to the review.

We are joined by our colleague Carol Mochan. Good morning, Carol, and thank you for your patience. Do you have anything to contribute to the committee's thinking on the issue?

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Good morning, convener, and thank you very much for asking me to speak. I very much appreciate the opportunity.

The petitioners have asked the committee to continue to seek evidence with a view to producing a report for submission to the 2022 review on moving around descriptors within the adult disability payment. In that light, it is only fair that I give a little bit of background on the 20m rule.

Under that rule, which was introduced as part of the eligibility criteria for accessing the personal independence payment, a person who can walk a step over 20m will not qualify for the enhanced rate of mobility support. The rule does not consider the nature of fluctuating conditions or the impact of physical or mental fatigue, and it makes no allowance for people who might be required to go further distances and might have to stop and start in order to do so.

The relevant point here is that the Scottish Government is replacing the personal independence payment with the adult disability payment, but it is keeping the eligibility criteria the same. I know that the petitioner has tried to lobby the Government on that and continues to do so.

I have spoken with a number of people who have been affected by the rule—in particular, people who suffer from multiple sclerosis. It greatly affects that group of people. I have spoken to individuals and to the representative organisation.

Since the rule was introduced, the Multiple Sclerosis Society has done some research, and I think that the findings are relevant for this committee. One in three people with MS has had their support downgraded, and 2 per cent of people with MS have had to give up work altogether because they lost the enhanced rate of mobility support, which they needed to continue with their work. That work is really important not only for them as individuals but for the economy, and people should always be able to have that opportunity if they can. Around 611 people with MS gave up work altogether between 2020 and 2022 as a result of their loss of mobility. The MS Society believes, from speaking to people and from the evidence that it has gathered, that that has cost the Government in terms of support for people with MS, due to the additional cost to the national health service and the rise in claims on other forms of income support.

Having spoken to the MS Society, I felt that its points were very relevant and important.

What difference can the committee make by keeping the petition open? One consideration is that the committee is about engaging with people and ensuring that underrepresented voices are heard by giving them a platform.

The petitioner feels that keeping the petition open would offer that opportunity, certainly until the report on moving about is finalised. They also feel that people who are at the sharp end of the 20m rule want to be able to engage in meaningful debate and to continue that debate. Those people are a very marginalised group due to their disability, and they find it difficult to find avenues by which to participate in the discussion and debate. This committee has certainly allowed them to do that, and they would wish to continue. The committee has already had evidence, so it could continue that work relatively well. The MS Society feels that the Government is quite open to some of the evidence that the committee is collecting, so it would be relevant at that time.

It would seem premature to close the petition when the evidence has been supportive and the MS Society feels that the petition has been a very successful route for it and for its members. We hope that the committee will consider keeping it open, at least until the review is complete.

The Convener: Thank you for that.

The petition is an important one, and we have considered it in some detail. The Scottish Government has confirmed that it will include stakeholders in the review, and I propose that we keep the petition open at the current time.

I wonder whether colleagues would be happy for us to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government to request information and more detail on the timescales, including the dates for completion of each stage of the review; to ask how the Government intends to report on stage 1 of the review so that we have an understanding of the thinking; and to ask how the Government intends to engage with the Scottish Parliament throughout the period of the review and on the proposals and recommendations for action.

Are there any other proposals from the committee? Are we content to proceed on that basis?

David Torrance: I whole-heartedly agree with your recommendations, convener, but I think that the committee should wait until we see the first stage of the review before we bring the petition back to the committee and take any further decisions on it.

Fergus Ewing: Carol Mochan MSP has provided very interesting information about the

impact on people who have MS. I wonder whether it might be appropriate to write to the MS Society in order to elicit more information. Perhaps Carol Mochan could help the clerks by providing the information that she has. Given what she has informed the committee of today, I would be interested in digging a bit deeper to see whether there are people who have been casualties of the rule and have lost the ability to carry on working. That is a very serious matter, and I am very grateful that Carol Mochan has brought it to the committee today. I would be keen to see whether the MS Society could give us a more complete picture.

11:00

The Convener: That would be very helpful. Mr Park lodged the petition on behalf of the MS Society. It would be interesting to drill down into the very specific complications arising from the condition itself.

Paul Sweeney: I concur with your and Ms Mochan's comments, convener. There is an important need to keep the petition open. It is one thing to have the Government carry out a review, but it is the Parliament's role to keep the Government under scrutiny, and the committee has an important function in that regard. The issue is clearly a live item of business that the committee has been attending to, and we are therefore well placed to perform that role. It would also be helpful to inform the lead committee that we intend to do that.

The Convener: Is the committee content with that?

Members indicated agreement.

Funded Early Learning and Childcare (PE1907)

The Convener: PE1907, on the provision of funded early learning and childcare for all two-year-olds in Scotland, was lodged by Claire Beats. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide funded early learning and childcare for all two-year-olds and remove the eligibility criteria for access to services.

The committee last considered the petition on 23 March, when we agreed to write to the Scottish Government for further information, including on its plans to address concerns about the impact of Covid-19 on the development of children born during the pandemic.

We have received a response from the Scottish Government, in which it refers to its

“commitment to expand early learning and childcare to 1 and 2 year olds, starting in this Parliament with children from low income households.”

The response also states:

“the Scottish Government is funding a range of ... learning resources for ELC practitioners, which are directly relevant to supporting COVID-19 recovery”.

Do members have any comments or suggestions?

Alexander Stewart: Once again, this petition deals with a very live situation and set of circumstances. In its responses, the Scottish Government has indicated what it is trying to achieve, but it would be useful to get some further detail on the anticipated timescales for expanding early learning and childcare provision to one and two-year-olds. That will give us more clarity on where we stand and an idea of how to progress matters in the future.

The Convener: That seems sensible, Mr Stewart. Does the committee agree with that?

Members indicated agreement.

Secondary School Uniforms (PE1914)

The Convener: PE1914, on banning school uniforms in secondary schools, was lodged by Matthew Lewis Simpson. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to remove the requirement for school uniforms in secondary schools.

The committee last considered the petition on 20 April. At that meeting, we agreed to keep the petition open while we wrote to the Scottish Government following the publication of its consultation on school uniforms. We also agreed to write to the Scottish Government to highlight the evidence that we had received and to seek further information on how children and young people have been involved in the consultation process.

We have now received two responses from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, which highlight the timing of the Scottish Government's consultation on school uniforms—it ended on 14 October—and confirm that the consultation process would include bespoke engagement with children and young people. The cabinet secretary also suggested that the Scottish Government does not intend to take a uniform approach to uniforms and that local authorities and education authorities would also have a responsibility and determination in all of that.

Do members have any suggestions?

David Torrance: As the consultation has been published and the cabinet secretary has indicated that there are no plans to abolish school uniforms or mandate specific school uniforms, I do not think

that we can take the petition any further. I would like to close the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders.

The Convener: We thank the petitioner for raising the issue. The consultation has now been published and, as Mr Torrance has said, given the Scottish Government's response, that is the limit that the committee can go to. Do colleagues agree that we should close the petition?

Members *indicated agreement.*

New Petitions

HPV Vaccination Programme (PE1939)

11:04

The Convener: Item 2 is consideration of new petitions. PE1939, on amending the date of birth to allow wider accessibility to the human papillomavirus vaccination programme for boys, was lodged by Suzanne Thornton. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to demonstrate a commitment to health equality for young males who were born between 1 September 1997 and 1 September 2006 by allowing them to access the HPV vaccination via the national health service.

The petitioner has told us that she is concerned that the current vaccine eligibility criteria are creating a health inequality. She has noted that all girls, as well as men who have sex with men aged up to 45 years, are offered HPV vaccination, but young males who were born prior to September 2006 are unable to access the vaccine. Should a young male who was born prior to that date wish to receive the HPV vaccine, he would have to do so through private healthcare, which the petitioner has advised us would cost approximately £500 per person.

The Scottish Government notes in its response that eligibility for teenage immunisation programmes in Scotland is defined by academic year rather than date of birth. As such, any boy who started in secondary 1 in 2019-20 would have been offered the vaccine and will remain eligible up to his 25th birthday. The response also notes that the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation does not currently recommend a catch-up programme for boys and states that the evidence suggests that boys are already benefiting from indirect protection as a result of the roll-out of the vaccination programme to girls.

I know that the HPV vaccination has been controversial and that it has been the subject of previous discussion in the Public Petitions Committee in earlier parliamentary sessions.

Do members have any comments or suggestions in relation to the petition?

Alexander Stewart: This is an area that requires to be looked at in a little bit more depth in order to get more clarity, so I suggest that we write to the JCVI to ask whether it has any plans to review the need for, and the value of, the catch-up immunisation programme for males aged 25 and younger. I also suggest that we write to the Teenage Cancer Trust, Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust, Young Scot and the Men's Health Forum to seek their views on the issues raised by the

petition. All of that would be of interest to us in clarifying things and seeing what would be required in future.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Stewart. If colleagues have no other suggestions on organisations to contact, is the committee content to keep the petition open and to pursue further evidence from those sources?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The petition will stay open, and we will seek to gather evidence for consideration at a later date.

Peer Support Programmes (Public Sector) (PE1942)

The Convener: PE1942, on encouraging peer support programmes in public sector organisations, was lodged by Fiona MacRae. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to promote the use of peer support programmes such as trauma risk management, or TRIM, and sustaining resilience at work, or STRAW, in public sector workplaces to promote better mental health.

The petitioner has told us that use of the TRIM and STRAW processes could help to create psychological safety at work by encouraging employees to complete an incident report when they experience or witness behaviours that might affect employees' mental health. She has also suggested that early intervention could help to reduce the number of employees experiencing mental health problems and contribute to a safer and more positive workplace culture.

In responding to the petition's aims, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has provided information on a range of actions that are being taken to promote mentally healthy workplaces, including a mental health transition and recovery plan, funding for a national trauma training programme, and the establishment of a peer recovery hub by the Scottish Recovery Network.

Do members have any suggestions or comments with regard to further action?

David Torrance: I wonder whether we can keep the petition open so that we can get more information. We could write to relevant stakeholder organisations, including the Mental Health Foundation, the Scottish Association for Mental Health, the Samaritans, the Scottish Recovery Network and the Laura Hyde Foundation, to seek their views on the value of, and the need for, the provision of peer support programmes in workplaces across Scotland.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Torrance. If colleagues have nothing to add, are members

content to keep the petition open and to write to the organisations that Mr Torrance has suggested?

Members indicated agreement.

Brownfield Sites (Remediation and Reuse) (PE1943)

The Convener: PE1943, which is on helping to prevent the destruction of greenfield sites by providing financial incentives for the remediation and reuse of brownfield sites, has been lodged by Victoria Mungall and calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce financial support mechanisms that would enable local authorities to work alongside developers in bringing brownfield sites back into use, while discouraging developments on greenfield land.

Victoria Mungall tells us that brownfield sites can often be difficult and expensive to remediate due to contamination, unstable ground and other challenges. That results in greenfield sites being targeted for development, as they can be far less expensive for developers to build on. She also highlights that, in England, grants have been introduced that allow local authorities to contribute to the remediation of brownfield land.

In its response, the Scottish Government provides details of the vacant and derelict land investment programme, which was launched in March 2021. That £50 million fund is available on a competitive basis to all Scottish local authorities and to the Clyde Gateway urban regeneration company.

Members might be aware that the draft national planning framework 4 proposes an updated and expanded policy on vacant and derelict land that discourages development on greenfield land, unless no suitable brownfield alternatives are available.

Do members have any thoughts or comments?

David Torrance: The committee should keep the petition open until the fourth national planning framework is finalised and approved, so that we can see an updated version. We should also write to the Royal Town Planning Institute, Homes for Scotland and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to seek their views on the issues raised in the petition.

The Convener: Are members content with those suggestions? Should we write to any other organisations?

Paul Sweeney: Vacant and derelict land is a particularly acute issue in Glasgow. I think that the bulk of Scotland's derelict land is in Glasgow, so it would be interesting to get insights from the Clyde

Gateway urban regeneration company, which is the only urban regeneration company left in Scotland, about its work and the model that it has adopted.

It would also be worth while engaging with the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland and the Chartered Institute of Building, which has proposed a demolition levy to promote the reuse and renovation of buildings. A major disincentive has been created through the tax system whereby the renovation and retrofitting of existing buildings is subject to 20 per cent VAT, but demolition and new builds are zero rated, so a handicap is imposed on what should be the right thing to do. That is why you often see otherwise pleasant-looking buildings being destroyed; it does not make any financial sense for the developer to renovate them. There are some perverse incentives out there that should be investigated, because addressing them could be part of the remedy.

The Convener: I am very happy to accommodate that suggestion. Are members of the committee content to keep the petition open and to write to the organisations suggested ahead of further consideration when we receive responses?

Members indicated agreement.

Peat (Ban on Extraction and Use in Horticulture) (PE1945)

The Convener: PE1945, which is on banning the extraction and use of peat in horticulture and all growing media by 2023, was lodged by Elizabeth Otway. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to place a legal ban on the extraction of peat and peat imports, exports and sales in order to protect peatlands in Scotland and worldwide.

Elizabeth Otway states that the Scottish Government's investment in peatland restoration is undermined by continued extraction and use of peat in horticulture. The call for a 2023 deadline is in line with the UK Climate Change Committee's recommendation to ban peat extraction, sales and imports by 2023.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing notes that the Scottish Government's commitment to phase out the use of horticultural peat has been made for several years. The UK Government aims to end the retail sale of peat and products containing peat in England and Wales by the end of the current UK Parliament, and by 2028 in the professional horticulture sector.

The Scottish Government's response indicates that a public consultation will be launched shortly to inform its work in relation to banning the sale of

peat-related gardening products, and it has commissioned research on the issue. The Scottish Government states that it is committed to setting a timescale for phasing out peat and to introducing legislation to support that.

In view of that suggestion to us from the Scottish Government, do members have any comments or further suggestions?

David Torrance: We should keep the petition open and, in doing so, write to the Scottish Government to highlight the UK Climate Change Committee's recommendations to ban practices such as rotational burning on peatland by 2020 and to ban peat extraction, the sale of peat and peat imports by 2023. We should ask how feasible it would be to ban the extraction and use of peat by 2023; when the Scottish Government expects the delivery plan and timetable for phasing out horticultural peat to be developed and produced; when the public consultation will be launched; and how the petitioner can contribute to the consultation.

11:15

Fergus Ewing: I was not quite sure whether the petition was calling for restrictions beyond the use of peat for horticulture. From what David Torrance said, and the reference that he made, it would appear that the Climate Change Committee recommends going further than that and banning peat for burning. Given that we all know that the burning of peat is traditional in crofting counties as an essential means of heat and is a cultural practice that has gone on for centuries, I wonder whether any attempt to ban said practice would be met with horror and outright opposition, if not direct action, by crofters. We might write to the Scottish Crofting Federation to seek its guidance on whom we should be consulting on the matter, because I suspect that it will become—to use a rather poor pun—a burning issue.

The Convener: I wondered which pun, from a range of poor puns, you were going to reach for there, Mr Ewing.

I am happy for us to do that. Are members content with that approach?

Members indicated agreement.

Homeless Temporary Accommodation (Scottish Government Funding) (PE1946)

The Convener: PE1946, which was lodged by Sean Clerkin, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to use general taxation to pay for all charges for temporary accommodation for homeless people, including writing off the £33.3 million debt that is owed by

homeless people to local authorities for temporary accommodation.

Sean Clerkin tells us that vulnerable homeless people, including working people,

“are being forced into serious debt.”

His recent submission highlights the increase in the number of homeless households in temporary accommodation over recent years and states that the situation will worsen given the cost of living crisis. He says that, without the action that is called for, the financial burden and further poverty will drive many people into physical and mental ill health.

The SPICe briefing that the committee received states that councils use different methods of calculating charges for temporary accommodation and that a Social Bite report found that there was wide variation in costs, which ranged from £65 to £400 per week. The Legal Services Agency published a report that noted

“varying levels of detail in local authority policies and varying regard for, and definition of, the affordability of temporary accommodation.”

The LSA recommends that, in the longer term, charging individuals for temporary accommodation should be prohibited.

The Scottish Government’s response highlighted its forthcoming housing bill, which will seek to prevent homelessness through principles of shared public responsibility, earlier intervention and increased housing choices for individuals. It has also established a temporary accommodation task and finish group, which will review charging practices and affordability concerns.

Do members have any suggestions or comments in relation to the petition?

David Torrance: Perhaps the committee could keep the petition open and, in doing so, write to the Scottish Government to ask whether the forthcoming housing bill will include provisions to prohibit local authorities from charging individuals for the provision of temporary accommodation, and whether the Government will give consideration to paying for temporary accommodation for homeless people and to waiving the outstanding debt that is owed by homeless people to local authorities for temporary accommodation.

Alexander Stewart: I am content to support Mr Torrance’s calls, convener. As you indicated in your opening remarks, there is no doubt that the cost of living crisis will have a knock-on effect on all of this, and there might well be a need to clarify what will be developed in the housing bill so that we can make progress. Without that, the situation could spiral into a much larger issue for many local authorities and individuals.

Paul Sweeney: I propose that we invite Shelter Scotland to make a submission on the petition, as it might have some important insights.

The Convener: I am happy to accommodate that.

As there are no further suggestions, are members happy to keep the petition open and proceed on that basis? We can consider the petition afresh when we receive the submissions that we are now seeking.

Members indicated agreement.

Youth Violence (PE1947)

The Convener: PE1947, which was lodged by Alex O’Kane, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to address the disturbing culture of youth violence in Scotland. The petitioner highlights a culture of youth violence in Glasgow city centre, saying that children as young as 13 years old have been kicked unconscious and that such incidents have been videoed and circulated on social media. He also sent us a further submission to highlight a recent incident involving a young girl. He says that children should be safe on our streets and that young people

“need to learn about consequences and deterrents or they will simply become adults without fear of consequences and deterrents.”

The Scottish Government’s response outlines a number of on-going programmes and the work that is being undertaken with partner organisations such as the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit and Medics Against Violence. It also highlights a notable decrease in the number of young people frequenting Glasgow city centre and an associated decrease in antisocial behaviour and violence.

The Government states its plan to publish the first national violence prevention framework for Scotland, which seeks to refresh its approach to violence prevention and harm reduction. Its submission also notes that there was an 85 per cent reduction in the number of children and young people being prosecuted in courts between 2008 and 2020.

In view of the Scottish Government’s response and our own thoughts on this important petition, do members have any comments or suggestions?

Alexander Stewart: This is a very important petition. I know that it talks primarily about Glasgow, but there are other locations across Scotland where people are suffering from the blight of violence and where young people who find it difficult to assimilate what they should or want to do choose to go out and be involved in antisocial behaviour and vandalism, which can sometimes lead to violence. The petitioner has

given us some strong examples of what is taking place and has highlighted how social media is being used to publicise and promote some of these things. That, too, is a dangerous development.

I suggest that, as a first step, the committee might wish to seek evidence from those with lived experience across the board, because that will give us an opportunity to have further discussions with individuals about the details of the situation and to hear about certain circumstances. There is also a role for community safety, the police and other authorities to play in all of this, so it would be very useful for some of those people to be involved and to participate, too.

Paul Sweeney: The petition was lodged following a spate of violence in Glasgow city centre and surrounding areas that the petitioner brought to my attention earlier in the year. Since then, there have been several instances in which the level of violence on display has been absolutely horrifying, most notably in the case of 13-year-old Abbie Jarvis. I do not want to get into the specifics of the case—legal proceedings are under way and I do not want to prejudice them—but I point out that, following media coverage, this petition has become known as Abbie’s petition, and I know that my colleague Pauline McNeill MSP has been engaging with Abbie’s family to see what can be done to support them.

I would therefore like the petition to be kept open and progressed. I know that the Government has responded by setting out the measures that it is taking to try to reduce youth violence in Scotland, but I put it to the committee that those measures have not been adequate and that in big cities such as Glasgow—particularly in the city centre—the situation is getting worse. From my conversations with Police Scotland and the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, it appears that there is no one reason for the recent increase; indeed, the problem is multifaceted. I therefore think that the committee will benefit from hearing from the likes of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit and, if they wish to appear before us, families who have been directly impacted by youth violence.

The Convener: Mr Stewart has suggested that it might be of interest for us to proactively visit communities that have been affected by the issue. Does that appeal to the committee?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will therefore write to organisations involved in order to do that and ask the Parliament’s engagement team to develop a programme for us. Are members happy for that to happen?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Would members like us to visit anywhere in particular, bearing in mind that, given our timetables, any visit is not likely to happen until the new year, or is the committee happy for the engagement team to come back to us?

Paul Sweeney: A particular focus of antisocial behaviour has been St Enoch square and what was formerly known as the four corners area of Glasgow around Argyle Street and under the Hielanman’s umbrella, but I am sure that the petitioner will have suggestions, too.

The Convener: Are we therefore content for some recommendations to be evolved on where we might visit and to plan to undertake that visit early in the new year?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The clerks will take that forward for us. On that basis, we will keep the petition open.

Unexplained Deaths (PE1948)

The Convener: PE1948, which was also lodged by Alex O’Kane, is on improving the way in which unexplained deaths are dealt with. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to encourage Police Scotland to review its practices for dealing with unexplained deaths, from initial recovery through to the support that is offered to family members.

Alex O’Kane stresses that, when a body is discovered with no clear cause of death, there is a vital window of time when decisions are made and evidence can be secured or lost. He says that, because an unexplained death is not considered to be a crime, the same level of resources are not invested to support the person’s family, and victim support is not involved. He also stresses the need for good and supportive police communication with families in such situations.

The Scottish Government’s submission sets out the process that is followed by both Police Scotland and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service when managing unexplained, reportable deaths. Police officers are expected to undertake a range of actions during an initial assessment to determine the response. If at any stage circumstances indicate a “police reportable death”, the assessment must be halted and officers must notify supervisors and the criminal investigation department.

In dealing with unexplained deaths, one of the key principles highlighted by the Scottish Government is that the deceased and any family or friends are treated with respect, dignity and compassion. Guidance states that consideration should also be given to the appointment of a family liaison officer for bereaved relatives.

Do members have any comments or suggestions?

Paul Sweeney: I have engaged with the petitioner on the petition, which I believe is known as Stephanie's petition. Stephanie Bonner is a constituent who lost her son three years ago in what was recorded as an unexplained death. The family has had no answers, has been let down by the authorities and is awaiting the outcome of a review by the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner into the handling of the case. Nothing that I say today will do justice to the importance of the petition.

I am of the opinion that the committee should invite Stephanie Bonner to give evidence on her experience since the tragic passing of her son three years ago. I gave a commitment to the petitioner that I would encourage the committee to invite Stephanie to the committee at the earliest opportunity. Today's meeting is the first opportunity that I have had to stand by that commitment.

Fundamentally, the petition is about improving the way in which unexplained deaths are dealt with. In order to do that, it is vital that the committee hears at first hand from those with experience of the current system and its flaws, and about the impact that that can have on families who are grieving and seeking answers and closure.

The Convener: We have a proposal to hear from the petitioner. It might be useful to seek further information from a variety of other organisations ahead of that. Do members have any suggestions in that respect?

David Torrance: I agree with Paul Sweeney's comments. Can we also write to Police Scotland for information on how a family liaison officer is deployed and on their role, training and accountability in such situations?

The Convener: We can. We might also want to write to Victim Support Scotland to ask for its views.

I apologise for my earlier mistake—the petitioner is Alex O'Kane. The clerks can liaise with Mr Sweeney in relation to the individual affected who would like to give evidence to the committee.

At this stage, are we prepared to keep the petition open and to explore how we take forward the suggestions that have been made?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Trawl and Dredge Fisheries (Inshore Coastal Limit) (PE1951)

The Convener: That brings us to the last of this morning's new petitions. PE1951, which was

lodged by Alistair Bally Philp on behalf of the Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation, is on reinstating an inshore coastal limit on the use of dredge and trawl fishing gears. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to reintroduce a variation of the historical 3-mile coastal limit on the use of mobile dredge and bottom-trawling fish gears to support: the recovery of Scotland's inshore demersal fin-fish population and the wider ecosystem; opportunities to optimise the social, economic and environmental returns within the new spatially managed area; and increases in the number of fishing jobs and the revitalisation of coastal communities.

The Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation highlights the decline in fish landings and the significant losses of marine features since the removal of the historical inshore limit. It is concerned that, despite the use of marine protected areas, less than 5 per cent of Scotland's inshore waters are currently protected from damaging trawling and dredging activity. The federation has also shared information on economic studies, showing that switching fishing effort from trawl fishery to creel fishery has the potential to

"yield substantial economic, social and environmental benefits to Scotland".

11:30

In its response to the petition, the Scottish Government states that it has engaged in extensive discussions on the matter with the Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation and has no plans to introduce a 3-mile limit to restrict mobile gear activity in inshore waters. The Scottish Government suggests that there are already a range of measures in place to protect fish stocks, and it highlights commitments contained in the Bute house agreement, including the designation of highly protected marine areas, which are to cover at least 10 per cent of Scotland's inshore and offshore waters by 2026.

The petition has already attracted a large number of written submissions, many of which indicate concerns about the Scottish Government's approach to marine management.

Given everything that we have received in advance of our consideration of the petition this morning, do members have any comments or suggestions? It appears that both Mr Stewart and Mr Torrance are keen to jump in.

David Torrance: Considering that there is another parliamentary committee working in this area, I would like to refer the petition to the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment

Committee for it to consider as part of its work on inshore fisheries issues.

Alexander Stewart: I agree. The federation makes some strong and valid points in the petition. It would be more appropriate for the petition to be considered by the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee, given that that committee is already looking into inshore fisheries issues. That is the right place for it, because that committee will look at the issue in much more depth and with the appropriate precision.

Paul Sweeney: I cannot remember what stage it is at, but I believe that there is a UK Parliament Fisheries Bill—it might have already passed into statute. It might be worth contacting the Scotland Office to see whether the UK Government has input on the matter.

The Convener: We can draw that together with the recommendation when we refer the petition. Given that the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee is already exploring the issues, do we agree to refer the petition to that committee?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you very much. We will next meet on 9 November. That concludes the public part of the meeting.

11:32

Meeting continued in private until 12:17.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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