



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 14 December 2023

Session 6



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CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
35th Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

*Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)

*Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

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

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab) (Committee Substitute)

Fraser Dick (Scottish Government)

Katrine Feldinger (Scottish Government)

Kirstin McPhee (Scottish Government)

Catriona Radcliffe (Scottish Government)

Emma Roddick (Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees)

Christopher Thomson (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 14 December 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:17]

Ukraine

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning and welcome to the 31st and final meeting of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee in 2023. I apologise for the slightly late start. We have apologies from Neil Bibby, who is substituted, not for the first time, by Foysoyl Choudhury MSP. We welcome him, and there is no need for him to make a declaration of interests.

Our second agenda item is to take evidence in support of people who have been displaced from Ukraine to Scotland. We are joined by Emma Roddick, the Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees. She is supported by Kirstin McPhee, head of ministerial support, and Fraser Dick, head of Ukraine resettlement finance, both from the Scottish Government.

I invite the minister to make an opening statement.

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): I am glad to attend the committee for the first time in my role as Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees. I am aware that the committee has taken a key interest in the Scottish Government's response to the war in Ukraine and that you undertook several evidence sessions this spring. There has been much progress since then and I am glad to have the opportunity to update you on some key developments since you last considered that work.

Scotland stands for democracy, human rights and the rule of law at home and abroad and offers unqualified support for Ukrainian sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.

I am proud of how Scotland has responded to a humanitarian crisis and grateful to all who have opened their homes to displaced Ukrainians fleeing the war, providing sanctuary to more displaced Ukrainians per head of population than any other United Kingdom nation. We are glad to have been able to support so many people fleeing war by working with local government, the third sector and local volunteer communities. We have been clear from the outset: Scotland is their home for as long as they need one.

We are aware that many Ukrainians are already in the second year of their three-year visa period, and they are anxious about the future. I am engaging with my Home Office counterpart to seek clarity on the position, and I will work with the Home Office to ensure that we communicate that as early as possible to Ukrainians living in Scotland.

We published "A Warm Scots Future: Policy Position Paper" on 27 September. It outlines our new strategic priorities for supporting the longer-term integration of displaced people from Ukraine living in Scotland.

Scotland has the strongest rights in the UK for people experiencing homelessness, but we are committed to ensuring that no one needs to become homeless in the first place, including displaced people from Ukraine. More than 26,000 people from Ukraine have now arrived in the UK with a Scottish sponsor, more than 20,500 of them through our supersponsor scheme. As part of the warm Scots welcome, safe and suitable welcome accommodation is provided to those arrivals who need it. Our supersponsor scheme has ensured that all arrivals in Scotland have had access to suitable welcome accommodation and are now being supported into longer-term accommodation.

We are investing more than £100 million in the Ukrainian resettlement programme in 2023-24 to ensure that people continue to receive a warm Scots welcome and are supported to rebuild their lives in our communities for as long as they need to call Scotland their home. That builds on the significant funding of around £200 million that we have provided to support resettlement in 2022-23. "A Warm Scots Future", which was developed in partnership by the Scottish Government, the Scottish Refugee Council and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, re-commits partners to working to reduce the numbers of people in welcome accommodation and provides a framework for integration within communities. We have set out our plan to reduce the numbers of people in welcome accommodation and the length of time that people are spending there. We published our response detailing the actions that we are taking to reduce the use of temporary accommodation on 19 July.

We will invest at least £60 million this year through the affordable housing supply programme to support a national acquisition plan. We will maintain momentum in delivering the affordable housing supply programme, and we will work with social landlords to deliver a new programme of stock management. We will implement targeted partnership plans with the local authorities that are facing the greatest pressure, backed by an additional £2 million. Work to set the conditions for effective delivery has been progressing in parallel

to preparing our response, and we are ready to hit the ground running in implementing the actions that are being taken.

To help continue to drive down the numbers of people in welcome accommodation, and to encourage guests to move on from welcome accommodation, we are introducing a new national moving on policy, which requires guests to accept reasonable offers of accommodation, with a re-entry policy to prevent future presentations. We have introduced two new policies to tackle our reliance on welcome accommodation. Local authorities will seek to make two reasonable offers of accommodation to all displaced people. Where possible, those offers will be within the original local authority area or in a neighbouring local authority area. Where necessary, offers can be anywhere in Scotland.

I hope that that has given a helpful overview of the work that has been going on. I will now take questions from members.

The Convener: As Motherwell and Wishaw constituency MSP, I know that we have been lucky to have North Lanarkshire Council engage with the fund for social landlords. There is a tower in my area that was dedicated for use in this regard, and that has worked out extremely well, with support services on hand. The families there are very well integrated into local schools and organisations. That was supported by a £50 million fund, and my understanding is that £23 million of it has been used to date. Can the cabinet secretary explain how the rest of that fund will be used? What barriers are there to getting social landlords to take up that opportunity for Ukrainians?

Emma Roddick: We have certainly been engaging with local authorities and social landlords to encourage the use of the fund and to encourage authorities to consider where stock might be suitable. There is already a pipeline of around 100 homes for future development. As more and more developments open up and we see their success and what that has meant on the ground, more people might view it as a positive way not just to support Ukrainians in the community but to ensure that there is a lasting legacy of social housing that can be used in the future.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. I now move to questions from the committee. Mr Brown will go first.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): We have been given a really good briefing from the Scottish Parliament information centre, which includes details on the number of people who left the two ships, *Ambition* and the other one. In each case, quite a small number of people left to go to hosted

accommodation. I think that the figure for the other one was 1 per cent and for the *Ambition*, it was 7 per cent. Do you have a figure for how many people generally—by which I mean not just the people on those ships—went to hosted accommodation?

Emma Roddick: The other one is the *Victoria*. That shows the success of having that support service on board. Residents had the space and time to explore all their options while they were in supported accommodation. I know that many of them were keen to take up offers, which allowed a group to be able to travel together and then continue to support one another after building up a support network.

I do not know whether we have any figures for the number of people who are in hosted accommodation.

Kirstin McPhee (Scottish Government): We can certainly look into that. The issue with the homes for Ukraine scheme is that, if people do not come on a supersponsor visa, they might go straight to hosted accommodation, so we would not necessarily have access to those figures. However, we can do a bit of digging and write to the committee with an update on that.

Keith Brown: On a personal note, I hosted a Ukrainian family for six months and was able to get them both permanent accommodation and a job—in fact, two jobs. We have stayed in contact—they are now in the minister's region—and their real worry is about what happens now. They see the 18-month deadline looming. Their home in Nikolaev was destroyed, and they have no idea where they would go back to. Having taken the opportunity to get a quite specialist job and having settled, after moving from Killin to me to where they are now, they are still really worried. Is the UK Government giving any reason why it will not confirm what its intentions are?

Secondly, given the possibility—I will put it no higher than that—that there could be a change in Government next year, and I know that you will have Government-to-Government relations, is there any indication of where the Labour Party stands in relation to the three-year visa?

Emma Roddick: Labour's position is not something that I can speak to, but we are certainly keeping an eye on the possibility of a change in Government. For my part, I am willing to work with anyone who might be in a position to give Ukrainians in Scotland that certainty, because it is by far the issue that is raised most often with me and officials when we are out speaking to the Ukrainian community in Scotland.

Members might be aware that I wrote to my Home Office counterpart yesterday, along with COSLA and the Scottish Refugee Council,

pressing for that clarity to be provided. I think that the Home Office's current position is that it has not decided on its preferred option, so it is not yet able to communicate it to us or to Ukrainians living in the UK, but we are in regular communication about it.

I and colleagues in the refugee space in Scotland have been pressing regularly for any kind of timescale or update that we can provide. I know that the uncertainty impacts family and travel plans and it causes people to be hesitant about committing to long-term employment and housing. Everything in their lives is up in the air, so we are very much alive to the issue.

I also know that officials have been working with UK officials to try to move things along. In partnership with the Ukrainian Government, we want to make sure that clarity is provided.

Keith Brown: It was not the ideal way for people to come, but it was necessary at the time and, like the convener, I have to say that Clackmannanshire Council did a superb job, as did Stirling Council in Killin. Is any work being done to look at how that might be kept as an infrastructure, almost like a resilience facility? The committee has talked about whether people coming from Gaza could be accommodated in a similar way. Are we keeping that infrastructure? I have not heard a word about the scheme since the family left and I wonder whether we are thinking about how we might use it for the future.

Emma Roddick: I will bring in Kirstin McPhee on planning for Gaza, because I know that things are moving very quickly there. Although we are very focused on the immediate call for a ceasefire, which is absolutely the correct focus, we have also asked the UK Government to allow us to be part of a humanitarian response for those who want to leave and need to seek a place of safety.

09:30

The hosted accommodation is not the most appropriate infrastructure, and it is probably not our first option. However, the homes for Ukraine policy has allowed us to prove that it can work if it is managed correctly. Members will be getting similar correspondence from constituents who want to do their bit and want to help as I have been. Hosting can be a really helpful piece of the puzzle when we are dealing with humanitarian crises, but it is certainly not the immediate fallback.

Kirstin McPhee: I can add to that. Members will be aware that hosting is the sort of bedrock of the UK approach to the homes for Ukraine policy. We have taken a different approach by using the super sponsor scheme so that people can come to Scotland safely without the need to secure a host.

However, hosting is still a very important part of the infrastructure and building resilience in Scotland, particularly when we are responding to situations such as that in Gaza. We have undertaken a review of our approach to hosting. There is a strategic policy focus on hosting to consider the current guidance and improvements that can be made; we will engage with host families and people who have stayed in hosted accommodation so that we can learn those lessons and apply them to future schemes, for example, if we had to stand up a response to Gaza.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I want to ask about the supersponsor scheme, which has been paused since July 2022, which is almost a year and a half ago. Plainly, visas that have been issued under that scheme are still valid, but is there any intention to restart it? Has it now served its purpose? Where does it stand?

Emma Roddick: We are very alive to the fact that things can change. We have been reviewing the supersponsor scheme pause regularly—previously at three-month intervals and now at six-month intervals, with the next review happening this month. Within that, there are a number of tests—including escalation in the war, which would mean that more people were in immediate need of support—and if those were met, we would consider reopening the scheme.

However, as the member noted, given the number of visas that the Scottish Government has sponsored that have not resulted in Ukrainian arrivals, it is difficult to balance the numbers. We would be in the position of not knowing the scale of the numbers of people to whom we might need to provide immediate support; we have a responsibility to everyone who comes for support to provide the best that we can, and to provide suitable accommodation and not end up with people having to stay in temporary accommodation for too long. That is quite a difficult situation to manage, which is why we need to keep reviewing it and make sure that the tests are met before reopening the scheme.

Donald Cameron: So the scheme is still live, as it were.

Emma Roddick: Yes.

Donald Cameron: Was there any evidence that the pause in some way disincentivised people from coming? Are you content to say that the pause made no difference?

Emma Roddick: It is not something that I am aware of. It is near impossible to get information about the reasons why those who were issued visas did not then come to Scotland. It is not something that I have picked up on anecdotally.

Kirstin McPhee: We could say that the number of arrivals has steadily slowed. As the minister says, we cannot account for why that might be the case, but it has meant that we have had fewer people in welcome accommodation and have begun to be able to move the focus to integration rather than crisis response.

Fraser Dick (Scottish Government): I can give some context to that fact. We should note that approximately 13,000 visas were issued to people who have not yet travelled to the UK and, as Mr Cameron mentioned, the pause came into effect over a year ago now. So, if someone has had their visa for over a year at this point and has not yet travelled, we might say that it is fairly unlikely that they will. They have probably made other plans or resolved to remain in Ukraine or a myriad of other things. However, as we say, that possibility is live and those people could still arrive. However, as Kirstin McPhee said, arrivals are slowing to a lower level.

Donald Cameron: That is really helpful. I turn to the issue of accommodation and rent guarantees. A while ago now, we had evidence from the Ukrainian consul that he was in favour of local authorities acting as rent guarantors to enable people from Ukraine to access private rented accommodation. Highland Council, the area that the minister and I both represent, already operates such a scheme, and I think that Edinburgh and Glasgow councils were part of a national working group that was looking into that. Has that group reported, and is there any action that the Scottish Government can take to help local authorities to introduce rental guarantee schemes?

Emma Roddick: I am aware that more than half of local authorities now operate some form of scheme, and we looked into the feasibility of something wider. I do not have the report from the working group.

Kirstin McPhee: The difficulty of accessing the private rented sector is, unfortunately, not unique to Scotland. We have on-going conversations with the other nations about how better we can facilitate access to the PRS. It is a really difficult question and, obviously, different areas do things a bit differently.

We have paused that national approach in order to pursue other measures to support Ukrainians into longer-term accommodation. However, as the minister said, a number of local authorities already have their own guarantor schemes. We continue to keep in contact with them to learn lessons and to support them to help displaced people to access the private rented sector.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I am aware that there are about 3,000 people who are still in their welcome

accommodation and that councils are working very hard to offer people two options: moving into a tenancy or moving into hosted accommodation. However, is there a group of people who would prefer to stay in the welcome accommodation? I am thinking in particular about rural situations where somebody might have moved into a hotel—such as the Killin hotel, which Mr Brown has mentioned—got a job in the local area and become quite settled but the accommodation options in the community are pretty limited. I know that that was previously an issue, but is it still an issue? In that particular instance, a number of people moved out of the hotel—indeed, a family went to stay with Mr Brown, which is great. For people who have become quite settled in such areas and are quite satisfied with the situation that they are in, to what extent is there a bit of a residual issue in supporting them with what is appropriate and what they want?

Emma Roddick: That is a really good question, which helpfully recognises the nuance. There is a tendency for some people to view Ukrainians as a homogeneous group, but they are absolutely not. There are people who, although seeking safety here, view their residency in Scotland as extremely temporary and do not want to be here any longer than necessary. They are ready to move back to Ukraine any day. It is tough for many people to think about long-term housing options in Scotland when that is not where their heads are at.

It is not solely an issue for more rural areas. Members will be aware of the housing situation in Edinburgh. It is very difficult to find private rents here. I spoke to many Ukrainians on the MS Victoria who would have loved to stay on the boat for a good few years.

However, our focus is to get people into longer-term suitable accommodation as soon as possible. It is sensitive when our policies are at odds with the feelings of people who are not ready to think about being in Scotland long term. That is why we offer wraparound support, working with local authorities and the third sector to ensure that people know what their options are and feel supported and welcomed for as long as they need to be here, even if that is a bit longer than they had hoped.

Mark Ruskell: In that instance, Stirling Council has done great work in a complex and sensitive situation. Is it your impression that councils are able to support people right now, or are there particular areas where there is a difficulty and councils are struggling? You mentioned Edinburgh. There might be other areas where there are housing pressures.

Emma Roddick: There are certainly difficulties, but I would point more to the successes in

councils. Edinburgh has certainly been one where the wraparound support has been good and the partnership working with the third sector has been very visible, despite housing pressures.

We work to encourage other local authorities to raise their game and ensure that they are doing all that they can to support Ukrainians in their areas or to let Ukrainians who are currently in welcome accommodation know what the options are within their area if they have not considered them yet. There are really good examples from across the country, despite the housing pressures, of creative thinking and of good work with the third sector.

Alexander Stewart: You have spoken about success and there is no question that there have been successes. What is the working relationship between the Government, the Scottish Refugee Council and COSLA? You have said that you want to take a targeted approach in dealing with local authorities. How successful has that been? That was very successful in the initial stages, when a large number of people needed, and were given, support. How has that progressed since then? Are you now finding barriers within certain local authorities that are not able to give as much support now as they did in the past?

Emma Roddick: I recognise that everyone is under pressure and that there are many competing priorities, but I am still very proud of the work that we have done in partnership with COSLA and the Scottish Refugee Council. I would describe our relationship as very strong. I meet extremely regularly with the new Scots partners—we have met twice this week—and I hope that they would also describe the relationship as strong and positive. The letter that went to the Home Office yesterday, pressing for clarity about the visa issue, came from us all, which shows that our partnership is strong and consistent.

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I visited MS Victoria and MS Ambition, where I spoke with Ukrainians and saw the service that they were getting. They are now in temporary accommodation and I am not sure if they are getting the same sort of service as they were. You have mentioned that Edinburgh is struggling with the housing crisis, but every council in Scotland is in the same position. What discussions are you having with councils? It does not look as if the conflict will end soon, so what discussions are you having with councils about long-term housing?

Emma Roddick: There has been really positive progress in moving displaced Ukrainians into longer-term accommodation, and the number of people still in temporary welcome accommodation is dropping steadily. We have seen that since the disembarkation of the two ships. Whereas we previously had to keep a lot of welcome accommodation available in case that

disembarkation needed some support, we are now able to move away from keeping so many rooms available, which is bringing down the monthly cost of the Ukrainian scheme. That is possible because more and more Ukrainians are finding suitable longer-term accommodation.

Foysoil Choudhury: Kirstin McPhee mentioned the supersponsor scheme. Is that still open?

Emma Roddick: It has been paused.

Foysoil Choudhury: My last question is about the Westminster Government's current immigration measures. Do you think that those will affect your negotiations with Ukrainians or with any other refugees who want to come to Scotland?

Emma Roddick: I hope that they will not have a direct impact on Ukrainians living in Scotland, and there are certainly no procedural reasons why they should, given the way that their visas have been issued. My main worry would be about the longer-term visa position and the need to give people clarity as soon as possible, so that they can start to plan and so that we, their employers and councils can also start to plan.

More generally, I am worried about the impact that the new immigration proposals, including the Rwanda bill, the Illegal Migration Act 2023 and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, will have on how the UK is viewed internationally.

09:45

Most Ukrainians with whom I have spoken have been very positive about their experience of being supported and welcomed by Scotland, but I worry about how well we will be able to get across the message about the support that is available here if their first impression of Scotland as part of the UK—for Ukrainians and anyone else seeking safety—is they are not welcome here.

Foysoil Choudhury: I note the requirement for a salary of £38,000.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Unfortunately, I fear that Ukraine and the situation in the middle east will not be the last conflicts in the world. That may be stating the obvious. Scotland has always led the way in offering support and asylum where we can. What have we learned from the response to the need to help house Ukrainians that would inform our response to refugees from Gaza, if we are able to facilitate asylum for them?

Emma Roddick: Gosh, there are so many things. There was a positive response, not just through our partnerships with local councils and third sector community groups but in the way that people came forward to support Ukrainians,

whether organising collections of aid or money or helping them in other ways. Whenever people heard that a Ukrainian family was moving into an island community, they surrounded it and came together to make sure that those people felt safe and felt that they were a part of the community. In particular, the difference between the 3,000 people that we said that we would take in Scotland and the almost 25,000 that we have ended up with—an incredible number—shows that we can support people when we want to do so.

Kate Forbes: Accommodation provision had to be identified at record speeds. Some of that provision was temporary. Might we in future be able to arrange for the rapid provision, from the very beginning, of temporary accommodation that is a bit more permanent, rather than having to draft in boats or whatever?

Emma Roddick: From the beginning, we have been willing to be creative about finding suitable accommodation with wraparound support. We would be willing to explore, as we have done, any ideas and any availability of suitable buildings or space that can be used effectively.

When it comes to MS Ambition and MS Victoria, I went on board one of those boats, as Foysol Choudhury did, and was incredibly impressed with the services that were available. That was an example of temporary accommodation being done well, whereby people were welcomed and given all the support that they required to find longer-term accommodation.

Kate Forbes: I have one last question. We may do all that we can to offer accommodation and services but, ultimately, we still do not have the power to grant visas or access to the UK. A lot of organisations and charities that worked closely with us when it came to Ukraine—in particular, the Sanctuary Foundation—also want to work closely with us when it comes to the middle east. This may not be a question that you can answer but, having worked collaboratively with the UK Government on the Ukraine situation, do we have tried and tested ways of saying, “Look, we have X number of homes available for refugees and we can look after them. Can you please enable that?” That is not unique to the middle east; it applies to anywhere.

Emma Roddick: Absolutely. We have been doing that for the past few months. I have been clear with the UK Government—as has the First Minister—that Scotland stands ready now. If the UK Government makes moves to open a resettlement scheme for people who need to leave Gaza and seek safety, we have been clear that Scotland will do its part to take in refugees and support them in the way that we did Ukrainians. Likewise, we have also been clear that we would use the Scottish NHS to support injured and sick

children in Gaza. It is very frustrating that those powers do not lie with us.

During the past few weeks, we have been clear about what an independent Scotland would do differently. We set out what our immigration system would look like, and have been clear that it would be based on treating other humans with dignity, fairness and respect. However, in the meantime, this is the system that we operate in. We have been very clear to the UK Government that, if those routes were opened up, we would be ready.

Keith Brown: I have one small point to make, which is that we should always take refugees because they are refugees; we should need no other reason. However, although this may sound a little cynical, I wonder whether any part of the argument that you are making to the UK Government to move on with the visa extension—if that is what happens—is informed by the skills needs that we have in Scotland and the skills that the refugees who have come here have. Are you making the case that those skills are very important to Scotland?

Emma Roddick: Yes, that is an argument that we make for migration overall, but also in the context of individual schemes. I am aware that there are Ukrainians who are contributing massively to different sectors that were previously really struggling to recruit.

At the time when I was on the MS Victoria, 85 per cent of the people staying there were in employment of some kind. That shows that we have a cohort of people who not only need our support, but are willing and able to work, and very often in sectors that are struggling to recruit domestically. We have made that point to the UK Government, in relation both to Ukraine and to wider migration needs.

The Convener: Earlier, you used the phrase, “we can welcome people when we want to”. I am going to mention my constituency again, because in my lifetime we have welcomed Vietnamese boat people, Chilean refugees, Nigerians, Congolese, Syrians and now the Ukrainian settlement, so we are well used to doing that.

I am struck that, when the committee took evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture on Ukraine at an early stage in the situation, we were already talking about how to bring people in and everything was in motion, but that, when we had him in to talk about Gaza, at roughly the same point in that situation’s timescale, nothing was in motion on those issues. Do you have any explanation as to why the process for Gaza is so much slower than the response to the situation in Ukraine?

Emma Roddick: I would be guessing at the details of the UK Government's position, but from our perspective, one of the difficulties is that, although people are displaced internally in Gaza they are not classed as refugees while they are still in that place. The struggle that many have had to cross any border has made it a lot harder for neighbouring countries to provide support of the kind that Poland was able to provide to Ukraine.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. We have exhausted our questions for you this morning. Thank you for your first attendance; I am sure that it will not be the last. We were very glad to see you today.

09:53

Meeting suspended.

10:21

On resuming—

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener: A warm welcome back to the 35th meeting in 2023 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee.

Before we move on, is the committee content to take agenda item 4 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

National Outcomes

10:21

The Convener: Our next agenda item is to take evidence on the committee's inquiry into the Scottish Government's national outcomes and indicators relating to international policy. From the Scottish Government, we are joined remotely this morning by Catriona Radcliffe, head of the Beijing office—perhaps you could confirm which pronunciation of Catriona is correct—Katrine Feldinger, head of the Copenhagen office, and Christopher Thomson, head of the Washington DC office. Thank you all for taking the time to join us. I hope that all the technology will work for us.

I will open with a question about the annual report, which was published on Monday. It outlines three main pillars of work and seeks to connect those with national outcomes and the network outcomes. However, with regard to the national indicators—the level below the outcomes in the national performance framework—no indicator has been developed specifically for the international network. Is that something that needs to be worked on? If so, how would that be measured?

Catriona Radcliffe (Scottish Government): Hello. My name is pronounced "Catrina", without the "o" sound.

Thank you for inviting me and my colleagues in Washington and Copenhagen to this morning's evidence session. We all look forward to speaking to you about the work that we do overseas.

In answer to your question, those of us in the overseas Government offices submit annual monitoring and evaluation returns. Through those, we try to provide as much quantitative and qualitative evidence as possible across all areas of work that we cover. However, I will be honest and say that, with regard to diplomatic and international work, it is not always easy to find the quantitative evidence to back up the work that we do overseas.

As you say, there is not a specific indicator for international work at the moment. I believe that that is being developed and reviewed by colleagues in headquarters. They want to better align the data that we capture through annual reporting, as the committee requested.

The annual report was published on Monday. I believe that that is the first time that we have published such a report and that it is also the first time that we have publicly published the monitoring and evaluation information. I hope that that is a step in the right direction.

Katrine Feldinger (Scottish Government): It is good to see that the technology is working—happy days.

To add to what Catriona Radcliffe just said, the main purpose of all diplomatic and intelligence gathering work overseas is to ensure that the home Government has the best possible information on which to base decisions. If you were to look at what indicators could be developed for an international network, you would inevitably, as Catriona said, be in qualitative territory. We could count the number of people that we are meeting, but that would tell us nothing about the quality of those meetings or about whether they are actually furthering the aims of Government.

We can and do hold ourselves to account internally about the quality of the conversations that we are having, the seniority of the interlocutors that we are able to meet and the nature of the connection between those relationships and the work that we are trying to promote overseas. Each international office has a specific mandate and we also have a series of missions that the Scottish Government is running until at least the end of this session of Parliament, as well as the national indicators. We therefore have quite a lot of guidance about what we are here to achieve.

Where we have traction in the areas that we work in, the next trick is to turn that into a business plan and to ensure that we are targeting high-value interlocutors and networks in those areas. That is the trick but, as Catriona said, it is very difficult to develop that into a national indicator within a quantitative method. I hope that you will see in the annual report that we are beginning to do that at a qualitative level. I trained as a statistician and can say with some confidence that the plural of "anecdote" is not "data". Anecdotes only start to be helpful once you have enough of them.

Christopher Thomson (Scottish Government): I echo what Catriona Radcliffe and Katrine Feldinger have said. We do a huge amount of work to ensure that we hold ourselves to account regarding what we do overseas, but it is difficult to draw straight lines between diplomatic work and outcomes. I know that my colleagues are working really hard on that and that it is common to all Governments and not peculiar to the Scottish Government—we all wrangle with that.

Am I struggling for volume, convener?

The Convener: I have asked the broadcasting staff to turn the sound up. We can hear you, but we are straining a little. They have turned it up now.

Christopher Thomson: I am also trying not to speak so loudly that I wake up my wife, because it is 5.30 in the morning here in DC.

The Convener: You have my sympathies and apologies.

Christopher Thomson: Worse things have happened.

We know the outcomes that we are trying to contribute to. We want to be globally competitive, entrepreneurial and have a sustainable economy. We know how we are doing on being open, connected and making a positive contribution and on other things such as culture or having thriving and innovative businesses. We know what we are doing and what we are setting out to do. We also know that our colleagues at home are working hard to figure out exactly how to measure that and fit it into the national performance framework, but that does not mean that we are not doing that work.

I do not have much to add, because Cat and Kat captured it succinctly.

The Convener: I have another question about the national indicators. Some of them, including the indicators for reputation and for international exporting, apply to Scotland's international policy. The committee recently visited Belfast and Dublin as part of our inquiry work. In Dublin, we met with Irish officials who work in the international office and who told us that they are about to open their 131st overseas mission, which puts them on a slightly different scale to Scotland at the moment. They indicated that soft power is often the way to open up issues such as trade, or to start conversations.

What is the focus of your work? How do you balance those areas and how do you use soft power? Christopher, you are still on screen, so please answer first.

10:30

Christopher Thomson: I could not agree more with our Irish counterparts that soft power plays a big part. I work in collaboration with Scottish Development International, our international trade body. We set joint objectives during the year, we have a joint business plan and, last time I checked, we had about 130 or 140 different activities during the year.

It is about using our way in to talk about what Scotland does. Particularly in the US, when people imagine Scotland—we use the word “imagine” deliberately—they think of “Braveheart”, “Outlander” or other versions of Scotland that are rooted in the past. There is a lot of love for that—for whisky and tartan and traditional versions of Scotland. Through soft power, we bring people

into conversations and then say, “But did you know this?”

For example, in the US, we have a huge relationship with the space sector, because Scotland produces more small satellites than anywhere else outside the US. Once we start having those conversations, we talk about where Scotland is now. Those conversations lead us to trade, investment and modern versions of Scotland rather than just the traditional versions.

For example, we recently had a reception on Capitol Hill for staffers and members, in collaboration with the Scotch Whisky Association and the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, which is the SWA's counterpart. They wanted to talk about tariffs on whisky. However, in the room, we happened to talk about space with a bunch of Floridian chiefs of staff from Congress. As an upshot of that, we have a meeting scheduled for January to talk to a delegation from Florida as well as the Science, Space and Technology Committee of the House of Representatives about Scotland's space sector and what we can do to collaborate and work more closely on that.

We spend our entire year exercising that little bit of soft power—bringing people in with the version of Scotland that they are familiar and comfortable with and then beginning to talk to them about something more substantive. We see benefits from that approach and we are working to do more and more of it throughout the year.

Katrine Feldinger: In addition to our use of soft power through conversation openers—of which, as Chris stated, we do quite a lot—we have an incredible brand to work with. It has incredibly high brand recognition and is well liked. A recent survey of ours in Denmark showed that 91 per cent of respondents had a favourable view of Scotland. That figure is incredible. I would love to say that it means that we are doing really well; however, to be honest, we opened only 18 months ago, so that is just the baseline.

In addition, soft power is often more than soft power. A lot of our work in the cultural space absolutely opens the doors to partnerships and conversations, but it can also have a real impact. For example, we are doing a project with the Nordic Council of Ministers and with the Council of Nordic Composers, which has an annual classical music festival. Next year, for the first time ever, that festival will be held as a joint production with a country, and the council has picked Scotland. The festival is coming to Glasgow, so get your tickets. That also allows us to support that council in artist and composer exchanges.

At the end of all of that, you have to remember that, for the Scottish artists who take part, the

Nordics are a market of 27 million people, with a GDP the size of Russia's before the war started. That is massive. The ability to connect that soft power and the impression of the vibrancy of Scotland—in particular, its modernity, which connects really well with the Nordic countries—with measurable cultural outputs, such as having a major event or having Scottish artists booked to play across the Nordic countries, is really powerful.

Catriona Radcliffe: Soft power plays a massive part in our work here in China. We focus that work across three pillars: climate and biodiversity; what we call our people-to-people link, which covers education, culture, tourism and social policy; and trade and investment. Soft power cuts across all three pillars.

To give an added dimension to what Chris Thomson and Katrine Feldinger talked about, I will talk about the value of using tools such as social media to reach a wider audience here. To take China, with its population of 1.425 billion, how do we even begin to engage and deliver through our people-to-people links with such a vast country? One of the best tools that we have for doing that is our official social media channels. We have three channels that we use here in China. One is Weibo, which is the equivalent of Twitter back home. Another is WeChat, which we use for slightly longer articles. The third is something called Little Red Book, which is a bit like Instagram.

This is just a drop in the ocean compared with the size of the population of China, but we have 250,000 followers on our official Weibo account. We have 13,000 followers on WeChat, and we have 11,000 followers for the Little Red Book channel that we have just opened. Whatever we do, we can multiply the audience by posting on those channels and sharing what we do.

A recent example is the visit to China by the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, Mr Robertson, from 23 to 28 November on a six-day visit across three cities. It was the first Scottish Government ministerial visit to China since 2019 and after the pandemic. It was really important for us to use that visit to maximum benefit and to reach as many people as possible. We posted on our social media channels every day at the end of each visit to update people on what the cabinet secretary had done, what he had said and who he had met, and to share Scottish Government values in relation to what we do here.

The cabinet secretary did a video blog to round up everything that he did over the six days. That vlog alone received more than 220,000 views. That is just a wee example of a different type of soft power, but it is really powerful for how we engage here in China.

The Convener: Were those 220,000 views from within China or globally?

Catriona Radcliffe: They were within China.

The Convener: Thank you.

We will move to questions from the committee, starting with Kate Forbes.

Kate Forbes: I am delighted that you could join us, particularly at the unearthly hour of 5 am.

Each of you will be working towards the Scottish Government's overall objectives for Scotland, but I imagine that you also have short-term objectives for each office. Starting with Kat Feldinger, what are your immediate objectives for the first 18 months of the Copenhagen office and do you feel that you are making progress on them?

For your short-term objectives for the office, Catriona and Christopher, what will feel like an achievement and an accomplishment when it comes to moving on or considering next steps?

The Convener: Does Kat from the Copenhagen office want to respond? I am getting confused with the Katrines and Catrionas.

Katrine Feldinger: You can stick with calling me Kat, if you like, and Catriona Radcliffe can be Catriona for today. That is absolutely fine.

It is nice to see you again, Ms Forbes.

Kate Forbes: Indeed.

Katrine Feldinger: The short answer is that, any time we take on what is essentially a start-up within Government territory, the first set of objectives is about getting it right. How do we land in the market and make a reasonable impact of the right size? If we give ourselves so much follow-up work that we fail to do it, we are not doing ourselves any favours in the long term.

We had some short-term objectives for the first year around a couple of high-profile visits that helped us to generate some press and attention about the fact that we had landed in the Nordics, essentially. We had a couple of internal-facing objectives to get the team right for the kinds of things that we thought the Nordics might be interested to talk to us about and to ensure that we had the right skill sets and policy backgrounds. We then had a big set of objectives about getting the relationship right with our host British embassies.

Uniquely in the network, we have the task of working with three, five or eight embassies, depending on how we cut the Nordics and Baltics network that the UK Government runs, while ensuring that we have enough of a timespan to get the relationship right with each of those teams, understanding their priorities in the single country that they are in and how we can work with that and

augment it. That has been a big part of our work for the first 18 months.

That part of the work has paid off really well, as we are now at the stage at which we are starting to have annual organised events with those embassies. Burns night and St Andrew's day events are starting to roll out across different countries—those are nice, high-profile cultural events to have. We have a really good understanding of what the embassies' priorities are, so we therefore have a really good understanding of where Scotland has something unique to offer to Sweden or Norway, for instance. We can brief the relevant British embassy to ensure that it is drawing us into conversations. For only three people in the Nordic region, that gives us quite a big bang for our buck. That has been a deliberate part of the strategy.

We have had a good measure of success there, and the press is pretty interested in the fact that we consistently look to the Nordics as a model for policy for Scotland, and that also keeps us going as we make new friends across comms. The former First Minister came out, and such visits will always be high profile. Patrick Harvie and Ms Martin have also visited. We have had some nice, high-profile hits for all those visits, which have got us inquiries from people we would not necessarily have thought to get in touch with.

Catriona Radcliffe: This is a really nice question to get and to be able to answer, so thank you for asking it, Ms Forbes.

On short-term goals, I started in my role in July 2022 when China was in the middle of the pandemic and it still had its dynamic zero-Covid policy. That changed in December 2022. Our office had a clear purpose for this year's goals, which was to re-engage and reinvigorate the links with China following the pandemic and across the three pillars that I referred to earlier, which would bring benefits to Scotland. It was nothing too complicated, and that was our overall purpose.

For the first six months, we focused on getting out and about around China to engage with local government, which is really important for us as we take a whole-of-government approach. As an office, we travelled to several places including Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Chengdu and Kunming. The second half of the year was all about getting external visitors in and engaging at the senior level. We had a visit from the director of external affairs in the Scottish Government a couple of months ago, which was followed by Mr Robertson's visit in November. For us, this year has been about re-engaging and reinvigorating our links.

As for what success would look like for me at the end of this posting, I am a career diplomat and

have been a diplomat for more than 20 years, and this role with the Scottish Government has been great, because it means that I can join up the experience of being a diplomat with my Scottish background. For me, success would mean having delivered something of value and benefit to Scotland by the end of my tenure. That is not always easy to do, however.

To pick out one thing and provide an extra dimension, this year, under the social policy part of the people-to-people pillar we have been working on sharing how the Scottish Government approaches its policy on alleviating poverty, particularly period poverty. We shared updates about that on our social media accounts last year. That got really good traction in China and generated a lot of debate. We followed up on that this year by working with a local non-governmental organisation to bring more of a spotlight to that issue. Talking about that issue was also an element of Mr Robertson's visit programme. If I can build on that during the rest of my time here with my team and try to make a difference in that area, that would be a sign of success and progress.

10:45

Christopher Thomson: I hope that you can hear me. We have six in-year objectives in the US office. Some of them, such as enhancing reputation, are not entirely measurable, as we have touched on, but most of the objectives have measurements against them. We also have three in-year on-going deliverables. We have things that we measure that we want to be better at but, given the nature of the relationship between the US and Scotland, to paraphrase that presidential campaign, "It's the economy, stupid", for us.

We do a lot of work in trade and investment. The annual report highlights the investment that has come into Prestwick through Mangata, which is a US investment that colleagues and I have been working on for years. Those things are hugely beneficial. We see the difference that it can make to people's lives in Scotland to see those jobs come in.

I am hopeful that there will be a fairly chunky announcement in the new year, once we have that confirmed with another inward investor. Those things make a real difference, and ministerial visits and diplomatic work really support that. Our SDI colleagues have told us that some investments have come about only because doors have been opened by Scottish ministers visiting the country with us. They get access to people who they would never have had access to before, so you begin to have conversations that you would never otherwise have.

For example, this year, because of Mr Arthur's visit, which was to talk predominantly about community wealth building, we were able to meet the Lieutenant Governor of Illinois. That might not sound like an incredibly exciting thing, but Illinois is the 17th biggest economy in the world and the Lieutenant Governor brought her directors for economic development and investment into the room, which meant that I and our trade and investment specialists could be in the room. Conversations have developed from that, and we are hopeful that they will lead to Scottish companies exporting to and engaging in the US and US companies investing in Scotland. Those are the big focuses for us.

However, we also look at what we can do in terms of culture and our diaspora. I have engaged with diaspora and cultural organisations that have received huge amounts of grant and scholarship funding through the US. I cannot always draw a straight line and say that that is directly because of me but, this week, one such investment came about directly because of an introduction that we made in the US. That will put tens of thousands of pounds into cultural organisations in Scotland. I feel really good about those things; that is what success looks like for us.

There is lots more that we can do. The US is a country of 330 million people and, right now, my office is three people, so we can definitely do more, but we have had brilliant wins so far. It is a mix of things that cannot be measured and things that can.

I go back to what Kat said at the start. Some of it is just about the stuff that you know is doing good, and that is what we spend our year doing.

Kate Forbes: Obviously, I would not ask you to comment on political matters, but it is really interesting how Scotland maximises the brand that Kat talked about. In a sense, we have an advantage that there might not be for elsewhere. It is also fascinating to see people relate to Scotland as an entity in and of itself rather than one that is subsumed within the wider United Kingdom.

What one area would you like to see the committee focus on in terms of an opportunity for Scotland in the coming year? Christopher Thomson has talked about the economy and trade and investment. Is there anything else to add to that? Could you add one sentence on where we should lend our cross-party support to your work?

Christopher Thomson: Culture and diaspora are hugely important for us. Ensuring that awareness of Scotland is important. Our brand across the world is "Scotland is now". A lot of people in the US think that Scotland is then. They think backwards and we should be thinking forwards and engaging with culture and the

diaspora in the US to talk about what Scotland does now.

Catriona Radcliffe: On higher education and supporting the links in higher education, members should consider that 25 per cent of all international students at higher education institutions in Scotland are from China. That is about 20,000 students per year who then travel back to China with that positive experience of studying in Scotland and become mini ambassadors. Cultivating those links with higher education and supporting higher education and the international students who come here is a positive step forward.

Katrine Feldinger: In a sense, you are getting three of the big priorities for all of the offices here: diaspora, higher education and—I will add the third one—energy. Our focus in Scotland is on delivering around ScotWind, but also on hydrogen, carbon capture, utilisation and storage and, essentially, what the energy networks will look like in the future. Those things are so dependent on the decisions that are being made in the rest of Europe and around the North Sea in relation to what the markets will look like, what offtake will look like and where the supply chains will come from. We are going to do 28GW, but the North Sea alone is going to do 300GW. Scotland's opportunity to be in the middle of shaping the conditions for its own success in that space will be absolutely enormous and we really need to seize it. That is where I would like to see some real cross-party activity.

Kate Forbes: That is great. I am grateful for those answers.

Donald Cameron: Good morning everyone, and thank you for being with us today. I have a short question for Christopher Thomson on something that he just said about culture and the diaspora. In the past few weeks and more generally, we have done quite a bit of work on Scotland's heritage. One of the items that came up was using the diaspora or Scotland's international connections—if I can put it like that—to help to create funding opportunities for projects here in Scotland, whether that is helping to safeguard a ruined castle or keeping a traditional music group going, or whatever it might be. Do you have any further thoughts about how we can leverage international connections towards that endeavour?

Christopher Thomson: There is a huge amount of potential for Scotland, particularly in the US, where—this touches on what Catriona Radcliffe said—there are a lot of Scottish university alumni. Aside from the heritage diaspora, there is also an affinity diaspora of people who love Scotland because they have spent time there. That is a slightly untapped market in the US. We can learn from what our friends in Ireland do. They have a brilliant outreach

to their diaspora. They have things like the Ireland funds, which collect money to funnel into projects in Ireland.

Some good stuff is being done. The National Trust for Scotland has National Trust for Scotland Foundation USA, which is a registered charity in the US. It runs fundraisers and engages with people throughout the US—the outreach is fantastic. That pulls quite a lot of money back to Scotland to help with heritage projects and the built environment.

There are some really good examples of things that are already happening, but I think that we can do better. We can work on the university and alumni connections. We should be nailing things such as the affinity that people have with the Edinburgh festival, the fringe and the tattoo—those things draw people in. We need to figure out how best to work with our partners in Scotland to effectively monetise that. People in America are not shy about fundraising; it is an industry here and the tax codes are written to promote philanthropic giving. We should be tapping into those things. There is much that we can do there and we are working really hard to try to figure that out.

We have a small office with three people, so we cannot do everything for everyone. We have to point people in the right direction, hold their hand and let them get out into the market across the US.

Donald Cameron: That is an interesting answer. This is just my personal view, but I think that there is a lot to be done and that is an area in which the international offices can contribute.

My next question is about the location of Scotland's international offices. I hasten to add that I am not asking you to justify, or in any way to question, the location that you are working from, but this has come up in the committee before. Are we in the right places? We are not in South America and we have a very limited presence in Africa, but there are lots of reasons, including trade, for us to be in South America and in Africa. Can you give me your general view about where we are internationally and where you would like to see us be if we are not there already? That is in the context of a difficult financial picture: resources are limited. I would welcome your general observations on that, beginning with Catriona Radcliffe.

Catriona Radcliffe: The Scottish Government office in China opened way back in 2005, making us one of the earlier openings, although SDI had a presence here before us, in 2003. The network has grown in recent years.

That is a really good question. Because of my background, I see value in having offices in a

number of overseas places, but the question is one of budget, affordability and where we can actually open offices. I understand that there is a commitment to open an office in Warsaw during the current parliamentary session, but I do not know of any other plans.

I was in New Delhi before I came to China and India is a place with multiple opportunities. As you say, it is difficult to pinpoint where we should be. We have to ask how big the budget is and work from there, but it would be great to have many more overseas offices.

I realise that I am hedging the question a bit.

Donald Cameron: It is a difficult question. Several of you have made the point that you have relatively small offices with just two or three people in them and that there is a question about how far those resources can go, depending on the size of the country that you are based in.

Would Katrine Feldinger or Christopher Thomson like to add anything?

Katrine Feldinger: Before I joined external affairs and flitted off to Copenhagen, my background was in the Scottish Government international trade and investment directorate. In that context, I took part in developing the evidence base for all three international economy plans. That process of really interrogating what we were trying to do, and therefore what the evidence was telling us about where we ought to locate people and resources, was really powerful and I am keen to take that with me into the external affairs side of the Scottish Government.

Every single Government on the planet struggles with the question of where they ought to be. You could justify being just about anywhere, but the trick is to make a decision about what you want to achieve. Are you going into a location because you want to have international development connections? Are you going there for pure diplomacy or for trade and investment? Once you know that, you can work out what sort of resources you want to have.

One of the fascinating things about being based in the Nordic countries is that we are not the only ones who are operating there on a regional basis. Ireland does it to an extent, as do New Zealand and Iceland. The Faroe Islands runs its relationship with every country in which it is not based through Copenhagen. There are lots of models we can explore for how we can get at opportunities.

As we do that, I would like us to bear in mind the need to look at the gap. If a market is already very well developed, we can go into it with relatively limited resources but will probably not have a huge impact. We would probably also not be very

impactful in a scenario in which we are trying to open a closed door. We need to find the sweet spot. I do not have the evidence in front of me, but that is something that we need to look at seriously.

11:00

Christopher Thomson: I echo what my colleagues have said, and selfishly, as I am sitting here in the United States, I would love to have more resource in the US. As I said, there are 330 million people here, and there are currently three people in my office; at full staffing, we are a mighty four. That does not allow us to do as much as we would like to be able to do.

Both Kat Feldinger and Cat Radcliffe have said a bit about their background. My background is in economic development, so I see the opportunities that we cannot get to because we just do not have enough people. I see what my Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office colleagues who are on a platform with me at the embassy are able to do and the outreach that they are able to get across the economy, culture and soft diplomacy.

I am all for having more resources, but the question goes back to how limited the resources are and what else we could be spending that money on. There is a cost benefit analysis to be done. Scottish Development International does a lot of great work, even when it does not have a diplomatic mission in a country, but there are definitely things that we can add to augment what SDI already offers.

Mark Ruskell: On the same theme, I will ask Kat Feldinger about the priorities of the European Union. On a number of recent committee visits, I have picked up that there is an increasing focus from the European Union on the accession states in the east. I want to get your thoughts on responding to the EU's agenda and on integrating and working with the EU. Where do you think the frontier of deeper engagement is, and how could a Warsaw office feed into that?

Katrine Feldinger: That is a great set of questions. Some of the questions have their answers at home, in Scotland. A lot of the work that we are doing on alignment with and retention of EU law and on tracking where the EU is going—even though we are outside it—is important, so that we understand where it, as an organisation or a series of organisations, is moving to. If our intention is to stay aligned with it and friendly with it, we first need to be aware of where it is going.

On how we engage with some of the potential candidate countries, some of the work that we have done on Ukrainian refugees is really important, as is our engagement with some of our Baltic neighbours on what that picture looks like.

At all times, we seek to understand where those sets of organisations are moving to and, therefore, where we need to stand in order to remain relevant to them.

One of our challenges—this might be where some of our work with the Nordic countries comes in—is that there is no doubt at all that all European Union member states see one another as the primary force. When they focus their resources on international engagement, they focus it first on one another, second on larger global blocks and only then on others. We therefore have to work hard to have something relevant to offer to the wider European connection.

I mentioned energy, which can relate not just to economic opportunities but to energy security. The offer that Scotland has to make Europe in that regard is critical for its industrial future. Framing it in those terms probably gets us into more rooms, so we are starting to explore that.

Brand awareness that Scotland is open and still wants to be part of the EU's work is also important. We still get a very friendly welcome, and it is incredibly important that we maintain that during the next decade to ensure that Europe is still aware that Scotland wants to align with it. There is a lot of global and geopolitical instability, and wanting to be part of something stable sends a really strong message.

Mark Ruskell: I will pick up on one thread of that. In the international network strategy, there is quite a strong focus on hydrogen, which involves a number of offices, including Scotland house in Brussels and teams in China, France and Germany, and I imagine that Copenhagen will be in that mix, as well.

I am interested in how that work is co-ordinated practically, because it could look like a disparate way of considering particular economic opportunities in different countries. Who is leading that work? Is it the cabinet secretary with responsibility for energy? How is the work on hydrogen being aligned with the direction of travel of the UK Government on hydrogen? It would be good to get a sense of that. I will go back to Kat Feldinger and then bring in Catriona Radcliffe, because the China office has also been involved in that.

Katrine Feldinger: It is an energy policy lead and, therefore, an energy ministerial lead. All the offices are engaged in that—certainly across Europe and, I suspect, across our global network—but they have different roles. The office in Berlin has done absolutely amazing work in driving out German partners for offtake, looking at where hydrogen will be sold to in the future and who will have a need for it.

The Nordics are a slightly different proposition, in that those countries, like Scotland, will have the ability to supply hydrogen, so we are looking to ensure that we work with those Nordic partners on what the supply chain looks like to build the renewable energy that will generate it and what the regulations around that might look like. We can inadvertently end up influencing EU regulations via the Nordics by having those conversations, and that is important.

You also asked about how we work with the UK Government. The UK was allowed back into the North Seas energy co-operation agreement last year, which was really positive. Scotland already had some really good on-going conversations with Denmark and Norway about what energy looked like in that space, and we have deliberately joined forces on that.

The fundamental point is that the UK needs Scotland to achieve its net zero targets in order for it to achieve its own, and all of us need that to happen on that European security level, as well as on an economic level. It is an area where it serves us to work as a block and to ensure that everybody understands where everybody else is going, and that is what we are trying to do.

Our offer back to energy colleagues and to the energy minister and the cabinet secretary is that we work on behalf of the energy team here, so there is really close co-ordination in the background. We have recently added a thematic lead to that, so that we have somebody travelling across Europe and, in essence, helping us to co-ordinate. It is absolutely mission critical.

Mark Ruskell: Can Catriona Radcliffe provide the Beijing office perspective on that?

Catriona Radcliffe: Yes. Perhaps I can give a specific example to illustrate how we work together and with our energy team colleagues back home. On the issue of the future of Grangemouth, when he was here in China, Mr Robertson had a meeting with PetroChina, which is one of the partners of the joint venture in Grangemouth. As a Scottish Government office, we do not lead on that issue, and the cabinet secretary does not lead on it. However, because we have close links with our energy colleagues back home and with Mr Gray, who has responsibility for that area, we can work quickly on the ground here when we need to raise issues with, in this case, PetroChina.

Mr Robertson was out here in the same week that there was an announcement by the joint venture company on PetroChina. Having those links meant that we could go in on the ground and have a face-to-face meeting about that issue. We got an up-to-date briefing from our energy colleagues and, overnight—in a matter of hours—

we were able to feed back the results of the meeting that Mr Robertson had with the president of PetroChina here. Being on the ground here and being able to link up quickly with colleagues back home on important pressing issues for Scotland makes a big difference.

The other dimension that you asked about was working with the UK Government. On that issue, we invited a UK Government official from the British embassy to join us at the meeting, because it was so important to give a joined-up view on that.

To step back and give a wee bit more background, we have been working with our colleagues back home in the Scottish Government and with the UK Government here. The embassy invited me along to a meeting with the chair of the China National Petroleum Corporation in the summer, because one of the issues that was going to be discussed was Grangemouth. That joined-up approach really helps us on the ground, and I hope that it will have longer-term benefits.

Foyso Choudhury: My question is in line with those that my colleagues Donald Cameron and Mark Ruskell have already asked. How do we measure the impact of international offices on trade in comparison with places where we do not have international offices, such as Bangladesh and Brazil? I am thinking of measurable outcomes.

Catriona Radcliffe: That is a really good question. Even though we sit in our offices—me in Beijing, Katrine Feldinger in Copenhagen and Chris Thomson in Washington—we do not always have those statistics and data to hand. We rely on reports from others for the latest information on exports. For example, two weeks ago, we were saying that China was Scotland's 13th largest export market, but, just in the past week, we had updated statistics that said that China is Scotland's sixth largest export market, excluding oil and gas. We do not generate that sort of stuff from our offices; we rely on external reports to give us that information. That is the same for places where we do not have offices or representation—we rely on external reports, data and analysis. However, we have a need for somebody to work on and analyse that information and to decide what to do next.

Christopher Thomson: It is a really interesting question, because it goes to the heart of why we, as diplomats, are in the markets. There are SDI teams around the world where we do not have diplomatic representation. I do not have the statistics to hand, but if you asked my SDI colleagues in the US whether they are happy for us to be in the country supporting them or whether they would be happier without us there, I would very much hope that they would say that they are much happier with us here and that we give them

a boost in the trade and investment work that they do. I hope that that would be the case for other offices and that we would be helpful in markets in the subcontinent and in other places in the world. Whether that would be a good thing requires a little bit of speculation, but I would hope that having further offices would augment and add to what our SDI colleagues are already doing, most of which is fantastic work.

Katrine Feldinger: It is almost impossible to measure what you do not know or what is not happening. As Chris Thomson said, it would be really nice if we could move into other areas, in the way that we have just moved into the Nordics, which are already really strong export markets and inward investors to Scotland. It would be nice to think that, over the first period of that office being open, we would see an uptick in those things. However, with three people covering all those countries, it might be slightly unrealistic to draw a causal relationship from that.

Where we are really maturing as a network—not just in the Nordics—is, as Chris Thomson said, in our ability to mix diplomacy and trade. Quite often, the two things open doors for each other. We had a really good experience working with SDI and the UK Government on WindEurope over the past year. The fact that we were able to field senior officials, as well as trade specialists, to speak to major investors such as Vestas, Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners and Maersk made a difference. We have a different quality of conversation with them. We have subsequently seen an uptick in the number of follow-up conversations with those companies about what is happening in Scotland.

I would never say that three people were responsible for delivering a massive uptick in trade and investment, but some of that can be measured qualitatively, and I hope that, over time, we will be able to see it quantitatively, as well.

11:15

Foysoyl Choudhury: Do you believe that there is a need for the location of the Scottish Government's international offices to be reviewed?

Katrine Feldinger: We should always have that under review—and we always have done. As I said, I came into this from international trade and investment. We went through a process of working with SDI to check whether the offices were in the right locations. We always need to be alive to the kinds of companies that we are trying to help export and the kinds of international investors that we are trying to land into the economy, and make sure that we are in the right places for that.

In my personal opinion, at the moment, the markets where we can blend the diplomatic and

the trade are probably the ones where we will get the most value. However, that is not to say that we cannot run ahead a little, particularly with some of the trade functions. It is also not to say that we cannot and should not—we absolutely should—be leaning on the much bigger UK Government resources. I have lost count, but I think that the DBT has 200-odd people in Beijing and the sort of resources that we can only dream about. The more aware that we can make them of exciting and interesting things that are happening in the Scottish economy, the more they are willing to use it, and the more that we can benefit even when we are not there.

Alexander Stewart: The discussion has been interesting—thank you for your participation. You are the window of Scotland, wherever you are located, and that is fantastic to see. Successes are happening continually. However, you are trying to manage trade and industry, culture, education, innovation and energy—the list is endless—with the capacity issues that you identified this morning, so what becomes the priority to ensure that you capture the market that you want?

We would like to have you doing all of that, but that is not possible with the people and resources that you have, so how do you square that circle to ensure that you are trying to capture as much of those areas as you can? What priority is specific to the location that you are in—is it your biggest market, the one that you want to develop the most, or the one that has the most potential? You cannot cover it all, but I think that that is what you are trying to do. You have co-operation from UK embassies and others that you can draw on, but what is the main priority for each of you in your location?

Catriona Radcliffe: You are right that we cannot do everything. When I talk about the three pillars of work that we focus on, we have to drill down under each of those and decide what our priority is for the coming 12 months and sometimes over the next few years to try to achieve our objectives. One important thing is the start of the business planning exercise. My colleagues have referred to how we work with others, including SDI. Each of our offices has a joint business plan with SDI. That helps us to drill down under the pillar of trade and investment to identify which things it would be most useful for us to focus on over the 12 months.

For me, for the other areas, we have to think about the huge size of China, the opportunity and the different local governments. This year, we did a bit of work on which local governments we wanted to focus attention and resource on. We would love to engage with every single province and local government in China, but we have to

work through them. For example, we did a lot of work with Kunming in the lead-up to COP15—the 15th United Nations biodiversity conference of the parties. This year, we focused on trying to build through that link, and that was one of the reasons why Mr Robertson visited Kunming as well as Beijing and Shanghai when he was in China.

There are various ways to cut it, but I think that the initial business planning process is key, and so is bringing in stakeholders at that point to ensure that we are delivering not what we think that we ought to be delivering but what brings real value back to colleagues in headquarters and really helps to deliver the objectives and goals that are set at the centre.

You are right that working with partners is absolutely essential. We could not achieve what we want to achieve in terms of benefits for Scotland by working alone. Those links are vital to our ability to deliver.

Alexander Stewart: Katrine, what is your main priority in Copenhagen?

Katrine Feldinger: It is almost like a layer of sieves. How do we use our mandate as an international office to contribute to the Scottish Government's missions in a way that has traction in the countries that we are working in, and in a way that also has a client, or somebody who is interested in working with us, back in Scotland?

As Cat Radcliffe described, we have, in essence, three long-term goals. Those are around energy in the North Sea, learning from the Nordic consensus model of democracy and learning about the things that we can bring back from there to help run good public services in Scotland, and really using Scotland's brand to promote culture, and particularly cultural exports.

In any given year and any given country, we chop and change depending on what we think has the most traction. With Norway at the moment, that is definitely carbon capture, utilisation and storage, so that is where our focus is. With Denmark, the energy issue is much broader, and so keeping those conversations going in parallel is part of where we put the effort.

Because we have only those three goals, we also have a kind of opportunist rule that we do our business planning for only 75 per cent of our resources. That gives us a bit of flexibility, so that, when something else pops up that looks absolutely amazing, we can go chase it.

It is worth highlighting some of the people and the behaviours that we have in the offices overseas. There is a whole bunch of us who are wildly curious and opportunistic, but at the same time there is a good measure of governance and

structure around it, because otherwise—you are right—the thing would fall apart.

Alexander Stewart: What is your response, Christopher? As you said, America has so much to offer on so many levels.

Christopher Thomson: Thank you for the question. I think that part of your question contains part of the answer: it is horses for courses for different offices.

My colleagues sitting in European offices will have much greater focus on clean energy and things like that, but we will never export energy to the US. Energy security is national security for the US. Therefore, when we talk about energy, we talk about investment in Scotland rather than selling to other countries.

Being located in the country, as Cat Radcliffe touched on, allows us to have our finger on the pulse. It allows us to be entrepreneurial and to say, "Actually, what's going on now is slightly different from what we planned a year ago," and to shift.

The business plans that both my colleagues referred to are not just done jointly with SDI. When our business plans are created, we go out to departments across the Scottish Government. We go to our agencies, such as Scottish Enterprise, Creative Scotland and Screen Scotland, and ask what their priorities are and how we can help to deliver for them by being in-country.

I mentioned the six big pillars that we have in-country as part of our business plan. In my view, all of them feed into trade, investment and money and jobs going back into Scotland. That is how I justify my existence; it is what I get up for in the morning. Trying to do everything, as you alluded to, is why I sound like I do today. We are running about with small resources, doing as much as we possibly can. That business planning is key to what we do. It is done with partners in Scotland and in-country, and co-ordinated centrally through the director of external affairs and colleagues. We are not just going about picking the things that we think it would be good to do in-country. All that we do contributes to enlarge the whole under the three priorities that we get from ministers in our priority mandate.

The Convener: There is a final question, from Mr Brown.

Keith Brown: Ms Forbes said earlier that she did not want to comment on political events, but you work in a political environment. Things have changed since I first came into Government and this is probably the most difficult time for external affairs and SDI that I can remember. I can support that by citing the letters from Alister Jack and David Cameron, which are a cross between a

juvenile huff and some control freakery and really set the context for the environment in which we have to work.

My memory is that, despite that, civil servants in the Scottish and UK Governments managed to work together pretty effectively. I am interested in whether that is still the case, whether the relationship is constructive and whether there is a difference between the locations where the Scottish office is located within a UK embassy and those where it is not. There may not be, but I am interested in whether that makes a difference. I would like to hear comments on how the civil services of different Administrations work together.

Christopher Thomson: Thank you for that question, which gives me an opportunity to boast, because a recent report from the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee highlighted the work done in the US as an example of partnership between the Scottish and UK Governments. I am really pleased to be able to say that we have fantastic relationships here in the US and that I get on really well with the ambassador and deputy ambassador and with colleagues from the UK Government.

Things can happen at home, and in the political sphere, that will have an impact on what we do but, as officials, our job is to get the work done. We have our priorities and we have our work to do, and we do not get involved in politics. We are in regular communication with our colleagues. I am based in the British embassy in DC and have a slot at our all-staff meeting for the whole US on a Monday morning, at which I talk about our priorities and what we do. As a result, I can broadcast messages about what Scotland is interested in, what we are good at and what we are looking to do across the entire UK network in the US, and I frequently get feedback from UK Government colleagues saying, “What you said was really interesting. How can we work together?”

The situation is really positive. We watch the politics and try to stay as far from them as possible, but we work well with our colleagues. That is not something that you will find me complaining about. I do not have to wear a hard hat at work and we do not have any fights in the office; it is genuinely very positive.

Keith Brown: I acknowledge the work that you do. If you could mirror the success that we had in Canada by getting haggis reinstated as an import to the US, that would be good, too.

Katrine Feldinger, do you have any comments?

Katrine Feldinger: I echo what Chris Thomson said. We must be a little cautious about taking what is often played out in the media as being the reality on the ground.

We have good relationships with British embassies across the Nordics and Baltics. We landed really well and have established ourselves well. We are seen as part of the embassy team and have worked hard to establish a series of joint events and working groups so that we are all aware of each other’s priorities and able to make ourselves relevant to each other.

We are, of course, all aware of the context that we operate in and we have conversations about how best to manage that because, as Chris said, that is our job. So far, that is going very well.

Catriona Radcliffe: I echo what Chris Thomson and Katrine Feldinger have said. It is the same here in Beijing and across the China network. We work with the British embassy and consulates general. We have a really good and collaborative working relationship and co-ordinate on some events and activities. Like Chris, I join the regular Monday morning meeting, which helps me to stay connected. I am part of the China board of management and have regular meetings and catch-ups with the deputy head of mission.

One of the first things I remember doing when I first arrived last summer was a joint vlog with the ambassador at the Beijing Highland games to promote Scotland. We have a good working relationship on the ground, which is so important to operating out here. I really appreciate that close collaboration.

The Convener: That brings us to the end of our time. Thank you all for an informative and useful discussion. I particularly thank those who have had an early start. Christopher Thomson, you mentioned your enthusiasm for your job and said that it was what gets you up in the morning—you have certainly demonstrated that today.

Because this is our last meeting for the year, I wish everyone the very best for the festive season and—in the context of our international visitors and our earlier discussion—peace on earth.

11:30

Meeting continued in private until 11:30.

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