



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 30 October 2024

Session 6



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CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

16th Meeting 2024, Session 6

CONVENER

*Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab)

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)

*Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Denise Brownlee (No Galloway National Park)

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

Mhairi Dawson (NFU Scotland)

Nick Kempe (Parkswatch Scotland)

Rob Lucas (Galloway National Park Association)

John Mayhew (Scottish Campaign for National Parks)

Ian McKinnon (Lochaber National Park—NO More)

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con)

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jyoti Chandola

LOCATION

The Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 30 October 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:35]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Jackson Carlaw): Good morning, and welcome to the 16th meeting in 2024 of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee. We are in a different committee room from our normal one this morning because one of our witnesses is joining us online. I am sorry—I have been nodding in the wrong direction to the sound people to tell us to go live, because they are sitting in a different part of the room this morning.

Our colleague Fergus Ewing is unfortunately not to able join the committee this morning. We have apologies from him, and we do not have a substitute from the Scottish National Party or from Fergus for this morning's business.

Our first agenda item is to agree whether to take agenda items 4 and 5 in private. Agenda item 4 is consideration of the evidence that we will hear this morning, and agenda item 5 is consideration of the draft report on our inquiry into the A9. Are colleagues content to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Continued Petitions

National Parks (PE2089)

09:36

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is consideration of continuing petitions, the first of which is PE2089, which was lodged by Deborah Carmichael on behalf of the Lochaber National Park—NO More group. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to suspend any action to create further national parks in Scotland, instruct an independent review of the operation of the current national parks, including assessment of the economic impacts on businesses and industries within the two parks—including but not exclusive to farming, forestry, crofting and angling—and conduct a consultation with representatives of rural businesses and community councils in order to help to frame the remit of said independent review.

I am delighted that we are joined this morning by two panels. On the first panel we have Denise Brownlee from the No Galloway National Park campaign group, Mhairi Dawson from NFU Scotland, Nick Kempe from Parkswatch Scotland, who is joining us online, and Ian McKinnon from the Lochaber National Park—NO More campaign.

I extend a very warm welcome to all of you. I do not know whether you have presented to a committee of the Scottish Parliament before, but we will try to make it as enjoyable, discursive and revealing an exercise for you as possible. We are obviously very keen to hear what you have to say in order that it can fully inform our consideration of the aims of the petition.

We previously considered the petition at our meeting on 12 June. At that time, we agreed to write to the Scottish Government. Since that meeting, the Scottish Government has responded, stating that there are no current plans for the Scottish Government to conduct an independent review of the two existing national parks in Scotland, as national parks are accountable to their boards and to the Scottish Government. It has also outlined in its national park proposal that there will be opportunities for local consultation during the next phase in the process, as NatureScot carries out its duties as the reporter.

We have quite a lot of stuff that we would like to explore with you, so if witnesses are content, we will move straight to questions. I do not know how we will decide how someone will indicate that they will take the lead on a question. Perhaps you can give me a nod to say that you would like to speak. Mr Kempe can wave a hand or something; I can

see you, so we will know that you are interested in answering particular questions.

Let me start off. Looking at the various aims of the petition—that is what we come back to—what evidence do you feel is currently available on the environmental and socioeconomic impacts of our existing national parks? Do you feel that the evidence that is available is enough to adequately assess what the impact has been? Is the evidence on the impact sufficient to inform future decisions, including future designations? I imagine that the fact that we do not know enough, which is why an inquiry needs to be held, is at the heart of the consideration of the petition.

Mr McKinnon, are you happy to respond?

Ian McKinnon (Lochaber National Park—NO More): Yes. Thank you very much for seeing us. I am a fisherman and a mussel farmer up on the west coast of Scotland.

You mentioned NatureScot. Where do we stand in relation to NatureScot? We spoke to Lorna Slater when she was the minister who was responsible for NatureScot. She highlighted that the proposal for a third national park was very much driven by the need to address the biodiversity crisis and the climate change crisis.

I have here a statement of NatureScot's own biodiversity statistics. I will read some of them out—I hope that I can find them. Basically, NatureScot says that trends in abundance for 337 species have remained remarkably stable since—let me find the year, please. The figures go up to 2023, and I think that the biodiversity was first monitored in 1997. The biodiversity numbers have remained remarkably stable, according to NatureScot's own figures. You can find them on its website. NatureScot says that biodiversity occupancy, which is the spread of different species, has increased by 24 per cent.

When it comes to marine biodiversity, NatureScot claims that that has declined by 41 per cent, but that figure is based only on 11 species of seabird. When we look at the underlying figures, we see that, in some cases, they have increased. For example, cephalopods have increased by 390 per cent. The other four groups that NatureScot has looked at have increased by a minimum of 90 per cent, but NatureScot discards that in favour of projecting a negative based on 11 species of seabird. We know that we have been through a period of avian flu.

NatureScot plays a very important part in the designation process, but its statements of statistics do not support the existence of a biodiversity crisis.

The Convener: Okay. What you conclude from that is that you feel that the evidence base is

subjective rather than objective and that, for want of a better description, NatureScot is cherry picking in where it is looking to find its evidence, rather than drawing that evidence out from the broadest possible base.

Ian McKinnon: Yes, I would say that. I would also question whether NatureScot can truly be considered to be an impartial and unbiased organisation in the process, given that it would appear to have supported a number of the groups that put in the initial applications, and it then assessed those applications and is now acting as a reporter to the Government. When the committee previously considered the petition, one member highlighted that that was like someone setting their own homework and marking it.

The Convener: That sounds very much like our colleague Fergus Ewing.

Ian McKinnon: The other crisis that Ms Slater mentioned was the climate change crisis. Some evidence is coming to light that national park authorities have funded actions, which are questionable at best, that involve considerable sums of money. It is an on-going process, but there is no evidence to suggest that the designation of a national park does anything to solve that crisis.

09:45

The Convener: Does anyone want to come in on that point?

Mhairi Dawson (NFU Scotland): Yes, please. NFU Scotland enjoys a very good working relationship with NatureScot, and we will maintain that relationship outside the process of national parks but also within it. However, although we are very grateful that NatureScot has promised to be open and transparent—so far, it has been—we share the concerns about the fact that it has intimated that it is not neutral but is a proponent of a national park. The messaging that we are getting in Galloway is all about a new national park; it is not about a proposed national park. The question is, “What do you want your new national park to look like?” and not, “Would you like a new national park and, if so, what do you want that to look like?”

The Convener: Therefore, it is a presumptive approach. It is presumed that the park will exist and then you can make contributions on that.

Before we move on, I welcome Finlay Carson, who has joined us while we consider the petition. Finlay, it is not normally the case that colleagues can participate in the questioning of witnesses, but should you wish to ask something, I am happy for you to indicate that to me and we will seek to bring you in, if that would be helpful.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Thank you.

The Convener: Mhairi Dawson, the NFUS has said that

“existing national parks have failed to make a positive contribution to farming and crofting.”

What made you draw that conclusion?

Mhairi Dawson: We have carried out multiple member engagement exercises over the years and we have spoken to our members who are within national parks. I want to acknowledge that we have members who support national parks, but the majority do not. The majority tell us that they are not working for them. An example of that is the Cairngorms national park, where farmers and crofters had to create their own board in order to be able to be heard by the Cairngorms National Park Authority.

The Convener: I want to fully understand that point. I asked about your conclusion that national parks have failed to make a positive contribution. Does that mean that the Cairngorms national park has made a neutral contribution, or has it created a negative environment for farming and crofting?

Mhairi Dawson: I think that members' experiences vary in the different national parks and areas. I apologise that I have not been doing as much with the Cairngorms national park and the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park. I have been more focused on Dumfries and Galloway and the proposed national park. However, I can come back to the committee with evidence and answer that question.

The Convener: It might be that these things get teased out as we go along, in any event.

What impact do you consider that our existing national parks have had on the economies and communities within their boundaries? Are the national parks achieving the statutory aim of promoting the sustainable and economic development of those communities? If there is a concern that the national parks are not meeting that statutory obligation, what lessons need to be learned or considered before anything further comes to us?

Denise Brownlee (No Galloway National Park): The No Galloway National Park group has been looking at what has been happening in the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park and the Cairngorms national park to gauge what might be coming to us. We came across the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs “National Park Partnership Plan 2024-2029”. One page is entitled “Uncomfortable truths that this Plan aims to tackle”. You must remember that the park has existed for 20 years. Those truths include the fact that 75 per cent of households—ordinary people—

in the national park cannot afford average house prices, invasive non-native species remain widespread, 50 per cent of the water bodies are not in good ecological condition, and 79 per cent of visitors come to the area by car and 73 per cent explore the whole area by car. There are so many different statistics, and nothing is joined up.

For us, it is about the environmental aspect. Dumfries and Galloway already has areas with quite a heavy tourist impact. The impact at the moment is bad enough, and we could not handle the impacts that we have seen elsewhere after 20 years. We cannot handle those kind of numbers—which come from a national park authority's own literature; it is not somebody making up those figures.

The Convener: The NFUS and NatureScot have commented on the impacts in relation to things such as housing, water and transport infrastructure. However, we get conflicting views—NatureScot is obviously taking a slightly different perspective. Is that a consequence of NatureScot's being an advocating proponent of the parks and looking to find what it wants to find? Why do those different views exist?

Mhairi Dawson: I believe that, unfortunately, NatureScot is looking to find what it wants to find. However, there is an issue with the overall process. The people in Dumfries and Galloway and Ayrshire—particularly those in Ayrshire—do not feel that their voices are being heard; there are no answers to many of the questions that we have proposed. The response is, “It might be this, it might be that.” Our members and communities are being asked to make decisions on a lot of assumptions, not firm facts.

The Convener: That brings us to the call for an independent review. I assume that among all of you here this morning there is a sense that an investigation or consultation led by NatureScot would already be compromised in the minds of the groups that you represent, because it would appear that NatureScot is there to act as a proponent for the parks and not necessarily to question whether the evidence supports the development of further parks. Is that correct?

Denise Brownlee: Yes.

The Convener: Mr Kempe, I have not had a chance to hear from you. Would like to say anything in relation to our commentary?

Nick Kempe (Parkswatch Scotland): Yes, if I may. I apologise; I have Covid, so I am at home.

I am actually neutral on the position of national parks, although I know that I have been grouped with people who are against them at the moment. I have been blogging about national parks for 10 years. The important thing to say is that the

Scottish Government started a review of national parks in 2008. The first part, which was on governance, was concluded. The second part of that review, which was meant to be on performance and whether national parks have, in effect, made any difference, was never concluded. The Scottish Government started a process of reviewing national parks but never did review them. In my view, that still needs to be done.

I would like to say why I am neutral. In principle, I think that national parks are a very good idea, but they have not made much difference in practice. I know that there are fears—I hear the fears about being overwhelmed by tourists, which are being expressed in Lochaber and Galloway. However, the fact is that the fairy pools on Skye and the north coast 500 have been completely overrun with tourists, and they are not in national parks. Therefore, factors such as the attraction of tourists do not depend on national parks.

Similarly, looking at land use, the key point is that the national parks have administered exactly the same system as that which exists in the rest of Scotland. We have the same planning system, forestry grant system and agricultural grant system. If the national parks have not made much difference to agriculture in the Cairngorms, part of the reason is that they have no control over how money is spent on agriculture there. They can do very little. They have created a tiny fund to compensate for beavers being introduced, but that is about the only thing that they have done for agriculture in 20 years.

My position, therefore—and this comes back to your first question about the evidence—is that we need an independent review to look at the evidence and to consider, if we do want national parks and want them to make a difference, what that might mean with regard to extra powers and so on.

The Convener: You make an interesting point about whether national parks themselves are the catalyst for additional tourism. There are other factors, too; for instance, you could point to American television series such as “Outlander” and the tourism that comes from people visiting those destinations. However, when it comes to the whole idea of creating a national park, is it not implicit that such a park will, in the public mind, be somewhere that we should all go to? It might not depend on this, but, by making somewhere a national park, do we not almost self-promote the concept that this is somewhere that tourists should consider upping themselves off to?

Nick Kempe: It would be interesting to know whether all the people heading up to the NC500 think that they should go through the Loch Lomond and Trossachs or Cairngorms national parks and stop off there on the way. I do not have

an answer to that—that would need a visitor survey. However, I would just point out that the Outer Hebrides has just been promoted as the best location on earth—or one of the best—to visit in National Geographic or something. Therefore, places are being promoted completely independently of national parks.

I think that the jury is out on a lot of this. Of course, there are hot spots in national parks—there is absolutely no doubt about that—but there are other places in them, too. For example, the Cowal peninsula, which has been almost forgotten as part of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs park, could probably do with more tourism. I am not sure that the Loch Lomond and Trossachs park has made much of a difference in that respect.

Ian McKinnon: One of the impacts on farming in the national parks is the withdrawal of permitted development rights for things such as agricultural feed sheds. Previously, farmers who wanted to put such things in place were able to do so as a permitted right; however, they no longer have that. Instead, you have to go through the planning process, which is costly and time consuming, with no guarantee that you will get permission. It is very much subsistence farming that we are talking about, and you have to make that choice while other areas of the country enjoy such things as permitted rights.

Again, on the idea that national parks are there to protect and enhance the natural environment, who are they protecting it from? When Lochaber was put forward as a national park, what I wanted to know was this: who is attacking Ben Nevis? Is it the people who live here? That is one of the problems. When you look at national parks around the world, you will see that the issue is the indigenous people—and by “indigenous”, I mean the people who live and depend on the community, the land and the resources. I believe that we use our resources well in the rural environment, and I would like that to be recognised.

As well as enhancing and protecting the natural environment, parks are supposed to promote their use through tourism. However, the problem with the NC500 and the fairy pools is not tourists—it is the lack of infrastructure. If you create a national park, with all the restrictions with regard to protecting the environment and so on, before you introduce the infrastructure, you end up refusing yourself the ability to provide that infrastructure or you make doing so far more costly.

The Convener: Thank you. Our second theme is the drivers for designating more national parks. I invite David Torrance to take the lead on the questioning.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Good morning. First, I want to put on record that I stay in the Cairngorms national park for a good part of the year.

Are there circumstances in which you would support designations of further national parks, for example, following further reviews and consultation with rural stakeholders and industry?

Mhairi Dawson: The NFUS does not support the creation of new national parks because we do not think that they are needed. We think that all the aims and benefits can be delivered by—as is indicated by its very name—the new Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024. Certainly in Galloway, there are multiple organisations that can deliver the aims of a national park.

10:00

I would also like it noted that the messaging on the new national park has very much moved away from being about the people who live and work in the area and become about it being a climate and biodiversity national park. Our farmers and crofters across the whole of Scotland, not just in Galloway, are already doing an awful lot for the climate, nature and biodiversity. That will continue, and we as an organisation and our members are fully supportive of those aims.

Ian McKinnon: The main driver for the third national park in Scotland is highlighted as being the climate and biodiversity crisis. The truth is that there was only one crisis, and that was the SNP's lack of a parliamentary majority. The park was driven by the Bute house agreement and nothing else. Every other factor in the Bute house agreement has failed miserably, and this will, too.

It has been highlighted that all national parks should have the support of the people who live the area. I do not see majority support in any of these areas from the people who live in them.

Mhairi Dawson: I want to follow up on that point. It is now awful in Galloway. The issue has become so divisive that it is horrible. It has really divided a community.

David Torrance: I know that consultation with local communities and groups is really important. How much consultation has been done on the proposal for a national park in Galloway with the whole range of local groups and communities, such as community councils and the NFUS?

Mhairi Dawson: We have done a member survey. I joined the NFUS in June last year, and it has been discussed at every one of our regional committee meetings, which happen bimonthly.

In terms of the wider community, I have lived in Galloway since 2015, and I do not think that the park proposal was very widely publicised, as has been intimated. Many people say to me that they had no idea about it. That has been a real issue in Ayrshire in particular; members in South Ayrshire and East Ayrshire do not feel that they have been consulted.

People also feel that it is a done deal. Every week, many people ask me whether it is a done deal and what the point of engaging is. That is terrible for the forthcoming consultation process, which we need people to engage with. They do not feel that their voices are being heard. I have two members who, in the run-up to the bid being submitted, went to community meetings. One was asked, "Why are you here if you are not here to support a national park?" The other asked whether, if the consultation showed that a majority were against the creation of a new national park in Galloway, a bid would not be put in. He was told that the bid would be going in regardless.

Denise Brownlee: There was very little done by the Galloway National Park Association. There were occasional murmurs on the ground about a national park, but I can put my hand on my heart and say that I never saw anything about a meeting or anything like that. The first that most of us knew about it was through a BBC news report, which said that we were going to be the next national park. That is when we started the No Galloway National Park group.

The GPNA said that it had extensive community support and had spoken to thousands of people. However, when we boil that down, we see that it only quoted a survey of 430 people. Considering that there are 148,000 people in the area, you cannot say that a survey of 430 shows extensive support. When we spoke to the GNPA, it had not consulted the health board or people at Cairnryan. The main players in the area—the big employers—knew nothing about it, either.

This has been done over six years. As Mhairi Dawson says, the issue has really divided people, because they are almost being asked to answer questions about what they do not know. A few weeks ago, we spoke to NatureScot, and the only answer that we got was basically, "Yes, the wind farm things will probably happen in a national park." Apart from that, we were told, "It could happen", "It's possible it'll happen," or, "That's in principle." There were no hard-and-fast answers, and that caused an even bigger division, because we were hoping that we would actually get an answer. I know that that was just pre the consultation, but we were hoping that there would be some answers that would settle things, but there were not any.

Ian McKinnon: Dame Barbara Kelly is the president of the GNPA and was part of putting forward the application. In her address to the board in 2023, she apologised to the other board members for the lack of information and declared that that was because a lot of the engagement had been done “quietly and without publicity”. That was in her statement, and I think that it highlights the failure in engagement.

I would go further and ask you to consider the process. In Lochaber, seven people decided that they were going to put forward a bid. Those people did not consult major industry. I do not think that they consulted anybody other than one of their funders, the Gupta organisation. They did not engage with fishing or aquaculture interests or with landowners, other than the Gupta organisation. That is a major failure in the process. However, in NatureScot’s assessment, Lochaber came out second top. The same thing has happened in Galloway, where there has been no engagement with landowners. There is a real fault in the process. It is undemocratic and unfair and it is not transparent. The Scottish Government was set up under the banner of being fair, equitable and transparent, but that is not happening, I am afraid.

David Torrance: Convener, I cannot see whether Mr Kempe wants to answer.

The Convener: Mr Kempe, would you like to contribute on that topic?

Nick Kempe: I agree that there are problems with the process. The Scottish Government’s expectation that local communities would compete with one another in bids for national parks was always going to be a disaster. To come back to Mr McKinnon’s point, seven people in Lochaber may have got together, but to expect seven people to negotiate with all the other interests was totally and utterly unrealistic, and I can see why local people have ended up being divided on the issue.

What is even worse is that, because there is no clear idea of what a national park would do, even further division has been created. That is why we need a review of existing national parks. We need a new national parks model that says what they are about, and then we might be able to take this forward more effectively.

David Torrance: I have one final question. The appraisal panel report noted that there might be complementary or alternative mechanisms for addressing the challenges that are set out in national parks proposals. Are there policy approaches or mechanisms that you would like to see in advance of or in addition to the designation of new national parks?

Denise Brownlee: Before anything else, I would like to see an upgrade of our infrastructure.

A lot of the stuff in the Scottish Environment LINK report on national parks is about improving things such as tourism infrastructure but, first of all, we should think about the people who live in the area and improve our roads. If our road system was better—I am talking about the A75 and the A77—it would be safer and more comfortable. From everything so far, it looks like the national park is just about getting tourists in. However, the roads need to be improved for the people who live there as well as for tourism. Our starter would be to get the infrastructure of the region sorted first.

Ian McKinnon: I am just back from the Slovenian Alps. I drove from there down to Ljubljana, and the sides of the roads were spotless; I never saw a bin and I did not see any litter. When I drove through Loch Lomondside, I stopped within a mile of the national park headquarters, where there were three bins that were full to overflowing. That was at the beginning of March—I was going down to see the Blockheads—so it was not the busy season. The bins were full to overflowing and litter had blown all over the verge. Since then, when coming down on the bus, I have looked at the verges along Loch Lomondside, and they are hideous. There is nothing that we can do, because, without closing the road, people cannot safely pick up the litter.

Mickey Mouse in Florida can take in 50,000 people a day. He can feed them, he can park them, and he can pick up their litter. I never saw a bit of litter in Disney World. Tourism is one of our most important industries, but we are failing to deliver the most basic things at places such as the fairy pools. I live at the mouth of the Morar river, and if we get two days of sunshine, the bins are full to overflowing. The toilets are not looked after—Highland Council gave them up because it did not have the funds. A local community group took them on, but it is now begging for money to keep the toilets updated.

If we cannot provide the basics of litter collection, toilets and parking—and we are not doing that in our existing national parks—we should not be considering creating another one in the future. We are destroying one of our most important industries.

The Convener: Mickey Mouse might facilitate all that with a smile, but he fleeces you while he is doing it.

Ian McKinnon: If we have to charge to provide good service, we should do so, because we are destroying the industry. Look at what has happened to Spain—Spain has not recovered, and probably never will recover, its identity. It is a great place to go—it is still regarded as cheap and cheerful—but I do not want to see that happen to Scotland.

The Convener: Mhairi Dawson, I will follow up on one of your responses to David Torrance, when you got almost quite emotional and passionate about the division that the issue has created. Will you illustrate how that has manifested?

Mhairi Dawson: If there is one thing that I would like the committee to take away today it is to not underestimate the level of feeling in Galloway and Ayrshire. It is getting to the point that it is not pleasant to work on the proposal, regardless of whether you are a proponent of it.

I have had members on the phone to me in tears because they are worried about the future for their children and grandchildren. There are so many agricultural family businesses down in Galloway that are worried about their future because we do not know what a national park would look like.

The Convener: Thank you. I will move to the next theme, which is the engagement process and local buy-in, which follows on nicely from your comments.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): From the evidence that we have heard so far, it strikes me that perhaps the starting point in all this is to have a definition of a national park and what it should achieve. For some people, it might be a pristine landscape without any land management, in which case, biodiversity will undoubtedly reduce. Loch Lomond and the Trossachs clearly has lots of tourism—Loch Lomond Shores has amazing facilities to attract tourists—but then the national park did not want more tourists to go there. Before we get to the stage of presenting to the people of Galloway, we need a starting point as to what we are presenting.

Nick Kempe has touched on this, but, based on the two existing national parks, is there an adequate definition of what a new national park might look like and what the experience would be for both visitors and local residents?

10:15

Nick Kempe: My view is that the four statutory aims of Scotland's national parks are good, although I know that the Government has talked about tweaking them. They are: the conservation of natural and cultural heritage; promoting public enjoyment of the area; promoting the wise use of resources; and the sustainable development of the local communities in the area. I think that the Scottish Parliament got that absolutely right first time. The problem is that there have been no mechanisms to enact those aims.

As I have previously said, exactly the same planning system applies to the national parks as applies elsewhere, and there is the same rural

subsidy system and the same type of forestry. For example, the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park is dominated by industrial forestry and sitka. Despite lots of talk from the national park about the need to diversify its forests and make them more resilient against disease, lots of larch is being felled in the national park because of disease. The forestry model is completely wrong, and nothing is being done to change that. Forestry and Land Scotland, which owns most of the land for forestry, has gone on operating in just the same way.

It is the same with other partners. Some of the witnesses have spoken about improving roads, transport connections and so on. Our national parks are supposed to operate in partnership and they have partnership plans with other organisations, but they have proved to be totally incapable of making those organisations do things. Mr McKinnon referred to all the litter at Loch Lomond. The problem is that the national parks cannot even persuade local councils to put out litter bins—they cannot even do that. The national parks are very weak. I think that that is why we need an independent review to look at how national parks can be strengthened and made more effective, which should start with looking at the existing parks. People would then have a better idea of what a national park would mean elsewhere.

Maurice Golden: On the definition of a national park, do the witnesses in the room think that the people of Galloway understand what is being presented, and is there a clear vision of what a national park would be? Wrapped around that question, what formal processes have NatureScot or the Scottish Government conducted to date?

Denise Brownlee: As far as I am aware, not an awful lot has been done. The first organisation that we heard from was the Galloway National Park Association. We organised NatureScot to come and speak to us so that people could get what we hoped was a balanced view. However, NatureScot could not give any hard-and-fast answers about anything—and I mean anything. All its answers were about what it could do, or what perhaps would happen. Nick Kempe has just spoken about the aims of a national park, but nothing was said about that. NatureScot could not answer any questions.

I lived in Loch Lomond and I was a ranger in the park for a couple of years, and I worry about things such as conserving and enhancing natural and cultural heritage. In the past, teenagers could camp anywhere in Loch Lomond—you could find a wee spot, stick your wee tent up and have a weekend party. You cannot do that now; you need a permit to camp, because of the byelaws. Rangers and the authority do not have teeth like

the police, so rather than make only the bad campers pay, everyone has to pay. The same applies to launching boats. The national park took over the public slipway, which was bequeathed to the people. It is now the only place that you can launch a boat from. If you go up to Loch Lomond with a boat, you now have to pay £37.20 to get on to the water, whereas in the past, you could just take your boat there. Some of the cultural heritage related to people's use of the lochside has instantly been lost.

There are all those issues. I know that I am rambling a little bit, but I am doing so because we have had no hard-and-fast answers about what the proposed park is about. NatureScot was not even using the word "proposed" until I got a bit angry about it. It was talking about a new national park in Galloway, but I said, "No, it's not a new national park in Galloway—it's a proposed national park."

Maurice Golden: There are two parts to the issue. The first is that the Scottish Government said that the creation of any new national park should be in response to local community demand. I would assume that the Scottish Government and NatureScot would deliver a balanced view of a national park in order to ascertain whether there was local community demand for it. For example, they could set out the economic benefits but say that the proposal would lead to a lot more footfall and litter, as we have heard. Was it presented in that way? What has the process been so far? Have NatureScot and the Scottish Government organised community meetings or social media campaigns?

Denise Brownlee: NatureScot set up a hub where people could answer questions, but the question was not, "Do you want a national park—yes or no?" The questions were skewed and biased, with a sliding scale from one to 10.

Maurice Golden: Where was the hub?

Denise Brownlee: It was a hub page on the computer, so people had to be able to use a computer to access it and fill out different tiles about what a national park could bring to them. There was no question to which people could say that they did not want a national park, even though we typed in that sort of information. Everything was biased.

People then started used the hub—NatureScot called it the Commonplace hub—to produce propaganda against our No Galloway National Park group. Rather than saying anything about the national park, they took a pop at us and were quite aggressive on the hub. We asked NatureScot to remove the comments, but it refused.

Maurice Golden: Mhairi Dawson, we have heard that there is not a clear understanding of

what NatureScot and the Scottish Government propose for Galloway and that the consultation process thus far has been inadequate. What is your assessment?

Mhairi Dawson: Although there are the four national park aims, we are constantly told that a potential new Galloway and Ayrshire national park could be different, but not how it could be different. The formal consultation period opens in the week commencing 4 November. As a starting point, we will be offered three different boundaries, so we will be offered not one but multiple options.

NatureScot has been good at engaging with the NFUS. We have had multiple meetings, for which we are very grateful, and we will continue to meet. NatureScot has committed to coming down to speak to our farmers in Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway.

The online hub was very difficult to navigate and use, which would have put off a certain demographic of the community, and the information leaflet was sent out either five or six weeks late. My concern about any further communications that are sent out on paper is whether, with a limited 12-week period for consultation, the residents of Galloway will have enough time to look at and engage with what they are sent.

Maurice Golden: One of our other petitions is about what are colloquially referred to as pylons. We have heard that that consultation basically said, "These are coming, so there's no option here." I know that the formal consultation period for the park has not started yet but, from what you have seen so far, has the consultation been framed in a way that says that the national park is coming and that the options are, in essence, about what the boundaries will be?

Mhairi Dawson: I believe that NatureScot has now said that it will offer people the chance to say that they do not want a national park. However, given the process up until now, we have concerns about whether that chance will appear and about the messaging, because the tone of the messaging so far has been about a "new" national park, not a "proposed" national park.

Maurice Golden: Which is fine, as long as you do not state that one of your aims is response to local community demand. If it is a policy decision that this must happen, that is up to the Scottish Government, but you cannot then say that it is because the community supports it, I would argue. It reeks a bit of George Orwell's "1984". Ian McKinnon, would you like to come in?

Ian McKinnon: I came before the Public Petitions Committee back in 2007 or 2008, again with the help of Fergus Ewing, who was our MSP then, asking that a local referendum be a part of

the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000. When we met Lorna Slater, when she was the minister, we asked again whether we could get a local referendum, and she said that there is no mechanism within the 2000 act to allow for that. People are being consulted about what is going to happen, rather than being given a choice. That is very evident in the way that the business has been conducted in Galloway since the beginning of the whole process.

Denise Brownlee: Can I just add something about the leaflet that came out? Every household was meant to get a copy. Needless to say, lots of people did not get it, because apparently you only got it if the postman was delivering mail to you that day. Galloway has a lot of outlying areas, so a lot of people did not get the leaflet.

Also, when it comes to the hub and other things like that, because of our age demographic down there a lot of people do not use the internet or the computer and all the rest of it, plus large parts of the area cannot get broadband anyway unless they spend a fortune, so that is not a fair way of getting in touch with everybody. I do not know how you would get in touch to consult with and speak to everybody, but what they have done so far has not worked.

Maurice Golden: Thanks. To finish off, Denise, what would be your top three concerns around a new national park in Galloway?

Denise Brownlee: Everyone's concerns are different, obviously. My personal one is the house prices, because already there are quite a few what I would call honeypot towns and villages in the area, where if you go at the dead of winter there is not one house light on because they are all second homes, holiday lets and so on. The other thing is that the tourism front is being pushed and we are told that all these jobs will come. The reality is that they will be low-paid tourism-type jobs and I want more for the youngsters in the area. Again, I would love to see the infrastructure sorted so that we are—how to put it?—so that more people can travel to and from the area. *[Interruption.]* More connected, that is the word.

Maurice Golden: Thank you. Mhairi Dawson, I have a final question for you. From a land management and farming perspective, are there potential benefits to farming and crofting as a result of the new national park, based on your discussions with NatureScot?

Mhairi Dawson: NatureScot correctly declined to answer that question when it was asked, because it is meant to be neutral. However, in our meetings with the Galloway National Park Association, the only benefits that I was offered were diversification opportunities. That is fine if you want to diversify, but many of our farming

businesses just want to concentrate on food production. The other benefit was access to experts.

Maurice Golden: As we know, diversification gets into tourism, about which we have heard, wind turbines, solar farms, battery storage—yes, okay. Back to you, convener.

The Convener: The fourth and final theme that we wish to explore with you this morning relates to the forthcoming legislation on the national parks, and the potential national park statement, including the implications of pursuing reform and designation on a twin track. I invite Mr Choudhury to ask some questions on that.

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Thank you, convener. The Scottish Government has proposed to make changes to national park legislation in a bill that is due to come out later in this parliamentary year. What are the implications of that process running alongside the investigation of a new designation? Are stakeholders aware of the changes that are being proposed?

Mhairi Dawson: We are aware that changes are being proposed, but I do not know what they are. How can we be asked to take a decision on the designation of a new national park when the legislation that that sits under could change?

10:30

Ian McKinnon: There has never been a national park that has been de-parked. Once you are a national park, you stay a national park. Basically, you are signing a blank cheque for the future.

We know that the group of people living in national parks are older than the population as a whole by a quite significant four-plus years. That information comes from the Office of National Statistics and, I believe, from the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority and the Cairngorms National Park Authority. According to the ONS, average earnings tend to be lower; there are fewer young people and families; and there is less ethnic and religious diversity in the population in national parks. There seems to be a higher level of further education—maybe that is because rich, educated people are retiring there. That has implications for the communities all the way through. We are already struggling to find people to take on care jobs. Up in Lochaber, three perfectly good care homes are closed because they cannot get the people. Generally, women, such as mothers working part-time, took on those jobs to look after the elderly. When we do not have that human infrastructure, we have to hire in people through agencies and the costs go through the roof. It is important to consider those additional issues.

Foysoyl Choudhury: Did I hear you say that you are not aware of the proposed changes? What should the Scottish Government do to get the stakeholders more involved when it is making any changes to legislation?

Denise Brownlee: One thing that it should do, as far as I am concerned, is to stop using the word “stakeholders”. If you live and work in an area through choice, you are a stakeholder, because everything depends on you living there.

I do not know what the Scottish Government could do to make us more aware. There are still some people who are quite unaware that the national park proposal that we are fighting at the moment is going to affect them—especially, as Mhairi Dawson was saying, in Ayrshire and that side of the world. Every day, we speak to somebody else who did not understand that it was going to affect them. I do not know how the Scottish Government can get the information out to everybody.

Nick Kempe: That is a good question. My view is that there are some minor tweaks to the aims of national parks to give a bit more emphasis to climate change and nature. However, climate change and nature are already built into the statutory aims of national parks, so I do not think that it is necessary to tweak the aims.

I think that the Scottish Government has not looked at the powers and resources of national parks—I have mentioned that before. If the parks are going to make a difference, they need to have more powers and resources. Also, in respect of Galloway, it is worth pointing out that there are some very basic issues, such as the size of a national park—our two existing national parks span four or five local authorities and they are meant to bring together co-ordination across different local authority areas. Galloway would be totally different—it is in one local authority area. Your whole governance of the national park needs to be fundamentally different. In fact, most of the alternatives to national parks are in the Highland Council area, so we will need a new model of national parks. How the national park relates to a single local authority is not being considered at the moment.

Mhairi Dawson: Can I come back on that? As it sits just now, although the majority of the park is in the Dumfries and Galloway Council area, the proposed boundary also takes in the South Ayrshire and East Ayrshire council areas. That goes back to my other point about Ayrshire not being consulted. The whole thing has been branded as “Galloway”, rather than as “Galloway and Ayrshire”.

Foysoyl Choudhury: NatureScot has also made other recommendations on how national parks

should be run. For example, it recommends that there should be more involvement of communities and different sectors in developing national park plans, and that funding streams should be available to deliver the plans.

What are your views? Would further changes to how national parks are governed or supported address your concerns about existing or future national parks?

Mhairi Dawson: In relation to the Galloway national park proposal, as I have already said, by its very name the new Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024 should be able to deliver those aims. We do not need a national park to do that.

Denise Brownlee: A lot of really good things are already happening on the ground in Galloway. The forest park, the dark skies project, the biosphere and all those different things are already up and running. If there is additional money for a national park, that money should be put into the things that Mhairi has already talked about and that I am mentioning. There are lots of them. If we are going to promote an area, we should promote those projects that are already on the ground and that employ people who live locally.

Ian McKinnon: I do not believe that NatureScot is an impartial and unbiased organisation. It is a Government agency—a quango—that acts on its own behalf. I do not believe that it gives valid scientific evidence to Government. If you want to get messages to the public, you should not involve NatureScot. When I was talking about marine biodiversity, I highlighted that NatureScot ignores what is happening on the ground, in favour of cherry-picking one incident to do with marine birds and ignoring the others. I certainly feel that NatureScot—or Scottish Natural Heritage—needs to be looked at. You can change your name, but everybody still knows who you are.

The Convener: There is a moral there in many different ways.

Mr Carson, you have been listening patiently to the evidence. Before I draw this witness panel’s consideration to an end, I wonder whether you would like to say anything.

Finlay Carson: One of my biggest concerns is that we have heard about all the downsides of national parks in Scotland. The Government is committed to delivering at least one new national park in Scotland by the end of 2026, but should it have waited until lessons had been learned from the existing parks? I know that somebody has already touched on this, but should there be a formal independent review of the current national parks to see what lessons could be learned?

In some instances, national park status might deliver benefits to some areas, but we do not know what those might be, because we have not reviewed the work that has already been undertaken on the benefits and drawbacks of national park status.

What are your views on potentially pausing the commitment to new national parks until a thorough review of the existing parks has been done?

Mhairi Dawson: I believe that a review of the existing parks would be beneficial. As I have said multiple times today, we do not know what we are being asked to sign up to. How can we make informed decisions with no information?

Denise Brownlee: I also agree that a totally independent assessment should be done. We could break it down in the way that we would with a job: have the parks met their aims and objectives? They have been on the go for 20 years so, if they have not managed to meet them in 20 years, should they be reviewed? Once that assessment is done, let us see the way forward.

Ian McKinnon: I can only agree with that.

Finlay Carson: I take issue with some of the sentiments that have been expressed, because they are somewhat conflicting. Mhairi Dawson, you suggested that you do not know what you are deciding on, but someone also said that it is all set in stone and is a “done deal”. There is a lot of uncertainty, but is that not because the formal consultation does not start until next week? That will set out the considerations for the public, which may be about boundaries, the planning authority status of the new national park or the make-up of its board. Are we jumping the gun by saying that NatureScot has failed, when in fact that process is about to be undertaken?

I know that the NFUS says no to national parks, but when it comes to the Galloway national park, what is the NFUS actually saying no to? What policies that are yet to be decided is it saying no to?

Mhairi Dawson: We do not believe that national parks are required, because we think that the aims of national parks, as they are currently set out, can be delivered through the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024. The emphasis for the new national park has been on biodiversity and climate. Our members across the country—not just those in Galloway, but all our farmers and crofters—are already working towards those aims.

The comment about a “done deal” refers to the designation, rather than the detail.

Ian McKinnon: We do not know a lot of what is going to happen, but we know that the priorities will be protection and enhancement of the natural

environment, and I would still like to know against whom it needs to be protected.

We also know that the whole process so far has been severely biased in favour of a park. Even today, and running for the next two days, there is a pro-park exhibition in the Parliament that has been sponsored by Colin Smyth MSP. That opportunity has not been afforded to the people who are against the national park. There is a real concern that the whole process has been biased and pushed forward—we know that.

The Convener: Would the gentleman online like to comment in response to any of the questions?

Nick Kempe: In answer to your question, I think that a review would help, because people need to be clear about what our national parks have and have not done. Many of the fears and misgivings about our national parks are not justified, because the parks have not really changed anything. An independent review is needed, but the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament then need to review, with regard to the legislation, what national parks should be doing if they are going to make a difference.

It is not up to me to speak to this, but I used to be in the Scottish Campaign for National Parks—I know that the witnesses who are appearing next will say something about that. I go down to Galloway quite a lot, and the big challenges there in terms of the landscape and it being made a national park include what happens to wind farms and what we should do about the Sitka spruce. The area is predominantly Sitka forestry, which has led to the loss of rural jobs and so on. How do we create more sustainable rural employment and bring in broadleaf trees and so on? There are some big land-use questions that need to be answered, and I am not sure that the consultation that is about to happen is going to set clear parameters for that at all—in fact, I will be very surprised if it does.

The Convener: I thank you all very much and I am grateful to you for your contributions this morning. We have teased out your views on a range of issues arising from the proposed national park, and that evidence will be of great interest and help to the committee as we consider what steps to take next. I suspend the meeting briefly to allow the panel to change over.

10:44

Meeting suspended.

10:49

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back to this meeting of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee. We continue our evidence taking in relation to PE2089, which is a petition to stop the creation of more national parks in Scotland. Following the evidence that we heard from our previous witnesses, we have been joined by Rob Lucas of the Galloway National Park Association and John Mayhew of the Scottish Campaign for National Parks. I extend a very warm welcome to both of you.

I say again that our colleague Finlay Carson is sitting in on the discussion of the petition this morning.

We will move straight to questions. We have four themes. I do not know whether you were able to watch or hear any of the evidence that we took from the first panel, but our questions will be on similar themes.

John Mayhew (Scottish Campaign for National Parks): Yes, we did, thank you.

The Convener: What evidence is available on the environmental and socioeconomic impacts that the existing national parks have been able to generate? That seems to be one of the issues relating to the parks. Did any of the evidence that existed inform the development of this proposal? Where there was no evidence, where was the information about and support for the proposal drawn from?

John Mayhew: We know what the existing national park authorities have achieved through their reporting mechanisms. The staff of the national park are responsible to the national park authority board, which is responsible to the Scottish Government and to ministers. The national parks have been in existence for more 20 years, and every year, the authorities have reported on their activities and what they have achieved for the area under their four aims.

The other way to read about what the national park authorities have been doing is through the national park partnership plan. The national park authorities are obliged to come up with a partnership plan—it is not just their plan; it is about working with all the other public agencies in the area, such as local authorities, other government agencies, including Forestry and Land Scotland and NatureScot, health boards and police boards. Part of the strength of the national park model is that it insists on all those agencies in the area working together to implement the four aims of the national parks, which we heard about earlier, of

conservation, recreation, sustainable use and community development.

A great deal has been done over those years. I am sure that the national park authorities would be the first to admit that there is a great deal still to do, but there is a solid record of their progress, which we think is sufficient to make it worth while extending the model to other parts of Scotland, which we genuinely think could benefit from it.

Rob Lucas (Galloway National Park Association): In the local context, we are drawing on information from a number of data sets, such as census data and other national statistics, where national parks are drawn out as a unique data set. We have drawn on information on not only Scotland but some of the English parks, which we think have relevance because their landscape is more like that of Galloway than that of the Cairngorms. Shall I go on?

The Convener: Only as you feel necessary.

Rob Lucas: No; I think that that answers the question.

The Convener: You will have heard the evidence from the previous witnesses, some of whom felt that there needs to be an independent review of the national parks, over and above any review that is being conducted by NatureScot. One of the witnesses referred to Mr Ewing's contribution when we first considered the petition, when he spoke about people marking their own homework and about the fact that NatureScot is a proponent of what is now being advocated in relation to an additional national park, such that there is not public confidence that there has been an independently generated and proper understanding of the benefits and lessons in creating any future national park. What is your attitude to the petitioner's calls for such an independent review to be established?

John Mayhew: We understand why the review is being proposed. However, we have noted that much of the extensive debate that has gone on over the past three years since the proposal was first made with regard to the process for a new national park—and, indeed, where it should be—has inevitably focused on the work of the existing national parks. After all, if we want a new national park, the obvious question is this: is it worth it on the evidence so far? That question has been discussed repeatedly at the various opportunities that there have been to debate the work.

I will not go right back to the beginning, but there was a full-scale public consultation on the future of national parks in Scotland in 2022. The Government then asked NatureScot to give more detailed advice on the approach to selecting new national parks, which included two further rounds of public consultation. There has also been the

debate, which I know that you discussed in the previous session, over possible legislative amendments and whether we should be seeking to change the legislation on national parks, either before the new park is proposed or at some point in the future, depending on the legislative timetable. Moreover, there was, last year, the big biodiversity consultation that was led by the Scottish Government and which covered possible amendments with regard to the forthcoming natural environment bill. In that respect, I would note the proposal to amend the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 as part of that bill.

Therefore, we have had a process of more than three years and a great deal of debate through all the different mechanisms—the NatureScot consultation, the Scottish Government consultation and so on.

The Convener: You say that, Mr Mayhew, but is a consultation the same thing as a review? I do not live in an area that is likely to be affected by a national park proposal—although I do live in the most beautiful constituency in Scotland.

John Mayhew: Of course you do.

The Convener: Nonetheless, it is not part of a national park. My local council is forever holding consultations, and I am for ever being besieged with consultations for this, that and the next thing. Speaking just as a layperson, I have become a bit suspicious of public consultations, because they are 10 a penny—it is almost exhausting. Very often, when you contribute to a public consultation, you will be told that your answer can contain 85 characters—and no more. The pro forma approach in these things becomes quite restrictive. If people have an underlying suspicion that a consultation is just the supporting organisation trying to find a mandate to progress with what it wishes to do in the first place, they will think, “Well, what’s the point?” Surely it is the case that, in the public mind, an independent review provides a more objective analysis of evidence and, indeed, can be more widespread. The previous panel told us about one consultation that could have reached several hundred thousand people but which attracted something like 430 responses. Is that really a consultation?

John Mayhew: I certainly share some of your frustrations with regard to trying to partake in some consultations, putting characters in a box and so on. I certainly know what you mean by that.

No, a consultation is not the same as a review, although a review would be subject to the same criticism about whether Government agencies can be truly independent. Inevitably, any such review would be paid for by the Government, and therefore, those seeking to disagree with it could reasonably argue that it was not independent,

because the Government, in paying for it, just wanted a particular policy to be implemented. There is no other solution. Any review would certainly not be independent if it were carried out by us, or by the national park association—or, indeed, by those opposed to national parks. That sort of review would not be independent either.

The important thing about consultation is not just that it happens, but that the results are analysed and published, and I know that the Scottish Government has a standard process in that respect. When it carries out a consultation, it hands over the results to an independent third party—say, a consultancy—and asks it to prepare an analysis of what everybody said, the main points that were made, the balance of opinion and what should come out of the consultation. In other words, it is not just consultation for its own sake, but a set of results and proposals.

The Convener: Given that the national parks have been in place for a couple of decades now, is a review not a perfectly reasonable proposition?

John Mayhew: I listened to Nick Kempe in the previous session describing the review of national parks back in, I think, 2009 or 2010. We were disappointed that that review did not extend to their performance—to their achievements, successes and failures. It was very much about the processes by which they were managed and their governance systems. We certainly felt that a review should be undertaken, but at that point, there was not the idea that it would be independent; the assumption was that the Scottish Government, as the organisation that is ultimately responsible for national parks, would carry it out.

11:00

I will directly address the petitioner’s request for the process to be suspended. The lengthy process that I have described should be allowed to run its course and should not be suspended. That thorough process has given ample opportunity to debate whether we should have another national park, and, if so, where that should be. There are more stages to follow.

NatureScot has been very much in engagement mode up till now. It has not been out to consultation for the past few weeks; it has simply been trying as best it possibly can to let everybody in Galloway and the relevant bits of Ayrshire know what is on the table, that there is a proposal from the Scottish Government and what that might mean, and that a formal consultation is coming.

Please correct me if I am wrong, but I also want to be clear that my understanding is that once NatureScot has finished the formal consultation, it must provide its advice to ministers, which could be that ministers should go ahead with the new

national park or that they should not. There is then a further stage when, following receipt of that advice, ministers can choose to take it or not.

NatureScot is being asked to do a professional piece of work, but the Scottish ministers, as the democratically accountable people, will make the decision on whether to go ahead. It is possible that NatureScot's advice will be that ministers should go ahead and that ministers will decide for other reasons that they have taken into consideration that they should not.

Even if NatureScot's advice is go ahead and ministers decide to do that, ultimately, the designation order for the national park must come before the entire Scottish Parliament. That is what the 2000 act requires. We are considering an important change to Scotland, and it is quite right that the highest body in the land, which is the entire Scottish Parliament, should make that decision.

What I have described—what has happened so far and what is still to run—provides a really remarkably thorough and detailed process for considering this very important issue, and that is why it should be allowed to run its course.

The Convener: I am speaking in an entirely personal capacity, but we have had NatureScot before us in relation to other petitions and I have found it to be deeply unconvincing and totally unpersuasive. When I hear NatureScot being mentioned, it does not sing to me as an organisation that is always in touch with the aims of petitions. That is my view; I cannot speak on behalf of the committee when I say that.

Mr Lucas, is there anything that you would like to contribute?

Rob Lucas: The process that is being undertaken in Galloway started a long time ago. The council commissioned a report on whether a national park was a way forward, and that was the start of our campaign.

Whether you undertake a review of national parks is a separate question. I do not think that Galloway National Park Association is qualified to answer that. That technical question is not within our remit.

The Convener: I need to move along and bring colleagues in, but there is something that I am interested in. I will put to you a similar question to the one that I asked of the previous panel. What impact have national parks had on people living in them and on the economy on which they depend?

John Mayhew: The largest part of the economy in the two existing national parks is visitor related. The visitor economy includes self-catering, bed and breakfasts, cafes, restaurants, all the outdoor experience operators and all the people who

provide for the visitors who like to come to the national parks. Those have been very successful.

I do not have the figures in front of me, but I can find them. Certainly, I know that the scale of the visitor economy in the two existing national parks is far larger than the relatively small amount of money that the Scottish Government puts in and which it costs to run a national park. You could argue that it is not possible to say how much of that is due to the designation of the national park and how much is due to the attractiveness of the area and the effectiveness of local businesses in catering to those visitors and generating employment and business. However, certainly, the scale of the visitor economy in both those places is testament to the on-going success from that point of view.

With Galloway—obviously, I would want Rob Lucas to come in on this as well—the situation is a little different, in that it has a successful visitor economy, but I believe that the Galloway National Park Association feels that it would be possible to have a modest increase in that without damaging the beauty or the attractive qualities of the place, which visitors like to come to see. If that were possible, that would create jobs for young people and income for businesses. It would create opportunities and potential for the area. One reason why some people in Galloway are enthusiastic about having a national park is that they feel a little bit left behind. They see that visitors who come to Scotland tend to go to Edinburgh, Glasgow and the Highlands and they think, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if those people came to Galloway, because it is such a beautiful place?" I hope that Rob Lucas agrees that I have characterised that correctly.

National parks are a real opportunity for local people to get involved. As the committee has heard already this morning, they have four aims that they have to achieve. Rightly, one of those is looking after the social and economic development of local communities. I should say that, although I am talking on behalf of the SCNP, which is an environmental organisation, and although we work closely with Action to Protect Rural Scotland, which is another environmental organisation, and of course, our primary interest is in nature, wildlife, scenery and landscape, that does not mean that we are opposed in any way to the social and economic development of local communities—far from it; we think that those things go hand in hand.

People who live in the existing national parks work in wildlife tourism, forestry and agriculture and in providing outdoor recreation activities. People work in all the businesses that help others to enjoy the place and which maintain its landscape and look after the special qualities that

the national park was created to conserve and is charged with maintaining.

I hope that that goes some way towards answering your question.

The Convener: Mr Lucas, do you wish to add to that?

Rob Lucas: I have the benefit of having previously run a national environmental education charity that operated across the UK, and roughly half the sites were in national parks and half were not. I can say that it was a lot easier to attract people to work in the centres in national parks and a lot easier to market those places. The national park brand is a powerful way of bringing people to an area, particularly areas that are underrecognised, and many people have never heard of Galloway.

When we undertook our discussions, we had more than 100 meetings. We had meetings with community councils, roughly a quarter of which were in the relevant bits of the Ayrshires. We had public meetings and we met stakeholder groups and schools. We had a fairly broad range of meetings and we spoke to well over 2,000 people. From that, two clear messages came through. First, people wanted to put Galloway on the map and felt that a national park could do that, because with it would come some recognition. Secondly, people felt that Galloway is a place that things are done to and not done with, and they felt that a national park and the partnership planning process that goes with it would help to bring back some sense of control of the area's destiny, which they felt has moved towards the Dumfries end of the area.

The Convener: I will let Mr Torrance take us on to the second of our themes, which, as you might recall, having listened to the previous session, is the drivers for designating more national parks.

David Torrance: I welcome our witnesses. First, I will continue on a theme that the convener asked about—that of communities, businesses and industry in national parks. As somebody who has visited Aviemore for 35 years and who watched its decline, I have seen the huge investment that has been put into the area, especially in the tourism and hospitality industries, following the designation of the Cairngorms national park. However, there are also negatives. Housing to accommodate workers was a huge problem in Aviemore, and it is still a huge problem.

John, could you highlight the positives of what has happened to areas such as Aviemore, such as the investment that has been put in? I will come on to the negatives.

John Mayhew: Certainly. I am a regular visitor to the Cairngorms as well, so I know the Aviemore

area well. In my opinion, it is looking a whole lot better than it did 30 or 40 years ago, and I would not put all of that down to the existence of the Cairngorms National Park Authority. Some of it is down to the national park authority, but a lot of it is down to local businesses. A lot of it is down to plans and projects that have been applied across the whole place. There was a big project to repair and extend dry-stone dykes throughout the village and to improve the lighting and the signage.

Another issue that I want to highlight, which applies in the other national park as well, is the opportunities for path networks. The fact that there are much better path networks in and around Aviemore, Kingussie and Newtonmore is to the credit of the national park authority. Those paths are used by local people for walking their dogs, for walking their kids, for running and for getting fresh air and exercise, and they are also used by visitors, because while some people who come to the area want to do challenging technical climbing high up in the corries and on the plateau, others want to do much more low-level walks in the woods and the forests around the towns and villages that they are staying in.

I think that you are right—there has been a lot of investment in the area, and there is more still to come—but the great thing about a national park is that it brings an additional focus, as well as additional resources, to an area. That includes not just money—budget—but staff who have dedicated jobs that involve looking after the cultural heritage and working with farmers and tourism and food and drink businesses in the area. That means that there are a lot of people working away, trying to do their best to support local businesses, where those local businesses meet the aims of the national park, and most of them do. That is important.

An issue that came across earlier when we were talking about existing national parks is the fact that national parks often focus on an area that has not hitherto been the focus of a local authority. Understandably, local authorities tend to focus mostly on the places where most of their constituents live, which tend to be in the towns and cities. For example, the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park includes the Stirling Council area, where most people live in Stirling, and the Argyll and Bute Council area, where a lot of people live in Helensburgh and Lochgilphead, as well as part of the West Dunbartonshire Council area. The area of the national park is slightly peripheral to each of those councils, and I think that the existence of a national park authority helps to redress that balance.

That issue has been hinted at in relation to Galloway, too. The Scottish Government is not proposing a Dumfries and Galloway national park;

it is proposing a Galloway national park. That is because it is the western part of Dumfries and Galloway—the historical Galloway part of it—that would benefit from the support and additional investment that the creation of a national park would bring. We are talking about places where there is a shortage of employment, where wages are relatively low and where there are housing issues. It is possible that a national park could contribute to helping with all those issues.

I hope that I have moved from the general to the particular in a way that Rob Lucas would approve of.

David Torrance: My next question is also aimed at you, John. In 2023, NatureScot gave advice that there should be regular reviews by the Government and stakeholders on progress within national park partnership plans. How well do you think national parks are currently reviewing their progress or being externally scrutinised?

11:15

John Mayhew: According to the national park plan, that is the central feature of a national park authority. As Nick Kempe mentioned earlier in the meeting, the national park authority often does not really bring any new powers or processes, so the forestry system is the same in the national park, the education system is the same and the farm support system is the same. A lot of things do not change. The national park authority's great power is its ability to convene wider groups to support its aims. That is where the national park partnership plan comes in, and with the partnership plan comes a partnership of all those other organisations—local organisations and local branches of the Government agencies that are relevant to the aims of the park.

There is a lengthy process for preparing each partnership plan. Yet another consultation takes place among local people and local representative bodies, which ultimately results in the main themes of the plan being pursued. The staff will prepare the plan, and then the important bit happens, which is that the plan starts to be implemented. If it is identified, for example, that deer management is a crucial issue, a five-year programme comes out to improve deer management arrangements. If affordable housing is identified as a key issue—as it always is in rural areas—a programme comes out of that for what the national park authority can do to encourage the provision of more affordable housing. It cannot do that itself, although it can certainly encourage housing associations, local authorities and private businesses to work together towards achieving that.

That is how the process works. It is a good process, because it happens every five years, and most of the time is spent with the national park authority and all its various partners implementing the plan. Towards the end of that period, everybody comes back together to review how the plan has gone. A review is always carried out as to what has been implemented, what the problems were and what the challenges were with the previous partnership plan, before the next one starts to be prepared. That is a good process, and it has resulted in quite a bit of success and progress in the two existing national parks.

David Torrance: The key drivers for designating more national parks are the climate and nature crises. How important are national parks as a mechanism for tackling the climate and nature crises?

John Mayhew: Again, I agree with Nick Kempe, from whom you heard earlier. I am not convinced that we need to say specifically that national parks have a role in tackling the climate and nature crises, because we could say that that is already built into their existing aims. However, I do not have any problem with that, as those crises are real and are upon us. All Governments, all citizens and all agencies need to work together to tackle both those things, and if that means that national park authorities are given additional duties, things are still heading in the right direction.

This has been clear for several years. Ministers have issued clear instructions to national park authorities that they should be leaders in this respect, in that they should be thinking hard about anything that they can possibly do to tackle the climate emergency in their own operations and in their own areas, as well as helping to reverse the nature crisis. That role is welcome, although I do not think that it is strictly necessary. We shall see.

I will also raise a point that I think was made earlier this morning, about timing. My understanding is that, if a new national park were to be designated in Galloway in 2026, that might be before the proposed natural environment bill has been discussed, passed and implemented. My assumption is that any new national park that is designated in the next year and a bit would come under the existing legislation, the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000, as it stands, and it may be that the 2000 act is subsequently amended by the natural environment bill, depending on the parliamentary process for that bill.

I do not have an answer to the question, but I hope that I have framed the issue correctly. We are not quite sure what the timing or the sequence of events will be between those various occurrences.

The Convener: I am slightly conscious of the time; I mention that in passing.

We move to the third theme, which is the engagement process and local buy-in.

Maurice Golden: I am quite interested in the public consultation and, if you like, the definition or the proposal. In consultations from local authorities, the Scottish Government or, indeed, non-departmental public bodies, it is often quite difficult to understand exactly what the proposal is and what it means. I know that the formal consultation is about to start, but, from your assessment, is NatureScot able to say, for example, “We know that Loch Lomond and the Trossachs has Loch Lomond shores and Cairngorms has Aviemore; this is the version of that in Galloway, which will mean economic and tourism benefits, but these are the downsides in relation to house prices or congestion,” or, “There will be a commitment from the Scottish Government to upgrade the A75 as a result of this”? Can that vision be presented over the next couple of weeks and throughout the consultation process?

Rob Lucas: A long conversation has gone on. I have mentioned the meetings that have taken place with Galloway National Park Association. Over the past seven or eight years that we have been working on this, there has been a lot of material in the local press. My file has more than 100 things in it, which suggests that there will be more that I have not seen. That does not include all the TV and radio features on the proposal, so the idea that nobody knows about it is a little disingenuous.

The process for the first five years was to convince the Scottish Government that we should have more national parks and that—obviously—Galloway should be one, but there was no commitment to that until this current programme for government. We were delighted to see that commitment.

I guess that people want two things. In most of this conversation, we have heard about lots of problems that have nothing to do with national parks—for example, Lochaber is not a national park and, as far as it stands, is not proposed to be one. However, those kinds of things exist and colour the conversation.

It is not easy, because if you precisely present something and say that “this is what it is,” you are then equally criticised for closing down the debate by presenting a final solution, which is clearly not the case. We very much see that this is a proposal. The question is whether Galloway national park will go forward and, if so, on what basis. Both questions are valid, and the impression that we have had in any of our

conversations is that those questions are still very much up in the air.

Maurice Golden: With regard to meeting their statutory obligations, national parks could vary quite considerably in what they look like. Is a tourism hub foreseen as part of the proposal, similar to the Aviemores and Loch Lomond Shores, or is that not part of the vision? How can the public and local communities assess whether they want something if they do not know what it looks like?

Rob Lucas: It is kind of the other way round. Tourism hubs appear. I do not think that national parks create them, although they try to manage them. In Galloway, we do not really have tourism hubs, because we do not have that number of tourists. We are quite a large area, although we do not know what the final size of the area will be if the proposal goes forward. Obviously, there are attractions in the hills and the forest park and on the coasts, and there are areas where people currently go, but I would not say that we have obvious tourism hubs.

The strength that we have in Galloway is that this proposal is not being driven by a need to address a major problem with overtourism. It is being driven by a desire to develop the four strands of the national park as part of developing a sustainable economy for Galloway, of which a national park would be a very important part. Forestry and farming are also important in Galloway and there are wind farms in some of the area. A lot of investment has gone into those three sectors, yet over the last decade, Galloway has got poorer. Despite all the investment and all the development in those sectors, we have actually gone backwards and continued to get poorer.

The number of people in farming and agriculture is falling. By comparison, a report on workforce and employment data for English national parks—which have obviously been established longer, but this information happened to cover 2009 to 2021, from when they went over to commercial holdings—shows that they have seen a growth in employment on farms in national parks. That suggests the use of a slightly different model, or a variety of models, because agriculture is very diverse—to lump it in and say that there is just one sort of farmer is disingenuous.

Maurice Golden: Thanks for that. I am having an issue with the response to local community demand. There does not need to be an exact blueprint, but there should be a vision or an indication of what that might look like.

John, you take a wider view on national parks. More generally, can you see there being a blueprint for a national park that differs from the two existing ones that we have, or do you think

that that is naturally where it would broadly lead to? On the Galloway park specifically, what might that look like and how might it be presented to local communities to allow them to make an assessment of whether they want it?

John Mayhew: The simple answer is yes, I think that it could be different. However, the way in which it could be different is through the governance arrangements, through the powers and functions that it is given, and through its size, its boundary and what it includes in its area. Those are precisely the things that NatureScot is being asked to report on: the name, the governance arrangements—in other words, how big the authority will be and who it will be made up of—the powers and functions that it should or should not have, and what the boundary should be. That is in the move from lots of different things being on the table, to consulting on a particular proposal or set of proposals.

Going beyond that, the sorts of things that you mentioned, such as major tourism developments or specific road improvements, are not the sorts of things that will be discussed in this phase. Those things will be up to the national park authority to deal with once it is set up and running. They would emerge from the first national park partnership plan, for which not just the national park authority but all the relevant local organisations come together to say what the top priorities for the area are.

That is part of the advantage of having a national park authority—it is not the Scottish Government or NatureScot saying, “This is what’s going to happen in your area.” It sets up a structure that allows people within an area to set their priorities.

I remind the committee that, according to the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000, there must be an in-built local majority on each national park authority. Forty per cent of the people on it are to be locally elected councillors and 20 per cent are directly elected local people, so you could say that it is local people who are being charged with the disbursement of national resources. The national park authorities are 100 per cent funded by the Scottish Government, but they are ultimately controlled by a majority made up of local people. It is important to understand the way that the thing was set up and has been working. The overall size of a national park authority and exactly which local authorities have which number of councillors are matters of detail that would come through the report.

I hope that that has gone some way to answering your question.

11:30

Maurice Golden: It strikes me that it would be beneficial for the Scottish Government, via NatureScot, to come up with a vision that provides the detail of the Galloway national park that would allow communities to make a decision. It sounds as though communities are being asked to sign a blank cheque for something when they do not know how it is going to impact on them. The concept of national parks could be different for different people, and therefore people’s assessments with regard to whether or not they support a national park could be radically different. It seems that, as it is envisaged, the consultation process will not allow communities to come to a conclusion on any of that. In some ways, asking for the level of local community demand for something when people do not know what something is, is an impossible task. Do you have thoughts on how to square that circle?

The Convener: Please be brief.

John Mayhew: In one sentence, I understand and have sympathy with what you are saying, but I encourage everybody to get involved as much as they possibly can, once the consultation is out, and to make exactly those points, because that is the opportunity that is forthcoming.

Rob Lucas: Getting people’s views is an iterative process, is it not? The stakeholder phase, which has actually become quite a public phase, was intended to gather information to help the reporter to shape what would happen in the public consultation phase. The public consultation phase will shape the kind of report that is produced by NatureScot. If the minister is minded to proceed and there are draft designation orders there will be another round of consultation.

It is as though we want all the information but we want to be able to input our own views into that information, so in some of these circumstances, with this kind of consultation, you are damned if you do and damned if you don’t. You have to provide some information; people respond to that. You then respond and produce a different version, or whatever it is. We are in an important process that starts, in the public sense, in the next couple of weeks.

The Convener: We will move on to our fourth theme, which is forthcoming legislation on national parks and a potential national parks statement, including the implications of pursuing reform and designation on a twin track.

Foysoil Choudhury: The Scottish Government has proposed changes to national parks legislation in a bill that is due to be introduced later this parliamentary year. Did you engage with that consultation? If so, were you able to take that

proposal into account in the development of the nomination that you are involved in?

John Mayhew: Yes, we engaged with that process. With our partners at APRS, we have been involved in all the various stages, from the decision to proceed with the next national park, which was made three years ago, and through all the various NatureScot and Scottish Government consultations, of which that is one. Therefore, we have participated in the process and we are aware of it.

I do not want to add much to what I said earlier, which is that I understand that any legislative change that is made through the natural environment bill to the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 will simply emphasise the potential leadership role of national park authorities in tackling the climate emergency and the nature crisis. I have no problem with that—that can only be beneficial. I do not think that it is strictly necessary, because you could argue that the existing national parks act covers those issues in its aims.

However, I would certainly welcome those changes, because they are proposed with good intent and they are intended to be wholly positive. National park authorities have been taking action on climate and nature issues, and I am sure that they will be happy to carry on doing so. To some extent, being given that additional focus just reinforces what has already been happening.

Rob Lucas: At the local level, like all the individual bid areas, we were not involved in the national stakeholder consultation on the proposed natural environment bill. Obviously, we have seen the kinds of things that have come forward. Some of the wording of the 2000 act needs to be updated, and we would be keen to press some aspects to ensure that a strong local governance element is retained for national parks.

The process is that, as ever, we have what we are faced with. We think that the proposed natural environment bill will not fundamentally change the nature of the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 as it stands. The 2000 act was well worded—it was written to be flexible enough. That is the situation that we are currently in.

Foysoil Choudhury: When I asked the witnesses in the previous session whether they were aware of the proposals, a lot of them said that they were not. How can the Government get those people involved?

John Mayhew: It is difficult for a local person in one of those areas going about their business to be aware of all the national discussions, consultations, proposals and legislative arrangements that are going on in relation to every

aspect that might affect them. I entirely understand that that is a challenge.

I have spent my life working in landscape policy and town and country planning policy, so I have an understanding of those areas, but I have no knowledge of or expertise in health, education, foreign policy or any of the other things in which the Government and the Parliament get involved. It is not easy, and we cannot expect ordinary citizens across the country to be able to engage with every high-level consultation that is going on. This one matters, because it is not general, but specific—it is about a particular area, so it is very important that everybody locally is encouraged to be brought up to speed as quickly as they can be, and that they are given the information that they need to be able to judge whether or not they are in favour of the proposals.

Foysoil Choudhury: NatureScot made other recommendations to improve how national parks are run. For example, it said that there should be more involvement of communities and different sectors in developing national park plans, and that funding streams should be available to deliver the plans.

What are your views on those suggestions?

John Mayhew: Those suggestions both sound very positive and sensible, and I would fully support them.

Rob Lucas: Likewise. We can see that in action in what happened with the Cairngorms partnership plan. Affordable housing and access to housing was previously just one thing on quite a long list of things to deal with in the plan. As a result of the consultation, however, it came to the top of the list very strongly in the latest version of the “Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan 2022-27”. The section on communities has not only some strong recommendations about how the plan should deal with housing, but also some potential actions that could be taken.

Foysoil Choudhury: This is my last question. Would you like to see any further changes to how national parks are governed or supported that would help to maximise benefits, or that you think could help to resolve stakeholders’ concerns about the designation of new areas?

John Mayhew: I will say two slightly conflicting things. I think that the new national park authority board should be as small as possible, but I also think that the balance between local and national representation on that board should be maintained. It is a good principle that there is a local majority, so that the really big decisions that the park authority has to take are made by a majority of locally elected people.

In the early days of the national park authorities, both the boards were too large and too unwieldy. That is one of the lessons that we can learn from the existing national parks—we can try to make the new board as small as possible, consistent with the principle of local majority.

Rob Lucas: I endorse that. I am comfortable that a national park does not need a huge number of powers, because that is not fundamentally how it works. It works by bringing people together. If somebody wants to stay outside what the park is trying to achieve, there is very little that the national park will do about that, because it has no powers to do anything in that regard. That is important.

It is important that if some of our farmers want to carry on in farming exactly as they do now, or indeed develop their farming—which I have no problem with—it is covered by the agriculture subsidies. There is a whole different set of rules for that, and I do not think that it is necessary for the national park to control everything. The national park is about bringing people together and working for a common vision. That is what we are aiming for.

The Convener: Mr Carson, we are quite tight for time, but I can allow you a question if you can pull your thoughts together concisely.

Finlay Carson: Thank you, convener. I am a proud Gallovidian, from the nicest and most beautiful constituency in Scotland—

The Convener: Not on this committee! [Laughter.]

Finlay Carson: Well, we can dispute that.

I put it on record that I was a supporter of Galloway park lite. I followed in the footsteps of the late, well-respected former Presiding Officer, Sir Alex Fergusson, who saw the opportunities that a national park-lite process could bring to Galloway, which is seeing depopulation, an ageing population, one of the lowest wage economies in the country and houses being unaffordable, even though the house prices are currently the lowest around.

However, my question is whether we are getting the process right. My support of the national park was somewhat dented by the Greens. The whole process has been tainted by the influence that the Green Party has had and the timetable that it brought in. We already know that, by the very nature of Galloway, any national park there would have to be hugely different to elsewhere. We have a bigger population, intensive agriculture, a population that is dispersed across the region, commercial forestry and renewables. Galloway national park would be quite unlike any of the other existing national parks—not only in Scotland,

but in the United Kingdom. It would therefore have to be fundamentally different.

I have already called for an extension to the consultation, and the cabinet secretary has stated that the process needs to be done properly rather than only to a timetable. I am sure that you gentlemen want a national park to deliver all the things that Galloway needs. The current timetable might lead to only 12 weeks of consultation and a designation sometime before 2026. That is, if we do designate a national park, and designation may not be the solution, as other policy interventions could deliver the benefits without it. Therefore, why are you not suggesting that we do the review of current national parks and ensure that the two processes are run concurrently, so that we could potentially change the priorities of a national park to include more biodiversity and climate change, rather than what it should be about—in my view—which is sustainable economic development? Why can we not have a process that delivers something that Galloway really needs, rather than sticking to a timetable that is far too short?

Rob Lucas: There has been a lot of discussion already, and a lot depends on the kind of information we get at the next stage. Clearly, it is important for those who are as yet undecided on how to move forward. I suspect that much of what comes next will reinforce whatever views those who are firmly for and those who are firmly against hold, and that is fine. However, the undecided people need to be able to get the information that they need and the kind of things that we are looking forward to.

There is no doubt that Galloway national park would be different to those in other areas. We have a biosphere. There is potential to work constructively between a national park and a biosphere. A biosphere on its own cannot deliver what we need, but it can deliver something better than a national park on its own, which is important because it extends the reach.

It is important that the process goes on, unless we are all going to sit around the table and make commitments into the next parliamentary session for a national park. Members are aware that things have to run on parliamentary cycles, and it would be naive to think otherwise.

11:45

John Mayhew: That is part of my concern, too. We are where we are, because, over many years, I and others spent a lot of time talking to individual MSPs as well as political parties and gradually persuaded them to include a commitment to a new national park in their manifestos. The parliamentary session that we are now in started in 2021, with four of the parties in the Parliament

making commitments to a new national park. The Scottish Government then decided in 2021 that it was going to go ahead with the new national park, and that commitment is in last year's programme for government, too.

This is, I suppose, a general point about public policy. It is important that political parties and Governments be seen to do what they have said that they will do. I think that manifesto commitments should be honoured and implemented, and I think that the programme for government commitment should be honoured and implemented by 2026.

As I said earlier, there has been an extremely thorough—some might even say too thorough—process to get us to this point, with every possible opportunity for all the issues to be debated. The timetable is quite tight for delivering on the manifesto and programme for government commitments, but I think that we should continue with the timetable as it exists.

Finlay Carson: It is important to put it on record that the manifesto commitments made by some parties were based on what was there previously, not on what the Bute house agreement ultimately delivered, which was a national park based on biodiversity and climate change as priorities. I can tell you that that was certainly not the manifesto commitment made by the Scottish Conservatives, which was about sustainable economic development. Therefore, we have to be very careful to ensure that we recognise manifesto commitments for what they were and the fact that things changed when the Greens entered into the Bute house agreement.

The Convener: We can note that, rather than pursue it. I was already struck by the fierce note of controversy that Mr Mayhew introduced by suggesting that Governments should do what they say that they are going to do.

With that, I thank Mr Lucas and Mr Mayhew for their evidence this morning. It is very much appreciated, and it will help us as we consider and develop the petition.

After all that I have said, we will be hearing from our friends at NatureScot at our next meeting, so I hope that they have been listening carefully to our deliberations today. Following that, we will hear from the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and the Islands. Members, are you content to consider the petition at a future meeting after we have had the opportunity to hear from NatureScot and the cabinet secretary?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: As we are slightly behind time, I will suspend very briefly. I therefore ask those who are departing to do so quietly and that we change

the scenery and personnel very quickly so that we can proceed without much delay.

11:47

Meeting suspended.

11:48

On resuming—

A75 (Upgrade) (PE1610)

A77 (Upgrade) (PE1657)

The Convener: Welcome back. Our consideration of continued petitions continues with PE1610, on upgrading the A75, and PE1657, on the A77 upgrade. The petitions call on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to upgrade the A75 Euro route to dual carriageway for its entirety as soon as possible and to dual the A77 from the Whitlets roundabout in Ayr south to the two ferry ports located at Cairnryan, including the point at which the A77 connects with the A75. We are joined this morning by our colleague Brian Whittle MSP—welcome, Brian—and I think that Mr Carson is sitting in for these petitions, too.

We last considered the petitions last December, when we heard that prioritisation of the strategic transport projects review 2 recommendations would feed into a delivery plan. That delivery plan was due to be published in late 2023, and colleagues will recall that we requested an update on when it would be published. The then minister and now Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Fiona Hyslop, responded to the committee in late January 2024, noting that it was a complex piece of work, with consultation on-going across the Scottish Government. However, she did not give an indication as to when the delivery plan would be published. The Scottish Government at that time had a commitment from the previous United Kingdom Government to provide multiyear funding of £8 million for improvements on the A75.

The petitioner for PE1657, Donald McHarrie, has provided a submission highlighting developments since we last considered the petition. He states that a summit was held on the issue, with the key message focusing on the need for investment in the A77 and A75 in order to provide economic benefits and to reduce carbon dioxide emissions on the roads. He calls for the improvement of the A77 to be raised to national status and not to be considered just as an issue for the south-west of Scotland.

We have also received a written submission this morning from our colleague Elena Whitham. She is unable to attend the meeting, but her submission reiterates support for PE1657 and

emphasises that the A77 and A75 are vital strategic routes for Ayrshire and Scotland, supporting both communities and businesses.

Before we move to comments from members, I ask Mr Whittle whether he has anything further to contribute to our consideration.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Thank you, convener. I really appreciate having another opportunity to support these petitions.

Having been here several times before, I have tried to find something different to say today and, as a result, have had a wee look specifically at the A77, which is in my region. I know that Mr Carson will speak to the issue of the A75.

I looked at the A77 trunk road and the number of times that it had been closed with diversions in place. Those diversions go along a B road where it is difficult for two cars to pass, let alone a convoy of 44-tonne trucks, and I know from speaking to one of the haulage companies that whenever there is a diversion on to that road, its trucks get damaged. Indeed, a few of them have been tipped into the field trying to pass each other. Between January 2023 and this September, the road had been closed with that diversion a total of 214 times.

I do not know how else we can frame this. Given that this is a trunk road and an arterial route to Cairnryan, the third busiest port in the UK, and given that 45 per cent of goods coming in from Northern Ireland come through that port, the route cannot be seen as anything other than very important. Driving down that route, especially at certain times of the day, will definitely give you an indication of why this is such a pressing issue.

What is more, we can now evidence what happens when action is taken, because of the bypass at Maybole. The huge impact that that has had on the town of Maybole and on the time that it takes to get down that route is evidence enough. We should, at least, be able to bypass Girvan, where you get a massive hold-up in traffic. These convoys of trucks used to go straight through the centre of Maybole. I have had the opportunity to go down the route in a 44-tonne truck; it is not something that I would advise, to be quite honest, but it is certainly illuminating.

As you have indicated, convener, STPR2 was supposed to have delivered a plan. It has been going on for as long as I can remember in this Parliament, and each time it gets watered down. The way that things are going, I fully expect the next one to say that the grass verges will be cut every second year or something.

This work has to be done. The cost of the Maybole bypass was £30 million, which I know is a lot of money, but I would just note that something

like 0.4 per cent of the transport budget has been spent in the south-west of Scotland over the past 10 years. We are definitely not looking for special treatment, but we would like a little bit of parity and a little bit of understanding.

I was interested in the previous petition that you heard, which concerns the economic issues that the south-west of Scotland faces. We need to get some answers on the issue, which has been going on for as long as I have been in the Parliament. The can keeps getting kicked down the road and the solution keeps getting watered down by the Government. We have absolute evidence as to why it is imperative that the A77 gets the treatment that it deserves.

Finlay Carson: I am a bit like Mr Whittle. I do not want to repeat a lot of what was said, but let me begin with the late Alex Salmond, who, in November 2011, 13 years ago, spoke at the opening of the new ports at Cairnryan, and talked about the three Rs of Scottish Government support for the region, which were roads, rail and regeneration. The then First Minister even announced the creation of a Scottish Government task force to work with local councils and other partners to explore the potential for the future of Stranraer. Sadly, that all fizzled out, like many other promises.

The First Minister, John Swinney, pledged to improve journey times on the road back in 2016. He has been followed by a succession of transport ministers. Humza Yousaf, Jenny Gilruth, Michael Matheson, Kevin Stewart, Màiri McAllan, Graeme Day and the current transport secretary, Fiona Hyslop, have all pledged action to upgrade this key artery between the UK and Europe. Eight years since petition PE1610, to upgrade the A75, was first lodged, we are still waiting for action.

The route was recognised in Sir Peter Hendy's union connectivity review as one of the most financially beneficial roads in the UK, carrying billions of pounds-worth of goods every year. Talks are now, thankfully, finally being held between the respective Governments in the UK and Scotland. I hope that today we will find out whether the UK Labour Government is continuing with the commitment to fund studies on the A75 and to follow that up with funding to develop upgrades.

The chronic failure to invest in the A75 is shown tragically in the number of human lives that we have lost, and the safety record of the road is quite appalling. Brian Whittle touched on closures on the A77. To give you some examples, between January and September this year, the A75 was closed on nine occasions due to serious road traffic accidents. In the same date range, the road was closed, with diversions in place, on 11 occasions as a result of roadworks or storm

damage. Those diversions resulted in hundreds of miles of detours on roads that are not fit to carry the traffic. Even scheduled closures are now overnight. They have to be overnight closures or full closures of the road because the trunk road is not wide enough to allow upgrades to be made to the surface and traffic to safely pass by, so it is a bit of a double whammy.

It is clear that we need to stop talking about this and get action to upgrade the A75, which has been identified as one of the most important roads in the whole of the UK. That needs to be done as a matter of urgency.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Carson. We were expecting an update nearly a year ago, but that has not been forthcoming. I think that Mr Torrance has some suggestions to make.

David Torrance: Would the committee consider writing to the Cabinet Secretary for Transport to note the delay in the publication of the strategic transport projects review 2 delivery plan and to ask when it will be published, and to ask whether the new UK Government has reaffirmed its commitment to provide multiyear funding to improve the A75?

The Convener: Mr Carson just made a point about that in his submission. Yes, it seems like an extraordinarily long time for a delay and for nothing to be forthcoming. Those suggestions seems entirely reasonable. Are colleagues content that we keep the petition open and that we pursue those two suggestions and try to get some definition as to what is happening?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Rape Charges and Convictions (Record of Sex) (PE1876)

12:00

The Convener: Our next petition, PE1876, which was lodged by Lucy Hunter Blackburn, Lisa Mackenzie and Kath Murray, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to require Police Scotland, the Crown Office and the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service to accurately record the sex of people who are charged with or convicted of rape or attempted rape.

We have been joined by our colleague Tess White, a former member of the committee, who has been following the progress of the petition. Good morning, Tess.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Good morning.

The Convener: Is it still morning? No, it is afternoon by six tenths of a second, as it turns out.

We last considered the petition at our meeting on 24 January 2024, when we agreed to write to Police Scotland. We have received a response from Police Scotland that states that it

“requires no evidence or certification as proof of biological sex or gender identity other than a person’s self-declaration, unless it is pertinent to any investigation with which they are linked as a victim, witness or accused and it is evidentially critical that we legally require this proof”.

We also received a submission from the petitioners, reflecting on all the responses that we have received from Police Scotland during consideration of the petition. Their submission also highlights the media coverage generated by Police Scotland’s most recent response and the subsequent comments that have been made by the chief constable and deputy chief constable, including in correspondence with the Criminal Justice Committee.

Our colleague Michelle Thompson, who is unable to join us today, has provided a written submission in support of the petition that shares her view on the lack of clarity being offered by Police Scotland on the operational detail of its policies.

Before I invite the committee to consider how we might proceed, I wonder whether Tess White would like to contribute to our deliberations.

Tess White: Thank you, convener, and I thank the committee for the opportunity to make a brief remark about this petition on Police Scotland’s controversial policy on recording the sex of offenders, which, until recently, was based on self-ID.

Public interest in the petition has, understandably, been growing, as the convener has said, not least among my constituents in the north-east. That is testament to the tenaciousness and determination of the petitioners Lucy Hunter Blackburn, Lisa Mackenzie and Kath Murray from policy collective Murray Blackburn Mackenzie.

In September, it shockingly emerged that Police Scotland had justified its data recording policy because it adhered to the force’s

“values of respect, integrity, fairness and human rights whilst promoting a strong sense of belonging.”

In other words, Police Scotland was prioritising the feelings of sex offenders over those of the victims of sexual crime, and to do so was absolutely indefensible. Rape is defined in law as involving penetration by a penis without consent, and it is therefore, by definition, the act of a male body. That is why this matters.

As MBM’s submission highlights, Police Scotland appears to have publicly U-turned on that policy, and that is to be welcomed, but questions remain about the application of the policy in the

past, and the detail of how Police Scotland will implement this operational change in the future.

Since the petition was lodged in June 2021, which is a considerable time ago, the committee has corresponded with Police Scotland on several occasions, and I thank you for that. My view is that if we are to get to the bottom of the force's operational policies on data recording, the committee must urgently invite Police Scotland to give oral evidence. I implore the committee to not close the petition down, please. The Scottish Government has already washed its hands of the issue, so I urge the committee to listen to the voices of women and treat this matter with the seriousness that it deserves. Thank you.

Foysoyl Choudhury: That was a very powerful statement by Tess White, and I think that we should invite the chief constable or Police Scotland to give evidence at a future meeting and keep the petition open.

The Convener: Thank you. Mr Choudhury has suggested something that I think will find an echo among colleagues: that we invite Police Scotland to come to the committee and give evidence on the matter at a future meeting. Are colleagues content that we do that?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will keep the petition open and look forward to hearing from Police Scotland in due course.

Tess White: Thank you.

Raw Sewage Discharge (PE1988)

The Convener: We move to PE1988, which was lodged by Sue Wallis. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the process for allowing raw sewage discharge from homes into Scottish coastal waters, to provide additional funding to the Scottish Environment Protection Agency for enforcement, and to introduce legislation to ban households from discharging raw sewage.

We last considered the petition in December 2023, when we agreed to write to the Scottish Government. Its response to the committee reiterates SEPA's approach to regulation. The submission highlights two consultations, the first of which relates to proposals for an integrated environmental authorisation framework. The second consultation sought views on the regulation of private wastewater treatment systems to protect the environment.

The petitioner's written submission states that the response from the Scottish Government provides a circular argument and does not provide more insight on regulation, as requested by the

committee. She notes SEPA's requirement to contribute to improving the health and wellbeing of people in Scotland and argues that the responses to the petition from both SEPA and the Scottish Government have not addressed that point. The petitioner states that all responses and strategies have focused entirely on environmental issues, to the exclusion of other linked duties.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

David Torrance: Perhaps the committee would consider writing to the Scottish Government to ask whether it intends to take any action on private wastewater systems in response to the water, wastewater and drainage policy consultation findings. We could ask whether the Government recognises that, by prioritising its enforcement activity on incidents that have the greatest environmental impact or involve significant non-compliance, SEPA is not addressing actions that fall under that threshold but still have a significant impact on people's quality of life?

The Convener: Mr Torrance has made a couple of suggestions. Do we agree to keep the petition open and to pursue the suggested course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

Defibrillators (Public Spaces and Workplaces) (PE1989)

The Convener: Our next continued petition is PE1989, which was lodged by Mary Montague, who I should say is known to me, as the constituency member for Eastwood, because she is the provost of my local authority, East Renfrewshire Council. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to support the provision of defibrillators in public spaces and workplaces.

We last considered the petition in December 2023, when we agreed to write to the Scottish Government. We received a response from the then Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, Maree Todd, which stated that defibrillators are purchased

"mainly through fundraising in the community"

or are funded by business and organisations. It also stated that the Scottish Government is

"working alongside the Resuscitation Research Group at the University of Edinburgh to better understand the evidence around placement of defibrillators in Scotland and to develop a tool, which would help defibrillator guardians make informed decisions about where best to place their device in order that it could have most impact."

That sounds a bit like gobbledegook. Anyhow, the committee had asked whether the Scottish Government would consider making

representations to the United Kingdom Government to update the legislation on health and safety at work to include defibrillator provision as part of the minimum first aid requirements. The minister's response stated that

"As the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1947 is a reserved policy area it would be the responsibility of the UK Government to consider the evidence"

and that the Scottish Government's priority is its collective partnership approach.

In considering the petition, members will have in mind that we recently asked the minister whether the Government would provide direct funding for primary and secondary schools to purchase and install defibrillators, under PE2101. The minister's response reiterated that it was for local authorities to make decisions on purchasing, installing and maintaining defibrillators for schools. I think that the committee has been quite charged on the aims behind the campaign for defibrillators but a bit underwhelmed by the response.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

David Torrance: I have a personal interest in the issue. It is close to my heart, because I know someone whose life was saved by a defibrillator and I know how important it is for the public to have easy access to them. Perhaps the committee would consider writing to the current Minister for Public Health and Women's Health to ask whether she is confident that relying on community fundraising, businesses and organisational resources to purchase defibrillators will ensure that the Scottish Government meets the 2026 targets in the out of hospital cardiac arrest strategy, which are that 20 per cent of all cardiac arrest patients will have a defibrillator applied before the Ambulance Service arrives and that survival from OHCA will increase to 15 per cent. Perhaps we could also ask what the Scottish Government's rationale is for not engaging with the UK Government on the issue of defibrillator provision through the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1947.

The Convener: I wonder whether colleagues would be content for us to frame this with slightly stronger language—to say that the committee is concerned about what appears to be growing evidence of a lack of urgency behind the will to take forward the issues. Given that we all support a preventative health agenda, the provision of defibrillators not only saves lives but is, potentially, through preventing the subsequent need for hospital admission and other interventions, a preventative measure that we should encourage. Taken together with the evidence that we heard on the petition in relation to schools—that Scotland seems to be lagging significantly behind the rest of the UK, for whatever reason—it seems that the

impetus is just not being put into this programme in Scotland. Are members content to frame our questions in that way?

Members indicated agreement.

Social Work Students (Work Placements) (PE1993)

The Convener: The next continued petition, PE1993, which was lodged by David Grimm and Lucy Challoner, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that social work students have access to adequate financial support during their studies by providing bursaries to all third and fourth-year undergraduate social work students on work placements, and to reform the assessment criteria and adequately fund the bursaries for postgraduate social work students on work placements.

We last considered the petition on 20 December, when we agreed to write to the Scottish Social Services Council and the Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans. The minister's response to the committee highlights that, from this academic year,

"postgraduate students who are not eligible to receive bursary support from the Scottish Social Services Council ... will be able to apply for the postgraduate funding package administered by the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS)."

The response also highlights the Scottish Social Services Council's new model and schedule of rates for the financial support that it provides to postgraduate students. It has also worked to increase clarity for students on the funding that they will receive if they are eligible for a bursary; to reduce the complexity of assessments; and to streamline the administrative processes.

The Social Work Education Partnership commissioned a review of practice learning funding, which reported in September 2023. The minister's written submission states that the "recommendations are being considered" by the Scottish Government. The Scottish Social Services Council's written submission states that an action plan is

"being drafted by the SWEP Programme Office".

The petitioners are concerned that the minister is not taking ownership of the issue. Their submission states that

"it is unfair to try and palm off decision making onto others",
and that

"the Government will need to make funding available to enable this policy to happen".

Do colleagues have any suggestions for action?

David Torrance: I wonder whether the committee would consider writing to the Minister for Higher and Further Education to ask what consideration the Scottish Government has given to the recommendations of the practice learning funding report and what actions will be taken to implement its findings, and to ask whether the Scottish Government will meet the petitioners to discuss the findings of the practice learning funding report.

The Convener: Are colleagues content?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Vulnerable People (Capacity) (PE2061)

The Convener: I am conscious that Mr Rowley has joined us this morning. The petition that he is here for is a little further down the agenda, but I will pull it forward to facilitate his participation in our proceedings, because he arrived early and did not quite understand that our evidence was a bit behind schedule.

PE2061, from Laura Johnston-Brand, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to help to prevent coercion of vulnerable, frail and debilitated individuals by requiring solicitors to have a medical professional co-sign legal documents confirming the capacity of the individual.

As I said a moment ago, we welcome our colleague Alex Rowley.

We last considered the petition at our meeting on 24 January, when we agreed to write to the Law Society of Scotland, the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland, the British Medical Association and the General Medical Council. Responses have been received from all those organisations and are detailed, as colleagues will have seen, in our papers for today's meeting.

Although expressing sympathy for the petitioner, the Law Society tells us that it does not consider it "necessary or desirable" to replicate the golden rule approach in Scotland

"in light of the other safeguards which exist."

The society also expressed concern that any requirement for medical professionals to co-sign legal documents could add significant complexity, delays, and costs to the legal process.

12:15

The General Medical Council noted that doctors must work within the limits of their competence, and so should not be expected to make assessments about the capacity of their patients to make financial decisions if they felt unable to do so.

The British Medical Association highlighted that there is already provision for doctors to comment on capacity where appropriate, and expressed concern that the petition's proposal risks creating an impossible increase in workload.

In its response, the Mental Welfare Commission advocates a proportionate response and an expectation that solicitors exercise their professional judgment, and has suggested additional organisations that we might wish to hear from, including the Office of the Public Guardian.

We have received two submissions from the petitioner sharing her reflections on the responses that we have received. She expresses concern about processes that are designed to protect clients, such as access to the client protection fund, and restates the view that this petition aims to build on the good practice that already exists to ensure that vulnerable people are further protected from exploitation.

Before the committee considers how it might proceed, I invite Alex Rowley to contribute to our deliberations.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am grateful to the committee for giving me this brief time this afternoon. I am here to speak on behalf of my constituents, because I believe that they raise an issue that requires further examination.

One of the fundamental points that are raised by the petition is the fact that an injustice has happened and that, therefore, we should consider what action is needed to stop that from happening again.

As I understand the Scottish Government's position, it believes that the rules that are detailed by the Law Society of Scotland, alongside the additional safeguards that are currently in place, are sufficient to protect vulnerable individuals when signing legal documents, in terms of their capacity, yet we have seen multiple instances of those rules and safeguards not being sufficient.

Although the decision on whether a client has capacity remains a question for the solicitor to satisfy themselves of the answer to, it is easy to see how a bad-faith actor could manipulate the situation. The question of the golden rule, which is best practice in England, has also been raised. It states that the capacity of someone who is elderly or is suffering from a serious illness, or has recently suffered from one, should be assessed by a medical practitioner when they seek to make or change a will. We must question why that is considered best practice in England but is considered not to be needed in Scotland. It could appear that we have fewer safeguards for vulnerable people in this situation than England does.

I do not come here today with all the answers, and I appreciate that the issue is not straightforward, but it appears to me that some form of action needs to be taken to address the issues that are raised by the petition and I would appreciate it if the committee would consider investigating the matter further by writing to the appropriate organisations to establish the levels of complaints that have been made and the levels of concern that exist in Scotland around the issue.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Rowley. At the very least, I think that we should consider taking forward the Mental Welfare Commission's suggestion that we write to the Office of the Public Guardian. I also suggest that we speak to the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges and Faculties in Scotland to discuss the issues, because I am slightly disappointed by the dismissive response that we have received from other organisations that seem to find the proposal inconvenient. Are there any other suggestions for action?

David Torrance: Perhaps the committee could consider writing to the Law Society of Scotland to seek information on the number of applications that have been made to the client protection fund in each of the past five years and the outcomes of those applications. Further, we could write to the Scottish Legal Complaints Commission to seek information on the number of complaints that it has received in each of the past five years relating to concerns about a client's capacity or coercive behaviour by solicitors, and on how many times those complaints have been upheld.

The Convener: So we would be seeking some factual responses.

I see that a member of the public would like to speak. I welcome them but, unfortunately, we are not able to take contributions from the public gallery.

Mr Rowley, would you like to add anything to what we have said about actions that we will take?

Alex Rowley: Mr Torrance's proposals would help to move this matter forward. This is not straightforward, but the more information we have, the more we can look at whether there is a way forward, so I very much welcome those proposals.

The Convener: The committee is persuaded that there are issues, and I am not satisfied that just being told that everything is as it should be by all the organisations that currently operate matters is sufficient comfort to the committee.

Is the committee content to keep the petition open and to pursue the avenues of inquiry that we have discussed?

Members indicated agreement.

Student Nurses (Payment on Placement) (PE2039)

The Convener: The next continued petition, PE2039, which was lodged by Amy Lee, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to pay student nurses for their placement hours. We last considered this petition at our meeting on 20 December 2023, when we agreed to write to the Nursing and Midwifery Council, the Royal College of Nursing and the National Union of Students. The Royal College of Nursing's response emphasises the importance of student nurses having supernumerary status, as that means that they must not be counted as part of the workforce that is required to provide patient care. The submission states that, for that reason, the RCN does not support students being paid while on clinical placement.

In a 2022 RCN members survey, 46 per cent of respondents said that, on their last shift, nursing students were being counted as staff in terms of the numbers required to provide patient care, and the submission states that, although RCN Scotland does not support student nurses being paid while on clinical placement, it is clear that the Scottish Government must ensure that nursing students have appropriate financial support to allow them to prioritise their education, cope with the rising cost of living and complete their studies without falling into financial hardship.

The RCN's report on nursing student finance said that 66 per cent of respondents had considered dropping out of their course due to financial concerns, and it recommended that

"Scottish government must implement a cost-of-living increase to the nursing student bursary and associated allowances, and establish a regular review to ensure the bursary increases in line with the cost of living."

Do colleagues have any suggestions for action?

David Torrance: The committee could write to the Scottish Government to highlight the Royal College of Nursing's report on nursing student finance and ask what consideration it has given to the report's recommendations.

The Convener: Is the committee content to do as Mr Torrance suggests?

Members indicated agreement.

Community Link Workers (PE2053)

The Convener: Our last continued petition, PE2053, which was lodged by Peter Cawston on behalf of Scottish general practitioners at the deep end, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to take action to ensure that the number and hours of current community link workers serving the poorest communities are not cut in the next financial year and to take binding

steps to secure long-term funding for community link workers in GP practices across Scotland.

The committee last considered the petition on 24 January. We have received responses from the Scottish Government, Glasgow city health and social care partnership, Health and Social Care Scotland, the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland, GMB Scotland, GPs working with community link workers and our MSP colleague Paul Sweeney. The responses, which are detailed in today's committee papers, highlight the valuable role that community link workers play. Many MSPs receive submissions in that regard.

However, I draw members' attention to the submission from the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland, which comments that the dispute that prompted the petition centres not on the value of community link workers but on who should fund them—the Scottish Government or local health and social care partnerships. A number of submissions indicated a preference for CLW funding to be included in baseline budgets from the Scottish Government, to ensure greater certainty of funding for these roles.

The Scottish Government has told us that a new national community link worker advisory group has been set up and will formulate detailed proposals for changes in relation to specific features of GP CLW services that are to be reviewed.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

David Torrance: The committee could write to the Scottish Government to seek an update on the work of the national community link worker advisory group, specifically on what consideration has been given to introducing baseline funding that would provide secure, long-term funding for CLW roles.

The Convener: Are colleagues content to proceed on that basis?

Members indicated agreement.

New Petitions

12:24

The Convener: We move to consideration of new petitions. For those who are tuning in to hear how their petition is going to be resolved, I will start, as I always do, by saying that the committee takes advice on the issues that are raised in each petition from the Scottish Parliament information centre—SPICe—which is the Parliament's independent research body. We also invite the Scottish Government to offer a preliminary view because, historically, those were the first two actions that we would take, and this process allows us to expedite the discussion of the petition.

Wild Wrasse (Protection of Stocks) (PE2110)

The Convener: The first new petition is PE2110, which was lodged by Charles Millar. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to develop and introduce a statutory fisheries management plan that is focused on protecting wild wrasse stocks in Scottish waters, beginning with a data collection exercise and introduction of precautionary fishery management measures ahead of the next fishing season, which commences in May 2025.

The petitioner tells us that wrasse are used as a cleaner fish to tackle lice in aquaculture facilities, and that their unusual reproductive patterns make them vulnerable to overcatching. The SPICe briefing notes that there

"is currently no Total Allowable Catch ... applied to commercial wrasse fishing".

That means that

"there is no limit to the number of wrasse above a certain size limit ... which can be fished during the fishing season",

which runs between 1 May and 30 November each year.

In its response to the petition, the Scottish Government highlights the mandatory management measures that were introduced in 2021. Those require Scottish vessels to successfully apply, on an annual basis, for a letter of derogation from the Scottish ministers in order to fish for wrasse. The response also refers to the UK joint fisheries statement, which contains

"a statutory commitment for the production of 43 Fisheries Management Plans".

The Scottish Government indicates that it is

"unable to confirm or commit to the production of additional" fisheries management plans

"beyond those that are currently in development".

We have also received a submission from the petitioner expressing concern that

“the mandatory measures ... are insufficient to ensure the sustainability of”

the wrasse fishery. The submission also highlights the development of a wrasse fisheries management plan for England.

Ahead of today’s meeting, we have received an update from the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands indicating that the Government will be undertaking “an appropriate assessment” of wrasse fishing interactions, along with assessments of special areas of conservation and marine protected areas, ahead of the next fishing season opening in May 2025.

The cabinet secretary’s update prompted a late submission from the petitioner, which has been circulated to members. It raises concerns that the Scottish Government received a report that was mentioned in the cabinet secretary’s submission in 2020, but has failed to act on it until now.

Members will also have noted that the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee is exploring issues relating to wrasse fishing as part of its consideration of amendments to the joint fisheries statement and its follow-up inquiry on the salmon farming industry.

Therefore, the Government will—however belatedly—do something in respect of the monitoring of all this. I wonder whether colleagues feel that that leads us in a particular direction.

David Torrance: I am going to surprise you, convener. I want to keep the petition open, so that I can get information from the Scottish Government on what consideration it has given to the total allowable catch limits on commercial wrasse fishing and what discussions it has had with the UK Government on the development of its wrasse complex fisheries management plan. Specifically, I want to know what consideration has been given to developing similar measures in Scottish waters.

The Convener: In an unexpected further burst of interventionist action, Mr Torrance has come forward with a proposal that we keep the petition open and try to track down a bit more detail. Are colleagues content that we do so?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will keep the petition open and pursue it on that basis.

Early Learning and Childcare (Funding from 9 Months) (PE2111)

The Convener (Jackson Carlaw): PE2111, which was lodged by Julie Fraser, calls on the

Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide families with financial support for early learning and childcare when their child reaches nine months of age. The SPICE briefing notes:

“Funded ELC is available to all three- and four-year-olds and some two- and five-year-olds. Eligibility for children under three is not currently universal, but is based on parents/carers being in receipt of certain benefits or the child or parent/carer having experience of care.”

It also notes that, in the programme for government in 2023-24, the Government said that the expansion of childcare support would cover children from nine months old when it stated that it would

“Work with Local Government and other partners to develop the local infrastructure and services needed to provide childcare from nine months to the end of primary school in specific communities in six local authority areas.”

The Scottish Government’s response to the petition states that it is

“working on the initial stages of an expanded national offer for more families with two-year-olds, focusing first on those who will benefit most.”

It explains that expansion work is currently focused on “insights and engagement”, including

“piloting new approaches through the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund and learning from the six early adopter communities.”

Do colleagues have any suggestions for action?

David Torrance: I wonder whether the committee would consider writing to the Scottish Government to ask how the engagement, pilots and investment in the early adopter communities will benefit children at nine months old in those communities, and how that work will inform its development of a targeted offer for one and two-year-olds.

The Convener: We are interested in keeping the petition open. Are colleagues content to proceed on the basis of Mr Torrance’s proposals?

Members indicated agreement.

Early Learning and Childcare (Independent Review) (PE2112)

The Convener: PE2112, which was lodged by Carole Erskine on behalf of Pregnant Then Screwed, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to commission an independent review of publicly funded early learning and childcare in Scotland, in order to better understand and address the challenges that families face when trying to secure and afford childcare.

The background to the petition provides details of the petitioner’s survey that looked at childcare in

Scotland, in which 83.7 per cent of parents said that their childcare costs are the same or more than their income, with 70 per cent of mothers and 50 per cent of fathers responding to say that it does not make financial sense for them to work. The SPICe briefing notes that, although data from surveys conducted by Coram Family and Childcare shows that childcare costs in Scotland are rising, they remain lower than the average prices that have been reported for England and Wales.

In its response to the petition, which is similar to the response that we received on the previous petition, the Scottish Government states that it is investing nearly £1 billion in high-quality early learning and childcare in 2024-25. The response goes on to highlight the funding follows the child approach for the delivery of the 1,140 hours ELC offer, which allows parents and carers to

“access their child’s entitlement from any setting in the public, private or third sector ... who meets the National Standard, has a place available, and is willing to enter into a contract with their local authority.”

The Scottish Government’s response also refers to independent research that suggests that

“97% of parents with a three- to five-year-old were satisfied that they could access funded ELC in a way that meets their needs.”

It notes that an evaluation of the 1,140 hours entitlement is due to report in 2025.

We have also received two submissions from the petitioner, the first of which comments on the Scottish Government’s response and draws our attention to a review of the early years sector in England, which was commissioned by the UK Labour Party before it entered government. The petitioner has called for a similar review to take place in Scotland. The second submission highlights the mostly negative experiences of the childcare system that parents have encountered, including issues around availability, council boundary changes, and the inflexibility of the current system to meet families’ needs.

Submissions have also been received from the University of the West of Scotland, drawing our attention to research that it has undertaken on the challenges that are faced by mothers who are working in the performance arts and entertainment industry, and from our MSP colleague Tim Eagle in support of the petition’s aim.

In the light of the information that we have received from the Scottish Government and SPICe, do colleagues have any suggestions on how we might proceed?

David Torrance: I wonder whether the committee would like to write to the National Day Nurseries Association, the Scottish Private Nursery Association, the parents group—

Connect—and COSLA to seek views on the issues that have been raised by the petition. The committee could also write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, highlighting the submissions that the committee has received and the call that was raised in PE2111 to fund early learning and childcare from nine months old. The committee could seek an update on the work to develop new childcare offers, including details of any discussion that the Scottish Government has had with the UK Government on the issue, specifically the financial support that is available to families.

The Convener: Are members content with that?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That concludes our consideration of new petitions. Our next meeting will be on 13 November. We now move into private session to consider agenda items 4 and 5.

12:34

Meeting continued in private until 12:45.

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