Official Report
Aithisg Oifigeil

Public Petitions Committee

Comataidh an nan Athchuingean Poblach

Thursday 10 September 2026

Session 7

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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE
2nd Meeting 2026, Session 7

CONVENER

*Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Cara McKee (West Scotland) (Green)
*Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Meghan Gallacher (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)

LOCATION

The Adam Smith Room (CR5)

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Thursday 10 September 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:03]

Interests

The Convener (Paul Sweeney): Good morning and welcome to the second meeting of session 7 of the Public Petitions Committee. Ahead of today's meeting, we received apologies from Cara McKee, who we wish well.

I welcome colleagues who are not members of the committee but who have joined us this morning to make representations on behalf of several other committees. I also welcome the many members of the public who have joined us in the gallery. It is a pleasure to have you join our proceedings.

I remind all members to ensure that their devices are on silent and that all their notifications are turned off during the meeting. This is the first meeting in which the committee will formally consider petitions. I remind members in the public gallery that only members who are sitting at the table may participate in formal proceedings. If a respectful silence can be maintained in the gallery, that would be appreciated.

Our first item of business is to invite Julie MacDougall and David Torrance to declare any relevant interests, because this is their first committee meeting of the parliamentary session.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I declare that I am a councillor in Fife Council. I have also been involved with Burntisland Hedgehog Haven, which is the organisation that lodged petition PE2213.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I have nothing to declare.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

10:04

The Convener: The next item of business is to decide whether to take agenda item 5 in private. Do members agree to take that item in private?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Continued Petitions

Justice for Megrahi (PE1370)

10:04

The Convener: The next item on our agenda is consideration of continued petitions. All the petitions included in this agenda item have been carried over from the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee of session 6. We will start with three petitions that were referred to the Criminal Justice Committee in the previous parliamentary session.

Petition PE1370, which was lodged in 2010 by the Justice for Megrahi campaign group, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to open an independent inquiry into the 2001 Kamp van Zeist conviction of Abdelbaset Ali Mohmed al-Megrahi for the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 in December 1988.

The committee sought the views of the Scottish Government on all petitions that were carried over from session 6 in order to inform its consideration. The Scottish Government's response is included in the papers along with a response from the petitioners. In that response, the Scottish Government states that it is not clear what the scope of any inquiry into Mr al-Megrahi's conviction could be. The Government considers that the mechanism for considering the safety of a conviction is via the appeal court.

The petitioners' submission argues that the petition should be kept open, arguing that the Justice for Megrahi campaign has consistently emphasised the importance of the Scottish Parliament keeping the petition on the table until all legal action is completed. It argues against closing the petition, given that what it considers to be possibly relevant fresh material might be about to emerge in a public forum in America. The petitioners state that they value the Scottish Parliament's continuing scrutiny and political oversight.

In session 6, the Criminal Justice Committee considered the petition on 26 January 2022. It agreed to keep the petition open, pending progress in respect of an appeal by Mr al-Megrahi's family. I invite members who have comments or suggestions for further actions to make them known.

David Torrance: I wonder whether the committee would consider referring the petition to the current Criminal Justice Committee for further consideration, which would be in line with what was agreed to in session 6.

The Convener: Are members content with that approach?

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Would it be okay to write to Mr al-Megrahi's family to request an update on where we are with the appeal?

The Convener: I would be content for clerks to write to Mr al-Megrahi's family to seek that update. We will also write to the petitioner. Are members content with that?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Judiciary (Register of Interests) (PE1458)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE1458, lodged in December 2012 by Peter Cherbi, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to legislate to require all members of the judiciary in Scotland to submit their interests and information on any hospitality received to a publicly available register of interests.

This is a continued petition that was previously referred to the session 6 Criminal Justice Committee and to previous incarnations of that committee. The session 6 Criminal Justice Committee most recently considered the petition on 26 January 2022. At that meeting, it agreed to write to the Scottish Government and to keep the petition open. The Scottish Government's programme for government for that year included a commitment to begin work on establishing a register of interests for the judiciary. The committee did not carry out any further work in relation to the petition in session 6.

In his submission to the committee, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice states that he has carefully considered the matter, including the views of the Lord President and the existing framework for judicial accountability, and does not intend to make any changes, because he is content that sufficient safeguards are in place.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

David Torrance: I wonder whether the committee would consider closing the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders, on the basis that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice's most recent update states that he has carefully considered the matter, including the views of the Lord President and the existing framework for judicial accountability, and does not intend to make any changes, because he is content that sufficient safeguards are in place.

The Convener: As there is no dissent, are members content to close the petition, given the Government's views?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Non-fatal Strangulation (Ban) (PE2136)

The Convener: Our final previously referred petition is PE2136, published in January 2025 and lodged by Fiona Drouet, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to make non-fatal strangulation a stand-alone criminal offence in Scotland.

On 23 April 2025, the petition was referred to the then Criminal Justice Committee. The committee held an evidence session on 21 May 2025, which included taking evidence from the petitioner. It wrote to the then Lord Advocate and justice secretary and received responses from each, as well as from the petitioner.

The position of the Scottish Government and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service is that non-fatal strangulation is already a crime, prosecuted under common assault, attempted murder or domestic abuse legislation, and that, as such, there is no need for a specific offence in Scots law.

In a submission to the Criminal Justice Committee on 11 July 2025, the petitioner set out her reasons for disagreeing with that position, believing that a lack of distinct recognition of the crime minimises the gravity of the offence. The petitioner did, however, welcome an offer from the Lord Advocate to discuss the matter further.

The committee sought the views of the Scottish Government on all petitions carried over from session 6 to inform its consideration. The Scottish Government's response of 21 July 2026 referred to its consultation on improving protections in the justice system for women and girls. The consultation ended on 31 August and sought views on a range of matters, including the operation of non-fatal strangulation law. The petitioner's response indicates that the petitioner submitted evidence to that consultation.

I invite members to make any comments or suggestions for action.

Julie MacDougall: My view is that we should refer the petition to the current Criminal Justice Committee.

The Convener: If there are no other suggestions, are we are all content to make that referral?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Redress Scheme (Fornethy House Residential School) (PE1933)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE1933, published in April 2022 and lodged by the Fornethy Survivors Group, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to widen access to Scotland's redress scheme to allow Fornethy survivors to seek redress.

In its legacy report, the session 6 Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee invited us to consider reviewing what progress has been made on the issues raised by the petition when it comes to considering next steps. The previous committee indicated that that might include pursuing the request for a chamber debate, exploring whether to refer the petition to a committee that is able to undertake substantive work on the issue of redress or seeking an updated view from the Scottish Government.

In her response, the petitioner asks the committee to seek a debate on the matter. The petitioner also refers to the previous Deputy First Minister arranging a meeting between the survivors and Glasgow City Council, which could not proceed due to an active civil court case.

The response from the current Deputy First Minister states that Richard Pugh KC formally apologised at the Scottish child abuse inquiry on behalf of Glasgow City Council. The Deputy First Minister's response also states that she plans to meet the Fornethy Survivors Group in the coming weeks to hear its views and to determine whether there are any remaining actions that she can support.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

David Torrance: As somebody who was involved in this petition during session 6, given that the Deputy First Minister is going to meet Fornethy Survivors Group very soon, I wonder whether the committee could seek an update from the Deputy First Minister once she has met the survivors.

The Convener: Absolutely. That seems a reasonable action and a reasonable position to take at this point. I know that there has been interest in having a debate. I think that there was a members' business debate previously, and there might be interest in a further debate, which we will certainly bear in mind as well.

Marie McNair: Can we seek an update from the petitioner?

The Convener: Yes, we can seek an update from the petitioner.

I think, on that basis, we will keep the petition open. Do members agree to do so?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Child Protection (Public Bodies) (PE1979)

10:15

The Convener: Our next petition is PE1979, lodged by Neil McLennan, Christine Scott, Alison Dickie and Bill Cook, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to launch an independent inquiry to examine concerns that allegations about child protection, child abuse, safeguarding and children's rights have been mishandled by public bodies, including local authorities and the General Teaching Council for Scotland; to examine gaps in the Scottish child abuse inquiry; and to establish an independent national whistleblowing officer for education and children's services in Scotland to handle these inquiries in the future.

We are joined by our colleague Meghan Gallacher, who has expressed an interest in this petition.

The legacy report of the session 6 Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee recommended that this committee pursue the issue further, noting:

"This could include consideration of whether referring the petition could be appropriate if other committees are undertaking relevant work which would allow substantive scrutiny of the issues."

In its submission to this committee, the Scottish Government refers to work being done in relation to the issues raised in the petition. That work includes a commitment in the Scottish National Party manifesto to legislate to make reporting of harm to children, including child sexual abuse, mandatory by adults tasked with safeguarding young people. It also includes phase 11 of the Scottish child abuse inquiry, which will consider the extent to which failures by state or non-state institutions to protect children in care in Scotland from abuse have been addressed—by changes to practice, policy or legislation—and whether any further changes in practice, policy or legislation are necessary in order to protect children in care in Scotland from abuse in future. It also includes the Scottish Government's intention to establish a targeted independent inquiry and a Scottish truth project; and the Scottish Government's support for the UK Public Office (Accountability) Bill.

In their response, the petitioners state that they are "frustrated" with the Scottish Government's submission and that the key focus of the petition

"continues to be on securing independent investigation of allegations relating to the mishandling of child abuse concerns by public bodies through an independent national whistleblowing office (INWO) for education and children's services".

The petitioners welcomed the support of the City of Edinburgh Council, in its submission. However, the petitioners stated:

"We urge caution though on the reference to the 'past' treatment of whistleblowers … as it's alleged this culture continues."

Finally, the petitioners' submission cites comments by Professor Alexis Jay OBE, the chair of the public inquiry into group-based child sexual abuse, about the petition and states that the petitioners would welcome a meeting with Professor Jay.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Marie McNair: I ask that the petition stays open and that the committee writes to Professor Jay. We could also see whether we could facilitate a meeting with the petitioners and Professor Jay.

The Convener: I will note that. Are there any further points before we bring in our colleague Megan Gallacher?

David Torrance: I am content with those suggestions.

Julie MacDougall: I absolutely support the petition remaining open. There could be a direct link with the grooming gangs scandal. This is a very serious issue, so I agree 100 per cent that it should remain open and be referred to the relevant bodies.

The Convener: Ms Gallacher joins us and is keen to speak on this petition, so I invite her to address the committee.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): Thank you. I welcome colleagues' comments. This petition was lodged in 2022, and I welcome the efforts by this group of petitioners to continue the conversation about whistleblowing and the need for a national discussion on how we change whistleblowing, not just to make whistleblowing safe for public sector employees, but to ensure that we safeguard children. The point is well made that the issue links directly to what we are seeing in relation to grooming gangs and the wider issues around child safeguarding.

If I may make a further suggestion, I understand that the convener has set out the Scottish Government's response in relation to phase 11 of the Scottish child abuse inquiry, but I wonder whether the committee would seek clarification from the Scottish Government that that work will include whistleblowing. The response is generic—I understand that the Government is trying to provide an overview—but it would be helpful, not just for the committee but for the petitioners, to know that whistleblowing will be at the heart of the work that the Government is undertaking. I say that because we must ensure that the measures that

will be considered and the recommendations that follow, and that are then put into practice in terms of policy, will be followed. For that reason, we need to know exactly what the work will include.

The Convener: Thank you. Do colleagues have any response to what Ms Gallacher has said? They seem a straightforward set of suggestions in addition to what has been proposed already.

Marie McNair: I am quite content to seek a response from the Scottish Government on the inquiry, if we can.

The Convener: Are we all content?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: We have noted your points, Ms Gallacher. Thank you very much for attending today. We will make sure that the petition is carried forward.

Specialist Neonatal Units (Centralisation) (PE2099)

The Convener: PE2099, on stopping the proposed centralisation of specialist neonatal units in NHS Scotland, was lodged by Lynne McRitchie in May 2024. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to stop the planned downgrading of established and high-performing specialist neonatal intensive care services across NHS Scotland from level 3 to level 2 and to commission an independent review of the decision in light of contradictory expert opinions on centralising services. Jackie Baillie has joined us, and Meghan Gallacher, Helen McDade and Clare Adamson will make representations on the petition, too. I thank all of you for joining us.

In its legacy report, the session 6 Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee highlighted its extensive work on the petition, including two oral evidence-taking sessions and a visit to University hospital Wishaw's neonatal intensive care unit. As a result of that work, the committee wrote a substantive letter to the then Minister for Public Health and Women's Health to highlight outstanding questions and concerns regarding the new model of neonatal care. The legacy report stated that there were ongoing concerns about capacity in NHS Grampian and about additional support to be provided to families impacted by the new model, and it recommended that this committee should consider the issues raised in the petition and review what progress had been made on the outstanding issues set out in that committee's letter to the minister.

The submission that we have received from the Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs provides an update on work that has been carried out since the session 6 committee last considered the petition. In her submission to the committee, the petitioner sets out why she disagrees with the minister's position.

Given the interest from colleagues, I will invite them to make representations first before we consider what further steps we might take. I will go from left to right, so, Ms McDade, would you like to start?

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Oh—you are talking about your left, convener.

Thank you for allowing me to come and speak to the petition. As a Mid Scotland and Fife MSP, I will highlight that the units that are suggested for downgrading from level 3 to level 2 include those at Ninewells hospital and Victoria hospital in Kirkcaldy, although other units elsewhere are also being affected. I have had many representations from mums who have given birth and had babies at Ninewells to ask for the units to be kept at their current level.

It is important to note that these are people who have already had this experience; they are not making those representations in their own personal interest, unless they are planning to have more family and the worst happens. They have already been there, and they feel strongly enough to make a representation and say, "Please rethink this."

The minister has told the committee that the plan is

"deliverable and clinically appropriate",

but a number of

"outstanding elements"

such as

"cot capacity and patient flow … will be incorporated into the next phase"

of looking at the issue. That seems to me to be a bit back to front. If you do not know what the cot capacity or the patient flow will be, it is hard to know whether it is clinically appropriate. We have seen the same problems in other areas of the NHS, where we have reduced things and then found ourselves short of beds.

As we have seen, centralisation is often not the answer. We need only think about, for example, the maternity unit in Caithness; I come from the north of Scotland, and I sometimes think that people do not know how far it is from the north to, say, Dundee, Edinburgh or Aberdeen. There are many areas of Scotland where people would be many hours away from the three units suggested, if their babies had to be taken there.

I note that the initial report says that babies will be safer in specialist units. That might conceivably be true, but the question is: are they safer if they

are having to be taken there in ambulances? How many hours will it take for people to get to those units? Will mothers increasingly be sent to other areas to give birth? That is already happening in Caithness, with mothers being taken 100 miles to give birth in case there are potential difficulties.

More centralisation is definitely not the answer. In one of her submissions to the committee, the minister said that families should stay together and that local care is important, so I suggest that we listen to families and to specialist staff. In other areas of the health service, we have seen that, if we reduce specialist areas, we lose staff—they are motivated to leave or go to other units—and there is a downgrading cycle whereby units are downgraded further as a result of staff shortages.

I ask the committee to consider writing to ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care to reconsider the proposals, particularly in the light of the NHS reorganisation that is about to happen, so that we keep experienced staff and so that local people's views are taken into account.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I recognise that there are concerns about the plans and that there has been a lot of debate. I am very proud of the Wishaw unit in my constituency. It is an award-winning unit that provides exemplary care, and it will still care for the vast majority of babies. The change will impact only the smallest babies and those in the poorest condition—the ones who need extra help—and those babies often already have to travel to Glasgow, because the Wishaw unit does not have the capacity to provide neonatal surgery.

In general, I support the proposals, given the expert clinical advice, the reassurances that the Government has provided and the fact that we have ScotSTAR—the Scottish specialist transport and retrieval service—which is a dedicated ambulance service for babies that is not subject to some of the challenges that there have been in ambulance procurement for patients in that area.

However, I recognise that there has been a major public service reform announcement regarding health boards, so it is important that we focus on what those big national health service changes might mean for these plans.

Meghan Gallacher: I have supported the campaign since it began back in the previous session of the Parliament. The work that has been undertaken by Lynne McRitchie and other mums, particularly those in the Motherwell and Wishaw area, can only be commended, because they want what is best for mums, parents and vulnerable babies.

"The Best Start: A Five-Year Forward Plan for Maternity and Neonatal Care in Scotland", which is not the only plan that relates to neonatal and maternity services, paints a very clouded picture of the provision that is available, what the proposals will mean for new parents and their newborns and what maternity and neonatal services will look like in the future. We have had too many reviews, and the Scottish Government has not implemented their recommendations. Downgrading of neonatal departments—particularly those in my region—is causing concern to a lot of families in those areas.

I still do not understand why the Government has not chosen to have five neonatal specialist departments instead of three. Even now, that has not been properly explained. I do not believe that the Government can continue with the downgrading without assessing all the issues that have been put on the table by the petitioner and by MSPs, who have been seeking clarity and answers to questions for quite some time.

I refer members to my recent question to the Government about when the neonatal departments would be downgraded. I received a response on 1 September, but we still do not have an answer. That puts families in limbo and makes expectant mums fearful about what might happen. If the Government is serious about implementing the best start plan, it must be honest with the mums, children and families who will be impacted.

A lot of things are in limbo, and I do not believe that the petition should be closed when we still have so many unanswered questions. The least that we can do—if we are not fighting the proposals, which I will continue to do—is get answers for the mums and families who will be impacted.

10:30

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I agree whole-heartedly with Meghan Gallacher's contribution. I am still in contact with Lynne McRitchie of the Wishaw neonatal warriors and with Lauren Bruce, who represents Ninewells parents.

So far, the debate has been characterised as being about lived experience, emotion and common sense versus the evidence. The Government is keen to say that all its changes are evidence based, so we spent a bit of time taking a deep dive into the evidence, and I make a challenge today, because the evidence does not support taking the reorganisation of neonatal intensive care units at level 3 to the level of centralisation that is proposed by the Government. We should remind ourselves that we would have fewer level 3 NICUs per capita than in England, and that has also to be combined with the geography of Scotland.

The evidence does not show that pre-term infants are more likely to be born in level 3 facilities, and it shows that transporting pre-term babies is dangerous. There is evidence to suggest that hospitals that hold level 3 NICUs are driving improved outcomes, but that needs to be set against the chances of survival for babies.

The argument that centralisation develops expertise and allows clinicians to maintain that expertise works for Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. However, the trade-off is that the level of benefit to babies in Wishaw and Ninewells is not acceptable, because the transportation means that those babies will have a lesser chance of survival.

The Scottish Government has recently shifted to using as its evidence base babies who are born at less than 27 weeks' gestation. I am not surprised that it is doing that, but that accounts for only 40 to 50 babies born per year, whereas its written submission suggests that 100 very low birth weight babies would be considered as a suitable level in Scotland every year. There is, therefore, a real discrepancy in the figures. That becomes more interesting when looking at Bliss Scotland and Public Health Scotland figures, which show 850 to 1,100 level 3 admissions. None of it adds up, convener.

Most interesting of all is that Finland did a study of babies born at high, medium and low-volume hospitals and found little material difference in outcomes, so it did not go on to centralise. The evidence says something different from the Scottish Government's interpretation.

On that basis, I invite the committee to consider the fact that an independent review of maternity and neonatal services is about to be conducted, to be led by Professor Christine McCourt. Its remit is not yet published, as far as I am aware, and there is no explicit consideration of neonatal services in level 3 NICUs. To be frank, given the patchy evidence, I hope that the committee will invite the independent review to look at the issue and, at the same time, keep the petition open.

The Convener: I thank all colleagues who have joined us to make representations on the petition. I now invite comment from committee members.

Julie MacDougall: In light of the information that we have heard from our colleagues, I whole-heartedly agree that there should be an independent review. What is proposed appears to be a dangerous move, given that there is not sufficient evidence for carrying it out.

Marie McNair: Given the nature of the issue and the public interest in the matter, particularly in relation to the assurances that are sought by the petitioner on capacity et cetera, I suggest that we keep the petition open and take further evidence from the minister, to expand on the previous letter to the committee.

David Torrance: I am happy with that.

The Convener: We note a number of proposed actions from colleagues and committee members. In particular, we note the forthcoming review of maternity services by Professor Christine McCourt, as well as the minister's view and the health board restructuring that has been proposed in the programme for government. All of those point to the necessity for continuing scrutiny of the issue. I thank everyone for attending to discuss this matter.

It is worth noting that the committee intends to hold petitions debates in Parliament in due course, and this petition might be a good candidate for a wider debate with members.

Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (Neurodivergent People) (PE2161)

The Convener: PE2161 was published in May 2025 and was lodged by Ivor Roderick Bisset. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to amend the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2022 to allow for a two-year complaints period for people with cognitive disabilities. Jackie Baillie has expressed an interest in the petition.

The Scottish Government's submission states that it is considering what legislation should be taken forward during this parliamentary session. The Government adds that the SPSO has piloted a revised and updated version of the time bar guidance tool, which has now been fully implemented, and that the SPSO can now gather data on when discretion is exercised by a decision maker in respect of the time bar.

The petitioner expresses concern that the SPSO's new approach to data gathering has yet to be tested against evidence and wishes for the time bar to be formally extended to two years.

Our predecessor committee stated in its legacy report that the new committee might wish to receive further evidence from the SPSO to inform its consideration of the petition.

I invite Jackie Baillie to make any comments.

Jackie Baillie: My colleague Rhoda Grant was very supportive of the petition in the previous session, and I have been contacted to take it on.

I will be brief. There is an issue of principle here, in that somebody with a disability or who is neurodivergent might require extra time to facilitate a complaint. That is widely accepted, and the SPSO seems to have accepted it, because it is undertaking work on the issue. However, it is too

early to tell whether the guidance will be sufficient. Therefore, the committee should keep the petition open and invite the ombudsman to give evidence in order to establish whether what the SPSO is doing will work and will provide the necessary safeguards for people who are neurodivergent and who wish to complain.

The Convener: Do colleagues have any comments?

Marie McNair: Given the nature of the issue, I suggest that we keep the petition open, seek further evidence from the SPSO and refer the petition to the Social Justice, Housing and Local Government Committee to ask it to consider the issue in its annual session with the SPSO.

Julie MacDougall: I agree with that, convener.

David Torrance: Agreed.

The Convener: Do we want to write in the first instance? Is that your intended action, Marie?

Marie McNair: Yes, if we could.

The Convener: That makes sense.

Marie McNair: It would be to ask that committee to consider the issue.

The Convener: Our colleague Ms McKee has said that, particularly now that the Scottish Government has decided to scrap the learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill, the petitioner is right that the question whether the process works for neurodivergent people has not been addressed. Ms McKee also points out that, as the SPSO says that it will have data at the end of the year, we should consider the issue at that stage.

Everyone seems to be in agreement. I am more than happy to keep the petition open and seek further evidence from the SPSO.

Guga Hunt (PE2202)

The Convener: Our final continued petition is PE2202, which was published in November 2025 and lodged by Rachel Bigsby. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to amend section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to remove the power to grant licences for taking gannets on Sula Sgeir. Donald MacKinnon, the member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, has expressed an interest in the petition. In addition to submissions from the petitioner, NatureScot and the Scottish Government, the committee received an unsolicited submission from Protect the Wild.

NatureScot's response to the committee outlines the reasoning for the decision that it took on 3 August 2026 not to grant a licence to the men of Ness for a guga hunt in 2026. The response states that NatureScot used the latest information available and commissioned an updated population model to help to predict the effect of the guga hunt on the gannet population. As a result, NatureScot concluded that an adverse impact is possible both at the applicant's requested application limit of 2,000 juvenile gannets and at a reduced limit of 500. On that basis, the NatureScot board refused the 2026 licence.

The petitioner also made reference to the NatureScot decision and argued that the committee should keep the petition open and recommend that the Scottish Government consider the legislative amendment that is requested by the petition, so that the gannets of Sula Sgeir are afforded lasting protection instead of protection that is determined merely one licence application at a time.

In its legacy report, the session 6 Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee invited the new committee to consider the issues that are raised in the petition, recommending that any further work to explore the issues raised should consider a range of views and ensure that the voices of islanders are heard.

In the first instance, I invite our colleague Mr MacKinnon to address us.

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): Thank you, convener, and all members of the committee, for having me here to speak to PE2202 on behalf of my constituents in the community of Ness in Lewis. For hundreds of years, men from Ness have made the journey north to Sula Sgeir to harvest guga—young gannets—passing skills and knowledge down through the generations. The harvested birds are shared out among the Ness community and are often enjoyed as family meals. From the harvesting to the eating of the birds, guga have deep cultural significance to the people of Ness.

As the committee has heard, section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 allows for the taking of guga from the island of Sula Sgeir, subject to a licence being granted. The granting of a licence is tightly regulated by NatureScot, as demonstrated by the decision in August not to grant the application for a licence on the basis of population modelling. NatureScot also considered animal welfare in its determination of the licence, and its board heard that the chief veterinary officer considered the method of dispatch to be humane. The Scottish Government has, quite rightly, indicated that it does not intend to amend section 16 of the 1981 act.

I understand that the petitioners have sincere concerns, but I cannot ignore the wider campaign that has sought to vilify the community of Ness, othering them and trying to portray them and other

people of our islands as backward, which has been deeply distressing for many of my constituents.

On the basis of the regulatory process that already exists, the view of the chief vet on the method of dispatch and the position of the Scottish Government, it is my view that the committee should close PE2202. However, if the committee intends to continue to consider the petition, it is essential that you take evidence from the affected communities and that you visit Ness in my constituency.

The Convener: I invite members of the committee to comment.

David Torrance: In the light of the public interest across Scotland, I wonder whether we should keep the petition open and take further evidence from NatureScot and other representatives to hear their views on it. There is a huge amount of public interest in the guga hunt across Scotland, not just on the islands.

The Convener: Do any of our colleagues have views on this matter?

Marie McNair: I am content.

The Convener: I appreciate Mr MacKinnon's contribution this morning. There is a significant level of public interest in the petition and, given that it has been under consideration for just a year, it might be useful for us as a new committee to gather further evidence on the matters that pertain to it. I appreciate the invitation to visit Ness, which we will certainly consider.

In the first instance, we should keep the petition open and gain further representations from NatureScot, the petitioner and representatives of the local community to further inform our views before coming to a final view on the petition's longer-term future in the parliamentary session. There is a reasonable balance to strike at this stage. Does everyone agree on that approach?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: Again, I appreciate Mr MacKinnon for joining us on behalf of his constituents. We will keep in touch.

New Petitions

Local Authority Safeguarding and Equality Compliance Frameworks (Review) (PE2212)

10:45

The Convener: Item 4 is consideration of six new petitions. Our first new petition is PE2212, which was lodged by Steven Fawcett and published on 17 June 2026, calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to commission a national review of the misapplication of unacceptable actions policies across local authorities and their impact on safeguarding and equality compliance.

The petitioner would like such a review to consider whether there is a need to develop statutory guidance clarifying the interface between the Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007 and local authority complaints or behavioural policies; strengthen enforcement powers for the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman and/or create an independent safeguarding and equality oversight body to ensure compliance with the 2007 act and the Equality Act 2010; and mandate uniform training and reporting standards across all councils to ensure that equality and safeguarding are treated as statutory, rather than discretionary, obligations.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing sets out that local authorities' responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 include the duty to make reasonable adjustments, and provides links to examples of how some authorities refer to equality and the reasonable adjustment duty.

The SPICe briefing also sets out the statutory functions of the SPSO. It notes that, although the SPSO has the power to investigate complaints and make recommendations, it does not have the power to enforce any of its recommendations or to initiate its own investigations. The SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee raised that issue in session 6.

In its submission, the Scottish Government states that it does not consider that there is sufficient evidence to require the development of statutory guidance to clarify any interface between the 2007 act and local authority complaints or behavioural policies. In response, the petitioner refers to a freedom of information response that he obtained from his local authority, which he considers provides evidence in contrast to the Government's position.

The Scottish Government acknowledges that the strengthening of the SPSO enforcement

powers or the creation of a new oversight body could be achieved through primary or secondary legislation. It notes, however, that that

"would come with significant time and resource implications and would require careful consideration to avoid duplicating current work with"

adult support and protection partners.

The Government does not consider that there is evidence or a need to support the creation of a new oversight body or to strengthen the SPSO's powers. The petitioner notes the Government's acknowledgement that any strengthening of the SPSO's powers or the creation of a new oversight body would require legislative action. He also notes how that issue was raised by the session 6 SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee and asks why that recommendation has not yet been progressed.

The Scottish Government refers to its adult support and protection learning and development framework, which was published. It does not consider there to be evidence or a need to mandate statutory uniform training and reporting standards. The petitioner refers to the freedom of information response and argues that that shows that a framework addressing ASP duties in general terms does not, in practice, extend to training staff on how to operate a policy.

Do members have any views on the petition?

Julie MacDougall: We should keep the petition open and write to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman asking for their views on the proposed action in the petition.

The Convener: Is there any disagreement? No.

Given that the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee recommended strengthening the office of the SPSO by enabling it to investigate without complaint, we should seek further information on how that could best be put into practice, as also expressed by our colleague Ms McKee.

Are members happy with that action?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Small Animal Road Signs (PE2213)

The Convener: PE2213, which was lodged by Burntisland Hedgehog Haven and published on 17 June, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce small animal road warning signage, as has been done in England. The petitioner would like the sign displayed in areas with high hedgehog populations to help to save a species that is already on the International Union for Conservation of Nature red list as near threatened.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing on the petition explains that, although the regulation of traffic signs in Scotland was devolved to the Scottish ministers in 2016, the design, size, location and illumination of traffic signs that are used on roads across Great Britain are defined in the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2016. The briefing goes on to explain that the UK Government created a standardised small animal sign for use on English roads in 2019 but that the directions were not amended to include the small animal road sign, meaning that it is not a prescribed sign.

The Scottish Government's response on the petition sets out that Transport Scotland does not support the use of small wild animal signs in Scotland. It states that such signs could confuse or distract drivers, create road safety risks and have an unnecessary visual impact on the landscape. The response explains that, currently, a standard hazard warning sign can be used where there is strong evidence of the need to warn drivers of a specific wildlife risk. That sign might be supplemented by text providing more information about the specific hazard and, where appropriate, the distance over which the risk applies. The response further notes that Transport Scotland is preparing a sectoral biodiversity strategy, which is due to be published later this year and which will set out objectives that are aimed at halting and reversing biodiversity loss.

The petitioner's written submission suggests that any potential confusion for drivers that is caused by the introduction of a new road sign could be mitigated by introducing one standardised sign for small animals rather than having different signs for different species. The submission further notes that hedgehogs are now more likely to live in urban areas than in rural ones and that placing small animal signs in specific places—for example, where people do not necessarily expect small animals to be present—could reduce the number of deaths of such animals.

Do members have a view?

David Torrance: The petitioner is a constituent of mine, and I have worked with them closely, so I will have to declare an interest and take a back seat.

The Convener: Do other members have a view?

Julie MacDougall: I have been involved with the group in my capacity as a local councillor, but I am happy to give my opinion.

The Convener: Please do.

Julie MacDougall: I think that we should leave the petition open and do a bit more investigation into the issue.

The Convener: That sounds reasonable.

Marie McNair: As a huge animal lover, I think that more needs to be done to protect our wildlife, particularly our hedgehogs, which are declining in number. I want to see change on that, so I am happy to keep the petition open. We should write to the key organisations. I would like to visit the Burntisland Hedgehog Haven.

The Convener: I second that.

David Torrance: I third it.

The Convener: There is a general consensus that this is a matter of interest, both to the public and to members of the committee and other parliamentarians. We thank the petitioner for lodging the petition, which has raised an interesting issue and certainly merits further investigation.

The suggested action is to keep the petition open and write to key organisations, as set out in the briefing notes. We will also seek to arrange a visit to the Burntisland Hedgehog Haven or another appropriate venue to obtain more information on the subject matter—that would be a good next step. Do members agree?

Members *indicated agreement*.

School Bullying Policy (PE2215)

The Convener: PE2215, which was published on 18 June 2026 and lodged by Kirsty Solman, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to create and enforce a national anti-bullying policy that all schools and local authorities must follow, with mandatory reporting procedures and stronger consequences to ensure the safety and protection of children who are affected by bullying.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing notes that, in order to deliver a consistent and mandatory policy across all schools, one option would be to create a power for the Scottish Government to issue statutory guidance. The briefing identifies a range of measures that are designed to support positive behaviour in schools, including a joint action plan between the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and "Respect for All: The National Approach to Anti-Bullying for Scotland's Children and Young People", which includes non-statutory guidance on implementing anti-bullying policies.

The Scottish Government submission refers to "Respect for All" and states that it was revised in 2024 following extensive engagement with a range of key stakeholders, including Education Scotland, teaching unions, parent representatives and children's organisations. The Scottish Government explains that it does not currently have the power to introduce statutory national anti-bullying guidance or mandatory reporting requirements. It considers that having that power would not necessarily improve outcomes for children and young people, and it observes that evidence does not demonstrate that legislating in the area leads to a reduction in bullying or an improvement in recording practices.

The Government further sets out in detail the range of work that it is undertaking alongside the "Respect for All" approach, including separate guidance on fostering a positive, inclusive and safe school environment and new guidance on risk assessments for violent, aggressive and dangerous behaviour. Both were published in June 2025 as part of the joint action plan. The next update of respect for all is due to be published in 2029. Do members of the committee have a view?

David Torrance: I wonder whether the committee would consider keeping the petition open and writing to the petitioner to seek their views in response to the written submission from the Scottish Government. I also wonder whether we could seek the views of key stakeholders such as the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland, the teaching unions, Connect, the Scottish Youth Parliament and respectme, Scotland's anti-bullying service.

Julie MacDougall: I completely agree with that. We need to be going further. It is a serious issue in our schools and we are letting our young people down. We should 100 per cent keep it open.

Marie McNair: I agree.

The Convener: I think that there is agreement from members of the committee. Cara McKee has written that she was minded to close the petition, but it seems that there is a majority in favour of retaining it open at this stage and seeking further views from the stakeholders that were suggested by Mr Torrance.

If we are in agreement, we will note those actions and carry on.

Members *indicated agreement*.

Free Bus Travel Scheme (Extension) (PE2216)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE2216, which was lodged by James Bond and published on 18 June 2026, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to extend eligibility for the young persons free bus travel scheme to include everyone aged 22 to 25

inclusive, using powers under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019. The petitioner states that the current age limit of 21 creates an unfair cliff edge for young people entering work apprenticeships or higher education and that extending the scheme would reduce socioeconomic disadvantage, boost workforce participation and aid net zero targets.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing on the petition states that two national concessionary travel schemes currently operate in Scotland: one offers free travel to Scottish residents over the age of 60 or disabled residents of any age; the other, which was launched in 2022, offers free travel within Scotland for Scottish residents who are aged five to 21. The briefing notes that, as part of those schemes, bus operators are paid a proportion of the full adult fare for each concessionary traveller that is carried.

The Scottish Government's response to the petition states that it has no plans to change the age eligibility for free bus travel. It cites concerns over affordability, estimating that extending eligibility up to the age of 26 would carry additional costs of between £95 million and £113 million per year. It further notes the Government's commitment to introducing a nationwide £2 fare cap across Scotland by the end of the current parliamentary session, building on the current pilot scheme.

Do members have any views?

David Torrance: I wonder whether the committee would consider closing the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders, on the basis of the response from the Scottish Government that it does not intend to change the age of eligibility for free bus travel and has confirmed plans to introduce a roll-out of a nationwide £2 bus fare cap by the end of the parliamentary session.

Julie MacDougall: I would be happy to close the petition, on the grounds that I do not agree that we should be giving free bus travel to adults of that age. I agree that we should close the petition.

Marie McNair: I have no dissent to that.

The Convener: Cara McKee was minded to keep the petition open and write to the Scottish Government to ask for information on £2 roll-out and perhaps also franchising, as well as engaging with the organisations in the Scottish Parliament information centre briefing. It seems that a majority is in favour of closure. I note that there are other relevant petitions, such as on bus franchising, that might be more appropriate vehicles to explore these issues.

With that, I am at an agreement to close the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders, on the basis that the Scottish Government does not intend to change the age of eligibility for free bus travel and has confirmed plans to introduce a roll-out of a nationwide £2 bus fare cap by the end of the parliamentary session.

Firearms Offences (Sentencing) (PE2219)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE2219, which was published on 24 June 2026 and lodged by Sharon Wilson, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review whether the mandatory minimum five-year prison sentence for the possession of prohibited firearms under the Firearms Act 1968 continues to deliver proportionate justice and effective public safety outcomes in all circumstances.

11:00

The petitioner clarifies that her petition calls for a review of whether the current legislation remains the most effective and proportionate approach in all circumstances, rather than calling for the removal of serious penalties altogether.

The petitioner has noted that firearms legislation is reserved to the UK Parliament but argues that the Scottish Parliament still has an important role in considering the impact of sentencing policy on Scotland's justice system and in making representations where concerns about proportionality and fairness arise.

The SPICe briefing for the petition explains that changes to the provisions in the Firearms Act 1968, which provides for a minimum sentence for certain firearms offences, can be made only by the UK Parliament. It notes that that would not prevent relevant Scottish bodies from looking at the implications of the mandatory sentence—for example, the Scottish Sentencing Council commissioned a review in 2025 to examine sentencing for firearms offences more generally. However, the SPICe briefing noted that the Scottish Sentencing Council has not produced guidelines for firearms offences and has confirmed that it has no plans to do so.

The Scottish Government response to the petition also notes that, in its view, the subject matter of the petition is reserved and the asks of the petitioner are therefore not achievable. However, it states that it respects the committee's role in examining the issues that the petition raises.

The petitioner's written submission acknowledges that the Firearms Act 1968 is reserved to the UK Parliament but asks the committee to seek the views of relevant organisations on how mandatory minimum sentencing in relation to firearms offences operates in Scotland and to consider making representations to the UK Government if the

evidence that is gathered identifies concerns about its proportionality or effectiveness.

Do members have any comments or suggestions?

Julie MacDougall: As we have said, convener, it is a reserved matter, so it needs to be referred to Westminster. However, we could write to the Scottish Affairs Select Committee on the matter.

The Convener: That makes sense. Do members want to raise any further points?

David Torrance: I think that we should close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders, because it relates to a reserved matter.

The Convener: I think that the matter more appropriately sits with the Scottish Affairs Select Committee. In closing the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders, we take cognisance that the Scottish Government's response states that the subject of the petition is reserved to the UK Parliament and therefore not achievable through this legislature. Nonetheless, we could make the relevant committee in the UK Parliament aware of the petitioner's concerns. I think that that is a reasonable step.

Just Transition (Retrofit Training) (PE2220)

The Convener: Our final petition for consideration today is PE2220, lodged by the Scottish Ecological Design Association, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to fund and expand retrofit skills training; work with education providers, local authorities and industry; widen access for underrepresented groups; and align training with area-based programmes.

The SPICe briefing sets out the four key policy drivers of Scotland's climate change plan and identifies steps that the Scottish Government has taken to upskill heating installers from fossil fuel systems to heat pumps, which include a heat pump skills fund and the green heat installer engagement programme. The briefing also notes the Scottish Government's indication that it will publish a heat in buildings strategy and delivery plan in 2026.

In its submission, the Scottish Government recognises that

"upskilling the current workforce and attracting new entrants to the sector will be necessary to achieve the target set out in the Climate Change Plan (March 2026) to decarbonise heat by 2045".

It adds that it will continue to work with the industry, trade bodies and training providers to deliver that upskilling, and notes that the green heat installer engagement programme has been in place for several years to support it. The Scottish Government also refers to capital investment schemes, such as area-based schemes and the warmer homes scheme, which it states has

"helped create 153 modern apprentices, upskilled 817 of the supply chain and delivered 1,491 scheme-related opportunities".

The joint submission from the petitioner and Common Weal highlights how the petition complements an open letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing, which was supported by leading industry bodies. The submission refers to the Scottish house condition survey of 2025, which identified that almost half of Scotland's 2.8 million dwellings and an unknown number of its 220,000 to 230,000 non-domestic buildings had critical elements of disrepair. The submission acknowledges that that is being addressed as part of the heat and energy efficiency technical suitability assessment and the planning and discovery report, which is not yet published.

The petitioner's submission argues that

"the retrofit industry needs to be restructured almost from scratch".

It notes a range of challenges and barriers that people will face in accessing the required training and upskilling, including not being able to take time out from other employment, caring responsibilities, and ability to pay. It considers that delivering training and upskilling will require a concerted effort from all training providers, supported by the Scottish Government.

Do members of the committee have views on the petition?

Marie McNair: I suggest that we keep the petition open and write to the Scottish Government for more info on heat in buildings and heat networks and write to other stakeholders as suggested in the SPICe briefing.

I have a constituency interest in the issue, given that there is a district heating system in Clydebank that is generating heat and using water from the River Clyde; some retrofitting has already happened there to connect some of the old tenements to the system. Would it be helpful for the committee to visit Clydebank to understand the issue and to learn a bit more about its importance?

The Convener: I thank you for that suggestion, which I think is entirely reasonable. Is it the cabinet secretary that you would like us to write to?

Marie McNair: Yes, please.

The Convener: We will note that as a referral. I am familiar with the Queen's Quay heat network, and I think that the visit is a great suggestion.

Julie MacDougall: I was minded to close the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders on the basis that the Scottish Government has committed to introducing legislation on the issue in the coming year. I am happy to take views, however.

David Torrance: I am happy to keep the petition open and go with my colleague's suggestion.

The Convener: Given that it is a new petition, I think that it is reasonable to give it some time. The suggested actions are interesting—a visit to Clydebank is not a bad idea. It might be worth seeking the opinion of the several stakeholders who the SPICe briefing suggested we write to.

Tradespeople in my constituency raised several issues around cost of training and building up their skills, which they said was challenging for them, and small businesses and others might have an interest in the reforms that could be achieved. It is interesting to note some of the challenges around scaling the Queen's Quay district heat network, such as planning reforms and the question of how we get those pipes to houses and so on. We could unpack a lot of interesting aspects and there is some interest in the issue.

Are we agreed to keep the petition open?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: That concludes the public part of the meeting.

11:07

Meeting continued in private until 11:41.

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