



Official Report
Aithisg Oifigeil

DRAFT

Public Petitions Committee

Comataidh an nan Athchuingean Poblach

Thursday 24 September 2026

Session 7



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

3rd 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:

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)

LOCATION

The Adam Smith Room (CR5)

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Thursday 24 September 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:01]

New Petitions

The Convener (Paul Sweeney): Good morning, and welcome to the third meeting in 2026 of the Public Petitions Committee. Ahead of today's meeting, we received apologies from David Torrance. On behalf of all committee members, I welcome Cara McKee back to the committee and wish her well in her recovery.

Ahead of each meeting, we notify members who are not members of the committee of petitions that they have expressed an interest in. We have been advised that we will be joined by David Green for our discussion of petition PE2224 and Kim Schmulian for our discussion of PE2231. I welcome Helen McDade for our discussion of PE2226 and PE2227, on business improvement districts.

I also welcome those who are attending in the public gallery. I remind everyone that only members sitting at the table can participate in the committee's formal proceedings, so no heckling, please.

I remind all members and visitors to ensure that their mobile phones, laptops and so on are on silent and that all notifications are turned off to avoid any disruption.

Food Standards Agency (Hygiene Scale) (PE2217)

The Convener: Our first and only item of business is consideration of new petitions. We have 13 new petitions to discuss today.

Our first petition, PE2217, which was lodged by Johnny Lee Kimberley and published on 24 June, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to adopt the Food Standards Agency hygiene scale that is used in England and to make display of the scale mandatory in all food establishments. The petitioner highlights their experience of anxiety in relation to food hygiene and their belief that the current pass or fail scheme does not provide enough information for consumers.

The Scottish Parliament information centre's briefing on the petition explains that food hygiene and food standards are devolved, with Food Standards Scotland having responsibility for food hygiene in Scotland. The briefing sets out that the

legal framework, consumer information system, rating scale and rules on displaying ratings differ across the United Kingdom. For example, a six-point food hygiene rating scale is used in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, whereas businesses in Scotland are either awarded a pass if they have met the legal requirements for food hygiene or given an "improvement needed" rating if they do not meet the legal requirements and need to make improvements.

The Scottish Government's submission on the petition confirms that provision for mandatory display already exists in the Food (Scotland) Act 2015. The response highlights that consideration of whether to make the display of compliance ratings mandatory would require significant consultation with stakeholders. The Government confirms that the introduction of such mandatory signage would include a review of whether the pass and "improvement required" classifications continued to meet the needs of consumers.

The Government's response highlights that the Scottish authorities food enforcement rebuild—SAFER—programme will explore new methods to advise consumers of compliance standards, including mandatory display.

Do committee members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): We looked earlier at what had already been done, convener, and you mentioned the SAFER programme, but, given that this is a new petition, it might be worth while writing to Food Standards Scotland to get an update, and possibly a reassurance, on what is already in place.

The Convener: I think that that makes sense. Are colleagues in agreement?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Great. We will take that action, see what Food Standards Scotland says and then consider our next steps. I thank the petitioner for the petition.

Women's Health Training (NHS Staff) (PE2218)

The Convener: PE2218 has been submitted by June Smillie on behalf of Nicola's, which is a charity supporting women in West Lothian. The petition, which was published on 24 June, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce mandatory standardised women's health training for general practitioners and national health service healthcare professionals across Scotland, noting that any training should focus on conditions that disproportionately affect women, should be evidence based and should be regularly updated

and regulated to ensure consistent, compassionate and informed care across all healthcare settings.

The SPICe briefing on the petition notes various research projects and inquiries that have highlighted the health inequalities that are faced by women, including research commissioned by the Scottish Government in 2023 that explored women's experience of discrimination and the impact on their health. The briefing also notes that that research highlighted a number of issues identified by participants. For example, women reported feeling ignored and dismissed when attempting to seek healthcare.

The Scottish Government's submission to the petition sets out that it cannot mandate what training GPs receive in order to become GPs. It explains that GPs are regulated by the General Medical Council, which is a United Kingdom-wide body, and their training is provided by independent university medical schools. Similarly, pharmacists are regulated by the General Pharmaceutical Council, which is another UK-wide body.

The submission further notes that responsibility for professional development sits with individual healthcare professionals, employers, Public Service Delivery Scotland, the royal colleges and other professional bodies. The Government, therefore, does not consider the petition's ask to be either practical or achievable, and it also highlights the various forms of women's health education and training resources that are currently available.

The petitioner's submission references the response to a freedom of information request that she submitted, which explained that

"individual practitioners are responsible for identifying their own professional development requirements/learning needs."

The petitioner also notes that the existence of good-quality training resources does not ensure that healthcare professionals undertake such training, and she asks for a consistent minimum standard of education and awareness for health professionals in relation to women's health.

In light of all that, do members of the committee have any views?

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): A number of the issues raised in the petition have also been raised with me as an MSP by my constituents. Given that this is such an important issue, I ask that we keep the petition open and write to other relevant bodies such as the Royal College of General Practitioners and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists to seek their views on the petition.

The Convener: Okay. That is noted.

Julie MacDougall: I agree. I, too, have been in touch with a number of constituents. These things might be in place, but they are not always being carried out, either because of a lack of training or because they need to be implemented in a different way. Nevertheless, the issue needs to be highlighted more.

As I have said, I agree with what has been suggested. These things might well be there, but they might not be. In any case, this sort of thing needs to be reinforced.

Cara McKee (West Scotland) (Green): I am also interested in finding out why GPs are not doing the research. Do they not have the time to do it? Do they have the facilities in place so that they can get on with it? It would be worth asking that question, too.

The Convener: That is an important point, and it might be something to highlight in the correspondence with the Royal College of General Practitioners as a first step. I meet the GPs group in Glasgow regularly, and I know that they frequently highlight time pressure on continuing professional development opportunities as a major issue. It is certainly worth factoring that in and asking how we can get the balance right, and what can subsequently be done with health boards and GP contracts.

I think that those actions are worth noting, and I thank the petitioner for raising these issues.

Additional Dwelling Supplement (Waiver) (PE2221)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE2221, which was lodged by Khadijah Rafiq, and published on 24 June. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to waive the additional dwelling supplement for those buying homes to support dependent family members.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing explains that ADS is payable when someone buys a residential property in Scotland and already owns one or more properties anywhere in the world. It provides examples of such additional residential properties.

The briefing refers to a Scottish Government consultation conducted from December 2021, with a summary of evidence published in February 2023. Although there was no question specifically about relief from ADS, 96 per cent of respondents agreed that Revenue Scotland should be given a power to waive ADS in exceptional circumstances. The Scottish Government did not support that proposal on the basis that such reforms would double the amount of time that someone had to sell their previous main residence. The Chartered

Institute of Taxation stated that doubling that window would be a sensible step.

The briefing further notes changes that were made to ADS and to land and buildings transaction tax—LBTT—through secondary legislation in 2024, but those did not include waiving ADS for people buying homes to support dependent family members.

In its response to the petition, the Scottish Government refers to the initial findings of a review of LBTT, which was published in March 2026. It notes that the review

“recognised that difficult cases can arise within the ADS framework, while also highlighting the challenges of introducing greater flexibility into a tax system that otherwise applies consistently across all taxpayers.”

The review concluded that further consideration of the issue may be warranted, while noting the associated legislative, administrative and evidential challenges. The Scottish Government states:

“This is a complex area and no decisions have been taken on potential legislative changes.”

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action on the petition?

Cara McKee: It seems sensible to me that we get some more information about the issue. People who can afford another property will have more money and may be able to pay the tax, so it is worth finding out more about it. I would also be interested in hearing from islanders who feel that they need another home on the mainland because of ferry services, so I wonder whether we could include that.

The Convener: Yes, I think that that is a good step.

Perhaps we should write to the Scottish Government in the first instance, or are we looking to institutions? I want to us be clear about who we should write to. I am open to a broad range of correspondence to clarify what is happening. It seems to be quite a complex issue.

Marie McNair: We should write to the Scottish Government, the Chartered Institute of Taxation, the Law Society of Scotland and Revenue Scotland.

The Convener: Yes, that makes sense.

I was also thinking of Dan Neidle, who runs a public tax charity. He often comments publicly on tax reforms. I would like to get his view. It might be a topic that we can open up to a broader inquiry, with public engagement, which could be quite interesting.

I note that the petitioner has not provided a follow-up response, even though this presents

them with a very good opportunity. We will want to invite the petitioner to provide evidence, because they might have a personal interest in a particular case that is worth looking at in detail.

There are a few actions there, and I hope that they are all acceptable. Do members agree with that approach?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank the petitioner for lodging the petition, and I hope that we will hear from them in due course.

Universal Credit (Limited Capability for Work and Work-Related Activity Reductions) (PE2222)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE2222, which was lodged by Sviatoslav Rozhenko and published on 24 June. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to use its powers under the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 to introduce an automatic Scottish top-up payment that fully mitigates the UK Government's reduction of the universal credit limited capability for work and work-related activity—LCWRA—element for new claimants in Scotland from 6 April 2026.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing sets out the background to LCWRA and the changes that were introduced by the Universal Credit Act 2025. It sets out the rates for 2026-27. Prior to April 2026, the rate was £429.80 per month. For claims made on or after April this year, it is £217.26 per month, which has been frozen until 2029-30. The briefing suggests that, by the end of the decade, 84,000 people in Scotland would be receiving the lower rate. It estimates that mitigating the difference between the two rates would cost around £245 million in 2029-30. In comparison, it notes that a Scottish Government response to a recent parliamentary question indicated that it had spent £115 million this year on discretionary housing payments to mitigate the effects of the bedroom tax and the benefits cap.

The Scottish Government acknowledges that the petition's proposals are legally possible but argues that they are not practical or readily affordable, citing the significant cost implications of developing and administering a new payment, with implementation likely to take several years. The Scottish Government states that it has committed around £1.5 billion to mitigate the impacts of the UK Government's social security policies in the past 15 years and that it has prioritised supporting disabled people through successive budgets. It also notes that recent estimates suggest that spending on adult disability payments will exceed block grant adjustment funding by around £200 million.

The petitioner has provided a robust response. He argues that the Scottish Government's refusal to act is purely a political decision to allow a £2,550 annual income cut to fall directly on newly disabled people. He believes that referring to potential future Department for Work and Pensions reforms in 2029-30 does not address how newly disabled people will be impacted between now and then. The petitioner considers that the Government's reference to ADP is a diversion that is irrelevant to the asks of his petition. He further argues that the Scottish Government's position that the proposals are not readily affordable do not withstand financial scrutiny and that there are double standards in policy mitigations. He believes that the petition should remain open and requests that his asks are fully implemented. Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Marie McNair: I take on board the comments that have been raised, but I would like further information. I urge the committee to keep the petition open and to write to Citizens Advice Scotland, the Child Poverty Action Group and the Glasgow Disability Alliance to seek their views.

The Convener: I am happy to do that. I realise that the issue affects a lot of people.

Julie MacDougall: I would be happy to get more information from grass-roots organisations.

The Convener: I thank the petitioner for his submission. We will see what our stakeholder groups say.

Additional Support Needs (Alternative Education) (PE2223)

The Convener: PE2223 calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to allow parents of children with additional support needs to use their local authority education funding to access alternative education, including private schools, forest schools and other alternative provision. The petition was submitted by Karmen Boyd and published on 2 July 2026. The petitioner points to the use of the model in Scandinavian countries.

The Scottish Parliament information centre's briefing sets out that it is a matter for local authorities to determine how they spend their education budget to best meet local needs. Although education provision at primary and secondary school level is normally fulfilled through local authority-run schools, local authorities can secure the provision of education through other means, such as a private special school to meet the needs of a child with complex additional support needs.

The Scottish Government's response indicates that decisions about educational placements should continue to be based on the assessed

needs of the child or young person and made within the existing framework that is established in legislation. It does not currently support the introduction of a system that would automatically transfer local authority education funding directly to parents for alternative educational provision. It recognises the importance of ensuring that the full range of educational options that are available to meet individual needs is considered where appropriate. It further highlights its commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people with additional support needs through ongoing work with local authorities, education providers, parents, carers and third sector organisations.

The petitioner's submission notes that there is no national training programme for educators on neurodiversity and disability, nor is there any form of grading and marking of how friendly a school is for additional support needs. The petitioner also points to other funding models. For example, she states that, in Denmark, 80 per cent of private schooling is paid by the Government and 20 per cent is paid by the parents. Do members have any comments?

Julie MacDougall: My view is that we should close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders, on the basis that the Scottish Government does not currently support the introduction of a system that would automatically transfer local authority education funding directly to parents for alternative educational provision. However, the issue might be something that could be picked up during the local authority reforms.

The Convener: Yes, potentially. Cara McKee, do you have another view?

Cara McKee: Forest schools and the like could be useful for children with additional support needs. However, it is unfortunately not correct to think that there is a pot of money that is allocated per child; rather, the funding is for institutions. Therefore, it is not possible to move a pot of money from the local authority to parents. As Julie MacDougall said, there should be some consideration of the issue in the public service reform programme, and I hope that local authorities will be able to make such choices. I also note that the Scottish Government has committed to developing a staged intervention model to reduce the inconsistency that has been raised. I am afraid that I agree with Julie MacDougall that we should close the petition under standing order 15.7—it is really a matter for local authorities.

The Convener: The fundamental issue is that the funding structure is not appropriate, and that structure will not be going anywhere, so I agree with the proposal to close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders. In doing so, we should write to the petitioner to say that we are

sympathetic to her concept of choice and that she could perhaps consider an alternative petition that is more about encouraging education authorities to consider the broader range of options that are available when meeting special support needs for children. That might, in due course, be a more appropriate petition.

Julie MacDougall: The funding structure could work slightly differently with the new reforms and new local authorities—we are in a process at the moment.

The Convener: Exactly. I am sure that the Education and Gaelic Committee will be looking into the issue, and there will be an opportunity for the petitioner to engage with that process. We will certainly keep an eye on that. I hope that the petitioner is listening in to the meeting and will take note.

Scottish Outdoor Access Code (PE2224)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE2224, which was lodged by Robin Pettigrew and published on 2 July 2026. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the legislation that concerns the Scottish outdoor access code in order to explicitly prohibit camping in a vehicle outside of designated camping zones and to make the provisions of the code legally enforceable by introducing dedicated enforcement teams and fines for code violations.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing on the petition explains that part 1 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 provides for a right to be “on land” or to “cross land” for recreational, educational or commercial purposes. Those rights apply equally to all non-motorised modes of travel—motorised vehicles and vessels are specifically excluded. Further guidance on that is available in the Scottish outdoor access code.

The petitioner lodged a similar petition—PE2191—in the previous session. That petition was considered by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee and was subsequently closed prior to the end of the session on the basis that legal access rights and the outdoor access code were designed to apply only to non-motorised access to land.

The Scottish Government’s written submission on the petition states that it does not intend to extend the scope of access rights legislation or to make the Scottish outdoor access code legally enforceable, because it considers that there are already a range of ways in which irresponsible behaviours, such as those that have been identified by the petitioner, can be addressed. The Government further notes that the Scottish Parliament determined that the Scottish outdoor access code should be established as a voluntary

code. In addition, the Scottish Government considers that the promotion and management of responsible access is best delivered through the existing network of local authorities, national park authorities, ranger services, land managers and enforcement agencies.

The petitioner’s submission includes statistical analysis of VisitScotland’s figures in relation to visitor numbers and types of visitors, as well as visitor spends. The petitioner states that the analysis demonstrates that the premise that increased visitor numbers equate to increased visitor spend is flawed.

The Rural Affairs Committee has agreed to undertake a short inquiry into outdoor access.

Before I come to members of the committee, I note that we are joined by our colleague David Green MSP, who has expressed a particular interest in the petition. I invite Mr Green to speak to us.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): Thank you, convener. I appreciate your having me along this morning, and I give credit to you for encouraging members to attend the Public Petitions Committee, which is something that I certainly echo.

I am grateful to my constituent, Mr Pettigrew, for lodging the petition. He has raised a number of key points, which I will touch on briefly.

First, it is important to caveat that tourism is very important for my part of the world—Caithness, Sutherland and Ross. However, the north coast 500 has exposed some serious challenges of infrastructure, roads and public toilets, which are just not up to pace. The challenges that are brought forward in the petition should be heard, particularly when it comes to the aspect of vehicle camping, which is outwith the scope of access rights and merits further attention.

I recognise that, in its evidence to the committee, the Government has said that it is for the courts to take forward any legal proceedings, but that puts a heck of a lot of onus on individuals who are trying to raise concern for the land that they are looking after. I will touch on that.

I will give the committee some context. There are schemes. The Highland Council has brought forward a motorhome pass scheme, but, by any measure, that has not been a success. You will have seen that in the evidence that was put forward to you ahead of committee. It has simply not raised the revenue required, and it has not done anything for environmental standards. Instead, it pushes motorhome users away from a lot of family-run businesses in my part of the world—in particular, campsites and caravan parks. We should be sceptical of that.

There are a number of layers to the issue and to the experience of my constituents every day. Fly-tipping is one example. In the period between 2020 and 2025, there were about 950 cases, but no prosecutions whatsoever. If anyone believes that the law is working, that is not the case.

On abandoned vehicles, within that same period, we went from 327 cases to 1,291. That was a big uptick. That puts a lot of onus on farmers, in particular, to look after their land. There have also been issues with wildfires.

I know that I am taking your time this morning, and I will try to get a bit closer to my conclusion, but we need stronger enforcement measures. There is no doubt about that. Whether those would involve the solutions that the petitioner has put forward is up for debate. I would certainly look at what resources we could provide to Police Scotland, which is already stretched.

Beyond what the Scottish Government has provided to you in evidence, I have been in correspondence with the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport, Stephen Flynn. He has put it to me that there will be a group to look at motorhomes, camper vans and the surrounding guidance and legislation, which I recognise and think is welcome.

On littering and fly-tipping, the Scottish Government intends to consult on introducing keeper liability for littering from vehicles—which, again, I welcome.

I certainly recommend that the committee keep the petition open. Given where some of the Scottish Government work is, there is, absolutely, merit to further parliamentary scrutiny. I recommend writing to the Rural Affairs Committee and the Economy, Tourism and Energy Committee to highlight those concerns in relation to their work planning and the Scottish Government evidence that they will take and scrutinise.

I also recommend writing to North Coast 500 Ltd. I was disappointed that it did not respond to the petition to provide evidence today, given that the petition overlaps directly with its work. That would be a helpful way of ensuring that the issues that have been raised by the petitioner are heard directly.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Green. You have raised important points on behalf of your constituent, the petitioner. I invite members of the committee to express any views.

Julie MacDougall: I am in agreement with the member in what he has said: we should keep the petition open. It is a huge issue. My colleague Helen McDade and I had a meeting up in the Trossachs, and we heard the difficulties and

challenges that are experienced. It happens everywhere.

As David Green mentioned, the problem that we have is of enforcement. How do we enforce? Everyone is already stretched. However, I agree that we still need to continue to look at it and not be defeated. I certainly agree that we should pass it to the Rural Affairs Committee in continuing to scrutinise it.

The Convener: In light of what David Green and Julie MacDougall have said, I think that it is important to keep the petition open and refer it to another committee. I understand that the Rural Affairs Committee is considering an inquiry into outdoor access. The petition seems timely in light of that work. Perhaps it would most appropriately sit with that committee in the first instance, although we note some of the proposed actions.

If members are in agreement, we will refer the petition to the Rural Affairs Committee, noting some of the suggested actions in correspondence, and see how that committee progresses with it. If the petitioner is not satisfied that that committee has made enough headway with the petition, they will be entitled in due course to seek that it be referred back to us. That would be a good move.

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I appreciate your taking the time to come to the committee today, David. Thank you very much.

Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood Education (PE2225)

10:30

The Convener: Our next petition is PE2225, from Mandy McGurk, which was published on 2 July. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to commission an urgent, independent safeguarding review of relationships, sexual health and parenthood education in Scottish schools, and to introduce a temporary suspension of delivery of RSHP education while that review is carried out.

The petition suggests that the review should examine whether RSHP content is consistently age appropriate and suitable for children's developmental stages across all year groups. The SPICe briefing on the petition notes that the content of the curriculum and the way in which the curriculum is taught are largely a matter for teachers and schools. It also notes, however, that there is statutory guidance on RSHP education, and that Scottish Government-funded resources are available to teachers, and that Education Scotland is undertaking a wider review of the curriculum for excellence.

The Scottish Government does not consider that there is a case for an independent review of safeguarding in respect of RSHP education. In its written submission, it notes that updated guidance on RSHP education was published in February this year and will be kept under review.

The petitioner's submission argues that statutory guidance does not by itself demonstrate that the policy is safe in practice, consistently implemented, or that adults delivering sensitive material are adequately trained. It further states that an independent review would examine policy, implementation, training materials, safeguarding procedures, complaints, children's experiences and evidence of safety or harm.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Cara McKee: In 2016, the Education and Skills Committee conducted an inquiry into the state of personal and social education in schools, which found that consent was not being addressed. That led to recommendations that were accepted by the Government, leading to a revision of the guidance on sex and relationships education. However, that revised guidance has gone through hurdles and was put in place only earlier this year, so it has hardly had time to bed in yet. We need to ensure that it is being implemented.

There is plenty of evidence from organisations such as Zero Tolerance that there are a lot of pupils, particularly boys, in our schools who do not have a proper understanding of issues around consent. It would be useful to get some input from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, for example, on whether the guidance is working. However, I think that we are at too early a stage to ask anyone to do more than that.

The Convener: Do members have other views?

Marie McNair: I agree with that recommendation. It would also be useful to hear from the Educational Institute of Scotland and other teaching unions, as well as Connect, which was formerly known as the Scottish Parent Teacher Council.

Julie MacDougall: I agree. It is important that we review and understand the situation, so we should write to the various people who deal with the issues in a day-to-day manner, so we can get their views on how things are going and how the system can be improved.

The Convener: I note Cara McKee's point that it is still early days. It will not do any harm to get an initial understanding of people's thinking about the current situation. We will take proposed action regarding correspondence and see where we end up when we receive responses.

Business Improvement District Levies (PE2226)

Business Improvement District Ballots (PE2227)

The Convener: We now come to two petitions related to business improvement districts, submitted by Daphne Hamilton on behalf of the Unfair Nae Mair campaign group, which comprises business owners in Alloa town centre. Both petitions were published on 16 July.

The first petition is PE2226, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to change the regulations for business improvement districts so that BID levies are required to range from 1 per cent to 2 per cent of the relevant non-domestic rate, with a maximum levy of 4 per cent. In addition, the petition calls for the agreed percentage levy to be applied equally to all liable properties. The petitioners believe that this would help to ensure that BID levies are not arbitrary but are proportionate and consistent, and would prevent smaller businesses from being unfairly burdened by flat-rate, capped or banded levy systems.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing explains that a business improvement district is a formal partnership of businesses and other organisations that work together to improve a defined area, often a town centre or a shopping area within a city. Businesses in a BID are required to pay a levy that meets the costs of delivering BID services. It is up to the BID to decide how much businesses will pay, with details set out in the proposed business plan that is voted on before a BID is fully established.

The Scottish Government's submission on the petition states that the petition's asks would not be achievable in the medium term, as they would require amendments to existing legislation. It notes that legal advice would be required to determine how quickly the relevant changes could be made. In addition, cost and resource implications would have to be factored in.

It further notes that Scotland's Towns Partnership convened a strategic group on BID operational effectiveness in early 2026. The group was expected to submit a report with its recommendations to Scottish ministers in late summer or early autumn.

The petitioner's submission sets out that fairness should be designed into the levy before it is imposed, rather than left to individual businesses to prove unfairness afterwards. The petitioner states that a transparent percentage-based framework would provide certainty from the outset and reduce the scope for retrospective disputes. The petitioner also sets out a number of

questions in their submission, which are included in annex C of the clerk's note on the petition.

Before we come to members of the committee to discuss the petition, I again welcome Helen McDade MSP to the committee. I need to get you a season ticket. I invite you to make representations on the petition.

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Thank you very much. I appreciate it. I promise not to turn up every time you have a meeting.

The Convener: Please do. *[Laughter.]*

Helen McDade: The Public Petitions Committee presents members of the public with a great opportunity to raise issues, and I welcome the opportunity to speak to this petition. As a Mid Scotland and Fife MSP, I have met the petitioner, Daphne Hamilton, who is one of the Unfair Nae Mair group, along with Julie MacDougall, who I am sure is about to speak to the petition. I have a few specific points to make. I also apologise for the fact that I have to get up and run afterwards, as I am late for a meeting.

If we consider the state of businesses on the high street, it is a major concern that some businesses are being charged a non-discretionary rate, which can be very high relative to their turnover. I support the point about raising a cap of 4 per cent. An individual business cannot say, "I'm not paying this. I don't think I am getting anything out of it". It is a burden on them. The fact that it varies so much across Scotland, including in Alloa, is one of the most important points.

I also have a concern about BID levies where businesses, or the owners of premises, are liable even if the shop is empty. We have a situation in which businesses might have ceased trading as a result of the current circumstances, but they are still liable to pay the levy. That could cause real harm. That is not reasonable. There is a rates exemption on empty properties for six months, so this issue is separate from that.

I agree with the point that ballot holders' names should not be disclosed during a ballot. That would not happen in any other ballot. I appreciate that that I am speaking to the other petition, PE2227. I simply want to make the point that that is not reasonable. I support those points.

As to the point in the Scottish Government's letter, the Government has lawyers, so seeking legal advice is not that difficult for it. On the issue of cost and resource, that is a matter for individual BID committees. That is a different matter to the points in the petition.

Thank you for hearing my representations on that. I am sorry that I cannot stay for the discussion.

The Convener: I appreciate your taking the time to make representations. Good luck with your next meeting.

Those comments related to PE2226 and PE2227, which is the one on ballot issues in relation to BIDs that we will hear about shortly. Do members have views, particularly on PE2226 on levies?

Julie MacDougall: I have met businesses, including Daphne Hamilton's, in Alloa. In my opinion, the levies need to be more transparent, more proportionate and fairer for local businesses. There need to be changes to the levy structure and to the maximum percentage that is applied.

I am aware that a number of BIDs have fallen in other local authority areas. They have run for maybe a five-year term, then gone. Obviously, something is not working, so we need to be looking into it.

Then there are struggling small businesses. We know how difficult things are for businesses at the moment. Some new business start-ups are not aware of the BID levy.

There is a lot to be looked at in the petition. I fully support what the business has raised in the petition, and I believe that we should keep it open and refer it to the appropriate person—whether that is the minister or, as has been written, the Scotland's Towns Partnership.

The Convener: Yes, as it has a project that is due to report imminently.

Julie MacDougall: It would be helpful to get the report then take it from there, to understand more about this system.

The Convener: Okay, that sounds good.

Marie McNair: I, too, am interested in the issue—*[Inaudible.]*—my area. It is about the sustainability of BIDs within the area, so I would like to hear information back on that as well.

Cara McKee: It would be useful to keep it open and to write to the Scotland's Towns Partnership to seek an update on the work of the strategic group on BID operational effectiveness.

The Convener: I agree. That is entirely reasonable. The issues that have been raised are important. Until you get into the practice of a BID, it is hard to understand some of the flaws. Being able to test and adjust is an important part of legislation, even if that takes a bit of time and effort.

What has been suggested by the petitioner is entirely reasonable. I thank the petitioner for attending today in the public gallery, which is appreciated.

We will note those actions.

We roll straight into related petition PE2227, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to amend the business improvement district ballot regulations to require BID ballot holders to prohibit the disclosure of interim ballot data before the official declaration of the result. The petitioners clarify that "interim ballot data" means turnout figures, information on who has voted, the rateable value of returned votes or any other information that is generated during the conduct of or counting of the ballot. The petitioners note that that should not prevent the lawful supply of information for canvassing purposes under regulation 13 of the Business Improvement Districts (Scotland) Regulations 2007.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing for the petition notes that a vote needs to take place before a BID is formally established. It refers to schedule 2 of the Business Improvement District (Scotland) Regulations 2007, which sets out how BID ballots should operate, including the stipulation that

"Every person attending the proceedings in connection with the issue or the receipt of ballot papers shall maintain, and aid in maintaining, the secrecy of the voting and shall not attempt to ascertain at the proceedings in connection with the receipt of the ballot papers the way in which any vote is given in any particular ballot paper, or communicate any information with respect to that obtained at those proceedings."

As was the case with the previous petition, the Scottish Government states that the petition's asks would not be achievable in the medium term, as that would require amendments to existing legislation. It notes in its written submission that legal, cost and resource implications would have to be factored in. It also notes the existence of the strategic group on BID operational effectiveness, which was convened by Scotland's Towns Partnership earlier this year.

The petitioner's view is that allowing access to information showing who has voted in a BID renewal ballot and the rateable value that is represented by the votes that have been cast can enable BID proposers to identify businesses that have not yet voted, and target their efforts accordingly, including by focusing attention on high-rateable-value properties whose votes can materially affect the outcome. The petitioner argues that that risks undermining the principle of a secret and independent ballot.

We have heard comments on this petition from our colleague Helen McDade MSP, in her initial

comments, and I now invite members of the committee to make any comments.

Cara McKee: It would be useful to keep the petition open, and I would like to find out more from the Scotland's Towns Partnership, to see what its views are on the proposal and to get an update on the work of the strategic group on BID operational effectiveness.

10:45

Julie MacDougall: I agree with that. I do not know how this works, but can we join the petitions and ask for a review of the issues they both raise.

The Convener: Yes, we can group them, and we can have them all tied up in one set of correspondence.

Julie MacDougall: I would just say that there is a level at which certain smaller businesses are not benefitting. If there are going to be BIDs, it would be good to have a report given to those businesses to update them on what has been done that year and the income that has been received from the BIDs. Having spoken to businesses, I think that more clarity is needed. It is not a clear process in certain areas. I hope that it is possible to make that point in relation to the petitions.

The Convener: Yes, it relates to the accountability issue. It is an important point.

Marie McNair: I am in agreement with that.

The Convener: The points that have been highlighted are entirely reasonable and worth further investigation. Certainly, from my own interactions with business improvement districts, I know that there have been teething issues in relation to how they operate and a sense of unfairness in some quarters, so it is reasonable to look into the detail of how they are governed. We will undertake that correspondence. I thank the petitioner for taking the time to attend.

Community Fairs and Gala Days (PE2228)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE2228, which was submitted by Ewan Irvine and published on 16 July. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the increasing licensing, regulatory and financial burdens that are placed on volunteer-run community fairs and gala days across Scotland. The SPICe briefing on the petition states that community events and gala days can require a range of licences depending on the nature of the activities provided. Those potentially include public entertainment licences, street trading licences and food-related licences. It is for the local authority, as the licensing authority, to determine whether to licence the various activities.

That is reiterated by the Scottish Government's written submission on the petition, which states that licensing authorities have wide discretion to determine the appropriate licensing arrangements according to local needs and circumstances and their own legal advice. The Scottish Government, therefore, does not consider it appropriate to interfere in any specific issues relating to locally made licensing decisions.

The Scottish Government's response further notes that it has convened a task force on civic licensing to review a range of existing licensing provisions in the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982 and that it will publish a report in due course.

The petitioner's submission draws the committee's attention to section 40(2)(a) of the 1982 act, which specifically exempts certain functions held by charitable, religious, youth, recreational, community, political or similar organisations from the requirement to hold a market operator's licence. The petitioner states that there is difficulty in understanding how that provision applies to a modern community fair or gala day. More generally, the petitioner explains that where materially different interpretations of national legislation exist in different authorities, that creates uncertainty for volunteers organising essentially similar community events in different local authorities in different parts of Scotland.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Marie McNair: I know that this is an issue in my constituency. We want to encourage community spirit, so we should encourage folk to put their gala days together, and we must remove any unnecessary bureaucracy. Convener, you referred to a task force on civic licensing; I would be keen to know whether it has considered the issues that are raised in the petition, whether it consulted community groups as part of its work and whether it will publish its recommendations. I know that there is discretion within different local authorities, so it would be good to hear from COSLA on that as well.

Julie MacDougall: I support that. As has been said, we all attend local galas, and we know the pressures that they are under at the moment—a heavy burden has been placed on them by the changes that have occurred. I fully support the suggestion that we write to COSLA and seek its view on the issue, and on how we can assist and support local organisations.

Cara McKee: I agree with those suggestions. I think it is really important that we get out of people's way so that they can get on with making their communities better.

The Convener: That is a really important point. When we think of the amount of effort and energy that goes into some of these things, with people often doing them in their free time only to be stymied in a spider's web of bureaucracy, we can see just how debilitating it can be. More than once, I have heard people say, "I'm not doing this again." It is not nice to see people who are trying to do the right thing feeling exhausted by the effort.

I certainly think that a check is needed here, and risk-averse local authorities might need encouragement to be more facilitative of these kinds of events. Therefore, I think that the proposals are reasonable.

I know that Mr Torrance is unable to be here, but I also wonder whether the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain might have a view on this petition, too. Should we write and see whether it does?

Julie MacDougall: I support that suggestion, convener. Being in Burntisland, I am in touch with a number of people in that area; we have the shows there regularly, and I know the difficulties that they have experienced. It would be helpful to have the guild's views, too.

The Convener: Great. We will note that, too. I thank the petitioner.

Childcare (PE2229)

The Convener: The next petition is PE2229, on making childcare choice a right in Scotland, which was submitted by Hannah Murison on behalf of the National Day Nurseries Association and published on 16 July. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to make funded early learning and childcare on a cross-local authority basis a legal right across Scotland so that families are not prevented from obtaining appropriate childcare as a result of arbitrary council boundaries. It also calls for national action to prevent cost-cutting measures from restricting parental choice and disrupting children's care and development.

The SPICe briefing on the petition explains that local authorities have a duty to secure the provision of 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare for eligible children who reside in their area. The briefing goes on to state that, under the Scottish Government's approach that the funding follows the child, local authorities are expected to facilitate that sort of choice and flexibility, and the statutory guidance on the delivery of funded early years care states that local authorities' admission policy should include arrangements for cross-boundary placements.

The Scottish Government's submission on the petition states that creating a legal duty to provide services on a cross-boundary basis would be a challenging and lengthy process, given that the

statutory duties in respect of early learning and childcare, and school education generally, are currently held by education authorities towards their residents. It notes, however, that ministers have committed to exploring cross-boundary provision with COSLA within the context of wider reform, and highlights the Scottish Government's ambition to expand the wider childcare offer during this parliamentary session.

The petitioner's submission notes that children in some parts of Scotland continue to have access to funded places in the setting that best meets their needs, while others are denied that opportunity. It also notes that parents who have selected a nursery because of location, continuity of care, sibling arrangement, specialist support, transport links or proximity to work can find that choice removed through local policy decisions over which they have no control. The petitioner also states that making cross-local authority access to funded childcare a legal right would protect parental choice, support children's continuity of care and contribute to wider employment and anti-poverty objectives.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Julie MacDougall: This is an important issue. I propose that we keep the petition open and write to COSLA, Connect and the centre for public policy at the University of Glasgow for some information.

The Convener: I think that is reasonable.

Cara McKee: This is a very important petition. We need to recognise that childcare is not the same as schooling; parents often need to be very close to their very young children, particularly if they want to maintain breastfeeding or maximise their time with them. It would be really useful to move this forward.

I note the Scottish Government's commitment to exploring cross-boundary provision with COSLA as well as the context of wider reform, so it would be useful to write to the Scottish Government to request that the issues raised in the petition be considered as part of the reform process.

The Convener: Thank you. Marie McNair, do you have anything to add?

Marie McNair: I agree with both colleagues' suggestions.

The Convener: So, we have a set of actions that involve writing to the Scottish Government, COSLA, Connect and the centre for public policy at the University of Glasgow.

In the light of my casework, I do think that this is an issue, particularly where there are awkward local authority boundaries—I am thinking of the boundary between Glasgow and East

Dunbartonshire and potentially between West Dunbartonshire and Glasgow. There are areas where the geography is very tight and can produce bizarre situations, so I think that this will be a useful thing to do.

I thank the petitioner.

Neurodevelopmental Assessments (PE2230)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE2230, which was lodged by Stephanie and Dale McDowell and published on 16 July. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to establish a national six-month maximum waiting time for neurodevelopmental assessments for children who display significant behaviours or emotions that raise concerns, including in relation to safety, in order to ensure that families can access timely assessment, support and intervention.

The SPICe briefing references an inquiry that was conducted in session 6 by the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee into attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism pathways and support. Analysis that was carried out by SPICe in 2025 in relation to that inquiry found that waiting times for children who seek a neurodevelopmental assessment ranged from between 22 and 141 weeks, with a median waiting time of 76 weeks.

The Scottish Government's submission on the petition states that it recognises concerns about long waits for neurodevelopmental diagnostic assessment and support. However, it sets out that it has no current plans to introduce a national six-month waiting time standard for neurodevelopmental diagnostic assessment. The response also highlights actions that are being taken by the Scottish Government to improve neurodevelopmental support for children and young people, including the establishment of a cross-sector taskforce to support the delivery of the national neurodevelopmental specification for children and young people.

The petitioner's submission raises the issue of what happens when a child displays significant risk behaviours and must wait several years before receiving an assessment. The petitioner highlights the practical consequences of receiving a diagnosis—for example, to allow the person involved to access appropriate medication. The petitioner states that there needs to be an immediate safeguard for children whose behaviour, emotional wellbeing or safety indicate significant risk.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Cara McKee: As an adult who is resident in Ayrshire and Arran, I have not bothered asking for

an assessment because I know that they are not doing them for adults. Waiting times are too long for young people, and Ayrshire and Arran has among the longest waiting times.

Parents need to fight for their kids to get the help that they need in schools. The schools recognise that many neurodivergent young people will be undiagnosed and they aim to be helpful, but they have a lack of guidance and resources to provide the support that those young people need.

The petition's request is not an unreasonable ask; childhood is not long, and the time that is spent waiting matters a huge amount. Although I recognise that the issue will take effort to address, and that many things are in train, I would like to see an update on how the Government has worked with children, parents, schools and medical professionals to significantly reduce waiting times.

Therefore, I would like to keep the petition open and write to the Scottish Government to ask what steps it is taking to reduce waiting times and whether it has considered creating a risk-based pathway, particularly for children who display significant risk behaviours. We should also ask for an update on the interim report of the cross-sector task force that was established to support the delivery of the national neurodevelopmental specification for children and young people. I would also like us to write to relevant organisations such as the Donaldson Trust, the National Autistic Society Scotland, Scottish Autism and the national autism implementation team to get their views on the petition.

Marie McNair: I agree with that. We should also write to the Royal College of Psychiatrists and to both the relevant committees—the Health, Care and Sport Committee and the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee.

The Convener: Yes, that makes sense.

Julie MacDougall: I echo what both my colleagues said. I 100 per cent support that.

The Convener: Should we write to the relevant committees to see whether they are doing any work on the issue?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That will ensure that we do not duplicate any work. I think that there is significant interest in this. It might also be something to note as a potential topic for a committee debate in due course.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (Neurodevelopmental Services) (PE2231)

11:00

The Convener: Our next petition is PE2231, lodged by Mhari Douglas, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide targeted funding for child and adolescent mental health service neurodevelopmental services in order for additional staff to be recruited and trained. The petition also calls for transparent waiting time data to be published and for maximum waiting time standards for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism assessments to be introduced so that no child is left waiting years for support.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing notes that data on waiting times specifically for neurodevelopmental condition assessments is not held by the Scottish Government. It adds that there is no published national figure for the number of staff who are employed in Scotland's neurodevelopmental pathways. Further to that, the briefing states that it is difficult to identify how much funding is specifically allocated to such services because much of the support is multidisciplinary and comes from universal services.

The Scottish Government's submission on the petition states that it does not plan to introduce national waiting time standards for ADHD or autism diagnostic assessment, or to establish ring-fenced funding specifically for diagnostic services. The response highlights actions that the Government is taking to improve outcomes for neurodivergent children and young people such as funding the national autism implementation team and the establishment of a children and young people's neurodevelopment task force.

The petitioner's submission seeks clarification on how neurodevelopmental services waiting times will be measured, what level of waiting is considered to be unacceptable, who is responsible for ensuring support while children wait and how the Government will ensure that children receive timely treatment.

We received an indication of interest in this petition from Kim Schmulian MSP, but she is unfortunately unable to join us this morning. We will correspond with her in writing if she has any views on the petition and can consider those in due course.

Do any members have any comments or suggestions for actions?

Julie MacDougall: Similar to what we mentioned in response to PE2230, we should write

to the various stakeholders, including the Health, Care and Sport Committee and the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, in order to get more information, because a more joined-up approach is needed.

The Convener: That assessment is fair.

Cara McKee: I agree with that. It overlaps a lot with PE2230. It makes sense to write to the relevant organisations, such as the national autism implementation team, Stronger Together for Autism and Neurodivergence and Scottish Autism. It would also be useful to get some information from the Scottish Government on whether it will consider gathering and publishing data on waiting times for CAMHS assessments, and whether neurodivergence assessments should take place in CAMHS or in other frameworks.

Marie McNair: I agree. It is a huge issue across Scotland. I know from my inbox that constituents have raised the issue, and it has been raised in the Parliament.

The Convener: There is strong overlap between petitions PE2230 and PE2231, so grouping them in the correspondence makes sense. Generally, if we are progressing this issue as a committee, we should liaise with the committees that Julie MacDougall mentioned. We have noted the particular stakeholders to correspond with, along with the Government, and we will wait to see their responses. I think that, if it is to be a debate topic in due course, there will be strong interest from members across the Parliament.

Those are a good set of actions. I thank the committee members, colleagues who are in the public gallery and the clerks for all the work that they do. That concludes today's meeting.

Meeting closed at 11:04.

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