



Official Report
Aithisg Oifigeil

DRAFT

Transport Committee

Comataidh na Còmhhdhail

Wednesday 28 October 2026

Session 7



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

9th Meeting 2026, Session 7

CONVENER

*Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- *Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green)
- *Zen Ghani (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
- *Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
- *Graham Simpson (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
- *Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Allison Cosgrove (Railfuture Scotland)
John Gurr (Rest and Be Thankful campaign group)
John Hamilton (Winchburgh Developments Ltd)
Jordan Jack (Campaign for North East Rail)
Paul Morgan (Pothole Partnership)
Nigel Mullan (Newburgh Train Campaign)
Shan Saba (Moray Chamber of Commerce)
Jamie Shovelin (Dumfries and Galloway Chamber of Commerce)
Alastair Smith (West Highland Chamber of Commerce)
Tom Thorburn (Rail Action Group East of Scotland)

LOCATION

The Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament

Transport Committee

Wednesday 28 October 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:16]

Pre-budget Scrutiny 2027-28

The Convener (Willie Rennie): Good morning and welcome to the ninth meeting of the Transport Committee in 2026. We have received no apologies this morning. Our first item of business this morning is the committee's first pre-budget scrutiny evidence session. The committee has agreed to focus this work on road and rail developments.

We have two panels of an hour and a half each, so we have a lot to cram in this morning. I am grateful that we have expert witnesses from campaign groups and national organisations. We have John Gurr, who is the chair of the Rest and Be Thankful campaign group, Paul Morgan, who is government relations executive at the British Motorcyclists Federation, representing the pothole partnership, and Shan Saba, who is the director of the Moray Chamber of Commerce. We also have Jamie Shovelin, who is not quite with us yet—he is just coming through security—who is manager of Dumfries and Galloway Chamber of Commerce, and Alastair Smith, who is president of the West Highland Chamber of Commerce.

We will give witnesses a couple of minutes each. Please try to keep to that couple of minutes to set out your case, or your elevator pitch, before we move on to questions. We start with John Gurr.

John Gurr (Rest and Be Thankful Campaign Group): I represent the Rest and Be Thankful campaign group. *[Interruption.]*

The Convener: I welcome Jamie Shovelin to the meeting.

Sorry, John—start again.

You may have heard of the Rest and Be Thankful, but I am here because the A83 is the main road that serves Oban and the isles, Campbeltown and Kintyre, Islay, Tobermory, Inveraray, Lochgilphead, Dunoon and many other communities in Argyll. The reality of our working lives, and our personal lives, such as when we need to go to hospital, has been 20 years of disruption from landslides, closures and roadworks. It has cost the Government £82 million over the past 10 years to keep that road open, and we still do not have a two-way road that stays open when it rains.

Transport Scotland has proposed a solution that will close the main road for four years, but it remains unfunded. Transport Scotland's proposals to fix this problem and the continuing road closures have been identified by our communities, businesses and elected representatives as being economically and socially catastrophic for Argyll. Transport Scotland has ignored our collective views, has not assessed the economic impact of the proposals and is ignoring the in-plain-sight solution that uses an existing forestry road that could easily provide a two-way solution and access into Argyll on Government-owned land.

We are asking to keep an existing road open while a new road is built on the opposite side of the glen. We are looking for your support to deliver a two-way road during this parliamentary session that stays open when it rains. Unlike previous cabinet secretaries, the incoming minister inherits a project that needs a delivery decision rather than a feasibility decision. Parliamentary scrutiny could help to finally secure a resilient long-term solution for this strategically important transport corridor.

Paul Morgan (Pothole Partnership): Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to give evidence. I am government relations executive at the British Motorcyclists Federation, but I appear today on behalf of the pothole partnership, which is a campaign partnership that brings together the Automobile Association, JCB, British Cycling and the National Motorcyclists Council. We represent different interests but share a common objective, which is to secure better-maintained roads, improve safety for all road users and ensure that public money delivers lasting results. Our central message is that Scotland needs to move away from its predominantly reactive approach to pothole repairs and road maintenance towards properly funded and planned preventative maintenance, and quality-assured and durable repairs. That is recognised in the research briefing that was provided for the committee today.

The scale of the challenge is significant. Scotland has more than 57,000km of public roads, and the latest published statistics indicate that around 35 per cent of the local authority road network may require some form of maintenance; meanwhile, the estimated maintenance backlog across the trunk road network has grown from £1.2 billion in 2015 to £3.1 billion in 2025. That is a significant maintenance challenge across an extensive network, which needs a prioritised programme of planned maintenance.

Emergency repairs will always be necessary, but repeatedly filling potholes is not a substitute for maintaining roads before they deteriorate. The pothole partnership advocates a shift towards preventative maintenance rather than simply reacting to potholes once formed. Poor road

surfaces can damage vehicles and create serious hazards, particularly for motorcyclists and cyclists: hitting a pothole will not just damage their vehicles but could lead to serious injury, or worse. Vulnerable road users, when they encounter a pothole unexpectedly, are at significant risk.

Scotland's road safety framework to 2030 sets a target to reduce fatalities and serious injuries by 50 per cent. Good road maintenance is part of that road safety target, so we are asking the Scottish Government to make road maintenance a clear priority in the budget, establish a properly costed five-year maintenance plan and measure success by improvements in road condition and the durability of repairs. That would provide better value for the taxpayer; it would be better for businesses and communities; and it would improve safety for everyone who uses Scotland's roads.

Roads authorities need predictable funding to plan their maintenance over several years. Roads are among Scotland's most important public assets. They affect safety, as I have said, as well as businesses, tourism and—given the cost of repairs—household finances, and they provide access to work and study. Maintaining them properly should be a core commitment of the Government.

Shan Saba (Moray Chamber of Commerce):

Thanks, Paul. I am a cyclist, so that really hit a note.

I am a director at the Moray Chamber of Commerce, which represents businesses of all sizes from small local enterprises to major employers in all sectors, especially food and drink, hospitality, tourism, manufacturing, logistics, energy and defence. The message that we hear consistently from our members is that transport infrastructure is not simply a transport issue but an economic issue. Reliable infrastructure underpins investment in the area, productivity, recruitment, supply chains and business growth.

For Moray, the A96 remains the single most important transport project. Businesses, communities and investors have lived for many years with uncertainty over what is happening with that route. Although our members recognise the significant pressures on public finances, they also need confidence that strategic commitments will be met, with a clear and credible timetable for progress. That has not been shown.

Alongside major projects, we recognise the importance of maintaining existing infrastructure. Businesses depend on roads that are safe, reliable and resilient. Delays, closures and deteriorating road conditions all have economic consequences, particularly in rural areas where there are no

alternative routes and transport options are hugely limited.

We also support investment in rail and wider transport connectivity where there is a strong business and economic case. In Moray and the wider north-east, improving connectivity between communities, labour markets and investment centres is critical to the long-term prosperity of the area.

Ultimately, our members are seeking a transport network that supports economic growth, attracts investment, improves resilience and allows businesses across the region to compete effectively.

Businesses can adapt to challenge, but they need certainty, and clarity around future transport investment is essential for maintaining confidence and supporting the growth of the Moray area.

Alastair Smith (West Highland Chamber of Commerce): Good morning. I am the president of the West Highland Chamber of Commerce, representing the A82 today. Our message is straightforward: the A82 and congestion through Fort William constrain our businesses, affect our daily life and limit the economic contribution that our region can make to Scotland. The route serves major employers in timber, aquaculture, transport and tourism. For them, unpredictable journeys mean lost productive time, disrupted deliveries and difficulty getting staff to work. For residents, they affect access to appointments and essential services.

We have two connected priorities: upgrading the A82 between Tarbet and Inverarnan—which, in my opinion, is the worst bit of road in Scotland—and delivering a strategic solution to the congestion and lack of resilience through Fort William in particular. If there is any incident on the A82 from Belford hospital to the A830, for those who are familiar with the area, the town grinds to a standstill, sometimes for several hours. In fact, that has been happening this morning, for a simple pothole repair. We have several businesses that are not yet open this morning because we cannot get our guys to work. That is a fairly regular occurrence.

The West Highland chamber supports a bypass or alternative strategic route that separates through traffic from local journeys in Fort William, alongside practical improvements to public transport, walking and cycling if possible.

We want to plan for future demand. The proposed Belford hospital at Blar Mhor makes reliable access essential. If the Coire Glas pumped storage scheme proceeds, it will bring nationally significant investment with transport requirements that need co-ordinated planning.

We welcome and look forward to the work on Fort William's integrated transport plan. Our concern is to ensure that its recommendations lead to funded support.

Our ask is for the 2027-28 budget to fund deliverable early improvements and the next stages of the strategic solution, with clear responsibilities, milestones and reporting. Our member businesses feel that they need a realistic programme that they can plan around. We ask the committee to help us secure that certainty.

The Convener: This is your turn now, Jamie.

Jamie Shovelin (Dumfries and Galloway Chamber of Commerce): Sorry about earlier—you might have thought that I was going to start singing all of a sudden there.

I am manager of Dumfries and Galloway Chamber of Commerce, and it is a privilege to be here today. On behalf of the chamber of commerce, I begin by stressing that investment in our road network is not simply a local transport issue but an issue of economic growth, business confidence, community sustainability and national connectivity. Dumfries and Galloway sits as a strategically important gateway between Scotland, Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. The A75 and A77 are critical transport arteries linking the Cairnryan ports to the motorway network. They carry hundreds of thousands of passengers and more than 400,000 freight vehicles each year. The roads are vital not only for our region but for Scotland's economy as a whole.

Businesses continue to face the same challenges year after year: unreliable journey times, limited overtaking opportunities, safety concerns and lengthy diversions when incidents occur. Research that was commissioned by the south-west Scotland transport alliance has highlighted that the A75 experiences accident rates that are significantly above the national average for comparable roads. Both routes continue to suffer from capacity and resilience issues, which hold back investment and economic opportunity.

The business community in Dumfries and Galloway welcomes the progress that is being made on the Springholm and Crocketford bypass project, but we believe that it must be part of a wider long-term programme of investment. We need certainty and a clear timetable, and we need the A75 and A77 to be recognised as national economic infrastructure, deserving of sustained investment, not just piecemeal interventions.

For businesses that are deciding where to invest, expand, recruit and grow, infrastructure matters. Modern and reliable transport links are

fundamental to competitiveness and support tourism, manufacturing, logistics, agriculture, the renewable energy sector and the many other sectors that underpin the economy of south-west Scotland.

Our message is simple: investment in roads in Dumfries and Galloway is investment in Scotland's economy. We ask the Scottish Government to work with businesses, local authorities and other partners to deliver a long-term programme that improves safety, strengthens connectivity and unlocks the economic potential of our region for generations to come.

09:30

The Convener: Thank you. Now that we have given you the opportunity to make your pitches, we want to hear about your experiences of the system. My colleagues will ask a number of thematic questions about public service reform, maintenance, communications and relationships. You can, of course, refer to your individual campaigns, but it would be helpful if you could also be a bit more strategic in your answers.

John Gurr, we are joined by two of our colleagues—Tim Eagle and Jenni Minto—who are particularly interested in the Rest and Be Thankful, and I will bring them in to ask questions on that subject at the appropriate time.

We have a lot to get through in an hour and 15 minutes, so I ask the witnesses to keep their answers short and to the point, and tell them that they do not have to answer every question. I ask colleagues to direct their questions to the particular witnesses they would like to contribute.

We will start with questions from Donald MacKinnon.

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I thank the witnesses for their introductory comments.

I would like to explore how you develop relationships and engage with Transport Scotland and the Government, and I am keen to hear how that engagement compares with your engagement with other public agencies that you deal with, including local authorities and enterprise agencies. Do you feel listened to? How have those relationships changed over time? My questions are about engagement and relationship building.

I ask Jamie Shovelin to answer first, please.

Jamie Shovelin: We work well with lots of agencies and the local council. We have great relationships with South of Scotland Enterprise, which does a lot of great work across the south of Scotland; Dumfries and Galloway Council, which we work with very well; and lots of other

organisations, including South of Scotland Destination Alliance, with which we have great conversations about tourism in our region.

I do not have direct conversations with Transport Scotland. Most of our engagement with it takes place when we are involved with and get information from the south-west Scotland transport alliance in relation to road improvements and so on. That connection would be better if it was a bit more direct. We feel that Transport Scotland is more focused on the central belt, so we would like to have conversations with it regarding the south of Scotland more often than we do at the moment.

Donald MacKinnon: It sounds as though the conversations take place on an ad hoc basis. Do you know who you should be speaking to in Transport Scotland? Do you have named contacts?

Jamie Shovelin: Yes. I cannot remember the person's name off the top of my head, but, through the alliance, we have a direct contact in Transport Scotland for emails and other communication. However, Dumfries and Galloway Chamber of Commerce gets updates on anything that is happening in our region from the council rather than directly from Transport Scotland.

Donald MacKinnon: I put the same question to Alastair Smith.

Alastair Smith: West Highland Chamber of Commerce has a very good relationship and very good contact with Transport Scotland via our chief executive and office manager—our team based in Fort William has fairly regular contact with Transport Scotland officers. We do not always agree during those discussions, but communication is not a problem. In fact, we recently hosted in Fort William a round-table meeting with Stephen Flynn and numerous members of the Transport Scotland team, and we had a constructive conversation. One of the premium members of our chamber, who has diligently taken notes of meetings with various cabinet secretaries over the past seven years, explained that we were no further forward on key projects, but that will be echoed across most areas.

Our relationships and communications are very good. We have our campaign for what we would like to see, and the channels of communication are certainly open.

Donald MacKinnon: You mentioned that you have dealt with various cabinet secretaries over seven years. Has that relationship changed over time? Has the chamber had to work at developing that?

Alastair Smith: We work hard at that relationship, but there are no complaints about

resistance. We have had good engagement. I think that we have probably had better engagement than some, but that is because we have put in the effort. We are constantly looking for partnership and solutions, as opposed to raising banners.

Donald MacKinnon: What about engagement with other public agencies?

Alastair Smith: It is very good. Our expanded chamber in West Highland now covers central Oban as well, and we have a really good relationship with Argyll and Bute Council and Highland Council. There is a lot of debate around those relationships, but there are no complaints about the communication. It is open.

Donald MacKinnon: Thank you, Alastair. Shan Saba, would you like to comment?

Shan Saba: I do not think that there are any issues at all with regard to the communication; the issue is the message. I have come here with a Moray hat on, but, with regard to the dualling of the A96, I note that that road stretches from Aberdeen to Inverness, and the issue of the connectivity with the A9 and the A82 is part of the same discussion, which has been going on since 2011. There is no timescale for that commitment. That is the problem, and that has represented a fiscal constraint.

Donald MacKinnon: So, you feel that there is good engagement with Transport Scotland, but that there is an issue with delivery.

Shan Saba: It is to do with where the budget gets allocated, and the project is not being committed to by the United Kingdom Government or the Scottish Government. That is where the difficulty lies.

Donald MacKinnon: What about your relationships with other public agencies in the area, such as local authorities and enterprise agencies?

Shan Saba: I mirror what the guys beside me have said. My experience is exactly the same as theirs. There is openness to what needs to be done. The dualling of the A96 is a community-wide issue and concern that touches on issues of safety, the economy, green ports, power infrastructure and so on. Everybody is engaged with it, in all the local authority areas along that corridor.

Donald MacKinnon: So, there is wide agreement and you are all singing from the same hymn sheet.

Shan Saba: Exactly.

Donald MacKinnon: Paul Morgan, you have some experience of operating across the UK. I am

interested in your engagement with Transport Scotland. How does that compare to your engagement with the UK Government, and are there any comparisons that you would like to draw?

Paul Morgan: Our engagement with Transport Scotland and Police Scotland is excellent. The relationships are very open. We discuss issues with regard to Scotland's roads, particularly on the safety front. With regard to the road safety framework to 2030, which I mentioned, we have done a lot of work, particularly on the motorcycling front, through the motorcycle focus group, which is chaired by Transport Scotland, to try to reduce fatalities and serious injuries on Scotland's roads. That has had some real success: in the year to date, there has been a 50 per cent reduction in motorcyclist fatalities compared to last year, and that is a direct result of our co-operation and collaboration.

We have run joint information campaigns on road design and the PRIME—perceptual rider information for maximising expertise and enjoyment—road markings in Scotland, which have enabled motorcyclists to better position themselves before approaching bends. That has worked really well. We also run UK-wide information campaigns that tell people who are thinking of taking a vehicle to Scotland in the summer what things to prepare their vehicle for and what things to be aware of, and ask them to drive responsibly and safely.

As I said, we also have a good relationship with Police Scotland. It shares its figures with us, and we use those to try to understand a bit more about what is happening on the roads. There is a gap in the figures, as we cannot use them to tell whether road injuries and fatalities have been caused by the road surface or potholes, for example. That information is broadly missing. I think that the Government could consider getting first responders—the police and emergency services—to record whether there was a road element to an accident that occurred.

There are no problems at all. We have really good relationships with those bodies. We meet regularly and we engage on all of those issues, but predominantly on issues around road safety, which road conditions impact on as well.

Donald MacKinnon: John Gurr, I suspect that we might get a slightly different answer from you with regard to your relationship with Transport Scotland.

John Gurr: I do not know. We have regular contact with Transport Scotland and have a good on-the-ground working relationship with the agency.

Since 2012, there has been an A83 task force, which is a combination of local businesses, politicians, Transport Scotland and the minister working for a solution at the Rest and Be Thankful. All we are talking about is 2 miles of road. We are not talking about the whole length of Scotland, like some of the other colleagues are.

We talk. We give the Transport Scotland officials information on impacts and about the solutions that we think would be of benefit. I am not sure whether that is not being listened to or whether they have budget constraints.

They are not listening to us. For example, recently, Transport Scotland asked me where I got the impact assessment numbers that we quote as being an impact on our communities. I had to say that Jenni Minto kindly organised a series of round tables last year to understand the impact on our communities. Transport Scotland officials were sitting in the room and the same guy is asking me where I got the information from.

Donald MacKinnon: It sounds frustrating. How has that relationship evolved and changed over time? You have campaigned on the issue for some time.

John Gurr: There are times when we work together. We try to support Transport Scotland as much as possible. The officials have a job to do and, if we can help, it will benefit our community. We have worked with them over the past year to come up with options to provide a different solution that would solve our issues but we are a year down the road and still do not have a decision.

Donald MacKinnon: Do you have any observations on layers within the agency? Transport Scotland is a big organisation. I imagine that you have good engagement at some levels.

John Gurr: When there is engagement, our project team works well on a particular project to deliver information. Then the project goes into a closed huddle and out comes an outcome that we were not considering. I do not know whether there are layers above that are saying no, putting the brakes on or changing the communication so that it stops or becomes blocked.

Donald MacKinnon: Thanks for that, John. I am sure that other members of the committee will pick up on some of those points.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): I thank all the witnesses for coming. We have heard so far that there have been lots of discussions over the years and that the witnesses have good communication with Transport Scotland and other agencies but, despite all the meetings that they have had, there has been no progress in each of their areas. They all have frustrations, which they have outlined well.

I want to explore the process and why things seem to take so long. I know that the witnesses are all frustrated. I will end with John Gurr and start with Jamie Shovelin. Tell me about the experiences that you have had. You have spoken about the A75 and A77. Those campaigns have been going on for years.

Jamie Shovelin: Yes. It has been going on a lot longer—since the noughties, for the A75.

I have been involved with the chamber of commerce for just over three and a half years. To be fair, the campaign has gained some momentum in the past three and a half years. A feasibility study on bypasses for Springholm and Crockettford is now being done by Jacobs.

09:45

The frustration is that we have gone to a lot of round-table meetings with different transport ministers in the past three and a half years, most recently with Stephen Flynn at Cairnryan along with P&O Ferries, Stena Line, Transport Scotland and a load of other stakeholders. People who are involved in some voluntary campaigns, such as the A77 campaign, are frustrated. One gentleman from that campaign said that he wanted that to be his last round-table meeting because he has done so many and nothing has changed.

It has been frustrating, because there have been so many round tables and we are getting nowhere. There has been some progression in the past year or so with the feasibility study, but businesses want to see timescales. Some parts of the A75 and A77 have been done, but we need progress on other parts. One of our member businesses, TP Niven, is 100 years old, and Jim, who works for it, is over 80. However, some parts of the road have not changed since he started driving almost 70 years ago. There is frustration within the local business community. Some people just laugh because they cannot believe it is still going on and that we have been talking about it for years and nothing has happened, but there is frustration.

Things are a little steadier now with the bypass deals that I mentioned, but we are hoping for more progress on work across the whole of the A75 and A77.

Graham Simpson: What do you want to see in the budget? Realistically, what should be in the budget?

Jamie Shovelin: We want to see a commitment to the A75 and I know that colleagues sitting to my left will say exactly the same about their roads. Businesses want to see investment in our infrastructure. There is a lot of work going on with renewables projects in the south of Scotland, especially in Dumfries and Galloway. The number

of wind farm projects in the region is at an all-time high and I have never seen so many prospective projects coming through. We want to see a commitment to improvements on that road because of the amount of stuff that is happening, and could happen, in our region. We want to see a commitment to investment in the A75 and the A77 so that businesses can travel a lot more easily and have better infrastructure to use.

Graham Simpson: Alastair, you have also described going to loads of meetings that are all very friendly and cordial but do not lead to progress. You mentioned the A82 and you want to see action in Fort William. I drove through Fort William earlier this year on my way to Mallaig and I can see what you are on about, but my question is where you would put a bypass if you were to get one.

Alastair Smith: That will be in the Fort William integrated transport plan when it is published, but there is an option to have a bypass that would start just outside the town centre, near the Underwater Centre diving school, and run down in front of the village of Inverlochy. Where it would connect back to the main route is debatable, but that is a possibility.

The problem in Fort William is not a local problem because it is not local demand that causes issues on the road. That demand comes from through traffic, both commercial and tourist, and that is why we see problems peaking in the summer. The real problem is that there is just no resilience. Even in quieter times, in deepest darkest November, any problem with the road shuts us down.

To go back to your initial question, campaign fatigue is an issue. Organisations like ours all say similar things; we come from different parts of the country but we all have a similar message. I am a volunteer director of our chamber of commerce and many before me have dropped out of campaign groups because they lost patience or energy.

As others have said, we have numerous meetings and round tables and we have engagement with ministers and with Transport Scotland. Our ask is similar to that of others on today's panel: we want to see meaningful steps in the budget to help us move towards our end goal. It sometimes feels as if we are talking about a golden nugget of big numbers and a whole solution, but that gets us no further down the road—if you will excuse the pun. I would like to see some baby steps and some progress on the A82, for me in particular and for Fort William.

Also, although ministers change from time to time, we have met several different cabinet secretaries and ministers over the years. I have

been involved in that personally. Of course, the ministers are advised by officials at Transport Scotland and other agencies, and the reality is that those people do not change as often as ministers, so there should not have to be a new message every time that we get a new cabinet secretary for transport. However, that is how it feels to us: like we are starting again.

Graham Simpson: You are absolutely right. We have had quite a lot of transport ministers over the years, and you should not have to start explaining things again and again every time that there is a change.

What needs to change in the process for getting things done, to speed things up?

Alastair Smith: We have meaningful engagement, but we do not have any meaningful next actions. There is no meaningful “What’s next?” That does not have to be a bypass in Fort William; rather, it is about what is the next funded step for the exploration of a bypass in Fort William, or what is the next funded step for some simple solutions on cycling or bus. It is about what we can do to make initial improvements. We are not coming here asking for hundreds of millions of pounds, but we are asking for more progress, which we can all buy into, on the journey.

In the west Highlands, we have a hidden crisis at the moment. Although we have lots of unlocked investment, we are hearing from our members in aquaculture, timber, transport and so on that they are really struggling to justify investment in our area, because of the road network. We feel that we are on the precipice of a crisis and it is about how we start making baby steps to work with those private businesses and the public sector to start improving things and make a plan for the future.

Graham Simpson: Shan, you mentioned the A96 and you said earlier that there is no timetable. It is a bit like the other guys, is it not? It is a very similar story.

Shan Saba: It is the same story.

Graham Simpson: It is the same story.

Shan Saba: It is the same story. I do not need to say much more on top of what my colleagues have said. Engagement is fine, but accountability, ownership and a clear timescale are what are really needed for confidence. Whether you look at the situation from a business perspective or from the residents’ perspective, the problem is holding us back.

I am not speaking on behalf of everybody, but we can see the impact in the regions that are being discussed, particularly in Moray, in relation to the infrastructure investment that is going on: the business decisions that are not being made or that

are being delayed, or things that are already in process, such as the power grid that has been put in place or the free port. How does that connect up? It simply does not.

Graham Simpson: You are involved in business. If this was down to you, you would get on with it. You would have a timetable, would you not? You would set a budget.

Shan Saba: Yes, and somebody would be held accountable for it as well. Who is responsible here?

Graham Simpson: Somebody would be held accountable, and if they did not deliver, they would be given the bullet.

Shan Saba: Unfortunately, or fortunately, in the private sector, if I do not do my job, I do not have a job. It feels like a job has not been done, and there is no plan for it.

Graham Simpson: I will get to you, John, but I have a bit of a quirky question for you, Paul.

You mentioned the pothole partnership and you said that one of your members is JCB, who of course make the famous Pothole Pro, a machine that can fix potholes in eight minutes. Do you know how many of those we have in Scotland?

Paul Morgan: I do not. However, I can find out and report back to the committee. I have seen the Pothole Pro in operation and it is a really nice piece of kit, which not only repairs potholes four times faster than standard repairs, but provides a durable repair. One of the issues is that, rather than quick fixes, we need something that is a bit more durable. I was, in fact, talking to one of the committee witnesses before we came in today about travelling down by car and avoiding the potholes on some of the roads, because of the potential damage to the car. There is JCB and the Pothole Pro, and there are other organisations who are coming up with new innovative ways.

That is something to be considered: when you set a budget and make a plan, you need to look at innovation, too. After all, there are new approaches out there—things that the Europeans are doing, for example—that we might be able to look at. In any case, innovation should be part of all of this so that we can try to bring down costs and look at things in a different way.

Graham Simpson: And, ultimately, that will save money.

Paul Morgan: Yes, if we can get away from a reactive approach and have a more durable solution that involves the contractors. Indeed, the pothole partnership has recommended imposing or looking for a five-year warranty from those fixing the roads to ensure that if their repairs fail, as frequently happens at present, they will be fixed by

the contractor free of charge. You might say, “Well, that’s going to drive up the overall costs”, but the actual real cost of pothole repairs includes not just the initial cost but the cost of revisiting the repair, because it has disintegrated several weeks or months later. If there were a warranty, and contractors were held to account, things could be monitored much more closely, particularly by the local authorities who I think control 93 per cent of the road network in Scotland, and the bad contractors could be driven out. You would have much more visibility of the situation, and you would get rid of those contractors and be able to work with others who will actually provide a warranty and want to do a good job.

Graham Simpson: I think that that is a brilliant idea.

Right, John—the taskforce was set up in 2012, but we still do not have a solution. Nobody seems to want what is on the table; certainly none of the elected representatives, who we will be hearing from in a minute, seem to. How have we got to this stage? It all sounds a bit daft. We are looking at four years of closure and chaos, but you have a proposal on the table to use a forestry road to keep things open and get a two-way solution. Why are we not at that point?

John Gurr: That is a very good question—I do not know. What I can say, though, is that the solutions that Transport Scotland analysed recently, from 2021 to 2023, were the same as those put forward in 2012. At that time, the solution costs were somewhere between £10 million and £50 million, depending on which one was picked; the £50 million solution was to put a tunnel through the Rest and Be Thankful, which would have taken all of the landslide risk away. Instead, it was decided to use mitigation, which was going to cost only £4 million.

However, 15 years and £82 million later, we still do not have a solution. I think that Transport Scotland has paid a lot of money to dig catch pits and do things on the existing road, but I do not know whether it is trying to keep that solution going. We are pouring more and more money into it, instead of saying, “Stop—let’s reassess everything. Let’s look at what we can do quickly, and let’s deliver something that is practical and cheaper and which will deliver a two-way road offline so that we can keep businesses running.”

I think that the process is broken. We are looking at investigations, analyses and procedures that take for ever, with no outcome. The outcome should be what drives Transport Scotland to keep a road open; instead, what is driving Transport Scotland is making sure that it is following a process. That, to me, is what is missing.

Graham Simpson: Okay. I think that you have a meeting tomorrow with Stephen Flynn.

John Gurr: With the cabinet secretary, yes.

Graham Simpson: What do you want to get out of that meeting? There has to be some outcome.

John Gurr: Last autumn, we identified three alternative two-way solutions with Transport Scotland, following the cabinet secretary’s direction to it to see what could be done to improve the situation. They were costed and presented to the cabinet secretary and the task force in February or March time. The cabinet secretary then deferred any decision because of the election, so it is now six months later and we still do not have a decision from the cabinet secretary. We are hoping for a decision on which route he would back and when work could start, with funding.

10:00

Graham Simpson: Thanks very much. I shall leave it there.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): What has really struck me are the comments from Jamie Shovelin, Alastair Smith and John Gurr about how reliant we, on the west coast, are on one another’s roads and about the lack of opportunities for diversions. What Alastair describes as the “worst bit of road in Scotland” is one of the diversions for the Rest and Be Thankful if there has been a rockfall. That really underlines the importance of looking at it as a connected road network.

John Gurr, you mentioned that, along with Jackie Baillie and Brendan O’Hara, I chaired a round-table meeting in September last year. What really struck me during that round table was the strength of feeling among the community—not just the business community, but also those of us who have the privilege of living in Argyll and Bute. Will you talk a bit more about how you see the four years of closure and the work on the two-way solution impacting different elements of the community?

John Gurr: Thank you, Jenni. It might not be apparent, but the hospitals in Argyll are basically doctors’ surgeries with a bit of accident and emergency attached to them. If you have to go for any kind of treatment, whether that is for broken bones or for cancer, you have to go to Glasgow. If you are travelling from Campbeltown, on a good day it takes about three and a half hours each way. If you have to navigate the Rest and Be Thankful, you are talking about allowing for another hour each way, and so it then becomes an overnight stay. You are talking about vulnerable people having to fund that. That is one aspect for communities.

We also have one of the fastest-declining populations in Scotland. The working-age population has declined by 25 per cent over the past 10 years. The figures that I have, which are from four or five years ago, when we started looking at this, are for Argyll and Bute Council's demographic. I think that 45 per cent of the council workforce is over 50. When you look at that and at the population decline, connectivity is one of the big elements. People do not want to live somewhere with no connectivity to the rest of Scotland, given all that that brings. From a social point of view, those declining populations have big impacts. I am sure that it is the same elsewhere in Scotland. There is a pull towards the central belt, but we need populations to work in our communities as well.

With four years of closure, we are talking about big impacts on business, but it is not just about business—we are also talking about investment. We are growing our renewable energy sector and the value of the planning pipeline for renewable energy is between £13 billion and £15 billion over the next 10 years, but, without access through the Rest and Be Thankful, delivery will be delayed or impossible.

Brendan O'Hara has helped us, as have Jenni Minto and Tim Eagle. Brendan's intervention recently has been to start a petition, and, in less than two weeks, 9,000 people have signed up to wanting a two-way road. Compare that with Transport Scotland's engagement with the community: when it met in Campbeltown, Lochgilphead and Dunoon, it had less than 200 people in each of those environments. That just shows what happens if you engage people in the right way. Our communities want the issue to be fixed.

Jenni Minto: Thanks, John. That is really important.

We touched a bit on the diversion options. Will you talk a wee bit about the option of the old military road? Transport Scotland says that that involves an average of 11 minutes of delay, but we know that that is an average across a 12-hour period—

John Gurr: A 24-hour period.

Jenni Minto: Sorry—a 24-hour period. We also had some evidence at the round table from a large business that said that a 20-minute delay could lead to a 25 per cent increase in costs. I will share the notes from that round table with the committee, but would you like to add anything on health and safety, including cyclists—which were also talked about, and in which Paul Morgan might be interested—and large vehicles going around the bends?

John Gurr: The Rest and Be Thankful was named for a reason. The old military road was built in 1745 by General Wade. It is a single-track road that winds its way up a steep hill to the top. Articulated vehicles such as fuel tankers get stuck because the slope is very steep, and tricky vehicles are going around very tight bends. That is a problem. Transport Scotland's solution was to slightly widen some of those bends, to ease access, but we are still under convoy.

As Jenni Minto said, Transport Scotland averaged the time over a 24-hour period, but most people drive that road during the day and, when businesses and people look at the variability in planning their journeys, they look at what the longest time is. At midday, the delay is upwards of 50 minutes to an hour. That is averaged over a year. In summertime, there are queues back to Arrochar, impacting the A82 and Inveraray.

I think that Transport Scotland has looked at it from the point of view of not the road user but the process: that is how they are supposed to calculate it, so that is good enough—but it is not.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I have two quick questions. Thank you, John, for those answers. To an extent, most of the questions have been answered and you have explained very well the problems at the Rest and Be Thankful.

I live next to the A96, which Shan Saba talked about. Despite all the problems with its being slow and the frustrations, and wanting a dual carriageway, we have a road—a two-way road that I can get up and down, albeit that it might be slow at different points in time. The problem with the Rest and Be Thankful is that the gateway to Argyll and Bute—you talked about the problems and we have talked a lot in the Parliament about rural depopulation—is effectively a one-way road that is not manageable at different points. I have sat there for more than an hour—I was there for an hour and a half at 11 o'clock one night, waiting to get through on the old military road. It is quite a dark place to be sitting at the roadside at 11 o'clock at night.

Since I have been involved with the Rest and Be Thankful, the frustration for me is that, despite all the years—we talk about 2012 and the task force, but my understanding is that the situation has been going on since as early as 2004-5—and the fact that we are so late on in those discussions, Transport Scotland says, "Yeah, it's perfectly fine if we take four years for a one-way road." I reiterate that that is a frustration because it undermines the whole point about trying to grow the economy in Argyll and Bute and making the road work for the people in that area.

John Gurr: Yes, you are right. Even today, that road has about a mile of traffic lights. We still do

not have a road that is fully open. It has not been fully open since the landslides closed it in 2020. We have been working with six years of roadworks or diversions or convoys on the old military road.

Tim Eagle: It was highlighted earlier that there is some debate about the option that has been put forward. Does it frustrate you and the group that you did not feel completely listened to in the making of Transport Scotland's ultimate decision for a sort of half tunnel and that Transport Scotland did not look again at the other side of the road and the potential for a road through the forestry?

John Gurr: There is a big frustration. Some of our group build roads—I think that the father of someone in the group built the forestry track, back in the day. They know how to build roads in our environment and we sometimes feel as if Transport Scotland does not.

Tim Eagle: On a wider point, Shan Saba, you mentioned a fiscal problem, meaning the money. A lot of you are very positive about your engagement with Transport Scotland. The interesting issue is that, although such engagement can be quite positive at the beginning, what we have learned from the Rest and Be Thankful, for example, is that it is when you get into the detail that problems start coming in, because Governments start going in different directions.

I do not know whether others would disagree, but the importance of political will is telling. The Government wanted to build the Queensferry crossing. I think that the design work on it started in 2006, and by 2007 we had a decision. The bridge was being constructed by 2011 and was in place by 2017. Wow—that was quick. When we wanted to nationalise ScotRail, we could do that with a click of our fingers and without much discussion. The fact that, for things like the A96, the A9, the A83, the A75 and the Rest and Be Thankful, we are sitting here 25 years later, thinking, "What's going on?", has a particularly damaging impact on rural Scotland. I find that really challenging. Ultimately, it comes down to political will. It is not a fiscal issue; it is about the will of Governments to get these things done.

On the point about the economy, I am not surprised that a chamber of commerce is talking about the economic impact. One of the things that has stopped some of these developments in the past—and one of the criticisms—is the question of whether they have an economic benefit. Do you think that any economic impact assessment will ever really highlight the possibilities that could come from a dualled A9, A75 or A96, or whatever it might be?

Shan Saba: How do you measure it?

Tim Eagle: Exactly.

Shan Saba: That is the difficulty. If we look at what is happening to the A9 and the plan for that road, we will see the benefit and the impact when construction of the dualling is finished. It is not just about the economics—it is about safety, communities and future resilience. I will use the example of Glasgow's avenues project, which, I suppose, is making the city climate proof for the next generation. That is what this is about. It is not about right now. We know how long it takes for something to go through planning and construction and to be finished, but the question—I am speaking for Moray—is how we ensure that that area of Moray is fit for purpose for future generations and the industry, commerce and communities that settle there.

Tim Eagle: There is no doubt in your mind that the dualling of those roads could fundamentally change and benefit rural communities in the future.

Shan Saba: Absolutely.

The Convener: Jenni Minto and Tim Eagle, thank you for bringing your particular expertise and local knowledge to this issue. You are welcome to stay for the rest of the evidence session, but we will move on to some other themes. We have about half an hour left and there are still quite a lot of members who have questions. Do not feel the need to answer every question. If you have something to say, please put your hand up.

Zen Ghani (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP): I thank the witnesses for coming along. I will focus on the maintenance side of things. As Paul Morgan highlighted in his submission, the maintenance backlog has risen from £1.2 billion in 2015 to £3.1 billion in 2025. At the same time, there are major road projects that are important for communities and businesses, and the economy of course. How do we get the right balance between delivering those projects and maintaining the existing road network?

10:15

Jamie Shovelin: That is a good question. Speaking from the point of view of Dumfries and Galloway, the A75 connects our region. It starts in Gretna and goes all the way to Stranraer and Cairnryan, so it hits all the big towns except Sanquhar. With regard to maintaining it, the backlog that you mention is already causing a bit of disruption anyway. The amount of roadworks that we have in place at the moment is a bit of an issue.

I cannot give you an honest answer to your question. We need to engage more with Transport Scotland on how it can focus its efforts from a

Dumfries and Galloway point of view. That is pretty much where we are with any solutions.

I heard what John Gurr said about diversions, and we are in the same position. If one of our main A roads is closed for roadworks, the diversion is up a country track. We have a lot of freight on some of our main roads, and sending a heavy goods vehicle up a country road is not ideal, especially when it meets another vehicle face-on. That is an even bigger issue at this time of year, when there are more hours of darkness.

A lot of issues need to be addressed. I will leave it at that.

Alastair Smith: We all face similar situations. To answer your question in a roundabout way and to make a point at the same time, I would say that it feels to me that the way in which we are managed by Transport Scotland and the Government is quite fractured. It is very unusual for us all to be sitting in the same room together. You will see us all nodding in agreement with each other, because we have common feelings and goals. However, an integrated approach does not exist, because one road leads to another, if you will excuse the pun. It feels like there is a divide-and-conquer approach to dealing with us. It is a lot easier to come and deal with the West Highlands and then duck and cover, and then go and deal with Moray and then duck and cover again.

Perhaps the answer lies in there being a more integrated approach and a forum in which we can have a Scottish discussion. We need regional discussions and regional opportunities to fly our banners, but we also need more opportunities to look at the Scottish problems.

If businesses understood more about the Government's position and the challenges that the Government faces—if that was communicated to us—perhaps we could help to solve some of the problems and meet some of the challenges. However, right now, there is a very one-way approach. We shout out but we are not getting enough back. We could solve the challenges, but we would need to have a discussion in a sort of think tank to do that. If there were such a forum, we would want to be included in that.

Zen Ghani: Absolutely. That is a really excellent point. Shan Saba, do you have anything to add?

Shan Saba: These guys have given a really clear outline of the situation, to be honest with you. Maintenance and infrastructure—what is the problem, really? Those two things go hand in hand.

I will finish by talking about something that has nothing to do with Moray. In Glasgow, people have been scared to go to the four corners for the past 30 or 40 years. That issue, which was addressed

recently in the “Disclosure” programme is not new. It is just like the issue with road infrastructure: something needs to be done. Something needs to change from what has been done over the past 15 to 20 years, because the approaches that have been taken are what have been holding things back.

Zen Ghani: Thanks for that. Paul Morgan, do you want to comment?

Paul Morgan: There is a dilemma, because we have a road network that is failing in some respects—we have heard about the impacts of that in terms of depopulation and rural connectivity in particular—but, at the same time, there are new projects that need to be taken forward.

The partnership approach is a more strategic one. You have seen the statistics that we provided in the briefing pack, which include the £3.1 billion maintenance backlog on trunk roads, but you need to unpack them more, because there is quite a lot included in that. I do not think that it would be safe to say that that sum is what it is going to cost to sort out the problem. There needs to be a clear picture of the backlog, and more work needs to be done on that. The Scottish Government has to publish a five-year maintenance plan that clearly sets out the state of the roads at the moment, the standard that they need to be brought up to, how that is going to be achieved and the funding that is going to be allocated to that—what has been allocated now and what needs to be allocated in the future.

As I said before, that sort of strategy needs to move towards prioritising preventative maintenance and actually improving repair standards, because, at the moment, I do not think that value for money is being delivered. In fact, it is more expensive to do emergency repairs all over the place than it is to do things according to a properly costed five-year plan. My message to the committee is that that is a really important thing to do and that we need to dig into the data to get a clear picture of the backlog.

Zen Ghani: Absolutely. Have you had any discussions with the Government about a five-year plan? We all recognise that, if problems are addressed too late and a reactive rather than preventative approach is taken, that will cost the Government a lot more money.

Paul Morgan: Exactly. We have not yet had such discussions, but that is our strategy.

Zen Ghani: John, do you have anything to add?

John Gurr: I think that the process is broken and too expensive. We do not take a strategic approach to road building and road maintenance. If we were talking about a business, the organisation would need to be completely

overhauled so that it could deliver better outcomes more quickly and more cheaply.

Zen Ghani: That is great. Thank you.

Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): Some of my constituents would say that the committee should recommend moving away from a focus on road building and road maintenance due to the ongoing climate crisis and the issues associated with it. If you were making a case to my constituents in Glasgow as to why the committee should recommend investment in roads and, potentially, the building of more roads, what would you say to convince them that that would be positive for the future of the country? I recognise that that is a very big question, but many of my constituents have such concerns.

Jamie Shovelin: In answer to your question, the A75 and the A77 are among the top five slowest A roads in Scotland. In fact, the A77 is the slowest A road in Scotland from the point of view of the speed in miles per hour at which vehicles move along it. When there is a 60mph limit and there are vehicles that travel at 30mph or 40mph, the traffic is always stop-start. That doubles CO₂ emissions, because vehicles are not moving at the speed that they should be moving at. That is one reason why we are pushing for improvements. If those improvements are done correctly, that will help us to lower CO₂ emissions.

In Dumfries and Galloway, there is talk of a railway line from Dumfries to Stranraer that would go through some of our big towns, although that proposal has only reached the starting point. We have had conversations with businesses, especially those at Cairnryan port, about putting freight on to rail, but the answer that we got was that that is just not doable at the moment, given the infrastructure that is currently in place. Could that happen 10 or 20 years further down the line? Maybe, but, given the state of the infrastructure, it is not currently doable.

The A75 and the A77 need to be improved to cut emissions and to make it easier for people and businesses to travel across the region.

Iris Duane: Just to be clear, would you support investment in the infrastructure to help to get freight on to rail in the future?

Jamie Shovelin: If that would be beneficial for the port businesses, we would support it 100 per cent. We would need to have conversations with the two businesses that are based at Cairnryan port, to find out whether that would be doable down the line. However, I can tell you for certain that they are much more focused on the need for road improvements. Both of those businesses are committed to investing more in our region, but they want improvements to be made to the A75 and the

A77 so that they can make a return on their investment before they invest more.

A new rail line would be great for tourism and commuting. Any further transport links for our region are always welcome, and, as I have said, a new line would also be helpful for businesses. I look forward to seeing how those talks progress. Laura Moodie is doing a great job in pushing for that on behalf of our region, and I look forward to hearing how that campaign goes in the years to come.

Alastair Smith: As far as the environment is concerned, we are very positive about improving public transport and walking and cycling routes, but rural representatives always complain that rural areas get the same approach as is taken in city centres and the central belt. We champion road improvements because the rail infrastructure in the west Highlands is inadequate. The average train journey from Fort William to Glasgow takes four hours, and there is no direct rail route between Fort William and Inverness, so it seems unrealistic to focus on rail, given the budget constraints and what lies ahead of us.

Also in our area, and around Fort William in particular, there is very little opportunity in the existing road infrastructure for cycle lanes, bus lanes and so on. We have a different challenge from the central belt. We appreciate it, but that perhaps gives you a bit more context for why we talk about the road infrastructure so much more than those in other areas.

Shan Saba: Without road infrastructure in an area such as Moray, communities suffocate because people cannot travel. Try getting from Buckie to Nairn without touching the A96 or using a car—you cannot do it. It takes forever to go into Elgin and back out again on the bus. We can compare that with the city of Glasgow, where there is infrastructure for public transport. In my opinion, and in the opinion of our members, those are two very different Scotlands.

Paul Morgan: I support the comments from the other witnesses. A well-maintained road network is crucial to a successful country in terms of economic growth, business viability, rural connectivity, tourism and all those sorts of things. The environmental targets are important but, if you want to encourage more people on to public transport and into walking and cycling in particular, you need a well-maintained road network, otherwise you are not going to achieve those other targets, because people will say, "Well, I'm not going to travel, because I'm at risk of serious injury and disappearing down a pothole." That is really important. It all comes back to having a well-maintained road network that supports all those wider objectives.

John Gurr: I agree with everything that has been said. In the rural network, we need to have roads. One of our members runs the bus company into Argyll, and their bus was recently two cars away from being hit by a landslide and taken down the Rest and Be Thankful. That is why we need the roads built.

Iris Duane: Thank you. That tells an important story—especially what John Gurr said at the end. I agree that the approach that is needed is very different from a central belt approach.

There are concerns that, although the current infrastructure is not great, as you said, investment in it is being held back because of a focus on roads. I think that all of us in this room are aware of the fiscal constraints on Government. Would you potentially support exploring further measures for raising revenue on roads, such as congestion charging and tolls, to pay for the developments that we may want to see in the future?

That question is open to everyone, but I ask Jamie Shovelin to start again.

Jamie Shovelin: I cannot say that such measures—tolls especially—have been mentioned at all in any of the campaigns. I am not totally sure of how that would work for us, because we are quite a rural region. If we put tolls on the roads, that would potentially mean more delays for people, depending on how long the process took—you pay your toll and off you go, but that adds a little bit more time to delays. It has not really been discussed, and I am not sure how it would go down with our business community or with the people in the campaign to improve these roads.

Shan Saba: I can answer that quite directly, if that is okay. Everybody is feeling the fiscal pressures. It is not just Government—it is every individual. We all know that—the situation has been going on for a couple of years and does not seem to be tailing off yet. There would be an impact in adding any extra cost to individuals. If you do it to a business, the cost of everything will go up, and that will inevitably have an impact on every individual in the area, so I do not think that it would be a good idea.

Alastair Smith: Tolls and congestion charges, in particular, would just be a big waste of more money that we do not have to spend. We need to remember that a lot of areas are at crisis point, and I do not think that adding infrastructure that would be able to cope with that would be sensible. It certainly would not be popular at this moment in time.

Government could consider how much the communication process costs. We are involved in all these discussions. How much does it cost the Government to speak to us so regularly? We have

all said that communication has been good, but how much does that cost? Could the process be streamlined? Could we do it more effectively and get better information to Government more quickly?

10:30

Paul Morgan: There are funding challenges in all areas of Government. We need to be realistic and consider other ways of funding road maintenance, such as road pricing, in the future. Those challenges will be the reality going forward, so we should consider those options.

Iris Duane: Thank you.

Alastair Smith, you made a specific point about how efficiently the Government is discussing things with you. It has already been raised in this meeting that you rarely get time to come together, and it is clear that there is a consensus on that point. Perhaps that is something that the committee can explore with the Government later.

I have no further questions, convener.

The Convener: Thanks for asking those questions, Iris. We will need to think differently at different times, so I appreciate those questions and answers.

We will move on to Collette Stevenson's questions.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Good morning. I will ask about community benefits—or potentially, from what we have heard so far, the lack of them. In your experience, what community benefits—if any—are going to your community and local area? I ask Shan Saba to respond first, just to change the make-up.

Shan Saba: Thinking specifically about the broader impact of the project that I have been discussing, community benefits will come from communities being content, happy and having more opportunities, including employment opportunities. Generally speaking, that is what is being held back from the area. There will be benefits in journey times, and people will be able to travel more easily and more safely. There will be fewer fatalities and injuries, with the impacts that those have. Infrastructure can be put in place for housing, employment and tourism, which—let us be honest—creates money. That is what the community needs. We are talking about community benefits, and the project is about regenerating an economy.

To touch on what Iris Duane was talking about, the project will also be huge for the green transition and the supply chain that is involved in that, particularly in the area that I am talking about. That will create opportunities in employment fields

where there currently are none. There is currently a growth sector, but it does not have the infrastructure to support it.

Alastair Smith: Jamie Shovelin, Shan Saba and I all obviously represent business. Certainly, in the west Highlands, we do not now think so much about the business community separately from the community; we are trying to tie in and join up our thinking, because the business community is the community—it is the backbone of jobs. Investment in infrastructure leads to investment in business, more jobs, better-paid jobs, better mental health for people in our areas and joining up the other multiple challenges that we all face. The benefit to the community is real and big.

The Convener: I will intervene just for a moment. There is a technical thing in project infrastructure called community benefit, whereby, in addition to the benefits of a project itself, the community will get some direct benefit, whether that is fixing the insulation in the village hall or putting housing in place, which is what some of the power companies are doing. I think that Collette Stevenson is keen to explore whether there has been any discussion about any of that stuff as part of the projects. Do you consider the projects themselves to be the benefit and so there is no need to have anything in addition to that?

Shan Saba: I will answer that question directly: no, community benefit has not been part of our discussions to date. There has been such discussion with potential hydro and green energy infrastructure. For example, there has been loads of talk about community benefit from Coire Glas as a project. However, when it comes to transport infrastructure, community benefit does not usually come into our conversation in that way.

The Convener: Okay. Sorry for interrupting you, Collette.

Collette Stevenson: That is okay.

I will dig a bit deeper into the engagement with Transport Scotland and the big tier 1 contractors that have carried out work so far. For instance, has there been work with local subcontractors? Have any graduate or apprenticeship schemes been created? Have you had any engagement in that regard?

Shan Saba: From the perspective of my chamber of commerce, the answer is no. That is not part of our remit, which is about the infrastructure and the commitment timeline. Community benefit is part of the contractual arrangements between the main contractor and everybody else. I have not been part of that in my real job—in the job that pays the bills—but I see it on a daily basis, so I understand exactly what you are talking about with regard to graduates,

employment and how benefits can be provided to the communities that need them the most. If a commitment to a timeline in that regard or an appropriate contractual arrangement could be put in place, I do not think that any business membership organisation would hide away from considering how to get secondary benefits for communities and ensure that those arrangements are in place for the people that need them.

Collette Stevenson: Will you comment on openness and transparency around community benefits, and their visibility?

Shan Saba: It is important to understand the social demographics and issues such as the underemployment in Moray. There is a lack of employment opportunities in general. We must also consider the poor state of men's mental health and the fact that, unfortunately, Moray has one of the highest rates of men's suicide in Scotland—it is in the top three. Many aspects should be looked at, including, for me, how we can take things to the next stage in how we interact with the relevant bodies.

Alastair Smith: A common piece of feedback that we get from members who are developers or have construction businesses is that Transport Scotland's requirements and demands are unrealistic and strangle projects. We have a potential project in Lochaber that involves four houses, but the demands related to the road network and the footpath to those four houses make the project completely unviable. It is worth noting that it is not a planning issue or about willingness to invest.

Jamie Shovelin: We have engaged with the community through the campaign on the A75. When the feasibility study for the bypasses was starting, we held some consultations for the general public to come and see what is going on and how it would benefit them. We have had community engagement on that side of things.

I want to bring it back to what we said at the start. The projects have lasted a long time. They have been going on since the noughties. When we speak to the community about that, the responses are, "Is that still going on?" and "What is the point?"

There are going to be benefits to the community. Finlay Carson MSP has been campaigning on the matter. In our region, we have a main hospital, Dumfries and Galloway royal infirmary, and a hospital in Stranraer, but because DGRI is the main hospital, people have to commute from Stranraer to Dumfries for certain services and appointments. That takes an hour and a half or sometimes an hour and 45 minutes, depending on delays. If we improve the road, it will obviously benefit the community because people will be able to get to their hospital appointments more quickly.

We hope that better roads will also encourage people to stay in Dumfries and Galloway. That will address an issue that we have at the moment, because we are trying to prevent people from moving from the country to the city. In Dumfries and Galloway, we have a lot of people moving to the central belt or further away.

We have talked about economic impact, which is also something that affects the community. Dumfries and Galloway Council, South Ayrshire Council and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council in Northern Ireland produced an economic impact report that notes that dualling the A75 and the A77 would bring £5 billion of positive benefits to the UK economy, and that will obviously benefit communities as well.

You mentioned apprenticeships. Under our chamber of commerce, we have the Scottish Government's developing the young workforce initiative, which pushes apprenticeships as much as it can, working with local schools. We are looking to develop that when the project finally gets off the floor.

I hope that that has answered some of your questions.

Collette Stevenson: That was really helpful, Jamie—thank you. John, did you want to come in?

John Gurr: With regard to the community benefit element of roads, I understand the notion of community benefit in the sense of, say, green energy profits going outside an area, but if the Government has a problem with financing all of this work, I wonder whether we should be looking to do things as cheaply as possible. If you are asking contractors to fund community benefit, I would suggest that the benefit to our communities will be in doing the job and getting the road.

Collette Stevenson: Thank you very much.

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): It is very clear that this has been a very long and arduous process; indeed, you have talked about fatigue in the campaigns. I was struck by John Gurr's comment that the road delivery process is broken and that, if this were a private business, it would have been completely overhauled by now. You will be aware that the Government has proposed bringing Transport Scotland back in-house as part of the core Scottish Government. Do you see that as an opportunity to make positive changes and, if so, what are the positive changes that you would like to see?

I will start with you, John.

John Gurr: My honest answer is that I do not know—I actually thought that Transport Scotland was already part of the Scottish Government. I listened to your discussion with the cabinet

secretary in September, and found the debate quite interesting.

I just think that this issue needs a business head at the top and a real look at the priorities. We have already identified a lot of them, because it is not just roads that we are talking about but rail, CalMac Ferries and a whole load of other things.

Lloyd Melville: Do you think, then, that this is about changing not just the structure but the culture of how these decisions are taken?

John Gurr: It is about fundamentally changing the processes. I believe that they use a process, or book, to build roads or start projects—and that is not just a Scottish thing; it is a UK-wide thing. However, we need to throw it away and start again by asking, "What do we need to achieve, and what is the cheapest, quickest and most effective way of delivering it?" We just need to start from scratch again.

Just bringing Transport Scotland in-house is not going to do it. You need to blow it all up and start again.

Lloyd Melville: So the mindset has to change.

John Gurr: Yes.

Lloyd Melville: Paul Morgan, did you want to come in?

Paul Morgan: The pothole partnership's focus is more strategic: we look across the whole of the UK and do not get involved in local projects as other colleagues do. However, I agree that a fresh, more strategic approach is needed. We need to go back to basics: look at the scale of the problems at the moment and the funding that is needed not only to maintain the roads but to take forward the separate projects, and then we need to put in place milestones over, as I have said, a five-year period so that we can check progress.

The situation particularly affects rural communities, which, as John Gurr has said, have been disadvantaged and are depopulating. I cannot comment on whether Transport Scotland should be brought back in-house but as John Gurr has said, taking a more strategic, business-like approach to such issues would be a good way forward.

Shan Saba: Anything that makes the public sector more integrated with the private sector, with decision making and accountability at the forefront, I will agree with. Given my previous experience in other sectors, I am not sure that that will happen, but that would be my core ask.

Alastair Smith: Bringing Transport Scotland back in-house, so to speak, gives us the chance to review things and do them differently. It makes no sense to carry on like this, and there is no point in

bringing Transport Scotland back into Government if it is just going to run itself. We want ministers to be better—and more quickly—informed, and to have meaningful engagement with business. We genuinely believe that we can bring business to the table to help solve some of these problems together.

Scotland is resilient. We do not ask—we do. However, we are in crisis, so we need to collaborate and now is the time to do that, given the great opportunity coming up with this potential change.

10:45

Jamie Shovelin: I echo everything that my colleagues have said. Indeed, you put it perfectly yourself, Lloyd, when you said that the mindset needs to be changed. Obviously, that is something that we definitely think should happen.

Lloyd Melville: Thanks very much.

The Convener: Excellent. It is now 10.45, so we are 35 seconds late, but that is still pretty good.

I want to thank our witnesses very much. I must say that you have been very good at getting your message across in a very clear way. I did not expect a fight to break out between you, but I did expect some disagreement, and I have been struck by the commonality of view about the workings of the process, and how great we are at talking, but not as good at the actual doing. That has come across very clearly from all of you, as has the issue of culture and behaviour with regard to the decision-making process.

I am not sure whether you have ever sat together on a panel before, but perhaps we could bring your knowledge together and ensure that it is brought to bear more frequently at a national level. All the conference organisers out there should be looking to get you on a panel.

Thank you very much for your evidence. I am sure that we will call on you again at some point over the next few years as we do our work. Please feel free to make any submissions to inquiries that might be of interest to you, and please keep us updated on the progress of your campaigns, too.

I suspend the meeting for a short time for a changeover of witnesses.

10:46

Meeting suspended.

10:56

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our second panel of witnesses. The next evidence session is about rail developments. Everyone will have seen the news that there has been a rail crash in Spain and that, unfortunately, 10 people have died after two trains collided, so we will be sensitive around those issues.

I welcome our five witnesses: Allison Cosgrove, chair, Railfuture Scotland; John Hamilton, chief executive officer, Winchburgh Developments Ltd; Jordan Jack, general secretary, Campaign for North East Rail; Nigel Mullan from the Newburgh Train Campaign; and Tom Thornton, honorary president, Rail Action Group East of Scotland—or RAGES, which is a great title. Everyone will have two minutes to set out their case, beginning with Allison.

Allison Cosgrove (Railfuture Scotland): Thank you very much. Railfuture is the UK's leading independent organisation, campaigning for better rail services for passengers and freight. We have branches all over the UK, and I am chair of the Scottish branch. We are a voluntary group that represents rail users, with 20,000 affiliated and individual members through lots of rail groups and community councils around the country.

Railfuture is a one member, one vote democracy that is not funded by train companies, trade unions or any other source. We support local rail groups around Scotland with publicity in our newsletter, on social media, through publications and, occasionally, with small amounts of financial help, which is made possible by our members' lottery. In Scotland, we have participated in the cross-party group on rail, and in the cross-party group on sustainable transport, which was chaired by Mr Simpson.

We campaign for satisfied passengers. Our passenger experience subgroup is examining good and bad practice from a passenger point of view, and that information will be shared with rail companies. We produce a quarterly newsletter, "Railwatch", and a copy should be sent to each of you. Scotland features highly in the newsletter, and the new station at Balgray is on the front cover of the latest edition. We believe that rail in Scotland has many good practices in relation to speaking as one voice, a continuous programme of electrification and regular station reopenings that many areas in the rest of the UK would very much welcome.

The rail industry must focus on delivering the best journey experience for all travellers. Rail services must be more reliable, convenient, clean, comfortable, secure and, above all, reasonably priced. There are many priorities in Scotland that we would like to see come to fruition, including the reopening of stations in St Andrews and Beattock

and of the north-east line of Ellon, Fraserburgh and Peterhead, as well as passing loops on the far north line rail service. We would like to see a station at Haddington, to serve the fast-growing East Lothian area. Our prime target is undoubtedly Hawick on the Borders line, and we are pleased to see the long-awaited study on that under way. I am happy to answer any questions.

11:00

Nigel Mullan (Newburgh Train Campaign): I represent the Newburgh train station group, an organisation that started in 2011 as a result of the community sustainable Newburgh project, which was funded by the climate challenge fund, as I think it was called at the time. That produced a report, out of which came the recommendation, overwhelmingly—almost unanimously—supported in the town, to go forward with a campaign to get a rail station.

For the Newburgh Community Trust, which commissioned the project, David Spaven, who had done a lot of work on freight for Scottish railways, wrote a literature review of what had happened, and recommended that the campaign had a good chance of succeeding if we had all our ducks in a row, which is what we have been trying to do ever since.

We have major cross-party political support, which has been repeatedly built on. Right at the outset, Roderick Campbell MSP got a motion going in the Parliament. Since then, we have also been part of the Fife rail forum, looking at Fife specifically, which saw the reopening of the Levenmouth rail link.

We worked on commissioning a Scottish transport appraisal guidance—STAG—study, through, at the time, European regional development funding, and we did a pre-run appraisal to look at the transport problems in the round, which also functioned as supporting materials for the regional development fund application. In the event, the local rail development fund sprang into life, so we used our work to apply for funds and got the exact amount that we asked for, which enabled a partnership to be established with the South East of Scotland Transport Partnership and Fife Council's transportation department. It was a trio—community led but with regional transport partnership and local authority support.

We then commissioned Systra to do the report for Transport Scotland to consider, and have been working with Transport Scotland all the way through—sluggishly at times, to be sure. At the moment, we gather that its final advice to the cabinet secretary is due. Through the committee's freedom of information request, we understand

that that is with special political advisors at the moment.

Transport Scotland has had great difficulty, I think, in appraising the kind of rail option that we have been looking at, which involves a shorter platform. It is fairly low cost and uses a modular system. Essentially, we need the work to be taken out of Transport Scotland's capable hands and put into the even more capable hands of Network Rail and ScotRail—people who know how to appraise rail projects.

The rail project has become the strongest option by far in the STAG. I have already submitted comprehensive notes, references and supporting documents to the committee, so I am pretty sure that you must be apprised, and I will be delighted to answer anything that you have to say.

The Convener: We move to Tom Thorburn, not Thornton—apologies, I was so focused on the acronym of your group, RAGES, that I got your surname wrong. Over to you, Tom.

Tom Thorburn (Rail Action Group East of Scotland): Thank you very much, convener, and thank you for allowing us the opportunity to come here to discuss matters.

Rail Action Group East of Scotland was founded in 1996 by myself and the late Dr Ralph Jordinson. Through a lot of active campaigning over the years, we achieved the establishment of Reston station in the eastern Borders and East Linton station in East Lothian.

Reston did not get off to a good start because of the Covid-19 pandemic; there were times when we were getting only two trains per day. No one would take the risk of using the station when there were only two trains per day, would they? There has, therefore, been a slow build-up for Reston to give people the confidence to use it.

I am pleased to tell the committee that Reston now attracts circa 40,000 passengers—and that is with only 18 trains per day. We can compare that with the likes of Stow on the Borders railway. Stow is a smaller village by far and attracts double that figure. Why is that? It is all down to the lack of services that we have at Reston. We have a two-hourly service, so if a service is cancelled, we are talking about a wait of four hours for the next train.

I will move on to East Linton, which has a ScotRail service as well as a TransPennine Express service. East Linton is now attracting circa 250,000 passengers—that is incredible. Some studies had it down as being only around 45,000. When the studies are done for us, at great expense, we have to take note of the outcomes.

We are now campaigning avidly to have our Haddington branch reinstated, such that the

county town of the massively expanding county of East Lothian can have a rail station and a rail connection. That is what the people tell us at our monthly stall in Haddington. They want to travel back to Edinburgh by train for their work, because that is where they have all come from.

The Convener: I appreciate that.

I will move to Jordan Jack now.

Jordan Jack (Campaign for North East Rail):

Thank you for the invitation to come to the committee. The north-east of Scotland is a region that is currently experiencing profound economic change. The oil and gas industry is declining and we are hoping that new industries are going to rise up and offer opportunities for those workers.

To give you a sense of just how interwoven the oil and gas industry is with the north-east, one in four jobs are either directly in the industry in some way or in the supply chain, and a much larger percentage are indirectly connected with it—things such as cafes, taxis and bars all feel the pain when the oil industry declines, and they feel the benefits when it is thriving.

We see the writing on the wall, and that shows that it is critical that we make a success of the just transition. Workers in the oil industry want to move to renewable jobs, but at the minute those jobs are just not there, and they are not coming through fast enough.

How do we link that to rail? Three rail studies in the past 10 years have identified a deep sense of isolation that is felt throughout the region. It impacts our ability to attract investment, and to attract teachers, and—crucially—to keep teachers who move up to the area. It impacts people's ability to visit their relatives in prison, which has a knock-on effect on reincarceration rates.

However, we are also a region of producers, producing things from beer and cereal grain to ice cream and fish, so much so that our most recent study showed that the roads north of Aberdeen are so constrained that there is zero room for growth because there are so many HGVs on those roads. That leads to HGVs platooning, and the roads becoming dangerous.

Why am I talking about all this? It is because railways are a catalyst for growth, and we see our project as one of the key unlockers for just transition in our region. It will put the region on the map, and crucially, it will allow some of the freight that is suitable for rail to be taken off the road, which will in turn give the new green industries, or other alternative industries, the capacity to use those roads.

I would also point out, just for context, that Fraserburgh and Peterhead are the largest towns

furthest from a railway station anywhere in the UK. You might find larger ones, but they will be closer to a station, and you might find towns that are closer, but they will not be as big. Those two towns are both.

Our proposed railway is a big project, on the order of magnitude of the Borders railway; in fact, its length is within 0.2 of a mile of that of the Borders railway. In other words, it is another Borders railway, which comes with a cost but also with the same kind of benefits. It was said that the Borders railway breathed new life into communities up and down its length, and we want to do exactly the same in our region.

Again, we are not rooted in nostalgia. We are not looking for a railway just because there was one before. We simply see it as the best solution to deliver the benefits that we want to be delivered.

I know that I am running out of time, but I want to quickly give you a sense of how difficult it is to use public transport. For me to get here for 10 o'clock today, I had to get a bus leaving Fraserburgh at 4.55 in the morning, and I got here with literally 30 seconds to spare, because—ironically—my train was cancelled. If you had invited me to the previous evidence session and I had had to get here for 9 o'clock, I would have had to leave yesterday and stay over. That shows the order of change that we are looking for, the challenges that we face and, of course, the opportunities that lie ahead of us.

The Convener: When Jo Grimond was the MP for Orkney and Shetland, he was asked by officials what his closest train station was and he told them it was Bergen. I think that you would be going some to compete with that. *[Laughter.]*

Jordan Jack: I should clarify that I meant the mainland.

The Convener: I call John Hamilton.

John Hamilton (Winchburgh Developments Ltd): Good morning, and thank you for the chance to appear here today.

Winchburgh is one of seven strategic growth sites in the Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city region deal, linked by the SEStran 2035 regional transport strategy. Our submission to the committee contains some detail on the regional context, but the first main point that I would make is that Winchburgh railway station is a shovel-ready project with approval from Transport Scotland to proceed as soon as a full funding package is finalised.

You mentioned that you will be exploring the challenges that we face in delivering railway projects to the timescale involved. Our development gained planning permission back in

2012, but, at that time, the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme had priority, and our planning conditions effectively prevented Winchburgh station from proceeding until electrified services started running in 2018. Only then could we move forward with preparing a business case.

We started by commissioning the timetable work, which showed that a half-hourly stop at Winchburgh would be feasible on the Dunblane and Stirling to Edinburgh Waverley line without detriment to electrified mainline services. At that point, it was clear that we could move forward, so we commissioned Network Rail, at a cost of £600,000, to design the station in its planned location to full planning consent stage. We achieved full planning consent last October, and the outline business case was then approved by Transport Scotland's investment decision-making board in March. Because it was the week before the pre-election phase of the Scottish Government elections, things were put on hold, and have been on hold basically since mid-March.

However, we as the project leaders are committed to investing a further £1.9 million with Network Rail to get design to full construction stage and £2.6 million to construct the adjacent transport hub with up to 200 car park spaces. We are allocating for the transport hub two acres of land that would otherwise be used for housing, at a gross value of about £3.5 million, and we have already invested £6 million in constructing the rail overbridge adjacent to the station. In aggregate, those investments so far—and further committed investments from us—amount to about £14 million, including land value if the land is used for other things.

11:15

The project now needs a structured funding package between the stakeholders to deliver the station within Network Rail's proposed programme of two years. The station has a benefit-cost ratio or BCR rating of 12, primarily because of the economic and environmental benefits to the wider region and Scotland, and it would generate a positive income stream for Network Rail. The BCR is higher for Winchburgh than for equivalent station projects that we have been able to identify in recent years. It is a very strong case. I reiterate that the project could proceed immediately with the award of funding, and we can be operational within the two-year period.

I am happy to take questions on any other matters.

The Convener: Thank you very much, everyone. You have all made your pitches; we now want to glean some of the lessons from your

experiences with the agencies and the system. You can refer to your individual campaigns and work, but if you are able to draw on broader experiences, that would be helpful.

Donald MacKinnon: I thank the witnesses for their opening statements, which are helpful in setting the context for today's discussion. I am interested in exploring how you develop relationships and engagement with public agencies. I am particularly interested in hearing about Transport Scotland and the Government, but we can perhaps also go into your relationships with Network Rail and ScotRail. What are your different experiences of how those relationships have developed? Do you feel listened to? How have those relationships changed over time?

Tom, in your opening statement you talked about some of your successes in the past. I am interested in how those relationships were important, in how they have changed and in how that reflects on the projects that you are currently developing.

Tom Thorburn: We set out our stall very quickly, and we engaged with what is now called Passenger Focus. We built on that, appealing to all our politicians—local politicians, our MSPs, our MPs and the transport secretary. Until three years ago, when I took ill, I had met every transport minister in the Parliament since the start. We have had a fantastic relationship with the Scottish Government, although it has been quite a challenge to get our two stations open—but, hey ho, here we are. We have them, and we are really pleased with them.

One major thing to note is that the consultants doing the studies for us do not always get it right. For example, in the STAG, East Linton station was proposed to be built in a different position from where it is now. I argued against the case, and I had a colleague who drew up all the plans for me. The study showed the main access to the station as coming up a single narrow road past a primary school. That was just not on. The access to the station was then put in on the opposite side of the railway line, with the car park on that side as well.

There are lots of lessons to be learned. Looking at East Linton's figures, which I have given you, we note that so many stations fall through the Swiss cheese because the study shows that their BCR is not good enough. The BCR for East Linton at the time was something like 3.4—it was in the 3s, anyway. If we were to take today's figures and put them back into the BCR, my word, it would be a different case.

Our group has enjoyed full commitment from the politicians and they have worked hard, because our councils did not have the money to fully fund

those stations. This Parliament funded the lion's share, and we have to thank it for that.

The Convener: Thank you for that very helpful contribution. I move on to Nigel Mullan. You talked about the extensive engagement that you have had with a variety of public agencies in Newburgh. Can you expand on that a bit and say what your experience has been?

Nigel Mullan: In the early days, we were doing a lot of the work ourselves to try to get the funding moving. We did consultations, including one with Transport Scotland as part of the consultation process to involve the community, politicians and so on. However, we also talked with Network Rail and ScotRail at that time, which was interesting. I had a good conversation with Network Rail in Glasgow, at St Vincent Street—it was with Catherine Hall, who I think has moved on and up since then. We talked about STAG and the difficulties with it, and so on. She said, "Well, it's always good to get something in, especially if you have a strong rail option emerging. It is always good to have some kind of rail background."

When the STAG process got moving, Network Rail and ScotRail dropped out of the picture. We even had a good consultation with Scott Prentice at ScotRail on the low-cost modular idea that was part of our campaign at the time; he called it mature and innovative. We had very good conversations with those people. However, I highlight the difficulties that we have had, which I can pin down to what have been termed—as I know from talking with other campaigners and other people associated with the rail and transport world—STAG gatekeepers.

The STAG gatekeepers include the strategy and analysis unit in particular. They are probably exceptionally well-trained and competent people with regard to road, buses, walking and cycling, but they do not seem to have a particular idea or identity around rail. It is not their fault—I think that that can be addressed, probably very easily. It is perhaps a cultural thing. We have found that they have slowed the process down with overanalysis.

Our BCR has been exceptional; we have not even taken into account the removal of peak rail fares, as I know that Winchburgh has done. We can range between a BCR of 8 and a BCR of 17 and even upwards of that. Transport Scotland has shown great difficulty in understanding why there was such a high BCR and the importance of that. Apart from the transformational aspect of the project, using a fairly small-scale, low-cost short-length platform installed quickly into Newburgh at the start of the Fife coastal path would increase visitor numbers and tourism, and kick-start the whole place once again. Every campaign has that at the back of it—the isolation and all that.

However, Transport Scotland has had difficulties in getting its head around that. Fiona Hyslop had a great meeting with us just before the election in 2025; she was very supportive and was expecting that her advice would soon come in from Transport Scotland, but that advice never materialised while she was in the Government—it was still, this summer, being chased around by Transport Scotland. This information came out as a result of the committee's freedom of information request—it had to come out. Transport Scotland had to involve Network Rail and rail industry people to give it the confidence, I guess, to write up the final report for the advice to a minister. That is ironic.

The Convener: We are going to have to be sharper, because we have a lot to get through. That is not a criticism of anyone, because I know that you are all passionate about your subjects, but it would be helpful if we could be a bit more succinct.

Donald MacKinnon: Allison Cosgrove, you spoke about a number of different projects across the country in your opening remarks. What level of engagement have you had with Transport Scotland so far, and do you have any reflections to add?

Allison Cosgrove: We have had good relationships with politicians over the years; that has not been a problem. Sometimes, it is difficult to get things moving with Transport Scotland, which I think everyone on the panel would echo. That is a problem with Governments, although I must say that it is much easier for us that we have the Scottish Government close at hand, rather than having to go hundreds of miles down the road to Westminster. Over the years, we have built good relationships with people such as Bill Reeve at Transport Scotland and Scott Prentice at ScotRail. We know them and can contact them.

Donald MacKinnon: Do you feel that you are listened to?

Allison Cosgrove: I believe that we are. People are always courteous and helpful.

Donald MacKinnon: That is good. John Hamilton, do you have any reflections on how relationships have developed over the time that you have been involved with the Winchburgh project?

John Hamilton: Over the years, our relationships with Transport Scotland and Network Rail have been excellent, but the context for the Winchburgh project is a bit different from that for the projects that other witnesses have spoken about. Since 2012, we have been building a new town in West Lothian out of a small mining village, and it needs a public transport strategy. Rail can

be part of that, but other aspects of public transport, including road transport, have been mandatory. It was mandatory for us to build a motorway junction on the M9 before we completed 1,000 houses. We also had to build a rail overbridge across the main Edinburgh to Glasgow railway line, because it links east and west Winchburgh. We collaborated early with Network Rail on the overbridge and established a rail steering group in 2014 or 2015 with Transport Scotland and Network Rail.

At the time, Network Rail saw the station and the rail overbridge as one joint project, but we could not get ahead with the railway station because the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme took priority. Notwithstanding that, the steering group's work continued and the rail overbridge was built. We formed an early relationship with Network Rail until it came to the point that it was feasible to start the business plan for the Winchburgh railway station. That came about six or seven years after we first started building. The steering group was re-established when we knew that we could get on with the business case. Transport Scotland, Network Rail, the South East of Scotland Transport Partnership and the council attend the monthly meeting of the steering group, so it is collaborative.

Donald MacKinnon: It is good to hear that the relationships are good and that the communications are working well.

Jordan Jack, you spoke about the economic potential of widening rail in the north-east. I am interested in hearing about your relationships and communication with Transport Scotland. Do you engage with other public agencies in the region to build the wider economic argument?

Jordan Jack: Very much so. Like all rail campaigns, we are trying to build support from the grass roots up. We have partnered with Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce to get our proposals through, which has opened doors for us around the region.

11:30

When it comes to agencies, I cannot speak highly enough of the North East of Scotland Transport Partnership and Network Rail, which have been so helpful to us—sometimes sanity checking some of the things that we propose and sometimes just helping us to navigate the political system. However, when it comes to Transport Scotland, it feels as though we have had to go through the Parliament and politicians, who have then dragged it kicking and screaming to the table. It has been very dismissive and sometimes very silent.

That said, during our studies, it has been the complete opposite. We have done a case for change and a preliminary options appraisal so far, and a piece of work is ongoing through Nestrans. Throughout the studies, when we are in progress meetings, Transport Scotland has been incredibly helpful and informative, and has given us excellent feedback, which has been passed on to consultants. It is like night and day.

For context, those two first studies were not funded through Transport Scotland, because we were finding that, despite our success in lobbying during the 2021 election, we were getting no progress towards having a study funded. It always comes down to money. We managed to get a pot of money through the just transition fund for those two studies, into which Transport Scotland fed after we funded them. The picture for us has certainly been black and white.

Donald MacKinnon: Thanks for that.

Graham Simpson: To speed things up, I will concentrate on two of the witnesses: John Hamilton and Jordan Jack.

Tom Thorburn: I cannot hear you.

Graham Simpson: I do not know why. Can you hear me now?

Tom Thorburn: Yes.

Graham Simpson: My mic is on. I will concentrate on those two witnesses and we should be able to cover the points that I want to get across.

John Hamilton, Winchburgh is in the region that I represent. It is a case study in how long things can take. It has been really frustrating. It must have been really frustrating for you, the people who live in Winchburgh, the people who bought houses there and the people to come. It is frustrating for me, as an elected representative, to watch that.

It feels as though we are almost there. However, the missing piece of the jigsaw is the money. Where do you think that money has to come from, and how much is required in the next budget?

John Hamilton: The business case that was submitted at the end of last year was approved by Transport Scotland in March. It contains, I believe, a figure of £24.7 million. We have reached an arrangement through the steering group. I mentioned that we are committed to building a 200-space transport hub, the cost of which is taken from that £24.7 million. We are also committed to investing £2.5 million with Network Rail, £600,000 of which has been spent on getting the full planning permission in place and preparing the business case. So the balance of £1.9 million that we are spending, potentially, with Network Rail, will go to full construction stage drawings to get

Network Rail building the station only, while we build the adjoining transport hub. Overall, the money that has to be spent to do both those things is just shy of £25 million.

I mentioned earlier that we have already built the rail overbridge, so that is not part of the project. However, the money that is needed to build the station was identified by Network Rail in the business case in March as just over £20 million—about £20.1 million.

Graham Simpson: Where do you expect that money to come from?

John Hamilton: Well, the council made an application to the city region deal fund. A pot of money—£50 million—has been identified for transport in the city region deal, and there was some discussion with Transport Scotland and the city region deal officers about the criteria and definitions for using that pot. The council wrote to the First Minister, asking for the money to be released from the city region deal fund, but I believe that a technical matter has arisen on the criteria set out in the city region deal for use of—

Graham Simpson: I am just going to stop you there, John, because I am still not clear where you expect the money to come from.

John Hamilton: We expect the money to come from the Scottish Government transport budget, ultimately, but, as I have said, an application has been made to the Scottish Government in respect of the £50 million sum identified in the city region deal.

Graham Simpson: So, are you expecting to see in the forthcoming Scottish budget in December a figure of around £20 million being allocated to the project?

John Hamilton: Yes. That figure is comparable with those for other rail station projects. The Winchburgh project features, as I have said, a 200-space car park and a transport hub plus the station, so it will be more than that. However, the figure that has been identified, which is an estimate prepared by Network Rail, is just over £20 million.

Graham Simpson: Okay. It is just that we had a written answer from Stephen Flynn on 20 October, saying:

“The Scottish Government recognises the benefits that a new rail station at Winchburgh could bring to local communities and regional connectivity, and remains committed to working with partners and stakeholders to support its delivery.”—[Written Answers, 20 October 2026; S7W-03713.]

The key word there is “support”, is it not?

John Hamilton: Yes.

Graham Simpson: And, to my mind, supporting delivery means putting up the money.

John Hamilton: Yes—that is my interpretation, too. Our planning conditions said that we were responsible for leading a project for an integrated public transport strategy; that might, or might not, include a railway station. Winchburgh will exist, but the regional benefits of that railway station will go way beyond the town. That has been identified in the business case, and the project needs public sector investment to support it. The business case also makes it clear that, for ScotRail, that would be cash positive in operational terms, and that the project itself has a significant positive net value. The financial case has been made, but it needs support from public sector funding to go ahead.

Graham Simpson: Okay. Thank you for that.

Turning to the Fraserburgh and Peterhead railway, I have to say, Jordan, that you are nowhere near as far along the line as John Hamilton is. Where would you say you are in the process, and what have been your frustrations about the length of time it has taken?

Jordan Jack: We cobbled together our campaign in a rush, ahead of the 2021 elections—it was probably just at the turn of the year in 2021—so, by the end of this parliamentary session, we will be coming up to 10 years. Realistically, we are probably looking at having only just completed our business case and starting to argue that case on its merits. In short, we are looking at 10 years of nothing but studies.

We have done our case for change and a preliminary options appraisal, and the results of both have been positive. We are now waiting for a study that is being done by AECOM, funded by Nestrans, to add on to that preliminary options appraisal work. It is looking at the freight potential that has been identified on the line. That aspect has never been done on any of the other lines that have been opened in Scotland so far, and Transport Scotland has asked us to dig a bit deeper into it and take the findings into the detailed options appraisal.

Yes. This project will involve something in the order of hundreds of millions of pounds, as was the case for the Borders railway. However, at the minute, we are looking for £250,000 to £300,000 to go into the detailed options appraisal. As we funded the first two through the just transition fund, we are nae in the pipeline, so to say, with Transport Scotland, where, if we get a positive result from the new study, we will automatically be in the list for the next one. We will have to seek that funding.

Transport Scotland could very much look at the result, see the merit in it and provide us with that

funding for the detailed options appraisal, which is a path that we would be very glad to go down. However, we are also open to simply going to the just transition fund and asking for that money. Because of the unique make-up of our campaign in the region, and the need for the just transition, we believe that we have merit that could feed into our campaign and take the pressure off Transport Scotland on funding other things throughout the country.

Graham Simpson: It could take 10 years, you have had multiple studies and appraisals, and nothing happens. That is the upshot, is it not?

Jordan Jack: That is the way it is going.

Graham Simpson: It is all very frustrating.

Jordan Jack: In a word, it is glacial.

Graham Simpson: You are absolutely right. That appears to be the way that things are.

I have not put a question to anyone else, in the interests of time. However, if anyone has thoughts about how we can speed things up, if you put your hand up, I will take one of you.

Nigel, you will have to be brief.

Nigel Mullan: I would say that we need to bring in the rail people.

Graham Simpson: Bring in the rail people. Bring in the experts. Okay. I will end there.

The Convener: We can finish the committee's session now—that is it. *[Laughter]*

I will jump ahead a little and go to Iris Duane next.

Iris Duane: Before I get into my questioning, I apologise to you, Jordan, for the length of the journey that you have had to make to come here. Thank you for coming.

Tom, the acronym for your group—RAGES—is absolutely fantastic and perhaps indicates how we all feel when we hear such stories.

I will do what Graham Simpson has done and really focus on one aspect. I will come to you, Nigel. My understanding is that your group used the rail development fund, I believe in 2018, and received around £82,000.

Nigel Mullan: It was the local rail development fund.

Iris Duane: Have you any reflections on whether the fund was effective for what your group wanted?

Nigel Mullan: Yes. I know that we have heard about the difficulties that some people have with consultants, which I think is probably the case for them. However, we were able to take it away from

being a desk-bound exercise, which is remote from locality, and bring the locality to their attention, which is vital for developing any project that impacts on communities. Sitting with a very supportive local authority and regional transport partnership was significant, alongside being able to get in touch with consultants who otherwise might not have been so concerned with the impacts of the kind of work and the sorts of things we were after.

Iris Duane: That is incredibly positive. Was enough funding available to you at that time, and is it potentially available at this time, to realise the vision of your group?

Nigel Mullan: Transport Scotland went at glacial speed and made every progression quite difficult, I guess because we did not fit into the strategic transport projects review 2 process, although the local rail development fund was set up to intervene for smaller-scale projects within a regional context. However, it kept us waiting and it was demanding more work, and that work had to be paid for extra to the £82,000. I think that SWestrans paid an extra £10,000 to answer a bunch of questions, which is held in documents. I have referenced them for the committee.

The process sometimes involved going around in circles. The abbreviation for Transport Scotland is "TS". In some instances, we felt that that might have stood for "transport sphinx", in that we were being asked riddles that Transport Scotland should have known the answers to. We therefore had to pay extra to progress matters, which seems to be a pattern.

11:45

Iris Duane: Just to be clear, and to ensure that I am hearing you correctly, you are saying that the fund was useful, but that you got money from the Government that went back into paying what will soon be a part of the Government for dealing with questions to which it should have already known the answers. Is that correct?

Nigel Mullan: Yes, pretty much.

Iris Duane: That does not seem to be too efficient, at the end of the day. Thank you for telling us about your experiences. Would you support a reintroduction of the fund to help other organisations like yours? Or should we consider retooling how we approach systems like this, so that we do not end up in another situation in which people fork out money to get questions answered by Transport Scotland?

Nigel Mullan: It is useful to have some kind of Government-sponsored scheme such as the local rail development fund, but the regional transport partnerships and the local authority transportation

teams also need to be strengthened. Those teams have some good people in them, some of whom I have known through the work that we are doing for longer than some of the campaigners, who come and go.

I am not a rail anorak, a trainspotter or anything like that, but I am concerned with the project because there seems to be such a huge community need for the station, and it would have such a huge community impact. The project is important, and it has been interesting and, at the same time, informative to be able to work with all these partners.

There needs to be a good, strong Government lead. A rail-led project or proposal needs strong regional strategy work, which the regional transport partnership people do, and, in this instance, it needs proper support from local authorities' transportation departments. We are just talking about transport—we are not talking about health, or anything like that.

Iris Duane: That speaks to the Government's ongoing work on local government reform and public sector reform, which I am sure that everyone in this meeting has opinions on. Thank you for your reflections on how the local rail development fund was used.

Do other witnesses have reflections on the fund and on whether it should be extended or brought back? I would be happy to hear from anyone.

Tom Thorburn: Last month, I went to a conference in Leeds with my colleague Barrie Forrest BEM, who is sitting behind me in the public gallery today. At that conference, it was brought up that groups like ours contribute £17.89 for every pound that is spent on them. That is an enormous return, is it not? That figure applies across the country. On the back of that conference, and what we have heard in this meeting, I am looking for there to be greater engagement with the groups, because they have the local knowledge that is needed to advise Transport Scotland. I want to see better engagement with it, and also with yourselves in the Parliament, because that is a huge statistic.

Iris Duane: I see that no one else wants to give their view. Thank you for your answer, Tom, and I certainly agree with that point. It echoes something that was said in our previous evidence session about linking groups more closely with the Government and the Parliament so that we can get more effective gains for your groups. Thank you so much for giving us your time today.

I have no further questions, convener.

The Convener: There has been reference—particularly by Jordan Jack, but by other witnesses, too—to the economic benefits and the

multipliers that we get from investment in these areas. I know that that is certainly the case in Newburgh.

Allison, based on your experience of projects that have already gone ahead in the Borders and elsewhere, what has the economic benefit been? Has it exceeded expectations in terms of passenger numbers, jobs and opportunities? What has your experience been in that area?

Allison Cosgrove: I will reference something that is in your back yard, convener, which is the railway station in Leven that reopened two years ago. I was there on the first day that it reopened, which was lovely, and I went back in the summer to see how things were going in Leven itself—a town that had really been on its uppers. I went round the shops, asking people, “Have you seen more trade? Have you seen more visitors?” and so on. Everyone, without exception, answered yes to those questions. People were really enthusiastic in saying that visitors were coming, especially on Sundays, because Leven has a lovely swimming pool and lovely beaches. I heard that the putting greens were being reopened and that the sea defences were being strengthened. It was wonderful to see that little town begin to blossom again.

I am a resident of East Linton, which Tom Thorburn mentioned, and our station opened nearly three years ago. I cannot tell you the difference that it has made to the village. We have new housing, which has brought in young families, and our shops are much more sustainable. When I come to Edinburgh now, I do not take my car on the city bypass and add to the chaos; I get on a TransPennine Express train at half-past eight, which is wonderful.

The Convener: Stop rubbing it in to Jordan Jack.

Allison Cosgrove: That will also happen for you in due course, Jordan. It did take us 20 years to reach that stage with East Linton, but it made such a difference to the whole village. We are connected with the rest of the world.

I was very involved with the Borders railway and have seen what has happened there and the huge benefit that it has brought. To cite one benefit that you might not think about, on the first day that I was down there I met a young Queen Margaret University student who told me that she was able to live at home while studying. The Borders suffers greatly from depopulation, so that is one real benefit for towns that are a bit further away.

The Convener: There is an argument that we should fix what we have already developed rather than building shiny new things. What do you think about that, Allison?

Allison Cosgrove: If a community is looking to develop a station that was in its area previously, or to develop a new station, as has happened in some areas, we should look closely at its case. As Nigel Mullan said, we should listen to what local groups and local people are saying. If they are going along to their MSP's office and saying, "We'd like a station because it will stop all the congestion on the motorways and I will not need to use my car," we should pay attention to that. The two bits of Government—the pro-rail bit and the bit that says, "Do not use your car"—do not seem to be joined up at all, which puzzles everybody.

Jordan Jack: I want to respond to the question about repair versus new. We need to keep up the railway because, otherwise, the bill will get bigger and bigger, and, all of a sudden, all that we will be able to afford is maintaining what we already have. However, we dinna need to replace like with like.

Aberdeen station used to have six through lines and many platforms for both directions. It now has only two through lines and three buffer-end platforms that face the south. Platforms 8 and 9 are still there, but they have no rails; they are just empty platforms. When we go to spend millions on renewing all that track at Aberdeen station, perhaps we should say, "Well, we are spending all this money, so could we spend just a little bit more and add those two lines in and give us all that extra capacity." Also, when it comes to things such as renewing signalling, we can add extra capacity by decreasing the gaps between trains and by modernising and updating old Victorian designs, so that we can run larger and longer trains and create more space for rail freight in particular.

There is also a question of targeting. To come back to the point about local knowledge, I will give two examples from my corner of the country. On the Aberdeen to Inverness line, it currently takes between two hours and 20 minutes and two and a half hours to go between those cities. The line is mostly single track, with some double-track sections. There are sections that are double track and then it goes to single track and back to double track. When we are renewing that single track, we could look at the sections between the double-track sections—for example, between Inverurie and Insch—and double just that section, and suddenly the line would be doubled all the way to Insch, as most of it has been done already.

My key point is that if we were to do that—I am nae saying that that alone would do it—and take the two hours and 20 minutes down to one hour and 59 minutes, suddenly train drivers and conductors could do two trips to Inverness and back in a day, rather than the one trip they currently do. The furthest that they can go in a day is to Huntly, back to Aberdeen and then to Inverness and back, because of the working time

regulations. If they could do two trips in a day, we could suddenly operate that line with half the staff—or, on a more positive note, we could double the number of trains on that line with the existing staff, or anything in between.

That is a targeted investment that could be paired with the repair budget. I am making the point that when we are repairing things, we should be looking at the opportunities that we have. We can think, "If we're doing a bit of work here, is there anything nearby that we could upgrade for a little bit extra along the line?"

I will quickly give a second example. I mentioned the empty platforms at Aberdeen station. Because we have only two through lines in Aberdeen and they are both intercity lines, train drivers spend more than 50 hours a week shunting trains out of the way of other trains to free up those through lines. That is 50 hours on a train driver's salary—whatever that is now—times however many drivers it takes. If we were to put those two lines in, there would be a steep up-front cost, but we wouldn't be spending that each way, and those staff could be redeployed to build resilience into other services.

All that said, however, we could spend all the money in the world, or in the Government, on upgrades to the railway, but in certain places it is nae gonna help. People in Fraserburgh, Peterhead and Ellon are nae going to be bothered about a train journey between Aberdeen and Inverness being under two hours, because they still need to spend an hour driving to Aberdeen in the first place. It very much depends on the area. As I said, we need to look at joined-up thinking as much as possible.

Nigel Mullan: To follow on from the exact points that have been made by my campaigner colleague, there is, in the control period, a spend earmarked by Network Rail for the line that passes through Newburgh between the junctions of Ladybank and Hilton, which is single track. It has earmarked in its maintenance work schedule a passing place. It could put that passing place right in the middle of that stretch of line, where Newburgh lies, and—following on from that logic, which is the sensible logic of previous campaigners' arguments—it could put in a couple of platform lengths at the same time.

The Convener: Excellent—I like your nice and simple solutions, Nigel.

Tom Thorburn: I will take up the point that Allison Cosgrove made about investment in Victorian structures. First, we all have to do better, do we not, for our young people. Young people came to us and said, "Please do something for us in the Scottish Borders"—on the eastern side, which is quite a distance from the Borders

railway—"such that we can get to university and come back home again." Not only has Reston station enabled that to happen; those youngsters have stayed with us in the Borders, whereas before there was an exodus.

The next thing that I want to speak about is the infrastructure. When the east coast main line was electrified the Calton tunnels were reduced to single line only, and that has caused huge problems for east coast main line traffic, such that we supposedly cannot get any more trains on to the line, because there are no more paths.

12:00

We want to see the same thing that happened in the Winchburgh tunnel, with electrification put back into the north Calton tunnel, such that it is retwinned and the paths are available. Almost every train has to sit outside Waverley station at Abbeyhill junction, waiting to get into the station. It is mainly the LNER trains that get preference to get into the station. We want to see the line retwinned, which would take away the congestion and allow more trains to run. That, in turn, would allow us to get more services for ourselves, down towards Berwick-upon-Tweed and on to Newcastle. We should be doing our best for our young people.

John Hamilton: I wanted to mention the Winchburgh tunnel, which is possibly another case study in how we really have to improve our transport planning. The Winchburgh tunnel was lowered by 2 feet in 2015 as part of the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme—the line electrification. We made an approach to Network Rail about whether it would be possible for us to do some of the railway station work at that time.

This is not down to Network Rail, but it could not be done, because the planning for the station had not been done in conjunction with electrifying the Glasgow rail line. For us, that could have been an opportunity to integrate things, but it could not be done, because the electrification of the Glasgow to Edinburgh line had priority. Nothing else was going to get in the way of that. Another new station was not going to be allowed to slow down electrification of the timetable. We did the timetable work that identified that the Dunblane and Stirling to Waverley timetable could be used with the new electrified service without any detriment. My question would be why that transport planning was not done in advance, so that that was already known.

Collette Stevenson: I want to discuss community benefits. When Transport Scotland and any of the big contractors start to carry out work that is subcontracted out, there are community benefits such as graduate schemes. I will use the example of East Kilbride, which is my

constituency. Luckily, we have just received two new train stations along with the electrification of the line. I would be keen to hear more about any experience of community benefits for constituents.

John, you have been talking about the housing at Winchburgh and about the developers and the further contribution that could be made to the town, so I will bring you in first.

John Hamilton: I agree with other opinions that have been expressed. Rail investment can be transformational for an area, whether or not that refers to small towns that are on their uppers, as has been mentioned. It can change people's lives. Our overall public transport strategy relies on buses as well, but buses do not work for everyone. Buses very often need subsidy; they do not turn up very often. On the integration of bus services with rail transport, locating transport hubs or nodes can generate growth for an area. It has been proved that creating those nodes boosts economic growth in any major city or town, and that helps people's lives. It helps them to move around and get jobs, and it creates better communities. We see that almost daily.

The support for the railway station in Winchburgh has never faltered. People want to see it getting done. However, the challenges are huge. As I said, a better way of planning such things and communicating that to people, so that they can have greater certainty on where they want to live, would be a big help.

Collette Stevenson: Thanks very much.

Allison Cosgrove, you have covered quite a few projects.

Allison Cosgrove: When the station was proposed in East Linton, the field near the station immediately went up for sale, so we knew that we would get new houses. However, we are not a very big village, and we thought that new houses would be good. We have had about 80 of them. We have had lots of young families. You cannot have a village full of old grannies like me. You need young families. That keeps the school, the shops and the church open, and the cubs, scouts and guides—all the things that a village depends on. They are the life-blood of a village. We can sit at the back, getting older.

People sometimes decry having a lot of housing. For example, housing has changed Dunbar enormously. It has made Dunbar, which was a very small village, into a very large town, and there have been huge improvements in its rail service because of that.

To digress south of the border for a moment, Ashington was a bit like Leven—very neglected ex-mining communities. The railway line opened

two years ago and all that can be seen along the line now is house building.

Collette Stevenson: I will just say that we still need all our grannies. Thanks, Allison.

Tom Thorburn: I will reiterate that the Scottish Borders has the biggest proportion of senior citizens in Scotland. That is for two reasons. One of the main reasons was that our youngsters were leaving. However, since the station reopened, that flow of youngsters out from the eastern Borders has been stemmed, because they are staying at home.

The other thing is that, just now, a huge development is taking place off Eyemouth: the Berwick Bank wind farm. We are working with the harbour master at Eyemouth. The harbour is to be extended to about three times its size, to cater for all the vessels that will go out to support that wind farm. The harbour master has said that he does not want a construction village there; he wants all those people to come in by train.

We have set up a meeting on 12 November with the managing director and senior staff of our provider, TransPennine Express, such that we can bring in integrated bus services. We will bring the harbour master to that meeting. We in Scotland—in Britain—are very poor at integrated transport. We want to showcase it, because the harbour master is willing to put up money, as the council will have to do. Currently, six vessels work out of Eyemouth for the Neart na Gaoithe site, and Berwick Bank is going to be 10 times the size of that. Those people will need transport, and they will need it to be integrated. We hear that people are travelling from Newcastle in taxis because there is no connectivity. The harbour master wants that to be stemmed and he wants us to help him achieve that objective.

Nigel Mullan: I will jump in very quickly about the Levenmouth project. We were talking about the involvement of the community and community benefit. There was a very good project along the River Leven that used youngsters and voluntary groups to regenerate and restore it. There was work on conservation, footpaths, plantings and all the rest of it, so that when the trains were arriving along the riverway, it had also already been transformed. They did a very good black and white animation of that project, which is on YouTube, and which captures beautifully the kind of thing that you are after, because it introduced a lot of new skills to people, and it introduced youngsters to filmmaking, animation, script writing and all that stuff.

Collette Stevenson: Thanks very much. That is really interesting.

Lloyd Melville: You will be aware of the commentary, particularly after the election, about public service reform and the opportunities that the Government sees to improve efficiency of public spending and to increase the pace of delivery.

We had Transport Scotland in front of us a few weeks ago and we were talking about the length of time that it takes to deliver rail projects. I was hoping to start with you, Allison, given your experience of multiple projects. When it comes to bringing Transport Scotland back in-house, are the issues solely structural, or is there also a cultural issue? What practical steps would you like to see to speed up delivery of future rail projects?

Allison Cosgrove: There might be some who think that it is a cultural ethos; perhaps it is simply that things do not get done in a hurry. However, when you are campaigning for a station for 20 years, it does seem like an awful long time.

How do we bring about change? Others will have different viewpoints, but perhaps it is about more frequent dialogue, a feeling that people are not in silos, a feeling of being listened to, and people being able to make valid points that are taken on board. If people are saying, “Look, thousands of people are driving from this town to work every day because the station is not open,” that should not simply be disregarded; it should be acted on. That is the kind of thing that I mean.

Lloyd Melville: Nigel, you said earlier that you wanted to get the rail experts in. Are there any other practical steps that you would like to see come out of public service reform?

Nigel Mullan: It all seems to be a bit up in the air, this plan to reform. I mean, how many times over the years have we been reforming Government, local government, regions and all the rest of it? I think that we need these national bodies and that they should maybe be a bit more accountable to bodies such as this committee and the Parliament. We also have to strengthen regional transport partnerships and local authorities.

This is perhaps a broader issue, but there has also been a lot of talk about place—about developing place, transforming place and having pride in place and even having growth in every postcode. However, we have to look down the telescope both ways. Local communities also need support in developing projects. We could talk about community development workers. All of that costs money, to be sure. However, within regions and local authorities, and perhaps even within Transport Scotland, maybe there should be teams of people or a person who could engage more directly with local communities to help them get on with community development, which is broad brush.

Transport will not change everything; there is a multitude of other issues. Newburgh started looking at that through its sustainable Newburgh project, which examined what people thought and what they felt they needed. The railway station emerged at the top of the list, and it was pursued helter-skelter thereafter.

12:15

Lloyd Melville: Is it your view, then, that the answer is not only engagement but deeper community engagement at those levels?

Nigel Mullan: Absolutely.

Lloyd Melville: Do you have any reflections on that, Tom?

Tom Thorburn: Yes. I formed a group in 1996 and, from then on, the aim was to reopen East Linton and Reston stations, and East Lothian Council asked us to take on Haddington as well. In that period, the committee and I had very little dialogue with Transport Scotland; all our dialogue was with the transport minister. To be honest, I felt at the time that the Government was dictating that we should not engage with Transport Scotland. Therefore, I stepped away from that and all my dialogue was with the minister and the MSPs who were on board with us.

East Linton station opened on 13 December 2023, so we are now a wee bit on from that and ready to build up again and put our case forward for Haddington station. However, that is how it was for us: all the dialogue was done via the transport minister.

Lloyd Melville: The Government is talking about fundamentally changing how Transport Scotland functions by bringing it back in-house. Is that an opportunity to make positive changes?

Tom Thorburn: I would like what we have all said to the committee today to be taken on board, so that we can have more engagement with Transport Scotland. It is a two-way thing: it is not only about Transport Scotland speaking to us; it is about us speaking to Transport Scotland.

Lloyd Melville: Thanks for that, Tom. Government officials watch this committee very closely, so I am sure that that will be taken on board.

I will come to you next, John. What are your reflections on public service reform?

John Hamilton: Whether Transport Scotland is in-house or not, getting the people who need to develop programmes and discuss agendas together in one room, whether it is a meeting room, a workspace or an office, needs to happen in a much more integrated way. Way back, we found it

difficult to have conversations with Transport Scotland officers—things later improved for us—and have separate conversations with Network Rail, and we could tell that the bodies were not speaking to each other.

We were ultimately able to present our project as one in which we had planning obligations to meet in terms of other forms of public transport, and we had an obligation to develop an integrated transport strategy and look at a business case for rail. I am not a rail or transport expert, but we were left to do that, and we had to find the right people to get into the room. For that reason, and for the other reasons that I mentioned earlier, achieving that took quite a few years. Once we did so, we found that the level of collaboration was very good. Getting people aligned on the same agenda through meetings and working arrangements improved dramatically. That speaks to the need to review the culture of having silos for different parts of transport delivery in Scotland.

Lloyd Melville: Thanks, John. It is also an opportunity to improve accountability and get it to the right place.

Jordan, when I mentioned culture earlier, I saw you nodding enthusiastically.

Jordan Jack: I would not go as far as saying that the culture at Transport Scotland is anti-rail, but it is certainly abrasive at times. I disagree with some of the other witnesses about whether Transport Scotland itself needs reform. We saw the announcement to take the agency in-house as positive because of the opportunity that it provides.

Local knowledge is key. Even having such an agency based in the central belt makes it difficult for places such as ours, because every time Transport Scotland officials have come up to visit or attend an event that we have held, sometimes alongside the transport minister or our local MSPs, our time has been cut short because they had to get back home again. It is literally that simple for us. We are always rushing to get out the door. We can never say enough to them, and they can never say enough to us.

We talk about reducing the need to travel in our transport policy. We certainly need centralised transport policies and strategies, but we already have transport partnerships in our council areas. Nestrans, SEStran and many others have local knowledge and ties to their communities and they regularly engage with councillors. Therefore, I see this as an opportunity to distribute Transport Scotland's power to our local authorities or similar bodies.

Lloyd Melville: I will come in there, because the Government has published its first goal as part of its local government reform programme, and there

are questions about the future of regional transport partnerships and whether they should be brought into the new regional council model that the Government is looking at. Do you have a particular view on that balance of power?

Jordan Jack: Having regional transport partnerships is very useful. Nestrans, which comprises politicians, people in the community and people in the industry, has been an enormous help to us, even just by having the expertise to help us navigate the system.

To put a head on this, when we have engaged with MSPs and MPs during our campaigns, we have found it easy to lobby them and have positive engagement. However, a lot of councillors have fed back to us that they feel like it is nae their job. They feel that, because we are campaigning for such a large project, it is a national Government thing and nae really for them. What else can they dae apart from publicly giving us their support?

If transport decisions were taken closer to the transport partnerships in the localities, they widna feel that way. They would feel like they had the power to help transport projects come through in their communities.

Lloyd Melville: Thanks, Jordan.

The Convener: Witnesses, you have been excellent. Thank you very much for your expert evidence and advice. The dysfunction of the process, the need for expertise in the process and the need for speed are all factors that have come across very clearly from you all. You have had a range of experiences: some of you have delivered projects and some of you are perhaps a little bit further away from achieving them. The session has been incredibly valuable and will feed into the pre-budget report that we will submit to the Parliament and that the Government will therefore read, so thank you very much for your evidence. Do follow our proceedings. If you wish to provide any other advice or evidence in future, do not hesitate to contact the clerks.

This is the last meeting at which we will have Pauline McIntyre as our clerk. I was going to say that she is going off to do lesser things, but they are bigger and better things. We wish her well. She has been excellent at getting the committee up to speed from a standing start and, on behalf of us all, I thank Pauline for her excellent advice and support over the past few months. We wish her well for what comes next.

Greg Black is stepping up to fill Pauline's shoes. We have already got to know him through our proceedings behind the scenes, and we look forward to working with him more closely over the next period.

12:25

Meeting continued in private until 12:46.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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