

# **LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE**

Wednesday 14 January 2009

Session 3

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## LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

### 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting 2009, Session 3

#### CONVENER

\*Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)

#### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP)

#### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP)

\*Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)

\*David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)

\*Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)

\*Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD)

\*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

#### COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP)

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD)

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con)

\*attended

#### THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Veronica Burbridge (Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland)

John Esslemont (Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland)

Michael Levack (Scottish Building Federation)

Bill Potts (Scottish Society of Directors of Planning)

Bob Stewart (Scottish Society of Directors of Planning)

#### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Susan Duffy

#### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

David McLaren

#### ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

#### LOCATION

Committee Room 5



## Scottish Parliament

### Local Government and Communities Committee

*Wednesday 14 January 2009*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:01*]

### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Duncan McNeil):** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the first meeting in 2009 of the Local Government and Communities Committee. I give a special welcome to Susan Duffy in her role as clerk to the committee. I am sure that I speak on behalf of all members of the committee in saying that we look forward to working with her in the coming years.

I remind members of the public and committee members to turn off their mobile phones and BlackBerrys.

Agenda item 1 is to decide whether to take agenda item 4 in private.

**John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP):** Should we not be deciding whether to take items 3 and 4 in private?

**The Convener:** We have to decide whether to take item 4 in private. Under that item, the committee will consider its approach to future work. Do members agree to take it in private?

**Members indicated agreement.**

## National Planning Framework

10:02

**The Convener:** Agenda item 2 is the national planning framework. I welcome our first witness, Michael Levack, who is chief executive of the Scottish Building Federation. I thank him for his attendance and invite him to introduce himself and to make some short introductory remarks before we move to questions.

**Michael Levack (Scottish Building Federation):** Thank you, convener. I welcome the opportunity to appear on a panel of one.

It may be of assistance if I put into context what the Scottish Building Federation is and my personal background. The Scottish Building Federation is 114 years young. It has some 700 members from Orkney to the Borders and is a true federation. We have 17 local associations throughout Scotland, and member companies from major contractors to small and medium-sized enterprises down to sole traders. Our members are building contractors. We do not represent volume house builders, although we have some dual members—some companies are also members of Homes for Scotland. Some of our small and medium-sized members are involved in development work that they have procured themselves.

I have been in the construction industry all my working life and consider myself to be a builder and chartered surveyor.

Planning is clearly of great significance and interest to our member companies. When I was invited to join the committee this morning to give evidence on the national planning framework, I wanted to take the opportunity that I was given, although I did not think that I would be sitting here by myself. There we are, though.

The next panel that the committee will take evidence from will consist of people who are perhaps more articulate on the finer points of planning and its technical, nitty-gritty issues. My comments will come from the perspective of an average member of the Scottish Building Federation. I will think about what they would see as NPF 2's implications for their business, if they read it.

**The Convener:** We appreciate that and your attendance. One reason why we invited you here was to get a perspective from what is overly commonly described as the front line.

**Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP):** I will open up the discussion by asking about the extensiveness and effectiveness of the Scottish Government's consultation on NPF 2. The

consultation received 242 substantive responses. Can you offer any comments on how effective the exercise was?

**Michael Levack:** I cannot comment specifically on that consultation. As a trade body with limited resources, we need to contend with the amount of consultation that is of interest to the construction sector and the fact that it is far ranging. It can be difficult to respond to all the consultations, given our limited resources. We did not respond to the consultation purely because we need to be selective about which consultations we deal with.

**Alasdair Allan:** Was the construction industry more generally involved in the consultation exercise?

**Michael Levack:** I believe so. I know that a kindred body that we have a good working relationship with—Homes for Scotland—made a submission. I think that the timescale for responding to the consultation was fairly limited.

**Alasdair Allan:** A more important issue is the outcome of the consultation. Do the changes that were made to NPF 2 take into account—or are they a consequence of—views that were expressed by the construction industry more generally during the consultation?

**Michael Levack:** I cannot give a view on that, as I have not read the hundreds of consultation submissions. I looked at some of them in preparation for this morning's meeting, but I have not reviewed them all.

**Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab):** Good morning. Does the national planning framework provide guidance and support for the future investment plans of Scottish Building Federation members?

**Michael Levack:** Having given evidence on the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill in the previous parliamentary session, I was aware of the development of the national planning framework. As a concept, having a framework that highlights matters of national importance seems sensible.

Having gone through the NPF document, my only comment is that it is not readily readable and understandable. It contains lots of buzz words that I suspect different people will interpret in different ways. I appreciate that NPF 2 is a strategic document, but one would need to be an experienced planner or practitioner to grasp some of the issues in it. The document could be a little clearer and less repetitious.

When I went through the document thoroughly in preparation for this meeting, I was left wondering what the average member of our federation would make of it. I understand what the Government is trying to achieve, but I am slightly disappointed that the comments on some aspects—housing,

the regeneration of vacant or derelict land, and water and drainage—are fairly limited. I am unclear about exactly how any action programme will ultimately happen. The most important issue for the construction and house-building sector is when projects will be put into action. The document contains a lot of aspirational thoughts and positive future developments for Scotland, but unless they are put into action, the framework will be almost meaningless.

**Mary Mulligan:** Is your fear that, although it is helpful to have such a strategy document, developments might not happen in practice?

**Michael Levack:** Clearly, the planning system has been the subject of constant, and often negative, media comment. That comes over when speaking to local authority planners. We are actually on the planners' side, if you like, in wanting a planning system that is fit for purpose, is properly resourced and can tackle not just projects of national importance but day-to-day issues at a local level. The national planning framework by itself will not achieve that. As many people have commented, a change of culture is required. There is also a resourcing issue. Those issues must be tackled if the framework is to be successful and deliver what it sets out to do.

**Mary Mulligan:** You mention that you gave evidence on the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill, which, I hope, was about changing the culture. You also mentioned water and drainage issues. Have those issues been dealt with satisfactorily so that they are no longer a block?

**Michael Levack:** No, definitely not. Not a week goes past in which we do not deal with an issue for our members on live projects. That has perhaps quietened down slightly because of the lack of activity, but generally there is a long way to go. I appreciate that the national planning framework has been developed in a world that is changing by the day, let alone the week, which is difficult, so I do not want to be overly critical, but I detect that people have gone back and redrafted sections of the framework to pick up on the latest changes in the economy. Ultimately, on infrastructure and housing, which are essential for the future wellbeing of Scotland, we must address the funding issues, because without funding we can have all the aspirational thoughts in the world, but they will not happen.

**Mary Mulligan:** Do you mean the funding issues in relation to the water and drainage infrastructure?

**Michael Levack:** Yes.

**Mary Mulligan:** You are helpfully pre-empting my questions. My next and final question is about the current situation. There seem to be new developments each week. The situation is putting

financial pressures on your members. Is the framework flexible enough to adapt as situations change?

**Michael Levack:** Given the words that have been used, it is intended to be, but many local authorities' capital receipts have dropped off severely and they have a reduced income stream from planning applications and fees. Our concern is that the culture change and all the measures that need to be put in place at a basic working level to allow the planning system to improve significantly and to make the national planning framework a success will not be put in place because local authorities will find it difficult to invest in their planning departments when cash is tight and receipts are dropping off. Now is the time to get things sorted out at the working level to ensure that, when we start to come out of the recession, we come out of the starting blocks quickly and get some of the projects moving.

**The Convener:** I have a quick follow-up question. You raise issues about planning and resources capacity. What is your solution?

**Michael Levack:** I believe that none of the planning authorities the length and breadth of Scotland has a full complement of staff. Whether they are in city centres or more rural areas, the authorities all struggle to recruit and retain staff. Morale does not appear to be particularly good, which leads to problems with sickness and absence—there is a downwards spiral. For a building contractor, it would not be a legitimate excuse for somebody to say, "We just can't get the staff. We've tried, but it's very difficult." They would be told, "I don't care what you do, just get the brickies and make sure you deliver the job on time."

In some respects, the issue is funding, as salaries need to be reviewed. However, the marketplace is different now compared with 12 months ago, because the situation has changed drastically. A year ago, there were comments that the private sector was taking people from the public sector, which was another pressure on local authorities in recruiting and retaining staff.

To be frank, we cannot always just shrug our shoulders and say, "We've tried to get staff, but we can't get them." Planners do an essential job. I suspect that, in many cases, the pay structure needs to be reviewed. However, the economic climate is slightly different now, so that position will be difficult to uphold when the income stream to local authority planning departments is reducing. A big fear of our members is that the work that needs to be done on development activity in this relatively quiet period will not be undertaken and that the resources will not be in place to be ready for when we come out of the recession.

10:15

**John Wilson:** Good morning, Mr Levack. The debate about local authority planning departments is for another day. However, it is interesting that you raised the link between the national planning framework and local plans, which local authorities develop. Is the national planning framework co-ordinated enough with local authorities' plans? I ask you to bear in mind that what local authorities do in their local plans is not part of our examination of the national planning framework: the discussion is about a national policy framework that takes forward major projects, not about local housing or other developments.

**Michael Levack:** I cannot really comment, because I have not been involved with local authorities or asked them that question, but I am sure that the next witnesses will be able to answer. However, my gut feeling is that there is room for improvement.

**John Wilson:** I am trying to draw out the issue. One concern that has been expressed—Mr Levack mentioned it—involves the national planning framework and local authorities. You referred a lot to what happens locally and you talked about local planning officers. However, the framework concerns not local issues but projects that are of national significance to Scotland. Does the federation think that the framework contains enough for its members to get their teeth into in the next 20 years, or does the document lack aspiration?

**Michael Levack:** Are you talking about work?

**John Wilson:** Yes—potential work for your members.

**Michael Levack:** The infrastructure investment plan provides great optimism and hope about potential work, but without funding and without projects coming through, the plan is only aspirational. We need the projects. I do not want to divert into a discussion about the state of the industry, but speed is of the essence. A steady work flow of projects is critical. Just over a year ago, the industry was gearing up to meet the demands for housing, but that work stream has suddenly disappeared.

I return to your point about the relationship between local authorities and nationally significant projects. I know from going round local authorities in recent years that every local authority has at any one time a project that it considers to be significant. Such projects might not meet the criteria for classification as nationally important, but they involve major planning applications that local authorities must deal with. The implication of such projects is that they draw staff away from more mundane, day-to-day stuff. That is another

pressure on local authorities. The two aspects are closely linked.

**The Convener:** Will the national planning framework give the construction industry more confidence to plan for investment? Will it help?

**Michael Levack:** No, not in itself. We must deal with the delays that we constantly face in the planning system. The national planning framework comments on dealing with infrastructure and housing, but it needs to do more, because it does not address adequately how projects will be funded and provided.

**The Convener:** Is that because of the economic situation? If we did not have the difficult economic circumstances, would the position be the same?

**Michael Levack:** The position would be the same. Those questions would remain unanswered.

**Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP):** Good morning, Mr Levack. Thank you for joining us. I will return to consultation on the national planning framework, which Alasdair Allan raised at the start.

You rightly acknowledged that, because of time constraints and demands on your organisation, you did not make a submission to the NPF 2 consultation. I wonder if that underlies the fact that there is a disconnection between the planning framework and those who are involved in the building industry. You said that NPF 2 is full of planner jargon rather than straight talk. Should future planning frameworks—NPF 3, whenever it emerges—have less planner jargon, and would that make them more user-friendly for your industry?

**Michael Levack:** I would like to see that. Having been in the industry all my life and been involved in development work, I would like to think that I would have a better grasp of the NPF 2 document, but I almost asked myself, “Am I missing something here?” The framework is a little bit woolly. It has some good intentions, but a lot of buzz words. Equally, it is a strategic document, and maybe that is what comes with it.

**Bob Doris:** Perhaps it is missing a straight-talking summary.

**Michael Levack:** That might help.

**Bob Doris:** Did your organisation make a submission to the consultation on NPF 1?

**Michael Levack:** No.

**Bob Doris:** So, over a long period of time, there has been a disconnection between those who are involved in planning and those in the building industry. That is not something new that has to be addressed.

**Michael Levack:** But, as I said, the bulk of our members are building contractors. Some of them undertake development work, but most of them are contractors, so the framework might have limited significance to them. We just have to pick and choose our priorities when we are responding to consultations.

**Bob Doris:** I will not drag you into political discussions about how we fund national infrastructure; the politicians on the committee can look at that another day. However, there are obviously issues around how we fund large national infrastructure projects that make it difficult to estimate start dates for a lot of them. Would such start dates give your industry more assurance and confidence in planning for the future?

**Michael Levack:** The infrastructure investment plan contains estimated start dates but, as Mary Mulligan said, we have to deal with the funding issues.

When dealing with any of these documents, such as the first infrastructure investment plan that came out under the previous Administration, I ask myself, if I was running a construction business, what would I glean from it? Would I be able to base my business and my employment and recruitment patterns, for example, on it? Some of the information is useful, but some of the detail is very vague. The start dates are a little bit loose, shall we say. Equally, they are not clear—they might include procurement periods. I am asking when will the project be available for bidding or tendering, and when will I be able to put a shovel in the ground? We have to remember that contractors and developers only start to get a return on their investment when they put the shovel in the ground. If we do not reduce the lead-in periods, whether for planning, infrastructure or procurement, we will not achieve sustainable economic growth.

**Bob Doris:** Thank you. That is a well-made point. Politicians of all parties have to get together to sort out the funding issues so that we can give more assurances to your sector, Mr Levack.

**Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab):** Good morning, Mr Levack. You touched on the point that the NPF is a strategic document, which might limit how explicit it can be. If there were prioritisation of the major projects in the NPF, a clear commitment to funding—wherever it came from—and a clear timetable, would that help your industry in the normal course of events? Would it help, particularly at the moment, by allowing people to see that work is potentially coming?

**Michael Levack:** Yes.

**Patricia Ferguson:** So your industry needs and is looking for that kind of detail and clarity.



**Michael Levack:** Yes.

**Patricia Ferguson:** That is interesting. Thank you.

**Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD):** Good morning, Mr Levack. I am interested in specific skills for some of the key projects that the cabinet secretary has identified in the framework document. Whether it is the new Forth crossing, improvements to the electricity grid or building new power stations, people with specific skills will be required. I do not know whether many of your members will have the skills to carry out those projects but, even if they do not, is it necessary, in a wider context, to have some of the relevant skills in place as early as possible in the planning process, so that they come through when they are needed? Would it be helpful if the proposed framework prioritised projects, to help you and other organisations to plan the specific, high-quality skills and tradesmen who have to be in place to work on them?

**Michael Levack:** That would be very helpful. Our sector skills body, ConstructionSkills, does a lot of work on forecasting what the marketplace will provide in the way of work, and how to match that with the availability of resources. In the current climate, it is very difficult to retain those resources.

The industry has often been challenged over recent years. People have asked me about skills shortages, but I always maintain that, although high-quality tradesmen or managerial staff in the construction sector have been hard to come by, we should consider the growth that has been handled by many Scottish companies—either United Kingdom companies with operating divisions in Scotland or locally based companies. Many companies have increased their turnover significantly in recent years, by 25, 30, 40 or 50 per cent. Clearly, they have managed to get the labour. You might say that they have done so using eastern European labour, but the numbers show that such labour accounts for a maximum of 5 per cent of the workforce, which is not huge. Companies have managed. The industry is used to coping with peaks and troughs, at least to a limited degree, as far as the need for resources is concerned.

Looking forward, prioritising the projects would certainly help ConstructionSkills, the Scottish Building Apprenticeship and Training Council and the various sectors within construction to gear up for them.

**The Convener:** The straight question is whether the Scottish construction industry has the capacity to achieve the national developments within the lifetime of the national planning framework.

**Michael Levack:** That is a very pertinent question, as we are losing capacity in a serious way—by the day. It is very difficult to predict what the next six months or year will hold. I am always surprised when people speculate that there will be some recovery in the economy during 2009. Personally, without wishing to wear the black hat and sound a note of doom and gloom, I think that it will be 2011 before we see any improvement in the situation. That is why we are constantly calling for some infrastructure projects to be brought forward, to allow us to retain capacity in the industry.

Major projects are always going to rely on people coming from outside Scotland to supplement our workforce. That has always been the case. If we go back to the previous century and the building of hydro schemes, a lot of migrant labour was used—the workers happened to be from Ireland, rather than eastern Europe. That will be the case in the future—a degree of migrant labour will always supplement our resources.

**The Convener:** If the decline continues, might that 5 per cent grow to 20 or 30 per cent?

**Michael Levack:** It might. I fear that, if we do not get projects moving in the short term, we will be faced with rampant construction inflation—and I use those words carefully—when we start to come out of recession.

**The Convener:** What work and discussions have taken place? Have any studies been carried out on the matter? Has your organisation or affiliated organisations done any work to assess the level of capacity? In particular, what discussions have taken place with the Scottish Government on the priorities and how to deliver them?

10:30

**Michael Levack:** Monitoring the required resources is done through ConstructionSkills. Most trade bodies in the construction sector participate in that sector skills council and in the others that relate to the construction sector. The figures for the future staffing and managerial requirements are tested and are believed to be fairly accurate.

We have continuing discussions with the Scottish Government on bringing forward work for the industry. We do not receive any form of grant subsidy; all that we want is a continuous flow of work.

I accept that there are demands on budgets. However, if we are to deliver the projects of national significance, the 35,000 houses a year that have been requested and the improvements in transport infrastructure, and if we are to move

towards low-carbon housing that uses efficient and renewable energy, it is a serious concern that the industry is losing capacity at a fast rate of knots. At the moment, there is little light at the end of the tunnel.

**David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con):** Good morning, Mr Levack. My apologies for having missed your introductory remarks.

Does your organisation feel that the national planning framework should prescribe the number of houses that we should seek to build in each region?

**Michael Levack:** If the national planning framework does that, it will have to be done in consultation with local providers of housing and with the people who know what the demands will be. I would have thought that it was slightly academic whether the information was stated in the framework, because the information will surely have come from the local level. It would be dangerous for someone to sit in Edinburgh and prescribe the numbers without any consultation. The mix of tenures, and all the other details, will have to be dealt with at local level by the local authority, private developers and housing associations.

**David McLetchie:** That would be a fair comment were it not for the fact that someone sitting in Edinburgh has determined that, by 2015, 35,000 houses have to be built in Scotland every year. How will the person in Edinburgh who prescribes that figure ensure that it is delivered?

**Michael Levack:** One would assume and expect that the figure of 35,000 houses has been calculated by aggregating the details from the local areas, and has not just been plucked out of the sky.

**David McLetchie:** I suspect that it has, in fact, been plucked out of the sky. We have heard evidence from Homes for Scotland, and the number of houses allocated in the development plans of all Scotland's councils is around 24,600 a year; and—surprise, surprise—the rate of house construction in recent years in Scotland, both private sector and for rent, is around 24,000 or 25,000.

In the current economic climate, how will you achieve a step change, in the space of six years, from the level of 24,000 or 25,000—which has been the level in the industry for many years—to a target level of 35,000? Those development plans are approved by ministers.

**Michael Levack:** The bigger challenge for us this year is that completions are at around the 11,000 level. There is a target of 35,000, but targets can be a problem. Are they realistic? Are they based on fact? Should they in fact be higher?

The target has been set, but given the state of the economy, and given that we will complete only 11,000 houses this year, I suggest that it will take a number of years to get back to the figure of 24,000 or 25,000 completions a year.

**David McLetchie:** I absolutely agree. I thought that the 35,000 target was a complete nonsense when it was announced. It flew in the face of the experience of the industry over many years and it went against the content of development plans that had already been approved.

Let us assume for a moment that there is no recession and that we are simply discussing the structure of the planning system in this context. How can a national target, involving the step change that we have discussed, be achieved without a degree of prescription? The development plan of a local authority may specify a certain number of houses—say, 1,000—for a particular area; but the national target will not be achieved without ministers throwing the local authority's figure back and saying, "That's no good. You've got to build more. We want to build 35,000 houses nationally and you've got to play your part."

**Michael Levack:** I still maintain that the national total must be based on accurate requirements from the local regions. It is no different to running a large public limited company with different operating divisions in different parts of the country. It would be absolutely wrong to dictate from plc headquarters what the turnover of each division will be in the next year. It is necessary to take at least some cognisance of what the local business says its current marketplace is.

The same philosophy applies to housing. It is necessary to understand the demand and the likelihood of building the houses. The big challenge that the house building sector faces is a totally inadequate supply of land that is ready to build on.

**David McLetchie:** Absolutely, but our problem is that our Scottish Government plc has prescribed a total from the centre that bears no relation to the local totals.

**Michael Levack:** One hopes that it would bear some relation.

**David McLetchie:** Experience suggests otherwise, does it not?

**Michael Levack:** I could not comment on that because I am not au fait with the matter.

**David McLetchie:** Really? We will leave it at that.

**The Convener:** I call John Wilson.

**Michael Levack:** It would have been useful if David McLetchie had heard my opening comments about who we represent.

**David McLetchie:** Oh, I know who you represent, Mr Levack. You say—and I agree with every word—that any national total must take cognisance of what can be delivered and must be the sum of local totals. It seems to me completely illogical to pluck out of the air a figure that bears no relationship to local totals and to give no direction as to how that national total can be achieved locally. I simply invite you to agree with that. I do not disagree with you; I am inviting you to agree with me.

**The Convener:** I do not want to interrupt the conversation, but I have just called John Wilson to ask some questions.

**John Wilson:** I welcome Mr McLetchie's comments on the house building strategy, but it is not part of the national planning framework.

**David McLetchie:** Yes it is.

**John Wilson:** Is it?

**David McLetchie:** There are whole pages of it.

**John Wilson:** We are considering the major projects that the Government has presented. There are clearly issues. One that the convener raised is the skills shortage. Mr Levack mentioned the sector skills council and the industry considering what skills are required. Some members of the Parliament have raised the need for more apprenticeships, particularly in the building trade. How do your members view the aspirations on apprenticeship numbers?

**Michael Levack:** Good—you are now on a topic that I know in fine detail.

The federation administers the Scottish Building Apprenticeship and Training Council, which is responsible for the registration and apprenticeship scheme for crafts including joinery, brickwork and plastering, which we refer to as the biblical crafts; there are other apprenticeship schemes for electricians and plumbers. The figures for 2007 show that the Scottish industry recruited 5,000 new apprentices. In the SBATC, we registered 2,800 of them in the biblical crafts. At the end of December, the 2008 figures dropped to something like 2,200. If you asked me to speculate on the figure for this year, I would say that we would be lucky to hit 1,500. That clearly has a knock-on effect on the supply of young people to enter the industry.

**The Convener:** So we had 5,000 in 2007, without all the other qualifications. That drops to 1,500—

**Michael Levack:** No, 5,000 is the cumulative total for all the parts of the construction sector in

Scotland. We are responsible for only the biblical crafts, which accounted for 2,800 of that 5,000. Last year, it was 2,200 and, this year, I predict that it may drop as low as 1,500.

**John Wilson:** How many people who start an apprenticeship complete it? One concern that I have picked up from the building trade, in particular, is that people who have left school or are on modern apprenticeships are starting apprenticeships in the building trade but finding it difficult to finish them because there is not the work that would allow them to do that and the construction industry has had to let them go.

**Michael Levack:** That is currently a challenge. Half an hour ago, just before I left the office, one of my colleagues was desperately trying to help the father of a young apprentice to get him relocated to a new position. We suspect that between 150 and 200 of the 2,200 new registrations last year have been made redundant. We have managed to find new places for the majority of them, but a number are still either on their notice period or unallocated to a new employer. That is a major challenge. Not everyone will be placed with a new employer, which is a problem.

**Mary Mulligan:** Have you had any discussions with the Scottish Government about support to ensure that people finish their apprenticeships?

**Michael Levack:** We are pushing for further support through ConstructionSkills. When a third or fourth-year apprentice is unfortunately made redundant, there is not much incentive for someone to take that person on, especially in more remote areas, where it is even more difficult to have a forward supply of work.

**Mary Mulligan:** Do you have a figure for what would enable you at least to ensure that those people complete their apprenticeships?

**Michael Levack:** It would be a little more attractive for employers to take them on if the grant was in the region of £2,000. Currently a company gets £200 for taking on a third or fourth-year apprentice.

**The Convener:** Members have no further questions. Thank you for your attendance and for the evidence that you have given this morning.

10:42

*Meeting suspended.*

10:43

*On resuming—*

**The Convener:** I welcome our second panel of witnesses: John Esslemont, convener of the Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland; Veronica

Burbridge, national director of the RTPI in Scotland; Bill Potts, project manager for Glasgow City Council, from the Scottish Society of Directors of Planning; and Bob Stewart, director of environmental services at Moray Council, also from the Scottish Society of Directors of Planning. Thank you for your attendance. I invite you to introduce yourselves and to make some short introductory remarks before we move to questions.

**John Esslemont (Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland):** I am the convener, for this year, of the RTPI in Scotland. We welcome the opportunity to give evidence in this inquiry. I wish to make a number of introductory statements prior to questioning; I hope that you will bear with me.

The RTPI in Scotland is a long-time advocate of a spatial strategy for Scotland. We warmly welcome the publication of NPF 2, which is a major achievement for Scotland. We note Scotland's leadership in the United Kingdom in creating such a strategy. The NPF has an important role to play in providing a corporate view of the spatial implications of Government policy, and we would like all Government directorates and public agencies to reflect NPF 2 in their implementation plans.

We do not consider economic development and environmental protection to be mutually exclusive and think that additional steps could be taken to further environmental capital for economic development.

10:45

We consider that the national developments that are identified are, in general, a pragmatic choice but that, as the previous witness said, more detailed costings and stakeholder involvement will be required to ensure delivery. We have yet to see how the action programme will work out in detail, and further detail on the costings will be required.

We consider that the NPF provides a valuable framework for development planning. We are concerned about the resourcing of planning in Scotland. The RTPI is working actively with a number of agencies, including the SSDP, the Improvement Service and the Scottish Government, to take steps on staffing and training.

I see the NPF not as an end in itself, but as the beginning of a new process of planning delivery. What is essential, following the Parliament's consideration of NPF 2, is the rapid delivery of an action plan that is fully costed, to address the issues that we face.

**The Convener:** Do any of the other witnesses wish to say anything?

**Bob Stewart (Scottish Society of Directors of Planning):** It was not my intention to say very

much at the outset but, on behalf of the society, I welcome the opportunity to comment on a planning document that is unique from the point of view of its timescale and its intentions, and to be part of a process that will allow the document to be refined and improved as it goes through Parliament.

**The Convener:** As the other witnesses are content we will move to questions.

**Alasdair Allan:** Does the panel feel that the scope of the Government's national planning framework consultation exercise was adequate? To what extent did you participate in it?

**John Esslemont:** The RTPI was actively involved in all stages of the consultation up until about the middle of last year, when the debate on the national developments took place. Our involvement after that phase was more limited.

**Bill Potts (Scottish Society of Directors of Planning):** Our perspective is the same. We were heavily involved in the process from its initial conception but, like the RTPI, we feel that the consultation became a bit lighter once the matrix of national developments began to be developed.

**The Convener:** What do you mean by "a bit lighter"?

**Bill Potts:** There was no real consultation on alternatives to the national developments or on background analysis of how the matrix worked and how it boiled down.

**Alasdair Allan:** A criticism that is often made of consultation exercises is that they involve the usual suspects. Do you feel that the consultation on the NPF was effective in involving the wider public and smaller community groups?

**Veronica Burbridge (Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland):** In the early stages, we were extremely impressed by the efforts that Scottish Government staff made to reach out to all stakeholders. Given the resources that were available to them, they did a good job in setting up regional consultations. It has been more difficult for people to be consulted and to respond on the national developments, and on specific proposals or alternative suggestions that individuals and communities might have made. As the results of that consultation have not been available more widely, it is difficult to comment on the effectiveness of those contacts.

**Alasdair Allan:** In the end, does the panel feel that the changes that were made to the NPF reflect the results of the consultation exercise?

**Bob Stewart:** I think that you will find that the changes that have been made will have satisfied some people, but not others.

The main point about the consultation is that local authorities and others made a considerable number of suggestions about alternative national projects. The process of sifting those projects has not been transparent and it is not clear how we arrived at the projects that are listed in the NPF. I am not arguing that they are the wrong projects, but the process could have been more transparent. The strategic transport projects review had a clear sifting process that allowed members of the public and local authorities to see why projects had failed to make it on to the list. An explanation of the sifting process would have been a useful appendix to the NPF.

**Alasdair Allan:** What form would a transparent sift have taken?

**Bob Stewart:** For example, the Royal Air Force is a particularly important industry in my area and it intends to station the joint combat aircraft at RAF Lossiemouth. That is a very exciting prospect and it would obviously happen within the timescale of NPF 2. We suggested that that project could have national implications and that we would like to see it included in the document. It is not there, and we are not clear about the reasons for that. Local authorities in other parts of the country have made similar suggestions. We would just like to see a clearer picture.

**The Convener:** We will ask some questions about the consultation and then move to other areas.

**David McLetchie:** On the point about candidates for national developments, the minister provided us with a copy of the assessment matrix, which has just been published on the Scottish Government's website. It looks through the various candidates and evaluates them with reference to the criteria that the cabinet secretary set out. It also has a useful commentary saying why some projects are in NPF 2 and why some are not. I assume that that assessment of the candidates has not been publicly available until now; is that correct?

**Bob Stewart:** Yes.

**Bill Potts:** Yes.

**John Esslemont:** Yes.

**David McLetchie:** Would it be appropriate for such a document to be publicly available when the consultation is being undertaken so that people can see what was considered, what was incorporated, and what was rejected? They would then have the opportunity to comment on the decision to include or exclude.

**Bill Potts:** It would be helpful. It is a bit like the discipline with the development plans. It would expose the issues that sit behind the final policies and strategies. The list gives a light analysis, but

what sits behind the pluses and minuses is not explained in the brief commentary at the end.

Equally, the list is only a list. It does not say whether viable alternatives were looked at, or whether some of the elements on the list are alternatives to each other. It simply lists 1 to 100-odd projects, makes a general comment on them and then the 12 national developments are selected from that. It is difficult to see how that boils itself down without understanding more of the workings that sit behind it.

It would have been useful for the umbrella organisations to have such a document, but I am not too sure how useful it would have been to communities.

**David McLetchie:** That is helpful.

One of the other documents with which we have been provided is a "Critique of the National Planning Framework 2 Consultation Process", which was authored by a lady called Clare Symonds from an organisation called Building Alternatives, which seems to be a synthesis of views from a number of organisations. Are any of you familiar with that document? Have you read it and do you have views on it?

**Bill Potts:** I pulled it off the website to give it a quick skim. There are key representations from the umbrella organisations, but the document has almost the same feeling as the strategic development plans or current structure plans have at the moment. It is very difficult to engage on those higher level plans with individual elements of the communities. That is a recognised difficulty that the Planning etc (Scotland) Act 2006 is trying to address through the certificates and regulations. Some of that may apply to the national planning framework as well.

**David McLetchie:** Does the RTPI have a view on the critique?

**John Esslemont:** I am familiar with the document. Like Bill Potts, I read it off the website. There are lessons from the NPF 2 process that will need to be reflected in consultations on subsequent documents, particularly the action plan programme and, looking forward, NPF 3. Lessons can also be learned from the way in which development planning takes place in local government, where there is a much more open and transparent acknowledgement of the views that are put forward, particularly by individuals; there is detailed correspondence on why those views have or have not been taken into account.

**Bill Potts:** One useful element that has come through the 2006 act in respect of development plans is the development plan scheme. It has to explain to the stakeholders the timescale for delivery and when and how best they might

become engaged, as well as why it is worth while for them to get engaged in the process. That provides a useful early discussion with communities on the nature, purpose and importance of things such as the national planning framework and the higher-order documents and it explains why and when they may want to become engaged. If that is missing and the process is already up and running, communities find it difficult to catch up with the process regarding the higher-order strategic things.

**David McLetchie:** The document is a fairly substantial critique that evaluates the whole NPF 2 consultation process by reference to the objectives in the Government's participation statement and the standards that are set out in planning advice note 81. It seems to find the process wanting in most respects—I think that that is a fair summary of its conclusions. However, none of you can tell us whether you think that those criticisms are fair, appropriate and relevant.

**John Esslemont:** We can comment only on our own consultation with the Government, which was reasonable and fair. The RTP's engagement with the Government on NPF 2 was a fair process up to the middle of last year.

**The Convener:** Would Building Alternatives say, "You would say that, because you were part of the delivery process"? Is the criticism in the document an implied criticism of your involvement?

**John Esslemont:** I am not necessarily saying that about the latter stages. Things were moving at a fairly rapid pace. Anyone who has written any of these strategic documents will appreciate what is involved in the background.

**Veronica Burbridge:** The critique is relevant to how we move forward. We are working on skills development with Planning Aid for Scotland and through the Improvement Service. We are working through our own networks, such as the Politicians in Planning Association, and we are taking on board the new system under the Planning etc (Scotland) Act 2006. We will take account of what the report says. The process is, of course, resource dependent. We must remember that consultation exercises require resources and skills, and we must take that into account in the future.

**The Convener:** That is the second time that you have mentioned resources. Earlier, you said that a good job was done with limited resources. How significant is the problem? Has there been any discussion of getting additional resources to improve the consultation process?

**Veronica Burbridge:** At the moment, staffing resources are a crucial issue, particularly in local government. Since the planning advice note on community engagement was published, various

proposals have been made to use resources from other services in local government to support the communication and consultation process, perhaps linking across to community planning exercises. It is a matter for further thought in local government, given the limited resources that are available to us.

11:00

**The Convener:** Most of us would accept that there is a difference between getting engagement in strategic issues and getting engagement in the issue of a waste incinerator being built across the road.

**Bob Doris:** I have looked through the papers from the consultation process that has been run by the previous Administration and the current Government—there was a seamless join—and it seems extensive to me. I admit that it must be difficult to get people engaged because, although planning is vital, it is not very interesting for many communities. How can communities become more meaningfully engaged than they have been during the current consultation?

**Bill Potts:** That is quite a difficult question. There is, among communities, a lack of understanding or general awareness of the nature of what happens before the process starts. That is partly because of the nature of the higher-order documents. It is difficult for communities to become involved in the national planning framework if they are not quite sure what a national planning framework is and what their involvement in it might be. That was why I talked earlier about the development plan scheme. It explains the background and the basic issues before the process starts, which allows communities to get an idea about what they might want to get engaged on.

From our perspective, it is useful to take an approach that is similar to the strategic development plan approach. It is important to take the issue back out to communities on their terms and in their areas. It can be daunting for people—even for community umbrella groups—to get involved with officialdom because they have to go to an official building or because they have to attend seminars at which most of the other people are qualified professionals.

It is important to find the mechanisms that suit the sort of engagement that communities want. I do not know whether communities were asked, with regard to the national planning framework, what sort of engagement they wanted, or whether they understood the process or the importance of becoming engaged in it. Without those elements, it is difficult to engage communities.

**Bob Doris:** I know that local authorities engaged with the consultation on the national planning framework. Could councils have played a more formal role at local level by conducting local consultations of community groups? I would imagine that local authorities know the community groups in their areas better than the Scottish Government does. If there were no such formal arrangements, would it be good to have them in place for NPF 3?

**Bill Potts:** That is an interesting perspective. There were no such formal arrangements, but I can see the merit in having them. In Glasgow, we engaged in some consultation of communities on elements of the national planning framework, but that happened almost by accident because we were at a stage in the delivery of city plan 2 that involved meetings with community councils on Saturday mornings, which introduced elements of the national planning framework simply because the plan had to reflect the national planning framework. As I said, that consultation was almost accidental, but was probably useful in terms of dissemination of information, as we have spatial perspectives in the national planning framework that bring things down to areas that people recognise, whether in respect of the Clyde gateway, the west of Scotland or whatever.

**Bob Stewart:** Your suggestion is interesting. The only thing I would add to what Bill Potts said is that, although I think that local authorities should be part of the process of informing people, I question whether we could be part of the process of involving people in situations in which we are already a third party.

**Patricia Ferguson:** You probably heard Mr Levack's evidence, in which he talked about the language that is used—the "jargon", as he put it. Your point of view is that of professionals who are used to dealing with the issues and who understand what they are about almost instinctively, but can you see that it might be difficult for other people to understand enough to become involved? Is that an area where it would be helpful for local government to act as an interface or a conduit for the work that needs to be done?

**Bob Stewart:** Having been through the document a number of times, I certainly agree that it is not an easy read, even for a professional with some 42 years' experience. It will be refined as we go through the process, and as we do so it would be helpful if it was improved and simplified. I agree that a short and pithy introduction to and synthesis of the document would be helpful.

**John Esslemont:** We would support the publication of a document that distilled the key elements of NPF 2. There are parallels with the national transport strategy, in that a document was

issued recently that seeks to break down that strategy by region. Professionals should always try to make documents as easy to understand as possible, for the benefit of the audience.

**Jim Tolson:** I am interested in the panel's views on Clare Symonds's critique of NPF 2. She describes the critique as

"An independent evaluation from a community perspective".

Mr Potts is perhaps the only one who has seen the document, so I will give a brief overview. It considers a number of areas—in particular the standards that the Government has set down for involvement, support, planning, working together and so on. By considering the views of community associations and others, the report examines whether the consultation was done well.

I encourage panel members to read the critique. It is a quite damning indictment that suggests that the Government did not follow its own standards. There were some fairly basic problems; for example, all the consultation events happened during working hours, so people of working age did not manage to access them. Would it have been better if more cognisance had been taken of points such as Ms Symonds makes in her critique? Would that have led to a better outcome from the exercise?

**Bob Stewart:** I attended some of the early meetings about the national planning framework so, in fairness, I say that they took place not in working hours but during the evening, so that point is not totally accurate.

**Veronica Burbridge:** I would like discussion of the national planning framework to take place in a number of fora. One of the main lines of communication is between the planning directorate and other Government directorates and public agencies. The national planning framework must be considered in discussions on various policy areas. For example, discussions on energy, transport and waste disposal must consider the spatial implications and possible solutions to problems in those areas.

It is not just a question of reaching out to people at community level. As we reach out to them on policy issues, we must also engage and involve other Government directorates.

**Bill Potts:** I return to a point that I made earlier. I suspect that communities were told how they would be engaged with rather than asked how they would like to be engaged with. However, I know from experience of development plans that people find it difficult to accept that consultation was satisfactory when they do not see all their comments reflected in the documentation. The key issue, I suspect, is whether respondents were

given a clear picture of why their comments were, or were not, taken on board in the final document.

There are probably issues that sit behind the submission from Clare Symonds that I am not aware of. It is not easy to become aware of them from reading the submission.

**The Convener:** John Wilson will move the discussion on a wee bit and broaden it out.

**John Wilson:** I do not know whether this will broaden out the discussion, but I want to take up some of Mr Levack's earlier comments about the relationship with planning officers in dealing with planning applications.

I hear from local authorities that their income stream from new planning applications—compared with expected income—has taken a nosedive. Mr Levack hinted that that might mean that local planning departments will not be geared up to deal with the number of planning applications that might be submitted by developers. Given panel members' expertise in planning, what in their view will be the effect of the downturn in planning applications? More important, what will it mean for local authority planning departments? If their budgets have been set against expected income that is now not coming through, will we see a downturn in the number of staff employed by local authorities? Do local authorities need to find other funding streams to ensure that they maintain planning office staff numbers at a level that allows communities to engage fully not only in the national planning framework but in the local plans that are currently being developed?

**Bob Stewart:** The national planning framework is part of a much larger process. The number of applications that our authority has received—I cannot talk for other authorities—is down by about 12 to 16 per cent over a year, and the raft of proposals in the new Planning etc (Scotland) Act 2006 include a review of householder permitted developments that could further reduce the number of applications by, perhaps, another 12 per cent. The intention behind that review was to allow those who handle minor applications to deal with major applications. It is also intended that there be a review of planning fees. Therefore, people have already accepted that there will be change within the system.

To be honest, fee income is just one of many pressures that local authorities are currently under. I am also responsible for waste management, so I am aware that, although Moray Council has a good record in dealing with recycling of waste, the price that we get for recycled material has dropped quite considerably. Local authorities are under considerable pressure and the downturn in the number of planning

applications is just one more issue that we must deal with.

As things stand, I would not envisage that a drop in the numbers of planning staff would be due purely to the reduction in the number of applications. Until the current raft of legislation that is being introduced—just before Christmas, several sets of regulations were laid before Parliament—goes through Parliament and we can measure its implications, planning staff will continue to be needed.

Staff pressures might arise not so much within planning departments as within other departments and organisations that we consult. There are shortages of transportation officers and of the environmental health officers who comment on issues such as contaminated land. Outside local authorities, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency has a shortage of people who can comment on planning applications. Many of my colleagues feel frustrated that delays are always blamed on town planners, who would far rather see themselves as being just one part of the planning system. The requirement to consult all those bodies is introduced in the planning acts as such. Therefore, although skills shortages are an issue that we will need to consider, I do not think that the problem will stem just from a downturn in the number of applications.

11:15

**John Wilson:** I think that that answers the question that I was trying to ask. If we are to move forward with the national planning framework, I believe that, in addition to issues that have been raised this morning, we need to consider the shortage of planning officers in various agencies, because it raises concerns about how national or local planning applications can be progressed in a way that will address emerging issues. From what Mr Stewart has said, there could be a logjam.

Other agencies, some of which belong to Government, that might be expected to respond to new planning applications simply do not have the resources to do so. If they do not have the necessary resources, how can we move forward at the required speed to allow the developments to be put in place quickly?

**Bob Stewart:** Perhaps I should highlight one other issue. From talking to the likes of SEPA, I have learned that a great many objections arise because of the absence of information from applicants. Applicants should be informed at the outset about the information that is required to process applications quickly.

**Mary Mulligan:** In what ways will the national planning framework contribute to the construction of development plans?



**John Esslemont:** There is a reasonable relationship between the development of the national planning framework and the preparation of the current strategic plans. Although that synergy will continue in parts of Scotland, it might well break down in some rural areas.

We must maintain the link between the centre and local government that was established in the move from NPF 1 to NPF 2, in order that we can ensure that local views and strategies can build into an NPF 3 that achieves consensus and general agreement. Because NPF 2 was built up as a result of that link, with many areas advocating components that ought to be included, there is a lot of agreement about it.

**Bill Potts:** The development plan has to sit within the wider context of the national planning framework. If people feel that that is not the case, they can always object and test the matter through the development plan examination process.

The action programme—and the level of detail in it—will be vital to the interface between the national planning framework and the development plans. If, at the spatial level, we have to drive new associated development that will link into some national developments, we will need some clear steers about the delivery of that kind of major infrastructure. After all, elements such as community growth areas, infrastructure or other forms of development will be built into and around that work.

As a result, we need to continue the dialogue that has begun in the national planning framework through into the development of the action programme and consideration of its effect on development plans. The situation is totally different from what happened with NPF 1 in respect of which—to my recollection—the dialogue more or less stopped when the framework was published. We cannot allow that to happen this time round. It is vital that dialogue is maintained.

The only other concern that I might raise, which might grow out of the need for a more jargon-free document, relates to the fact that development plans can be tested in the examination process. We are often asked about what we feel about national planning framework policy and so on. Because it is a framework, it is often difficult to determine what is policy, a well-meaning statement or a good example. It does not have the same discipline as a development plan, which specifies policy. Further dialogue is needed on some matters so that implementation can work its way through the action programme, into development plans.

**Mary Mulligan:** I will come back to the action programme. First, I will pick up on something that Mr Esslemont said. He seemed to suggest that

rural areas in particular may have some issues with development plans. Will you say a little bit more about that?

**John Esslemont:** My point was that under the current legislation, the only strategic context for large parts of Scotland—the rural areas—is the NPF 2, so vision statements and development planning for those areas will clearly be based on it.

**Mary Mulligan:** That is fine. Thank you for that.

His earlier evidence seemed to imply that Mr Potts is content with the consultation, but that he had concerns towards the end. That gives me concerns that you are not in the position that you consider necessary to allow you to influence the action plan. How could that change?

**Bill Potts:** We need a clear agenda from this stage of the national planning framework, because it is a rolling programme that will feed into NPF 3. That was not the case with NPF 1, which stood alone because it did not have an action programme. We must set an agenda for implementation of the action programme, but not for that alone—I suspect that the spatial development perspectives in the plan could be fleshed out and worked forward. Elements of those should be reflected in the programmes that development plans will contain.

We need continuing dialogue, but it needs to be formalised rather than being something that may or may not happen, or that may not happen equally throughout the country. I suspect that Mr Esslemont's point is particularly true in that context and that dialogue and setting the agenda may be much more important for the rural parts of Scotland that will not have development plans.

**Bob Stewart:** I will give the committee another example. The national planning framework makes only one reference to Moray, which suggests that our remoter areas could perhaps be treated like Skye or Mull. We are talking about an area that contains 50 malt whisky distilleries, makes a greater contribution to the national economy than oil or gas have ever done and contains more winners of the Queen's award for export in a six-mile radius than any other part of Scotland. We feel rather hard done by in that short extract, so we would like to see a little bit more.

**Mary Mulligan:** The committee has heard you loud and clear. We will not forget you.

**The Convener:** It is now on the record.

**Mary Mulligan:** Absolutely. I am sure that all the witnesses would want the committee to make it clear in any follow up to the inquiry that a continuing discussion is needed about how the NPF becomes a reality.

**Veronica Burbridge:** Yes, indeed. That relates to the new Scottish planning policy that comes out for consultation later in the year.

**The Convener:** We have taken evidence about communities' expectations that they will be consulted and their consent will be sought for much of what is in the NPF. On the other hand, we heard from Mr Levack pretty low expectations in respect of whether it will make any difference. In some of the late submissions that came in last night, which we are still going through, there is almost a sense that events have overtaken the framework. Will you comment on that?

**Bob Stewart:** I would not say that events have overtaken the framework. For a long time, there has been a lack of a national statement; I, for one, am glad to see the national planning framework come into being at this point in time. The comment was made that it must be flexible, and I accept that. It will also be helpful if we differentiate more clearly between the projects and the aspirations. However, the projects themselves concentrate on infrastructure. Infrastructure developments would make a considerable contribution to enabling us to pick up after the recession. The document is positive and I will continue to support it.

**John Esslemont:** We support those comments. The events of the past year have highlighted the urgent need to move forward with the action plan and to deliver early components of it fairly quickly.

**David McLetchie:** I have a couple of questions for Mr Stewart, wearing his Moray Council hat. One of the committee's correspondents is a lady called Rhona Patterson, who is the chair of Strathisla community council. I suspect that she is known to you. She is one of the people who is complaining about the lack of full and meaningful consultation on NPF 2. She says in her letter to the committee:

"We believe that even the elected members in The Moray Council are not debating this document nor been asked for their input."

What is the factual position with regard to Moray councillors? Were they involved, at either committee or full council level, in debating or discussing NPF 2?

**Bob Stewart:** I must apologise—you are stretching my memory. The document has certainly been discussed with councillors; it was mentioned at various stages. However, I cannot confirm one way or the other whether it was discussed in committee or by the full council. My development plan manager has fully briefed the relevant committee on the document. In my view, the part of the e-mail that you quoted is inaccurate. I know that Mrs Patterson is an ex-councillor of the authority and is an active community chair. She was motivated by analysis

of the communication that was mentioned earlier. When members of the community council read that, they decided to send their letter.

**David McLetchie:** Thank you for those comments.

**Jim Tolson:** Panel members will recall that I asked Mr Levack from the Scottish Building Federation about the possibility of the Government prioritising many of the national developments that are included in the planning framework. Mr Levack is firmly of the view that that would be advantageous in planning and delivery of many projects. I would like to put the same question to Bob Stewart. Would it be advantageous for the Government to prioritise the national developments and, if so, why?

Some of the national developments relate to container terminals. They involve either expanding existing terminals, such as that at Grangemouth, or putting in new ones, for example at Rosyth. Hunterston and Scapa Flow are also mentioned. I know that this is not precisely your detail, but there is clear potential for expansion of container traffic in Scotland. I understand that the figure for Scotland is currently about 250,000 units and is to expand to 1 million units in the fairly near future, so a significant expansion of container traffic is likely. Strangely, the figures that I have cited come from Forth Ports plc, which is objecting to Babcock's proposal for a new container terminal development at one of Forth Ports' near neighbours, Rosyth; I do not know whether you have its evidence. The growth of container traffic will feed into much infrastructure throughout Scotland. Do you view that as positive? Is it likely to help in the areas that you represent?

**Bob Stewart:** My off-the-cuff answer is that you are dealing with major projects that will involve not just public finance but private finance. Who knows when that will be made available for each project?

I have been dealing with flood prevention orders for a number of years now, and when we start to deal with large projects such as we are discussing, we inevitably hit unexpected hurdles. I would question whether it is possible meaningfully to prioritise, or give an order to, such projects. I would have thought that, if all the projects are important, they should be progressed by all means. Sod's law dictates that some of them will progress slower than others. I would question the practicality of such a prioritisation.

11:30

**Bill Potts:** It is a more complicated matter for some projects. Some of the national developments are almost generic scenarios. The rail enhancement development, for example, would need to be broken down to specify which elements

would come first. That is perhaps getting into matters of finance, lead-in times and so on.

The issue is not necessarily one of strict prioritisation, but of assessing the national developments against their delivery requirements and funding issues, such that a proper programme can be identified and laid out. If a project is given priority, that is fine, but there might still be a question about its delivery if the details have not been spelled out under the action programme. It is more important, from our perspective, to get the detail clearly articulated and discussed in the course of the action programming so that when people are preparing their development plans—regardless of when the project in question comes forward—they have as clear an indication of the programming and of their involvement as they can get. That will allow them to lay out the associated elements of infrastructure that they will have to link into the project.

**John Esslemont:** Some projects will need to be worked up at regional level. Involvement and dialogue need to be moved forward in the context of the resources that will be available to deliver the identified priorities.

**Patricia Ferguson:** The question that I was going to ask at this point has been covered.

**John Wilson:** My question follows on from Jim Tolson's. This morning's evidence suggests that people should have expected a timetable to be laid out for the delivery of the projects. Based on the responses that Mr Stewart and Mr Potts have given, do the witnesses think that it would be difficult for the Scottish Government to lay out a timetable if it did not have in place all that was needed to deliver on that timetable? I am thinking about private development finance, and whether or not it is in place. One of the major factors that could delay the projects that we would like to proceed under NPF 2—if we take it to be an aspirational document—could be the requirement for private finance expenditure as well as Government expenditure.

**Bob Stewart:** There are further aspects to consider, such as public local inquiries and flood prevention orders. I understand that it will be six months before such an inquiry can take place—it will take that time before a decision is given. There are delays inherent in the system, which makes it difficult to pinpoint when a development is going to take place.

**Bill Potts:** It is perhaps not the same for all national developments. Some work is under way; for example, preparatory work for the Glasgow airport rail link has started. We can identify where the precursors are for some programmes. Should we be building on that work in developing the programmes? I take the point that some of them

are more aspirational, but there is a core, on which we are already committed with funding.

**The Convener:** There are no further questions. I thank you all for your attendance and for your evidence.

11:34

*Meeting continued in private until 12:24.*



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