

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 21 February 2006

Session 2

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

5th Meeting 2006, Session 2

CONVENER

*Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)

*Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab)

*Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)

*Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)

*Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Colin Fox (Lothians) (SSP)

Mr Bruce McFee (West of Scotland) (SNP)

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)

*Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)

Murray Tosh (West of Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Tavish Scott (Minister for Transport and Telecommunications)

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Robert Andrew (Confederation of Passenger Transport UK)

Jo Cowan (Age Concern Scotland)

John Elliot (Traveline Scotland)

Ian Kernohan (Scottish Executive Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department)

George Mair (Confederation of Passenger Transport UK)

Tom Macdonald (Scottish Executive Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department)

Roderick McLeod (Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland)

Trevor Meadows (Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland)

Marjory Rodger (Confederation of Passenger Transport UK)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Martin Verity

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Alastair Macfie

ASSISTANT CLERK

Euan Donald

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Local Government and Transport Committee

Tuesday 21 February 2006

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:03*]

Subordinate Legislation

National Bus Travel Concession Scheme for Older and Disabled Persons (Scotland) Order 2006 (draft)

The Convener (Bristow Muldoon): I welcome colleagues and members of the press and public to the meeting and I welcome our first panel of witnesses: Jo Cowan from Age Concern Scotland; Trevor Meadows, who is convener of the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland; and Roderick McLeod, who is a member of that committee. We are taking evidence on the draft National Bus Travel Concession Scheme for Older and Disabled Persons (Scotland) Order 2006 and later in the meeting the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications will speak to the order. I hope that members will pick up points from the witnesses that they can put to the minister. I invite the witnesses to make introductory remarks, after which members of the committee will ask questions.

Jo Cowan (Age Concern Scotland): I am a community worker with Age Concern Scotland in Lochaber, in Highland. I work at grass-roots level with older people and older people's groups.

Age Concern Scotland welcomes the introduction of the Scotland-wide free bus scheme for older and disabled people, which will benefit people over 60 whose mobility allows them to access bus services and who live in areas in which such transport is available. The scheme has other potential benefits for that group of older people. However, we would have liked further action or measures to achieve equity of access to free transport for the many people who have mobility problems and cannot access public transport services, who will continue to incur travel costs, and for people who live in areas in which bus transport is lacking or infrequent or in which services are distant from people's homes.

In my submission I indicate that many people in the area that I cover will not benefit from the free bus scheme. However, we welcome the scheme for the people who will benefit. I am willing to answer questions on the problems that I foresee with the scheme.

Trevor Meadows (Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland): I will make some brief remarks. We are happy that concessionary travel is in the spotlight, but there remain areas of concern. We agree with Jo Cowan that the scheme will help to remove some of the anomalies of the previous system, under which people could not travel across boundaries. For example, people in Dundee could not make trips in a logical way.

I will raise a few issues that might be considered in future, to put what is happening in context. We would like the objectives of concessionary travel to be highlighted much more. What is the scheme trying to achieve? There is a general objective of keeping people mobile as they age, because that is regarded as broadly beneficial, but what level of mobility are we talking about? We are considering a huge block of people: there is an age difference of 40 years between people who are 60 and people who are over 100. In marketing terms that is a huge range compared with other sections of the community. What is aspired to for those people? What is the connection with, for example, social inclusion? What does social inclusion mean and what role does concessionary travel play in that context? Should the scheme be run on an equity basis? If someone who is mobile can travel 15 times per week, do we hope that everyone who benefits from a concessionary pass will travel as often as that?

To what range of activities should people have access? Monitoring is usually done in relation to the number of trips that are made rather than the activities that are undertaken, so there is a lack of information about what concessionary travel achieves. Monitoring should be higher on the agenda. Passenger transport should be involved in a cost benefit appraisal through the Scottish transport appraisal guidance, but currently it is outside that system, unlike most other transport investment in Scotland, which has to be STAG appraised. Such an approach would give us a better idea of the relevance of services.

There is an assumption that if we give someone a bus pass, they will have mobility, but I am sure that Jo Cowan can provide many examples of rural areas that have no service. Andrew Arbuckle is aware of the problem, which I brought to people's attention in Fife. What is the use of a pass in a rural area that has no service? Even in urban areas services can have limited relevance, because of restricted walking distances.

We must consider what we are trying to achieve through existing services and whether different types of services are necessary. If different services are necessary, how might they be financed and delivered? Such issues are generating a wider debate that is interesting.

The Convener: Thank you for those comments. I open the meeting to questions from members of the committee.

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): When the committee considered bus services as part of an inquiry that we undertook, access for elderly and disabled people was one of the most important issues. Should the Executive consider redirecting some of the subsidies that it gives to the main bus companies towards local schemes such as voluntary or community transport schemes? Do the witnesses have evidence that targeting resources at such schemes would offer a way forward?

Jo Cowan: Many of the people with whom I work use community transport solutions because they cannot access public transport. For example, they use accessible minibuses, when such services are available locally, for specific purposes. As the scheme unfolds and we see what resources are used, we will consider new solutions for people with disabilities and people who cannot access conventional transport. Hard questions might need to be asked about where resources go to provide equity of access for people who underuse transport because it is not appropriate for them.

Paul Martin: It is not just elderly people and disabled people who cannot access services if no services are available. Could community transport solutions be supported and developed locally?

Trevor Meadows: Yes. It is important to think locally. Obviously, we are concerned with the national transport strategy and regional transport strategies, so the role of local authorities in examining local needs is off the agenda a bit. The Executive note on the order refers to the hope that transferring concessions to a national agency will free up

“a considerable amount of management time to develop and improve bus services.”

That could also apply to community-based initiatives or more unconventional moves.

The problem is that a considerable amount of management time has not been freed up in local authorities, because they are under pressure to cut back. Instead, the posts for people in local authorities who were involved in concessionary schemes are being deleted. For example, in Fife—where Andrew Arbuckle is from—the posts of four key members of the team are being deleted. They had hoped to do the work that Paul Martin talked about—more demographic analysis and consideration of local community needs.

I would not get too hung up on the definitions of public transport and community transport—they are just passenger transport. One problem is the

idea that public transport must be big buses that go up and down routes. In the future, public transport can involve a mix of services and be analogous to the delivery of freight. TNT UK does not use just big lorries; it uses a range of appropriate vehicles. We need to achieve that.

Relevance of services is a key point. Among the disabled population, 20 per cent of people cannot walk more than 20yd; 50 per cent cannot walk more than about 60yd; and nearly 100 per cent cannot walk more than 400yd. However, the target distance to a bus stop is about 400yd in urban areas and about 1,000yd in rural areas. If a person who has a problem with mobility can walk 200yd, they will go only 100yd to a bus stop, because if anything goes wrong, they want to be able to return home. More analysis on the human level is needed of whether people can relate to services.

Three consultancies have undertaken a major £130,000 research project for the Scottish Executive that is due to be published in a couple of months. That research shows that the biggest gap for people with mobility problems is in flexible services—demand-responsive services. The problem is that filling that gap raises the issue of financing.

One worry in following through on exactly what Paul Martin describes—more locally designed, developed, delivered and monitored schemes—is about funding. After the transfer of the grant-aided expenditure element to the national agency for the main concessionary scheme, some money will be left for local authorities to deliver concessionary schemes under discretionary powers, but the figure has been set at the amount of expenditure last year plus inflation, so it does not allow for growth. However, from our experience and that of researchers, growth is needed in such services if we are ever to achieve mobility and social inclusion.

Financing is key to the future and to the issue that Paul Martin talks about. However, we cannot just throw money at services; we require a cost benefit evaluation and more intelligence on needs, outcomes—whether people are moving—and benefits. We do not have that.

14:15

Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): We hope that the national concessionary scheme will improve overall capacity in the network, but resources always have a limit. A certain level of resources is being applied to the scheme. If we were starting a bit earlier in the process, how would you have us shift resources to address the problems that you are talking about? It would not be easy to find new money.

Jo Cowan: I am disappointed that the scheme is limited to conventional bus services and does not include demand-responsive and community services. Many older people and people with disabilities use such services to carry out normal life in their community. I would have liked a formula that was not based on fares, because reimbursing fares is fine for commercial transport operators but not for operators that already provide subsidised travel to folk with disabilities and older people. I would have liked the scope of the concessionary scheme to be extended to community transport and demand-responsive services.

Bruce Crawford: Given the current envelope of available resources, that would inevitably have meant that there would be fewer resources for other matters. Do you accept that, while still arguing your case?

Jo Cowan: The people who are least served by transport and most socially isolated would have benefited if they had been included in the scheme.

Roderick McLeod (Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland): I would have liked the project to be based on a much more fundamental understanding of the issue. There is no doubt that the decision on the scheme was made in a hurry, without much thought being given to what it is trying to achieve and what numbers we need. I accept that if we have £159 million and we want to spend it in a certain way, we must cut down some of the services that we could provide. One issue that I am concerned about is the number of people between 60 and 65 who are in full-time paid employment but who will now be entitled to free bus travel.

It is too late for this, but another point is that we must ensure that we get good information. I refer the committee to the results of the consultation, which state that Transport Scotland will gather statistical and performance information to ensure that the scheme continues to meet users' needs. We need to consider the needs of non-users. It is important that some of the £159 million is used not just to find out whether people who use the system are happy but to find out about all the people who cannot use it. We need to measure those people and find out what they are not doing.

Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): The MACS submission mentions the

"very large number of disabled people who live in areas where there is little accessible public transport"

and those

"who live some distance from services".

Does either of your organisations have an idea of how many people are in that situation? Unless we know the numbers, there is no way in which we

can address the issue of the resources that may be required to meet their needs.

Trevor Meadows: We do not know the exact number, but we know that it is a lot of people. That is as much as we can say. An indication of the size of the issue arises when different types of services are introduced. For example, when low-floor buses are introduced, they allow some disabled and elderly people to travel more easily. However, the increase in uptake is not significant, given the statistic that a minimum of 20 per cent of the population have a mobility difficulty. On the other hand, when demand-responsive services are introduced, they cannot cope with the uptake. There is evidence to show that from throughout Britain and from right back to the early 1980s.

The issue is not necessarily to do with people who are very disabled; it is just that people do not relate to where the big buses go. The big bus routes are often determined by work, education and shopping areas. For the older population, work and education are not big destinations—they want to do many different things. Social activities of one kind or another can amount to about 60 per cent of their activities. When we look at an analysis of the use of concessionary passes on the main bus systems, we find that around 65 per cent of journeys are for shopping purposes. However, shopping trips account for only about 20 per cent of journeys that are made on demand-responsive transport systems, which is more in line with the figure for the rest of the population.

As Andrew Arbuckle rightly said, more evidence needs to be gathered on the exact scale of the problem. We need to know what we are trying to achieve and the extent of the range of activities that different service providers offer. The questions have not even been asked yet.

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): I return to the comments that Jo Cowan made earlier. I am interested not only in access issues but in the capital costs that are involved in fitting lifts and so forth to vehicles.

Obviously, in some parts of Scotland, the voluntary sector plays a major part in all this. Voluntary organisations undertake what can be called ambulance work in taking people to clinics and so forth and their vehicles have to be properly equipped for that work. Those services are sometimes but not always provided under contract and may be funded through bids for short-term funding, which may be challenge funding. Do you have any thoughts on how to deal with all that? I am thinking of the capital costs that are involved, the skilling of drivers and the maintenance and running of vehicles. Have you done any work on that area?

Jo Cowan: No. It is a postcode lottery at the moment. Many organisations depend on charitable funding or on their local authority subsidising the fare element of the service that they provide.

I agree with Trevor Meadows that a lot of work needs to be done on finding out where people do not go as well as where they do go. Much of our work is with people who do not go out a lot and who do not travel very often. The car scheme in our local area does not even have a wheelchair-accessible vehicle. The issue is not cost but usage—people do not know who the user is and where they want to go.

Until work is done on the ground to find out who is travelling, where they are travelling to and how they would like to get there—in other words, the best kind of vehicle to provide—funding from charitable institutions or local authorities will not be forthcoming. A lot of research needs to be done on the people who are not travelling at the moment.

Mr Davidson: Do other panel members have a view on the costs of setting up and running these services? You are looking for more flexibility than is provided by the main bus services on fixed routes. Capital costs are therefore involved. Do you have any notion of what those costs are? For example, there is evidence that health boards have withdrawn grant support from some services and that councils are being squeezed. Do you have any hard figures that you could send to the committee?

Trevor Meadows: Some costs are available, but they are dependent on the scale of delivery. At present, where flexible services are available, they are provided on a relatively small scale.

The figures would at least give the committee an indication of costs, one of which is cost per trip. Flexible services can be seen as expensive. I would rather that they were seen as having a relatively high unit cost in terms of the ability to pay. We should note that some of the routed bus services that the bigger bus companies provide are subsidised. Certainly, the unit cost of providing those services in rural areas can be up to £60 per trip. It is not always more expensive to put in a DRT system than it is to subsidise a socially necessary service on a main bus route. Both sorts of service need to be considered.

In order to keep costs down, the principles of logistics would have to be applied by way of travel dispatch centres that would arrange for transport requests to be met by the best-value means. That would involve bringing together information about taxis, car schemes, minibuses, semi-fixed routes and low-floor buses in an area and organising the meeting of travel needs efficiently. Although that has been talked about an awful lot, it has never been done. However, a national experiment was

undertaken in Norfolk. The efficient government transport working group has considered it in Scotland. A couple of local authorities in Scotland are looking to adopt some of the work that was done in Norfolk, which was principally aimed at bringing together social work and health transport.

When one thinks about it, social work transport and the majority of non-emergency ambulance work serves demand-responsive transport needs. Those services are run by agencies as separate bus systems. Why do we not try to combine as many of those elements as possible?

We also need to consider the disbenefits and additional costs of people being immobile and of services having to be delivered to their houses. I do not refer only to domiciliary care. There is evidence that, when people are mobile and can get to a doctor as they age, they can get six-monthly screening very cheaply. They could not get that if we had to pay to get a doctor to their house to screen them. The knock-on costs and benefits are important. We must break the silo thinking that is one of the problems in transport. We look at the costs of transport and do not see it enough as an intermediary good. We do not see the implications of and the problems caused by the lack of adequate transport, which are picked up in other, unconnected budgets.

Mr Davidson: What discussions have your organisations had with health boards, the Scottish Ambulance Service, social work departments and the main bus operators?

Roderick McLeod: MACS must hold up its hand and say that thus far it has concentrated on transport. However, we have a responsibility to advise Scottish ministers. We are aware that there is an “s” on the end of “ministers” and that we should put more effort into talking to ministers other than Tavish Scott, because of the need to join up and make better use of services.

Jo Cowan: I work at a very local rather than a national level, which means that I work closely with our local transport forum on such issues. We have groups throughout the country that are also no doubt involved in discussions with their local transport groups. We have worked hard to engage with health and social work to use resources more effectively. That has not been easy. Agencies in both sectors are subject to change all the time and finding the right people at the right time to try to make a difference is sometimes hard. Some kind of push from the top is always welcomed at the grass roots, in order to integrate transport. Getting agencies together from the bottom up is not always possible.

Trevor Meadows: There are great worries and there is an “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” approach. We have talked to people in social work, the

national health service and the SAS who are very sceptical about the new vision and about building a co-ordinated travel dispatch centre function. We are dealing with very vulnerable people and, if anything goes wrong—if someone is lost or hurt—it will be a major media event. There is evidence that better services could be provided. We receive information that people who use non-emergency ambulance services to go for treatment often feel worse when they get back than they did before they went for the treatment, because the journey is so horrendous. Sometimes it can take about two hours each way.

A proper travel dispatch system could provide better journey times. The problem is that it is a major piece of work to build all the mechanisms, the process, the image, the training and the software that is needed to make absolutely sure that everyone is secure and no one gets lost. It is almost necessary to carry out risk assessments for each individual, to see whether they can get into a vehicle. There is no such thing as a fully accessible vehicle. I am sure that Robert Andrew and Marjory Rodger will speak volumes about that, if they need to.

Low-floor buses are not the answer to every problem. Some people can get on to them, but many cannot. Even if there are community-based or local authority vehicles that have a lift, some people in some wheelchairs or on some scooters will not be able to get on to them, because the lift platforms are not long enough. All that information—for each individual and each vehicle—needs to be recorded and built up in the dispatching system from the bottom up, so that people can be scheduled on appropriate vehicles. You can imagine the disaster that would result if we made an appointment with someone and turned up at their house with a vehicle that they could not access, at a time when we were trying to build a new system and to convince the SAS or social work that we could do things better. The problem is that a lot of basic, detailed, thorough work needs to be put into the system to make it work.

14:30

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Good afternoon. I want to move away from the issue of cost and discuss the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland's submission, which points out that cost is not the only factor. It states that other factors can be even more significant, especially for people with disabilities, including the attitude of staff, accessibility and mobility. What should be done to address those problems?

Roderick McLeod: For many people, cost is not the key reason why they do not travel. Trevor

Meadows mentioned the complexity of transport. That is another reason, but even when people are physically able to use mainstream services, we still get far too many reports of inappropriate treatment by staff and other passengers on bus services, particularly in town centres. For example, Edinburgh's bus service is superb in terms of the number of services that are provided, but as someone who is getting more frail and elderly every year, I find that each day it is more and more challenging to get on to a crowded bus and fight my way to a place where I can at least stand safely before the bus moves off. We should bear in mind the fact that buses are fast moving, particularly in town centres. People use them because they want to get somewhere quickly and the driver has a big responsibility to keep on time. That is not an environment into which someone who is slightly slow on their pins fits well, so there is a fear of using buses.

My colleague Trevor Meadows pointed out that, when somebody in their 80s falls and breaks a hip, they are unlikely to survive. I am not saying that there are many falls on buses, but the situation is as serious as that. The fear that people feel is not the fear of vandalism or of being attacked; it is about much more than that. Buses can be quite a scary environment to go into. It is difficult for people to get on to a crowded bus when lots of people are vying for seats and other elderly people are already in the elderly people's seats.

Staff training is high on our list of issues. When MACS was set up and we talked to the movers and shakers, we got a lot of messages about lifts and ramps, but we said, "No, provision of lifts and ramps is not the only issue." Other important issues are staff attitudes, staff training, disability awareness and information. Information is still a problem. We have Traveline Scotland and Transport Direct, but for many people in the category that we are talking about—the over-60s and the disabled, many of whom have difficulty with reading—the information is complex. That is partly because we have so many operators. When someone goes to a bus stop in Edinburgh, they can no longer catch a bus just because it has a certain number on the front. They have to understand whether it is a FirstBus service or whatever. That is why the new system is brilliant. We can say to people, "You can go on any bus anywhere. You don't have to worry about whether to get this type of ticket or that type of ticket." I am sure that that will be a big help, but travel is still a complicated business and it has become more complicated in the past few years as deregulation has had more and more effect.

Trevor Meadows: There is no single solution. This is a complex area. It is a question of building up professional knowledge about what is involved. In the past 20 to 25 years, some knowledge has

got through to the professions, but not the detailed knowledge that is required. Certainly, cost is a factor. Some elderly or disabled people are better off, but there is still a strong correlation between those groups and low income and poverty issues. As soon as one starts to charge elderly or disabled people for travel, their journey purposes change rapidly. As I said earlier, about 60 per cent of the journeys that retired people make are for social activities, such as visiting people, leisure or entertainment, but they stop making those journeys. Next, they stop making journeys for shopping because they find someone else who can do their shopping, but in doing so they lose choice. They focus on quasi-medical trips such as trips to the chiropodist, dentist or optician. As soon as one charges people on low incomes, the journeys that they make change radically.

Training is a big issue, but one of the things that has been fed back to MACS is that the subsequent monitoring of behaviours is equally important. Do people do what they were trained to do or do they slip back into their old ways and forget about the customer-friendly approach that Roderick McLeod was talking about? For quite a significant proportion of elderly people, even if the services are put on, it takes an awful lot for them to gain the motivation, confidence, muscle tone and knowledge of which friend is still alive to go out and try it again. It is not easy marketing.

Again, there needs to be a link through people connected to social work departments, for example. They can be the front line of marketing, because they are already going into people's homes in the course of their duties as trusted home helps, care workers and so on. They can sit with someone and explain things to them. Some enlightened local authorities have allowed social workers to act as escorts for people who are going out for the first time. That is a good model. In other areas, people have been funded to do mobility training. However, that might result in only one person being available in an area whereas, if you already have a team of social workers, that could be much more effective.

Enough is still not known about preparing literature. The amount of information on a piece of paper must be minimised. The information must be easy to read—suitable for the average reading age—and the text should be printed in 12 point text at least. It is okay to have lots of white space in a document; you do not have to cram more and more information into it.

Fergus Ewing: I am sure that the Executive could do with taking on board that advice about the presentation of information.

What about the situation at a local level?

Jo Cowan: In the Highlands, many of our old people do not have access to booking facilities. One of the anxieties that folk have about the new scheme is that it takes a single-ticket approach; it is not based on being able to do a return journey and have a booked space without having to pay for that booking. Quite a lot of anxiety is caused by that. The system has enabled people to make longer journeys than they were previously able to make but they experience anxiety about whether there will be enough capacity, especially in tourist areas in the tourist seasons. When the local concessionary scheme was introduced, people were stranded at Inverness—they stood at bus stops waiting for a Citylink bus to come, only to find that it was full and that there was no other bus.

I notice that it is assumed that the rate of reimbursement will allow for the upping of capacity. I hope that that comes to pass but I think that the situation should be monitored carefully because, at the end of the day, people need to be able to make journeys secure in the knowledge that they will be able to return.

Fergus Ewing: I am pleased that you made that point and I know that those who are to give evidence after you, and who are listening at the moment, will wish to address the booking point. Particularly for older people or people with a disability, planning a long journey is a big thing. They do not want to leave it to chance. They want to plan at least a day before and be assured that the plan will work out. I presume that booking is essential if that is to happen.

Jo Cowan: One of the problems with booking that older people and people with a disability have is that many of the booking methods are not particularly user friendly. Nowadays, there are fewer local booking access points and there is more reliance on the internet and phone lines, some of which require people to navigate the system. We have all had to do that and we all hate doing it. Such methods can be much more daunting for older people and people with disabilities. Also, people in remote areas are much more disadvantaged in that respect and in respect of information being available in a paper format or over the counter.

Fergus Ewing: All the witnesses have been extremely helpful.

Recently, we had a debate in Parliament about the thistle card scheme, which, as I understand it, involves people with a disability presenting a card to a bus operator to indicate that they require a bit more help. During the debate, MSPs from all parties said that the card was a success in those areas where the scheme operates and that several hundred thousand people use it. Is it a good idea? Should the thistle card be

encompassed in the entitlement smart card, so that those people who qualify would have one card to show the driver and not two?

Trevor Meadows: As far as I understand it, whether someone is disabled will be indicated on the smart card. I might be wrong about that, but I think that it is the case.

The thistle card has been fairly well received in some areas. Although there are some training issues and some drivers have not reacted to it as they might have, it is a good idea overall and fairly unstigmatised in design. Whether it could be incorporated into the smart card, I am not sure. An awful lot of information is to go on the card. There is a lot of debate about what should be on it and whether there is space.

Fergus Ewing: Do you agree that it would be desirable for people to have one card rather than to have to carry several cards in addition to any other cards?

Trevor Meadows: Yes.

Fergus Ewing: No doubt we will all be carrying identity cards when we go down the street, in case we are arrested or strip searched or something.

The Convener: That brings us to the end of questions for our first panel, so I thank Jo Cowan, Trevor Meadows and Roderick McLeod for their evidence this afternoon. I inform them that the minister will give evidence in about half an hour, so if they are interested to hear what he has to say and have the time to wait, they are more than welcome to stay.

Before we move on to the next group of witnesses, I have been asked to remind members to switch off any mobile phones or pagers, because they can interfere with the sound system even if they are in silent mode.

We move on to our second panel. We are still dealing with the national bus travel concession scheme. I welcome four witnesses: Marjory Rodger, director of Government relations for the Confederation of Passenger Transport in Scotland; George Mair, the managing director of First Aberdeen; Robert Andrew, deputy managing director of Stagecoach in Scotland; and John Elliot, the chief executive of Traveline Scotland.

I do not know whether you have arranged between you who will make introductory remarks, but I invite one or more of you to do so. Marjory Rodger, do you intend to lead off?

Marjory Rodger (Confederation of Passenger Transport UK): Thank you for inviting us here today, convener. It has been a long, complex and sometimes frustratingly arduous trip since we first had talks on concessionary travel in 1999. It has taken five years, a lot of senior management time

and has frustrated us in the sense that we have not been able to progress other initiatives such as those to which MACS representatives referred.

We are committed to delivering the national bus travel concession scheme on time, but we hope that when it is up and running and any teething problems have been ironed out, we can then look at other initiatives, because we believe in integrated travel, through ticketing and all those things that we hope will make it easier for users and non-users.

Having said that, we are delighted to have got this far and we are committed to delivery of the scheme. It is a great example of effective partnership working and a great way of progressing into the future.

Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): I have discussed this matter with Marjory Rodger but, for the sake of the record, I will repeat what has been said.

Concerns have been raised by bus operators, particularly smaller ones, that the ticketing mechanisms may not be in place in time and may not function as well as operators will require. The concerns arise from trials that took place in England. Can you confirm your confidence that the system will be operational when the scheme is introduced?

14:45

George Mair (Confederation of Passenger Transport UK): Although there are some issues about acquiring the appropriate ticket machines, everything is in place. FirstGroup is well down the road to selecting one supplier from the four preferred suppliers that the Executive identified. Day for the scheme will happen in April, whether or not the technology is there on the day. People will have their cards and, as operators, we will operate the national concessionary travel scheme with or without the technology.

Robert Andrew (Confederation of Passenger Transport UK): It is worth reassuring everyone that, come 1 April, there will be no problem for anyone who wishes to use the concessionary travel scheme. The technology for the scheme will catch up and vehicles will be equipped, regardless of whether the operator has 1,000 or just two vehicles. MVA Consultancy, acting for the Executive, is speaking to all the operators regardless of size.

Michael McMahon: I have had that put on the record by the minister, but it is useful to hear the operators say it. While the system is a good idea, there is a real question in the public mind about whether it will work in practice.

Marjory Rodger: The process has been exceedingly complex. We had a very tight timescale and many of the reasons for the delays are technical. For example, it was difficult to finalise the specifications and standards for the interoperable equipment. There were also many delays that we could not do anything about.

All operators will be on the same scheme terms and conditions. There will be no two-tier system; the size of the bus operator will not matter. Neither is membership of the Confederation of Passenger Transport an issue. We will talk to everyone in the industry regardless of membership, because all operators are on the same terms.

Michael McMahon: How do you convince smaller operators that the system will be operational and so allay their concerns?

George Mair: We are happy to meet any operator. Early in our discussions with the Executive's team, we gave the commitment that if there were concerns among smaller operators who may not be members of the CPT, we would be happy to meet them to discuss the options, benefits and implications of moving to this new technological platform. We picked up that arrangement from the experience in Wales, where CPT made exactly the same arrangements for operators. The introduction of the scheme there worked exceedingly well. That same offer is on the table today. We are happy to meet any operator with difficulties in understanding what is ahead for the scheme.

Robert Andrew: A series of roadshows took place across Scotland, led by local authorities, at which operators had the opportunity to discuss their views and concerns with the ticket machine suppliers. All operators had the same correspondence from the Executive and its consultants, which afforded them the opportunity to raise any questions and to discuss any issues that they may have had.

Fergus Ewing: A great amount of work has been done and we appreciate that. We look forward to the scheme working as best it can from April, even if the cards are not ready. According to Nicol Stephen when he announced the scheme before the general election, they were supposed to be ready. A statutory instrument has been devised for the reimbursement rate to bus companies. Its reasonable principle is that bus companies should be no better or worse off with the scheme.

Currently, 16 schemes exist under which the reimbursement rate varies considerably. Strathclyde Scottish Omnibuses told Parliament that the five schemes in which it is involved include a range of concessionary reimbursements from 45 per cent to 63.5 per cent of ticket price. The average reimbursement comes to 60 per cent. Is that the

average level of remuneration that operators get under the current local concessionary schemes throughout Scotland? If not, what is the level?

Marjory Rodger: We have been talking about the issue since 1999, when we thought that a national concessionary scheme would be introduced in a couple of years. Way back then, when budgets were frozen, we agreed that we would try to make the schemes work. Under many of the schemes, operators lose money heavily, which means that the choice is to put up fares for fare-paying passengers or cut services. We can prove that we are worse off under most of the current schemes. In addition, under the current schemes we can charge for additional costs whereas, in the new agreement, we have said that we will make the system much simpler and will absorb the additional costs that relate to capacity and extra demand. That is the background to the situation. We have two experts on the reimbursements, who may wish to comment.

John Elliot (Traveline Scotland): The range of reimbursement values for the current schemes extends from 45 per cent to 65 per cent in Strathclyde. To give an example, somewhere down the M74, if a person makes a concessionary journey on the Dumfries and Galloway part of the route, the operator gets a reimbursement of 45 per cent, but, if a journey of the same distance just crosses the boundary into Strathclyde, the operator gets a reimbursement of 65 per cent. There are various inconsistencies that go way back into the dim and distant past.

A great deal of work has been done in Wales to calculate what the value should be, which I believe has been subject to pretty rigorous tests. To come up with the new figure, which is higher than the current one, we compared figures that the local authorities provided on the situation before the concessionary fare schemes with the present figures and calculated the values and the cost to local authorities. Fergus Ewing is correct that there is a range of values at present.

George Mair: Given the sheer mix-up and confusion that has prevailed with the various schemes throughout Scotland, we have always contended that the reimbursement levels are totally wrong. They are far too easily manipulated to balance budgets and there has been an almost continuous exercise of long debates, year on year. Consultants have probably made more money from concessionary travel than they have from anything else. The present reimbursement rates, whether they are 45 per cent or 69 per cent, are totally flawed, which is why we welcomed the opportunity to get involved in discussion to try to clear the whole mess up once and for all.

Fergus Ewing: I am grateful for the responses and I accept many of the arguments that have

been put but, with respect, my question has not really been answered. I asked what the average concessionary rate was under the previous schemes. It must be somewhere between 45 per cent and 65 per cent—I think that it is about 60 per cent.

As we have discussed the issue privately, the witnesses can perhaps anticipate the reason why I ask the question. Operators will now move from an average reimbursement of about 60 per cent to a reimbursement of 73.6 per cent, which means that they will get a further concession of 13.6p in the pound. That suggests three things to me. The first is that you have achieved an excellent deal from the Executive, for which I pay tribute to Marjory Rodger and her colleagues. The second is that the Executive may have entered into a deal that means that money that could have been used for rural services of the sort that we have mentioned will not be used for that purpose. The third is that the principle that you have set out must be wrong—you will be better off because you will get a further concession of 12p or 15p in the pound and you will not have the complications of dealing with consultants and with 16 different schemes, as there will be only one scheme. Is that all true?

Robert Andrew: No, I certainly do not agree that that is all true. The difficulty is that we are trying to compare apples and lemons, to a degree. On the one hand, we are talking about a headline reimbursement figure in the statutory instrument of 73.6p in the pound while, on the other hand, we are talking about average reimbursement levels across the existing schemes. Reimbursement is only one element of the existing schemes. If the adult single fare is £1, what the operator gets can range from 45p to 65p, but that does not take account of the additional cost payments that operators justifiably receive for running additional services or bigger vehicles and for whatever other costs they face due to the scheme. The two together bring us back to the no better, no worse situation. If additional costs are being met, the pence-in-the-pound reimbursement to operators drops but, if there are no additional costs, it rises. Within the two, there is equilibrium.

Fergus Ewing: That is interesting. I hear the argument—indeed, I was aware of it because that is what you told me when we met a couple of weeks ago—but there is no doubt that you will be paid at a higher rate than you were before. That is a fact, so are you saying that you provided the Executive with evidence of the extra costs and it accepted that evidence?

Robert Andrew: In the past, an operator had to prove to the local authority that ran the scheme that they had incurred additional costs. The bulk of the additional costs were probably in Strathclyde, but equally there were additional costs in the

Highlands, Moray and Perth and Kinross. Most of the schemes that currently have reimbursement factors also have additional cost payments, which do not appear in the equation.

Fergus Ewing: With respect, Robert, that was not quite what I was asking. I am trying to understand why you will not be better off under the new scheme, because you will be getting a higher reimbursement rate than you were before. Before, you were getting around 60 per cent but now you will be getting nearly 74 per cent.

George Mair: I think the point—

Fergus Ewing: I ask you to bear with me a second; I will be keen to hear your answer.

Michael McMahon: As long as it is the answer that you want.

Fergus Ewing: I suspect that it will not be, but that does not mean that I will not be happy to hear it.

You say that the reason why you will be no better off is that you have extra costs. Did you, in the course of your successful efforts to persuade the Executive to give you a reimbursement rate of 73.6 per cent, quantify those extra costs and prove that you would have them?

George Mair: We considered a range of issues. I repeat that our starting point was that the reimbursement rates that we were being paid throughout Scotland—that is, the rate per passenger—were totally flawed. They had been attacked, changed and reduced over many years, and the impact of that is that we were less inclined to invest in new vehicles or in enhancing the frequency of services because we were not getting proper reimbursement.

We visited Wales, where the National Assembly for Wales, CPT Wales and consultants had done a great deal of work. We believed that the scheme that the Assembly introduced and the reasons behind it were fairly robust. It compensated operators fairly for all elements.

It is not possible to divorce the reimbursement from the additional cost payments, because many operators in Scotland were receiving both. If we add the two together, we get a figure comparable to the 73.6 per cent reimbursement rate.

There are other benefits to simplifying concessionary travel. I recently read an Audit Commission report on bus travel in England. It states that the administrative costs for the current arrangement for concessionary travel outwith London are something like £16 million a year. The report suggests that the arrangement is so costly because it is fragmented, complicated for customers and complex because of the various reimbursement mechanisms. It also suggests that

simplifying the process and having one scheme could generate savings equivalent to about £12 million.

The new arrangements will bring benefits for everyone. The reimbursement that has been agreed is fair and will allow us to develop, to enhance our business and, we hope, to meet demand. If the situation had remained unchanged, that would not be the case.

15:00

Marjory Rodger: Another difference is that there will be no morning peak restriction. Our capacity will increase.

Paul Martin: Marjory Rodger talked about the complexities of the process, but the difficulties have been dealt with and we must deliver a service. What will passengers get in return for the £159 million subsidy, as well as other subsidies such as fuel and regional transport subsidies? What creativity from local bus companies can people in Glasgow Springburn expect as a result of the investment of £159 million?

Marjory Rodger: First, the subsidy is for the passenger, rather than the operator. The passenger will get the benefit. Secondly, I want to pick up on a remark that Fergus Ewing made. People will receive their new passes. A complication has arisen because the passes are citizens cards. People will get their cards, but they might not get smart cards—

Paul Martin: I am sorry to interrupt, but under the current arrangements 37 amendments have been made to First Glasgow bus timetables, to alter or withdraw services. An investment of £159 million in bus transport in Scotland can only increase capacity, so people will expect a service. What are the bus companies doing—

Marjory Rodger: We have—

Paul Martin: Please let me finish.

What are the bus companies doing to improve continuity of service? People who are elderly and disabled expect some continuity in the timetable. I can speak only about Glasgow, but continuity is not being achieved.

George Mair: It is disappointing to hear those comments, because for the first time we have witnessed four years of continuous growth in bus use. We must be getting something right.

Free travel for people in Aberdeen is restricted to the period after 9.30 am from Monday to Friday and all day on Saturday and Sunday. When the new scheme is introduced, people will be entitled to free travel all day, every day. If we consider the wider context, someone will be able to jump on to a bus in Aberdeen and travel to Edinburgh, where

they will be able to jump on to a local bus and travel round the city to their heart's content. That is a major benefit. Under the current system there are huge issues to do with cross-boundary travel, quite apart from the operational difficulties—

Paul Martin: But George—

George Mair: Let me answer. We were good enough to allow you to finish your comments.

Robert Andrew will explain better than I can the horrendous operational difficulties that we faced when a passenger wanted to travel across a boundary. Members will remember stories about people being stranded because of the silliness of the schemes.

Robert Andrew: Of the 16 schemes that Fergus Ewing mentioned, Stagecoach was a member of 11. Every scheme is different. At one extreme, a concessionary pass holder could not leave Dundee; at the other, a pass holder in Aberdeenshire could travel to Inverness, Aberdeen or Montrose. Under the new scheme, a passenger will be able to jump on to any bus in Scotland to make any journey, regardless of where they live.

Paul Martin: With respect to Robert Andrew and George Mair, my point is that a pass holder will not be able to cross a boundary in an area in which there is no service. Under the new scheme, can we allow a situation to continue in which, for example, there have been 37 amendments to or withdrawals of services—those are recent announcements—in Glasgow alone? I am trying to extract from the witnesses a commitment to acknowledge that such a situation is unacceptable and that if we are to encourage elderly and disabled passengers to use services we must improve continuity in timetable arrangements.

From John Elliot's point of view at Traveline, the constant changes in services must give rise to bureaucracy concerns.

John Elliot: The provision of accurate and timely information is not easy. Local authorities provide Traveline with information electronically from their databases. That usually works, but occasionally a service changes at short notice, with the support of the local authority, and it is not possible to get that information into our database on time. However, such a service is generally additional rather than one that is being removed.

We are in discussion with the traffic commissioner about what we call an information assessment for service changes. The CPT agrees with us on that. If the traffic commissioner is going to grant a short-notice change, the notice is typically 21 days rather than the normal 56 days. The local authority then considers the information impact of the change. For example, if a bus

service is to be removed and not replaced, the short-notice change will not be granted and the information can be kept up to date.

A number of concession card holders use Traveline's service; we will be able to make them aware of all the different opportunities that the national scheme will offer. Someone's mother in Rutherglen might not know how to travel through to Edinburgh. We can provide that sort of information—simply, I hope.

Now that I have the chance, I should take a second to speak about Traveline and the thistle card. Our operators have been specially trained. Obviously, if someone phones our call centre, they do not want to describe their disability, and neither would we want them to. However, if they just say that they have a thistle card, the operator knows immediately what that means and can spend time giving relevant information. Call lengths are important, but the operators are specially trained to handle such situations efficiently. I am told that they do a good job.

Last week at a Traveline board meeting with service operators, we discussed information on service changes. The issue is also being discussed at the CPT Scottish council tomorrow. The witnesses at the table today do not have different opinions on the issue. Our opinion is that we must configure the system so that people get the correct information at all times.

Marjory Rodger: I would like to reassure committee members. You are asking whether we will invest and the answer is yes. We should have the confidence now to increase our investment programmes. As has been said, there was a big deterrent to investment when certain factors changed every year, but we now have more confidence. We should be able to increase frequencies when a case exists for doing so.

Routes can be long and variations to services often do not affect the whole route. I do not know the details of the 37 changes that Mr Martin mentioned, but in a long route that goes right across the city, perhaps only one tiny part of the route is changing and the change may be for a very good reason. For example, a factory may have opened and a minor adjustment to the route may be required. Often, variations are not major. I do not have the details of those 37 changes, but we do not change routes without good reason.

John Elliot: I want to make an additional point about accessibility. If a local authority provides us with the postcodes of concession card holders, we have the technology—it is called batch journey processing—to feed those postcodes into the system and find out about the accessibility of bus routes. That allows us to evaluate how the concession card holder can access the network—

how it can all click for them. We have that technology right now and it would not be difficult to provide such information.

Robert Andrew: May I make one comment?

The Convener: Sorry, I want to move on to the next question, if that is okay.

Mr Davidson: I take the panel back to the evidence that we got from members of the previous panel. As well as mentioning issues such as staff attitudes, training and responsiveness, they queried whether there would be a booking scheme for return journeys and talked a bit about demand-responsive schemes. Those first two areas are straightforward. Are you considering how you could support demand-responsive schemes?

Marjory Rodger: I will pass on booking and pick up on the third issue. There are already several demand-responsive services. If they form part of a local concessionary scheme, they will be in the national scheme. Some demand-responsive services have been registered and are getting concessionary reimbursement under local schemes. That will also be the case under the national scheme.

Mr Davidson: Will you develop further the provision of such services?

Marjory Rodger: That is not for us to do. We are not responsible for those services.

On staff training, we were the facilitator of thistle travel cards in the beginning and we have extensive Scottish vocational qualification customer care and special needs training for drivers because we think that training on both those fronts is important.

You asked MACS whether it talks to the operators. We have had talks with MACS and have set up a working group, the aim of which is to establish which wheelchairs and scooters we can get on and off vehicles. We are trying to take practical measures on the ground.

On booking systems, I will pass over to the expert.

Robert Andrew: I do not know whether I would call myself an expert on booking systems, but I will do my best to answer the question.

It would be in the committee's interests for us to take half a step back; I apologise if it appears that I am being parochial. In the next fortnight, the first roll-out in the United Kingdom of a full service of coach-type vehicles that can accommodate wheelchairs will take place. The use of a booking system will be necessary to ensure that wheelchair users can be confident that they will get a place on the service. The operators will learn from that and will be able to modify the system on

the basis of experience so that we overcome some of the barriers to use that were mentioned earlier.

I think that the main thrust of the question was aimed at longer-distance coach services. For journeys of more than 100 miles, people need to be confident that when they go to the bus stop or the bus station to make their return journey, they will be able to travel on the vehicle. There will be booking systems for such services in Scotland, whether they are provided by Citylink, Megabus or another company, to ensure that people will be guaranteed a place on the vehicle when they make their return journey. Beyond that, all that I can say is that people will be treated in a totally non-discriminatory fashion. If someone does not have a booking, it will be a case of first come, first served. I think that that is what is laid down in the statutory instrument.

The operators that have booking systems will do everything possible to ensure that concessionary card holders and other people are aware of their existence and can access them. We acknowledge that many people do not have internet access, so the use of telephone booking systems will be widespread and people will still be able to book their journeys at bus stations and booking offices. I know that in some of the more rural parts of the country, there is an issue about where people should go to get a bus ticket for a longer-distance service. Jo Cowan mentioned that there has been a particular problem in Fort William, where the established outlet closed down. I know that Citylink is seeking to overcome that problem in conjunction with the rail network. That is an example of tackling a variety of travel difficulties by trying to get a joined-up solution.

Mr Davidson: You mentioned that a space that was dedicated to wheelchairs would be provided on buses. Did you mean that a single space would be provided on local services?

Robert Andrew: I am sorry—I might not have made myself clear. I was talking about the first wheelchair-accessible coaches, as opposed to the low-floor buses that are used in urban areas, which are not designed for travelling hundreds of miles up and down trunk roads or the motorway network, as they offer no comfort on longer-distance journeys. The manufacturers have only recently produced solutions to the problem of making coaches wheelchair accessible. Such vehicles are now available and the first full-scale roll-out of them will take place in Scotland in the next few weeks. Those coaches have been designed with a lift in the front-door area and there is space in the front near side of the vehicle for wheelchair passengers. Unfortunately, design constraints mean that at the moment there is only one space for a wheelchair user in each vehicle.

The Convener: We will move on.

15:15

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): I am sorry, convener, but I will probably have to take things back a wee bit. All of us are as excited about the introduction of the scheme as our witnesses are. The scheme may be long overdue, but we are coming at it from the positive point of view that it is good for Scotland. I am sure that all committee members agree that it is good for our citizens.

However, I want to illustrate the point that Paul Martin touched on. A week past Saturday, along with 35 people from the Mossbank and Pollokshields areas of Glasgow, I lobbied outside the Larkfield bus garage against the withdrawal of the 59 bus service. The 59 bus serves an area of the south-west of Glasgow—Mossbank—that has the highest concentration of elderly citizens in the whole of the south-west of the city. We are talking of around about 150,000 citizens.

Having an improved concessionary bus travel scheme is not much good to people if we do not also have the services for them to use. A number of panel members mentioned the situation in Wales. We have noted the fantastic increase in bus usage in Wales following the introduction of the scheme, which, importantly, is not time restricted; I am glad that Scotland has decided to replicate that model.

I am looking for some commitment from the panel. You have spoken about issues such as capacity and service availability. Can you give us a guarantee today that capacity and services will improve so that more people will be able to travel by bus?

Robert Andrew: I cannot comment on the example that the member gave; I am not familiar with the south side of Glasgow and it would be wrong of me to comment.

As commercial bus companies, we look at the opportunities, issues and challenges. I fully anticipate that we will see an increase in mileage, in bus use and in the number of buses that run on Scotland's roads. I cannot give a guarantee that we will overcome the difficulties in every instance; I am speaking only in the context of my own business. Certainly, we are looking positively at the situation. We want to find ways of taking forward the provision of bus services across our operating area.

George Mair: I concur with that. I work with First, but I am not in a position to comment on the 59 bus service in Mossbank. I endorse Robert Andrew's statement. That is fundamental to the scheme going forward.

Marjory Rodger: We want to see the market grow, but it will not do that unless we provide the services, which we want to do.

Tommy Sheridan: As operators and observers of the services, will your companies provide some form of monitoring or do you expect the Executive to do that? In two years' time, we will want to look back over what has happened. Similar statistics to those that were gathered in Wales will need to be gathered in Scotland. We will need to know whether capacity increased and whether additional services were provided. How will we get that information?

George Mair: The document on which we have been working since 1999 contains clauses that will allow all the information on concessionary travel to be made available, as is the case at present. Each local authority is given a periodic report—monthly or otherwise—on concessionary journeys. We will share the information with the new Transport Scotland agency.

We need to remember that Wales went from having a restricted scheme to one that is fully free. In Scotland, we have gone from local authority schemes to a national minimum scheme—

Marjory Rodger: Run by local authorities.

George Mair: Yes; in many cases, those schemes were already free all day. We have moved from that position to one in which travel will be free nationally across Scotland.

We have done the right thing. One has only to look across the fence to the lower part of the country to see the total confusion that reigns; England has gone in the opposite direction and is implementing a scheme based on local authority areas—

Robert Andrew: In many cases, boundaries are being reduced.

Tommy Sheridan: Is your point that the situation here is not strictly comparable with that in Wales? We hope that the scheme will have certain benefits in Scotland and I was encouraged by the Welsh improvement in usage. Are you saying that comparing the situation in Wales with that in Scotland is not comparing apples with apples?

Robert Andrew: Before we moved to the free local schemes in Scotland, there was a variety of schemes that were flat fare, half fare, quarter fare and the like. We moved to free local schemes and we are now moving to the free national scheme. Wales made that change in one jump, so in order to do a like-for-like comparison we would need to take as a starting point the pre-free-local-scheme position rather than today's position.

Statistics are already being provided. Somebody mentioned the figure that shows that bus use in Scotland has grown over the past four years. Bus mileage and bus passenger figures are in the public domain. They are published as part of the Scottish Executive's statistics and I am sure that that will continue.

Tommy Sheridan: If the situation does not improve, will you guys have failed or will the Scottish Executive have failed?

The Convener: We can perhaps judge that if and when the time comes.

Mr Arbuckle: Are you confident that you have the resources, by way of both vehicles and drivers, to cope with the introduction of the scheme?

Robert Andrew: Personally speaking—yes. Over the years the bus industry has shown that it can be flexible and can react quickly when changes are required and when unexpected events happen. I am confident that when we move to the new regime there will be few if any issues.

Marjory Rodger: We have referred to what happened when we moved from 16 local schemes to a national minimum standard. In Strathclyde, the 10-mile restriction was removed. That gives us an example to work from and a precedent. We are quite confident on that front.

Mr Arbuckle: What percentage of your fleets are low-level, easy-access vehicles?

Robert Andrew: The figure varies greatly. We operate a large proportion of the inter-urban services. Until now we have not been able to bring in accessible vehicles for longer-distance services. The target is for the average fleet age to be eight years or less, but a very high proportion of operators in Scotland exceed that figure.

Bruce Crawford: I am glad that you are confident that you will be able to deal with the additional issues that you will face. That is helpful. However, can you help me solve a conundrum? Given that 16 schemes are going into one scheme and that barriers will be removed, passengers will make longer journeys and there will be additional road times for buses on longer journeys. Therefore, there will be additional costs for the bus operators, which will bring additional pressures. Unless you bring in new investment in buses and drivers, which will be an additional cost, how will you ensure that other services will not suffer from the additional pressures that will be brought to bear by additional road times for longer journeys? There appears to be tension in that situation, but perhaps you can explain how the conundrum can be solved.

George Mair: It is an exciting challenge.

Bruce Crawford: I accept that.

George Mair: We faced the same dilemma when we moved to the national minimum standard in 2002. The only difference then was that although we moved to the new scheme, we did not believe that we were being reimbursed properly. Most operators in Scotland tried to establish the extra demand that would exist under the new

scheme and to put in place additional resources to deal with it. We are more inclined to do that in this case, because we feel that we are getting a fair crack of the whip.

Bruce Crawford: In effect, you think that the level of reimbursement will help you to cover the additional costs that might arise as a result of concessionary travel. Am I being told that, on top of that, you are prepared to make extra investment because of the new money that is being levered in?

George Mair: That is a fair assumption.

Bruce Crawford: We will watch that space carefully, because it might be an issue that we have to look at later.

Marjory Rodger: We would be assisted greatly if local authorities helped us by having more enforced bus priorities.

John Elliot: I have an important additional point to make on that. If the scheme increases demand—and it will—and if supply does not increase in line with that demand, it will not be just the concession card holders who will be standing in queues at bus stops not able to get on the bus; the ordinary passenger who is going to work, school or university will also not be able to get on the bus. The market will have to react to that. It cannot be a case of having new concession card holders but not providing the buses, which would simply mean some people not being able to get on the bus. People might not specifically say that it will be the 59 bus or some other bus that will be affected, but something has to happen. If it does not, the whole public transport system will be affected. Nobody will be confident that they will be able to get on a bus anywhere at any time.

Bruce Crawford: That is why I asked the question—it is obvious that there are tensions in that regard. However, if you guys at the Confederation of Passenger Transport are saying that you are confident that you can deliver, that is fine. Time will tell, but I am glad that you are confident.

Robert Andrew: We went through a similar process back in 2002. We identified where we expected local problems to be—although, with increased patronage, problems can also become opportunities. We have now done the same thing as individual operators have done: we know the contents of the 16 existing schemes and we know what happens in the areas in which they operate. We also know what we expect to happen. Some of those expectations will be right and some will be wrong. We will react to those situations when we have not necessarily got the bus there on day one, and we will have it there by day one plus 5 minutes or whatever. It is a moving target, but we will hit it.

Bruce Crawford: The best of luck to you.

The Convener: That brings us to the end of questions to the panel. I thank Marjory Rodger, George Mair, Robert Andrew and John Elliot. After a change of witnesses, we will move to the debate on the motion to approve the draft order.

We welcome to the committee the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications, Tavish Scott, who is here to speak to the draft National Bus Travel Concession Scheme for Older and Disabled Persons (Scotland) Order 2006. He is supported by Executive officials. I will explain the procedure that we will follow. First, we will give the minister the opportunity to make introductory remarks, although he may wish to hold some of them over to the debate on the order. I will at that stage give members the opportunity to ask technical questions, to which the Executive officials may respond. Following that, we will move to the debate on the draft order, which the minister will move that we recommend be approved. Members will then have the opportunity to debate the draft order.

I invite Tavish Scott to make introductory remarks to the committee in support of the order.

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): Thank you, convener, and good afternoon. This is an important stage in the process. I understand that you have spent the afternoon discussing the order, so I can perhaps keep my remarks to the point. The draft order is being made under provisions in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2005, which empowers the Scottish ministers by order to make national travel concession schemes.

The order is one of two that together will make what we are calling the Scotland-wide free bus scheme for older and disabled people. The order that is before the committee now covers all aspects of the scheme except the definition of the bus and coach services that will be eligible to be part of the scheme and the definition of the people—or, in legislative terms, the “persons”—who will be eligible to join the scheme. The eligibility issues will be dealt with through the second order. As is provided for in the primary legislation, the eligibility order is subject to the negative procedure. It must refer to the scheme order, so the eligibility order cannot be made until the scheme order itself is made in early March.

15:30

Under the free bus scheme, more than 1 million older and disabled people will be able to travel free on buses anywhere in Scotland from 1 April this year. The scheme will encompass people who are aged 60 and over and mobility-impaired disabled people. It will cover local buses and long-

distance scheduled services, and eligible people will be able to use it throughout the day, including during the morning rush hour. As is the case at present under local schemes, eligible people will be able to travel free on buses locally. From the beginning of April, they will also be able to travel free anywhere in Scotland and to Berwick-upon-Tweed and Carlisle, as they are main centres that are close to the border.

The scheme order sets out the rules under which bus operators will be admitted to, and will take part in, the Scotland-wide scheme. It also includes provisions on reimbursement of or payment to operators for carrying concessionary passengers, and on verification of operators' claims. As the committee has discussed this afternoon, operators will be reimbursed at 73.6 per cent of the average adult single fare, and the scheme will cost a maximum of £159 million in 2006-07 and £163 million in 2007-08.

The scheme was announced in Parliament on 22 December 2004 by my predecessor. It will implement the commitment in the partnership agreement to introduce a national free bus scheme for older and disabled people. Since the announcement, we have been engaged in extensive consultation of key stakeholders about the details. The order is therefore very much the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the preparations that are being made. I record my tribute to the many interested individuals and parties who have ensured that we can deliver a scheme that will meet the requirements of everyone.

Following the announcement, we set up seven task groups with key external stakeholders from bus operators, local government and the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland. Their input will be used to draw up draft scheme and eligibility orders, which will be put out to wide consultation. The order that is before the committee has benefited greatly from that inclusive and open process. I encourage the committee to support the order, because without it there will be no national scheme on 1 April. I am happy to take questions.

The Convener: I emphasise to members that they should ask short and precise questions and not give political speeches. There will be opportunities for speeches in the debate, if members choose to make them.

Fergus Ewing: The estimated maximum cost of the scheme is £159 million in this financial year and £163 million next year. What are the estimated actual figures for each of those years?

Tavish Scott: We have given the committee the maximum figures, but we cannot provide the estimates that Fergus Ewing seeks. As the committee would expect, we will monitor

expenditure month by month during both financial years in order to ensure that the cap is adhered to.

Fergus Ewing: Do you have a budgeted figure for the actual cost of the scheme in each of the two years? If so, what is it for each year?

Tavish Scott: I am not clear what you are driving at. We have a budget—the figures that I have stated on the record—and we will adhere to it.

Fergus Ewing: Has any thought been given to the following problem, with which the minister will be familiar? Although we all welcome the scheme—we will all, I suspect, support it this afternoon because we support its objectives—its fundamental flaw is that people who, for reasons of mobility or geography, have no access to a bus or to a bus that they can use will get no benefit from the scheme, whereas those who—

The Convener: We are straying into a debate.

Fergus Ewing: I am about to ask a question that follows from this point.

The Convener: Please stick to questions.

Fergus Ewing: Has the Executive given any thought to how people who are not really expected to benefit from the scheme could benefit from it? In particular, have you considered whether any of the community-based schemes in rural Scotland could have been included within the ambit of the scheme so that people in those areas might also be able to take advantage of concessionary travel by bus, minibus, local taxi service or other such means?

Tavish Scott: On the final point, one of the arguments is about demand-responsive transport systems. If buses are part of a scheduled service that is operated by a local authority under existing arrangements, they can be part of the national concessionary scheme. I hope that they would help people who already use that mechanism and who would continue to use it. It has certainly been said in debates and committee discussions and, I believe, it was said earlier that we have been waiting a long time—some of us would say too long—to get to where we are today. If we were to wait and seek to refine the scheme to provide the perfect solution, I suspect that we would be waiting a very long time.

I am interested in ensuring that a national scheme is up and running on 1 April. We can reflect constantly on how we can improve it once we understand the first and second years of operation. It is important that we reflect on the evidence and information that we will gain through the technology we will use to build up a picture of where problems might emerge. We will be happy to use those reflections when we consider future years.

Fergus Ewing: I have one final brief question.

The Convener: I would prefer to move on. You have asked three questions already. There will be further opportunities for the minister to respond during the debate.

Paul Martin: What kind of discussions took place about getting best value for such a substantial sum of public subsidy, and what improvements in services can passengers expect?

Tavish Scott: Any Scottish Executive budget has to pass through a process in which it must meet a number of key criteria on expenditure of public money and on what we and—more important—the passengers will get for that money. The Administration's transport priority has been through that process; it has been agreed by the Cabinet, so it has been agreed by ministers including the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform, who considered the value-for-money criteria. The transport policy has been agreed in the context of providing and assisting services for older and disabled people across Scotland. If the question was about something more specific, I would seek to answer it, but I can only give a general overview in response to it. A national scheme such as this is aimed at assisting as many people in our communities as possible.

Paul Martin: Part of getting best value into the process would be to ensure that there is competition in the market. Do you think that the current regime in Scotland is sufficient for competition? Some areas have been parcelled off and certain operators do not seem to have any serious competition. Was competition considered as part of the scheme?

Tavish Scott: We have a deregulated bus market. I appreciate Mr Martin's concerns; I know that he raised them at question time in the week before recess. However, in a deregulated market—the policy context within which the Government has to work—we have to make sure that the services that we fund are as effective as possible.

As we have also discussed previously, there are other mechanisms in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 that would allow the introduction of either quality partnerships or quality contracts. Local authorities will have to consider whether those are appropriate. I suspect that local authorities will be better able to judge that than would central Government.

Paul Martin: I do not know whether you can answer my final question today; perhaps you can write to the committee if you cannot. We always talk about competition and we expect local authorities to get best value in their contracts. We have seen that throughout many regimes. Will you assure us today that the matter was considered, or

will that be clarified at a future date? I understand that it is part of the existing options to ensure that best value is delivered and that there is a competitive market.

Tavish Scott: I will be happy to look into the specific market aspects of the bus industry in Scotland in general and how it currently operates. It would be fair to say that the Office of Fair Trading is currently considering several measures. It is, after all, the body that is responsible for issues relating to competition. We can, however, reflect on the points that Mr Martin has raised and then write to the committee formally.

Bruce Crawford: I am glad that the minister said that he will seek to improve the scheme after a period of operation. I accept that we could have tinkered with the scheme for ever, but we needed to put it in place.

Fergus Ewing mentioned the people who are the most socially isolated through mobility or geography. Resources are always limited, but the committee heard today from witnesses who suggested that the concessionary scheme goes too far in that it gives concessions to people aged between 60 and 65 who are still in continuous full-time employment. It was suggested that the resources that are devoted to that aspect of the scheme could be used to support community initiatives. Will the minister consider that in the future or as part of the scheme that is being discussed today?

Tavish Scott: To be brutally honest, that aspect pre-dates my involvement in the scheme. I do not want to duck the issue, but there is no way that I will change the scheme at such a late stage—I hope that Mr Crawford appreciates the complexity that would be involved in doing that. We can certainly reflect on the decision that was made. I guess that there was a clear policy decision to set up a national scheme for which people over 60 would be eligible. I suspect that once the scheme is in place and people of a certain age are eligible under the rules, it will be pretty difficult to withdraw eligibility without making many people feel aggrieved. The scheme is as we are discussing it; I do not envisage any changes.

Tommy Sheridan: I have three questions. You said that operators will be reimbursed at 73.6 per cent of the average adult single fare. What is the average adult single fare?

Tavish Scott: My officials might know that.

Tom Macdonald (Scottish Executive Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department): There is no generic average single fare that covers the entire country. The average adult single fare relates to individual bus companies and the services that they run.

Tommy Sheridan: I am confused by your answer, given that we are implementing a national scheme. Are you saying that the national scheme will operate differently from region to region throughout Scotland?

Tom Macdonald: No. I am saying that if someone wants to know what average adult single fare will be applied to them they will have to look at the fare that their particular bus company charges. No figure has been calculated to say what should be charged. Fares are not regulated, so the average adult single fare is the fare that the operator charges.

Tommy Sheridan: I assumed that you had collated information on adult fares throughout Scotland and negotiated with the operators to agree an average fare. Some operators might have lost out and perhaps many would have gained, given the current reimbursement levels. I had assumed that there was a consistent approach. How will you ensure that operators do not increase their fares by a remarkable amount just before the scheme is implemented, to ensure that their average fares are higher so that they can demand a higher level of reimbursement? Have you considered such issues?

Tavish Scott: There was a commercial negotiation—which I am sure we have discussed—with the CPT on behalf of the bus operators. The negotiation took some time because of the complexity and detail of the matter. We worked with both parties to ensure that we reached a fair settlement, which relates to the point about best value that was made earlier. It is important to note that the assessment and the work that went into it reflected the need for a national scheme. It is genuinely difficult to produce an exact figure, given that 32 local authorities have been operating schemes through different mechanisms. The commercial negotiation has come to an agreed and settled position, which is in the public domain.

Tommy Sheridan: I think Tom Macdonald wants to add something.

Tom Macdonald: The 73.6 per cent rate is in the deal. The bus operator charges 100 per cent, but there is a mechanism in the order that means that if an issue arises to do with the fare that is being charged there will be scope for Transport Scotland or the Scottish ministers to base the reimbursement rate on a different calculation—in extreme circumstances.

15:45

Tommy Sheridan: I asked my question because you are absolutely specific about the cost of the scheme in the next two years. I assumed that there would have been absolute agreement

on the average adult fare, because I thought that that was how you had arrived at the figure. However, it sounds as if the average adult fare is a moveable feast from region to region.

Are you confident that we are doing everything possible to ensure that all people who are entitled to concessionary travel will have access to an entitlement card? I am sure that you are aware of the low take-up in Scotland of various benefits. The concessionary travel scheme is not means tested, which is great and very important. However, are you confident that everything is being done to ensure that there will be maximum take-up of the entitlement card?

Tavish Scott: I was very specific about the budget for the scheme—I reiterate the point on the record. I believe that we are moving in the right direction on the entitlement card. I am grateful for the help that we have received from a number of bodies, not least the local authorities, which are acting as the points of contact for older and disabled people who apply for the card. In many cases, pre-printed application forms are being sent out that make it demonstrably easier for people to apply. In addition, we have spent some resource on national and local advertising throughout Scotland so that we can encourage those who have not yet come forward to do so. After all, there is a big incentive to apply. This is a tremendous scheme, from which potentially a million people in Scotland will benefit. If MSPs talk about it in the parts of Scotland that they represent, that will add to the advertising that is taking place to encourage people to obtain entitlement cards before 1 April.

Tommy Sheridan: In the course of establishing your budget, have you set a target for increased passenger use? If so, what is the target for which you are aiming?

Tavish Scott: We do not have a formal target, but we expect more people to travel and we expect them to travel longer distances. The situation will be monitored month by month. One of the advantages of the new technology of the card and the machines that will monitor card use on buses will be the intelligence—if I can use that word—that will be provided, which will allow us to monitor usage and types of usage month by month. That will help us when we come to examine the second year of the budget and any changes that we wish to make for future years.

The Convener: I have a supplementary question that relates to some of Mr Sheridan's earlier questions. Rightly, he asked how the Executive would protect the public purse against an operator that raises fares well above the rate of inflation in order to get a bigger share of the budget that is available. Article 12 of the order deals with reimbursement of operators; it says that an adjudication panel will rule on disputes relating

to reimbursement. Are you confident that that procedure will be robust enough to take account of individual operators that drive up fares well over the rate of inflation and above a level that takes

“account of the costs (including a reasonable profit) of a well-run undertaking”?

Tavish Scott: That is a fair question. The adjudication panel is to be established because of the concerns that the convener has highlighted. If we were not concerned about the issue and were completely satisfied that there was no possibility of operators driving up fares, we would not want to create that panel, which is intended to provide the robust analysis and process that you seek. It is important that the panel will be put in place. Three members will be appointed by Scottish ministers, and it is demonstrably the case that they will have a task to perform if such a problem arises.

I suspect that there will be a fair degree of local and parliamentary interest in the scheme as it operates and develops during the next year, which will ensure that such issues receive an airing in Parliament from time to time.

Mr Davidson: You said that there would be monthly monitoring of the scheme. Were you talking simply about monitoring the budget to ascertain whether there is enough money left in the pot to cover the year, or will you monitor the use of the card and congestion and capacity difficulties on particular routes?

Tavish Scott: As I am sure the committee expects, the primary purpose of the monitoring exercise will be financial; it will be to ensure that our budget is on track. However, the purpose of the contactless card and the ticket machines on buses is to enable us to gather substantial information about usage, particular routes and the spread of travel throughout Scotland. That will help our analysis of the effectiveness of the scheme and what might need to be done. I have not considered congestion on particular bus services, but I am sure that such issues will emerge as we interrogate the information that we gain.

Mr Davidson: Earlier in the meeting, witnesses talked about access to services. There was certainly a capacity problem in Aberdeen when pensioners took advantage of a new bus-pass scheme by going out for the day and travelling during the rush hours. The problem had to be solved locally. Are there plans afoot to monitor what goes on? I presume that the machines on the buses will provide information only on who has boarded the bus but will not tell you who could not get on the bus.

Tavish Scott: It is fair to say that we are not acting in isolation. We have a genuine working relationship with bus operators, so if such issues

emerge in Aberdeen or elsewhere we will ensure that the matter is carefully analysed. I do not think that we can allow such problems to build up and create difficulties for passengers, given the primary purpose of the scheme, which others have mentioned.

The Convener: I propose that we move to formal debate on motion S2M-3869. I ask the minister to speak to the motion.

Tavish Scott: I do not propose to add to my introductory remarks, in which I set out the purpose of our national scheme and the budget that it attracts.

I move,

That the Local Government and Transport Committee recommends that the draft National Bus Travel Concession Scheme for Older and Disabled Persons (Scotland) Order 2006 be approved.

Fergus Ewing: The Scottish National Party supports the scheme and its objectives and congratulates the people who were involved in the lengthy work to progress the matter to this stage—the CPT, Executive civil servants and local councils, including the people who work in council offices and help folk to receive their cards.

Although we support the objectives of the scheme in principle, it is reasonable to note that we want to ensure that as many people as possible in Scotland benefit and that public money is used most effectively. In that regard, criticism of the scheme can be made, which might be addressed in the future, perhaps after we have had an opportunity to witness the scheme in operation.

First, the scheme is a two-tier scheme. The first tier represents the people who will be able to use the scheme; the second represents those who will not. The second tier will include the many people in my constituency in rural Scotland who have no access to bus services or who have access only to sparse services. That needs to be said, although we accept that no Government in the world can provide a bus to every community and that we are talking about allocation of scarce resources.

Secondly, we heard evidence on a number of practical points from MACS and other witnesses who work at local level, which I am sure that we all want to take into account.

Thirdly, perhaps the Executive is open to greatest criticism over use of resources. I have discussed this at some length with the CPT and the bus companies. They are moving from 16 schemes throughout Scotland, in which the level of concession ranges from 44p or 45p in the pound to 65p in the pound, to the new deal in which they will receive almost 74p in the pound. That indicates that the bus companies have got a

very good deal indeed and that the taxpayer does not, on the face of it, seem to have got such a good deal.

I asked the minister for his estimate of the actual figures because the estimated actual cost of the scheme will be somewhat less than the figures of £159 million and £163 million, which are the maximum figures. I am interested in what the minister will not say or cannot say about what his department estimates the scheme will cost.

If there is a substantial excess, as I believe there will be, money will either be handed back to the Scottish Executive Finance and Central Services Department for end-year funding or it will be used otherwise in the Scottish Executive Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department. That money could be used to address some of the problems that we have heard about today, which is why I raised the issue with the minister in such a positive spirit.

My final point is about smart cards. When the minister's predecessor made the announcement about the scheme back in December 2004—conveniently, a few months before the impending general election, which is always a good time to give good news and promises for the future—he stated that the intention was that smart cards would be there from the beginning. They are not and, according to the MVA Ltd consultancy reports that I have obtained under the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002, MVA concedes and the minister knows that the possibility of fraud and the certainty of extra expense from having to operate manual and computer records at the same time have not been eliminated.

I appreciate that the constraints of time are such that we did not have the opportunity to ask the minister as many questions as we would have liked. What I do not know is how many of the 1 million-plus people will have their smart cards by 1 April, how many will not, when they will have them, and when each bus will be operated with the necessary machine for the smart card. Does the minister accept that there is a serious possibility of fraud on the part of a tiny minority of operators? What is he going to do about it?

That said, as the minister knows, he has my warm support for the objectives of the scheme, and I know that he is always pleased to receive the constructive criticism that I always seek to offer.

Michael McMahon: I have a couple of comments. I welcome the fact that we, as a Labour-led Executive, are introducing this concessionary travel scheme. It is something that we have long campaigned for. However, we are aware that a scheme exists already, and the

committee has looked into that scheme and identified several issues with it, some of which we have alluded to this afternoon.

Paul Martin and Tommy Sheridan have raised the issue of the accessibility and availability of buses, which is the one issue that concerns everyone. That was highlighted quite strongly during the committee's inquiry. Although there are problems, I hope that the new scheme will address many of them. We have heard some positive comments this afternoon that the scheme might well allow some of those issues to be addressed, because it will allow operators to plan better and to overcome many of the logistical and practical problems of the current scheme.

I would have liked to hear more from the smaller operators, who often have to pick up the pieces. We always seem to take evidence from the bigger operators who seem to be doing quite well out of the scheme. That concerned me during the committee's inquiry, it concerned me during the debate on the new scheme, and it concerns me now. That is not to detract from the new scheme, because we know that those operators are fundamental to its becoming everything we want it to be.

I still have concerns about some of the scheme's aspects. I am sure that the committee will want to keep monitoring its roll-out. We cannot assume that the problems will just disappear. I am sure that the minister—as he always has done—will want to address any concerns that the committee brings to him in that respect. I have always welcomed the positive way that he has engaged with the committee in taking forward its proposals. There are some caveats, but they relate only to the scheme's practice. Its policy and direction must be welcomed, and I hope that the committee will endorse it.

16:00

Mr Davidson: I welcome the working together of the private and public sectors in producing the scheme. The competitive edge in the marketplace will ensure that we have value for money. However, as others have said, that will happen only as long as there is proper scrutiny of queries that arise in the minds of those who operate the scheme.

The minister must consider and reply to the committee on route development, which applies to rural areas as well as to large housing schemes in suburban areas. Bus accessibility and where new routes can be established under the scheme must be considered.

The minister gave us the total that he is prepared to spend in the scheme's first year, but he did not define what might be used for what

purpose or whether the budget could be rolled forward. The GAE will be removed from local authorities and put back into the pot—not all of it, but a lot if it. What support will the minister and his colleagues in the Executive give to local authorities to support demand-responsive services? That applies particularly to the disabled and the elderly who live in communities where it may be uneconomical to run a large-scale bus service on a frequent timetable.

Our party is looking forward to the scheme's roll-out. We hope that the minister will respond frequently to what he picks up in its first two years. Preferably, a statement on the scheme's operation will be made every six months—whether it is in writing is academic—so that Parliament knows where it is going. Once a year, the minister could make himself available to the committee for a discussion on the practicalities of the scheme's workings and on whether he sees any shortcomings in it. On behalf of the Conservatives, I support the order.

Paul Martin: The concessionary travel scheme is the only transport initiative that has been welcomed by all parties. I am considering that in light of other issues, such as congestion charges, that have been raised in the committee. We must consider the unique aspect of the scheme and build on it. As Michael McMahon said on behalf of the Labour Party, the initiative has been welcomed across Scotland, but the importance of building on this opportunity cannot be underestimated.

The issue of competition must be raised during the scheme's progress. We do not have the competitive market in bus services that was envisaged. When the scheme was announced several years ago, the market was competitive. I recall that there were so many buses on Hope Street in Glasgow that no one was concerned about the market. Now, however, there are not so many buses. During the evolution of the scheme, the minister must ensure that market competitiveness and best value for bus service users are addressed.

Tommy Sheridan: From the Scottish Socialist Party's point of view, any policy that increases accessibility to vital services for the citizens of Scotland must be welcomed. I note that the important aspect of the scheme—it is good that all parties support it—is that it is non-means tested. Although the scheme will cost £159 million in the coming financial year, and £163 million in the next financial year, it is a non-means-tested scheme. We are often told that we must means test in order to target resources, for example in arguments about free school meals, but that is patent nonsense, as the concessionary fares scheme demonstrates.

There are issues about the level of public subsidy. We should consider who owns and

controls bus services, and whether we should move closer to public ownership and control of bus services throughout Scotland. We talked about Mossbank, which has the highest concentration of elderly citizens in south-west Glasgow. I would love to be able to report to those people that they can get a free bus to the Citizens Theatre, the Theatre Royal or the pictures in the city centre, but I cannot do that, because the 59 bus service has been axed and there is no bus after 6 pm to take them home. I hope that the minister will consider service accessibility and closely monitor service provision throughout Scotland. I hope that he will consider accessibility not just in rural areas, which is an important matter that members who represent rural constituencies highlighted, but urban areas, because in most of our cities off-peak bus provision is a disgrace.

It is important that the committee supports the scheme. It arrives six years late, as I am sure the minister accepts, but it is before the committee now and we must drive forward to encourage uptake and ensure that every person who is eligible for a card receives one and uses the scheme. All members have a collective role to play in ensuring that people apply for and receive their cards in the areas that we represent. I hope that the committee will support the scheme. However, lessons should be learned from the scheme's development to inform future policy proposals in the Scottish Parliament. Top of the list of lessons should be the non-means-testing approach.

The Convener: Before I invite the minister to respond, I will pick up on a couple of issues that have been raised in the debate. In response to Tommy Sheridan's comments about means testing, I note that since the inception of the welfare state in Britain there has been a mixture of means-tested and non-means-tested benefits and public services. Strong arguments for and against the degree of means testing can be made in relation to different services. Approval of the order will not have the broader resonance with other issues that Tommy Sheridan would like it to have.

All members of the committee and parties in the Parliament are likely to support the order and the policy. I welcome that—although anyone listening to Fergus Ewing's speech could be forgiven for thinking that he opposes the policy. If he believes that the order is as flawed as he said it is, perhaps he should vote against it. It is right that members express concerns and suggest improvements to the policy, but we should acknowledge the progress that has been made.

The free local bus travel scheme for older and disabled people was one of the most popular and—more important—effective measures that the Scottish Parliament introduced during its first session. The order that we are considering takes

us a stage further. When the local scheme was discussed there was a debate about whether we should set up a national scheme from the outset but, given concerns about the industry's capacity to cope with the demand that the immediate establishment of a national scheme would have created, it was right to approach the matter in two stages.

The increase in bus patronage during the past four years is partly due to the local concessionary fares scheme that was introduced in the first session of the Parliament. I am confident that the new scheme will contribute to further growth in the bus industry. Such growth should enable the industry to respond to concerns that members have raised about the accessibility of services to rural and urban communities. Time will tell whether the industry and the scheme will meet everyone's aspirations, but the order is a positive piece of legislation from the Scottish Executive. It is welcomed and supported throughout the Parliament, and I am sure that Scotland's elderly and disabled people will regard the Scottish Parliament with gratitude and praise it for progressing the initiative.

Tavish Scott: I thank the convener and all members who expressed their support for the scheme. The sun is indeed shining today. It is one of those rare days in politics, I suspect.

Mr Ewing talked about a two-tier system. I thought that he made a two-tier speech, if I may say so. I found his argument a little difficult to understand. On the one hand, he said that we should be careful about our budget and about fraud but, on the other hand, he said that we should guard against having lots of money left over and carrying it forward to another year. To make the scheme work, we must make the best judgment that we can make on the basis of the information that we have and the operational agreement that has been negotiated with the bus companies. That is what we will do. I will readily accept and welcome any observations on the scheme that are made by committee members or by the committee as a whole. The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications appears before the committee to discuss the budget every year so, even if there are no other opportunities, there will be a chance at that time to discuss in detail the budgetary implications of the financial performance of the scheme that we will introduce on 1 April.

I do not accept Mr Ewing's suggestion that there will be a two-tier system. It is not fair to use that phrase in relation to rural Scotland. It is an emotive expression and it does not accord with what I know about the bus services that will be available in rural Scotland. As Mr Ewing said, there are many areas in which bus services

cannot be provided for obvious reasons, but it is important to express the argument in a balanced way. We must not suggest, as he did, that vast tracts of Scotland will not benefit from the scheme.

It has been suggested that no smart cards have been printed yet, but I can confirm that 214,330 cards have already been printed and that 468,746 applications have been received. About 1 million people in Scotland are eligible, but the scheme is voluntary so, by definition, people do not have to apply. The fact that nearly half a million people have applied is a good start. I entirely accept the remarks that a number of colleagues made that more needs to be done, but a lot of progress has been made.

A number of members made a fair point about fraud. Prior to the introduction of a fully smart system, Transport Scotland will use tried and tested reimbursement and verification systems, including data analysis, compliance system audits and survey activity, to ensure that there is accurate and proper reimbursement of concessionary travel. The issue is important and we will keep a close eye on it.

I take Michael McMahon's point about smaller operators. It is a fair point, and he has made it on a number of occasions, but I hope that it is clear that our policy approach is to treat all bus operators in the same way and to adopt a range of methods to ensure that we are in contact with all bus operators about admission to the scheme and payments. The scheme is not applicable only to the large companies. If it was, those companies might be seen to have an advantage.

I take David Davidson's point about route development and I will consider it. I had a series of negotiations with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities about the GAE clawback and we reached an agreed position. I am grateful to COSLA—and particularly to the chair of its transport committee, Alison Magee—for the work that was done to come to that conclusion.

I take Paul Martin's point about competition. I think that I have already said that we will come back to him on that. On the point about demand-responsive transport, a report is being analysed and I am happy to consider in what way I can ensure that the committee is kept up to date as we use that method to improve services in areas where there are gaps. I recognise that the argument is about not just rural areas but urban areas too, as a number of colleagues said today.

I am grateful for members' support and I hope that the committee will agree that the order should be approved.

The Convener: The question is, that motion S2M-3869, in the name of Tavish Scott, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Local Government and Transport Committee recommends that the draft National Bus Travel Concession Scheme for Older and Disabled Persons (Scotland) Order 2006 be approved.

The Convener: The motion was unanimously agreed to.

Road User Charging (Liability for Charges) (Scotland) Regulations 2005 (SSI 2005/651)

Road User Charging (Penalty Charges) (Scotland) Regulations 2005 (SSI 2005/652)

Road User Charging Schemes (Keeping of Accounts and Relevant Expenses) (Scotland) Regulations 2005 (SSI 2005/654)

16:15

The Convener: The third item on the agenda also involves the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications, Tavish Scott, but there will be some changeover in the Executive officials who are supporting him. While that changeover is taking place, I will explain to the committee the procedure that we will follow.

We will debate three motions to annul—motions S2M-3899, S2M-3900 and S2M-3901—in the name of David Davidson, on the negative Scottish statutory instruments on road user charging regulations, which the minister laid towards the end of 2005. We need to have separate debates on each of the three sets of regulations, but it is possible for us to allow questions that cover all three before we have those separate debates. I hope that we will not necessarily have extensive debates on all three sets of regulations and that members will make their general points in their first contribution to the debate. However, we will have separate formal debates and votes.

Mr Davidson: It was my intention to make one set of comments that covers all three sets of regulations. If that is the way in which the rest of the committee would like to operate, that is fair enough.

The Convener: That will be up to individual members. Members can make one set of comments, but we will need to have separate votes, and if individual members want to make a separate contribution to each debate, it would be open to them to request to do so. However, it would help us to manage our time efficiently if members were to make one set of remarks.

I intend to give the minister the opportunity to make remarks on the three sets of regulations, after which I will open the debate for technical questions or points of clarification. I urge members

not to try to make political points when asking those questions; that will allow the Executive officials to respond to points of clarification or technical points.

I invite the minister to make some remarks about the three sets of regulations. He will have the opportunity to make any political points later in the formal debate.

Tavish Scott: I will avoid any need to be political at this stage.

I am pleased to have with me the three officials who are the most knowledgeable about the regulations to deal with any detailed questions on them.

The regulations before the committee today have already been scrutinised by the Subordinate Legislation Committee. There is an oversight in the drafting of the Road User Charging Schemes (Keeping of Accounts and Relevant Expenses) (Scotland) Regulations 2005 (SSI 2005/654) and I draw to the committee's attention my intention to revoke those regulations at the next available opportunity. It is important that we get the legislation right, and that is why we will bring those regulations back once we have ensured that they are appropriately drafted.

I point out that this is not about the Forth Estuary Transport Authority's charging proposals. If the committee was to vote to recommend annulment today, that would not prevent FETA from moving forward with its charging proposals. FETA would be able to continue to follow the process that it is following, and it would have no effect on that process if the committee voted to recommend annulment. As the committee knows, FETA has submitted to ministers its application for approval in principle of its charging proposals. We have made it crystal clear that it would make no sense to take that decision before we consider the related issue about the condition of the Forth road bridge and a replacement Firth of Forth crossing.

This is also not about the principles of road user charging. That principle has already been agreed by the Parliament. Should the committee vote to recommend annulling the regulations, that would not mean an end to road user charging schemes. It is important to place that firmly on the record, given some of the excitable comment that is in the public domain.

The regulations form an important part of how we give effect to Parliament's already stated and agreed intention. With them, we implement Parliament's will. They simply follow on from decisions that were taken during the passage of what became the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 and from the Parliament's endorsement of that legislation. As members involved in the process will recall, the 2001 act enables local traffic

authorities to introduce road user charging schemes if they so wish. Before we have the debate, I should bring to the committee's attention the fact that the regulations merely set out the framework within which a local authority that wishes to implement a charging scheme must operate.

The Convener: I seek technical questions and points of clarification from members.

Mr Davidson: Do I take it that the minister does not intend to move motion S2M-3901?

The Convener: Well, that is your motion, Mr Davidson.

Mr Davidson: I beg your pardon—

The Convener: I believe that the minister has already confirmed that he intends to revoke the regulations that motion S2M-3901 refers to.

Mr Davidson: My mistake.

Bruce Crawford: I am grateful for the minister's clarification on whether the regulations apply to the Forth road bridge. However, he said that they would not make any difference to what happens in that respect. If the committee decided this afternoon to recommend the annulment of the regulations, would that hinder the introduction of variable tolls for congestion charging on the Forth road bridge?

Tavish Scott: As I understand it, the regulations will not impact on a specific proposal from a local charging authority. As a result, the answer to your question is no.

The Convener: As members have no other questions, I propose that we move to the debate on motion S2M-3899, in the name of David Davidson, that the Local Government and Transport Committee recommends that nothing further be done under the Road User Charging (Liability for Charges) (Scotland) Regulations 2005 (SSI 2005/651).

Mr Davidson: I ask the committee to recommend annulment of the three sets of regulations before us on two grounds. First, they relate to the use of local road user charging schemes, to which I and my party are opposed. Secondly—and more important—I believe that, in light of recent confusing and seemingly contradictory behaviour, there is an urgent need for the Executive to clarify its position on road user charging. I will tailor the bulk of my brief remarks to that latter point.

Members will recall that part 3 of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 allows local authorities to establish road user charging schemes. During the legislation's passage through Parliament, only the Conservative party sought to remove those powers by amendment. Other parties refused to

support our position, and the proposed powers became law.

I remind members what they said at the time. During the stage 3 debate on 20 December 2000, Bruce Crawford said:

"It should be for local authorities to decide, following appropriate consultation, whether schemes are viable and suitable to their circumstances."—[*Official Report*, 20 December 2000; Vol 9, c 1190.]

However, on 19 January 2006, Nicola Sturgeon said in the chamber, with reference to the Forth road bridge:

"The SNP stands four-square against any increase in the tolls."—[*Official Report*, 19 January 2006; c 22551.]

I have been led to believe that the FETA permissions were part and parcel of the same permissions that were given to local authorities. I am confused by the way in which one SNP member says that the party is in favour of councils doing their own thing—of course, the membership of FETA is made up of a number of councils—while another SNP member says something else.

Back in 2000, Sarah Boyack, the Minister for Transport at the time, said:

"I believe strongly that responsibility for local policies lies with local authorities."—[*Official Report*, 20 December 2000; Vol 9, c 1187.]

However, parliamentary colleagues of the current Minister for Transport and Telecommunications, as well as the new MP for Dunfermline and West Fife and, in the Labour Party, a number of Ms Boyack's colleagues, have steadfastly opposed the schemes in practice. I am concerned that for the electors and the public at large such statements are, at best, confusing and, at worst, downright contradictory. Either one supports local authorities' right to implement their own schemes or one does not, and the public have a right to know where members in general, and political parties and the Executive in particular, stand.

To date, there have been only two instances of authorities seeking to exercise these powers. The first attempt was made last year by the Labour-controlled City of Edinburgh Council, but the public overwhelmingly rejected the proposals in a referendum. At that time, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party joined the Conservatives to campaign against the plan.

The second instance of these powers being exercised occurred earlier this year, when FETA proposed a variable tolling scheme. Once again, Liberal Democrat, SNP and, indeed, some Labour members vigorously opposed the scheme and their opposition became a key part of the Dunfermline and West Fife by-election campaign.

I am asking the committee to recommend annulment of the regulations today in an effort to

clarify where exactly the Executive—the whole Executive—now stands on road user charging. It appears to me and, I imagine, our local authority colleagues that, having granted the enabling powers to authorities five years ago, the Executive parties are reluctant to support schemes in practice. Legislation should always be pragmatic and achievable, but there appears to be an appetite actively to undermine authorities that bring forward plans for road user charging. That is surprising, given the Executive's passionate enthusiasm for including the relevant powers in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001.

The minister and other members will no doubt argue that their opposition has been based on the specifics of the schemes that have been proposed, rather than the principle behind them. However, I urge members and the minister to consider carefully whether such an argument sits credibly with the electorate, in light of the fact that, since the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 was passed, the position of at least one of the Executive parties has been near-total opposition to the practice of road user charging.

We have taken a consistent line on the matter throughout. Although we are supportive of moves towards a national road pricing scheme replacing other forms of taxation on vehicle use, which could reduce the cost of motoring and getting goods to market in many parts of Scotland, we remain convinced that granting local authorities the power to establish local schemes is a retrograde step. That is why we opposed the measure from the start and why we campaigned against both the Edinburgh and the FETA schemes. I believe that our stance has been vindicated by the unsatisfactory nature of both schemes and the opposition to them of other parties.

If Parliament chooses to approve the regulations, the outside world will perceive that we support the furthering of local road user charging schemes, while opposing them in practice. In light of both the Edinburgh and the FETA experiences, the committee should send a signal to the electorate that we do not support the furthering of local road user charging schemes, even if they are promoted as congestion charging. The charges represent a heavy cost for commuters, for those moving goods and for our struggling town centre retailers. I urge members to have the courage of their convictions and to back the motions for annulment in my name.

I move,

That the Local Government and Transport Committee recommends that nothing further be done under the Road User Charging (Liability for Charges) (Scotland) Regulations 2005 (SSI 2005/651).

The Convener: I will give the minister an opportunity to make some introductory remarks.

We will then move to open debate. Both the minister and Mr Davidson will have an opportunity to respond to the debate.

Tavish Scott: I may leave what I have to say until the end, after I have listened to the debate. I have said what the regulations are about, and other members may want to concentrate on that.

Bruce Crawford: It is interesting that David Davidson did not mention once the issue of the Forth road bridge, although it is all over the press today that the Tory motions are all about that. That indicates that the Tories have got things wrong, that they did not consider the issue properly and that, effectively, they have been playing juvenile politics. Neither I nor any other members of the committee appreciate that.

The proper time to deal with the Forth road bridge tolls will be when the tolling order comes before the committee, which will be sometime close to 31 March, when the existing tolling order expires. At that time, the SNP's position will be entirely clear and consistent, as it has been throughout: if the Erskine bridge tolls are removed, we will resist the renewal of the Forth bridge tolling order when the committee considers that towards the end of March. I say to David Davidson that that is the proper way in which to deal with the matter, through the proper mechanisms.

David Davidson referred to the imposition of a congestion charge on the Forth road bridge. No one in their right mind could consider what FETA is proposing to be a congestion charge. On the Forth road bridge, people are tolled when they travel north, where there is no big congestion problem. They are not tolled when they go south, where such a problem exists. We all know that when FETA decided on its course last June, as part of its overall strategy, the aim was to raise funds to pay for the upgrade of the A8000. We may have an argument later about whether congestion charging will be introduced in another form, once the process is complete, but that is the reality today.

16:30

It is not reasonable to impose on Fifers a system under which congestion charging could be brought in when there are no real alternatives. There is a limit to the extent to which the train service can deal with capacity issues, and there is only so much that can be done with bus park and ride. Even if a ferry service across the Forth were introduced, those solutions would not begin to deal with the expected increase in traffic on the Forth road bridge.

It is time that David Davidson did a bit more homework before coming to the committee. He should consider the issues a bit more carefully. If

he wants to deal with the issue of the bridge tolls, he should do so when the tolling order returns to the committee at the end of March. Perhaps at that stage, if the tolls have been removed from the Erskine bridge, he will support the SNP's call to remove the tolls from the Forth road bridge. To do otherwise would be to discriminate against Fifers in an extreme way. People who are involved in the economy of Fife simply would not understand it.

A couple of weeks ago, I visited a pallet-making firm, whose heavy business involves moving pallets by road. Its managers are thinking about making a new investment in Fife. If congestion charging on the Forth road bridge were to become a reality, members may rest assured that those managers would think twice about where their investment would be made in future. I suggest to David Davidson that, if we are to address that issue, we should do so at the right time.

Tommy Sheridan: If the effect of supporting David Davidson's motion was to prevent increased tolls on the Forth road bridge or to stop the existing toll mechanism, it would be worthy of support. I disagree with Bruce Crawford, in that I do not think that we should be waiting to find out whether the Erskine bridge tolls are removed; I think that we should be campaigning for the removal of the tolls on both the Erskine bridge and the Forth road bridge as a matter of principle.

However, according to the information from the minister, the annulment of the regulations would not have that effect. I can only take that as a factual presentation of the situation. If that is the case, it would seem to be irrelevant to support David Davidson's motion. If annulment were to have the effect of preventing the tolling order, it would be worthy of support. It would appear, however, that that is not the case. Unless David Davidson can say something in his summing up to the effect that the minister is wrong, I do not think that his motion is worthy of support.

Fergus Ewing: The SNP would have lodged motions to annul if any of these regulations had any relevance whatever to the cost of the tolls on the Forth road bridge. Bruce Crawford has made our position clear: £1 is enough. We are totally opposed to the proposal that there should be a £4 toll, and we are calling for a freeze at £1. Unfortunately, as the minister has said, the motions before us have nothing whatever to do with the Forth road bridge tolls, despite the publicity today. This is a complete and utter waste of time. It is hypocritical headline grabbing from the Conservatives, and I am surprised that they have taken such a route—one that I would always eschew.

I wish to give David Davidson the opportunity to answer a specific question in his summing up. As I understand the Tories' position—which seems a

little confused, if I may say so—it rests on one fundamental principle from which they do not deviate or depart: to have a road user charging system is wrong. Members should correct me if I am wrong, but a bridge is a type of road; the road, in this case, goes over water; and there are charges for using the Forth road bridge, called tolls.

I have with me a copy of the Forth Road Bridge Order Confirmation Act 1958, which was introduced, I believe, by a Tory Government. It contained a power for the Tories to introduce road user charging, also known as tolls. In case it has escaped David Davidson's attention, not only does the 1958 act say that tolls may be introduced; section 44 says that those tolls may be varied. Section 44(1)(b) states that the Tories, who were then in Government, could

"make an order revising all or any of the authorised tolls".

That means that they could increase the tolls and charge four quid. If David Davidson is so against road user charging, why did his party introduce charges as well as the power to increase them?

The Convener: Before asking the minister to respond, I have a few comments. I agree absolutely with the points that some members made about Mr Davidson's motions being irrelevant and petty politicking in the course of the by-election. However, to build on Mr Ewing's comments about the inconsistency of Conservative positions on tolling and congestion charging, I draw to members' attention the fact that it was the Conservative Government that introduced the tolls on the Skye bridge at a level well above the current £1 that is charged on the Forth road bridge—a decision that caused much controversy in that part of Scotland.

During a recent debate in Parliament when the future of the Forth road bridge was discussed, was it not the Conservatives' position that their answer to the current situation would be to make it free to cross the existing bridge, with its structural defects, while a new toll bridge would be constructed, although the tolls on the new bridge would not be limited but would be set by the market? Mr Davidson seems to argue from the point of principle that the Tories do not object to tolls or congestion charging; they object to tolls raised by the public sector, although the private sector can raise tolls at any rate that would make a profit. His party's position is completely illogical.

Quite apart from that, I recollect that, during our debates on the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001, although the Conservatives lodged an amendment to discount congestion charging, when that amendment was defeated, they did not oppose the bill. Had their position been one of principle, they would have opposed the bill at stage 3.

As for the broader debate on whether congestion charging should be introduced, most of the parties in the Parliament agree that it has a role to play in particular circumstances. If we look at the circumstances that applied in Edinburgh, I and many others felt that there might have been a case for congestion charging if Edinburgh had restricted its proposals to a central Edinburgh cordon. However, given the particular proposals and their discriminatory nature, the principle of congestion charging was not at the centre of that debate.

It is consistent to take the position that congestion charging has a role to play while still scrutinising critically any set of proposals that is made. I publicly expressed my opposition to FETA's Forth road bridge proposals, and I look forward to the minister addressing those proposals in due course.

However, to return to first principles, this is an ill-thought out attempt at politicking by the Conservatives that has brought them no benefit. It is clear from the widespread ridicule of their position by committee members today that their credibility in the Parliament has dropped even further.

Tavish Scott: I suggest that it was brave of Mr Davidson to bring this matter to the committee today for many of the reasons that members have mentioned. We might also bear in mind the interesting role of the political editor of Scottish Radio Holdings Limited in considering why the matter first appeared in that media some weeks ago—good old investigative journalism. I found it difficult to listen to Mr Davidson's speech moments ago without comparing it to the press release that he produced yesterday, in which he said that I was to be here this afternoon

"to argue for more tolling powers, including peak-time tolls on the Forth Road Bridge".

We have already discussed and agreed that that is absolutely not the case.

In the press release, Mr Davidson goes on to say of other committee members:

"If they are for congestion charging on the Forth Bridge they will back the Minister. If they are against congestion charging, they will back me.

The Scottish Conservative position is clear—we oppose congestion charging full stop."

We heard earlier about the contradictions alleged by some. The most striking contradictions in this debate are in the positions adopted by the Conservative party. I can do nothing other than agree with the points made by a number of colleagues.

I conclude with two observations. First, in the debate that the convener mentioned a moment ago, Mr Brocklebank, one of Mr Davidson's

colleagues, said:

"Murdo Fraser is right to float the idea of a privately funded second bridge, on which tolls could be charged".—*[Official Report, 26 January 2006; c 22753.]*

Secondly—I really cannot do better than this—the convener said that most parties believe that congestion charging has a role and, apparently, Mr Davidson shares that view. In a speech on 10 January this year—I stress, this year—to the Scottish branch of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport, Mr Davidson said:

"Road tolling is something that could be considered".

I can only ask why we are here this afternoon, wasting all our time.

Mr Davidson: It is fascinating to listen to people who just a few weeks ago, in the Dunfermline by-election, were politicking quite happily, because that is what politics tends to be about. It is interesting that they are not consistent in what they do.

The minister was correct to say that the motion could delay the implementation of the FETA scheme. At the CILT presentation, to which he referred, I explained to the members of the chartered institute what options were available to politicians in general, not necessarily to a particular party. Road tolling, as opposed to congestion charging, is about the use of a piece of road and has nothing to do with the volume of traffic on it. There is a subtle difference there, of which I find it strange that the minister is unaware.

I refer to the example of the new motorway north of Birmingham. People have a choice. They can drive on the current, free motorway or can go French-style and choose to pay to travel in an easier manner. I have done that in France and I am sure that many members have done so too. That is called choice.

As everyone must know, the current charges on the Forth road bridge cover—just—the cost of maintaining the existing bridge; they will not cover any improvement to the bridge, which will have to be a completely new project. One way of funding that would be to give people the choice to use the old bridge or to use a new bridge—they could pay for the privilege. We must balance the public accounts and this afternoon we have heard several Labour members talk about value for money and how projects are funded. How was the Skye bridge funded? The situation is exactly the same.

I understand the position of the SNP, which considers that all bridges, including the Erskine bridge, should be treated the same. I presume that that is yet another spending policy and that the SNP will seek to remove tolls on the Tay bridge, which affects the north end of Fife.

There is a difference between congestion charges and tolls. FETA is having to build an upgrade of the A8000. It intends to fund that through user charging, with a smart recognition system. The road should have been built by the Scottish Executive as part of the trunk road system.

Bruce Crawford talked about investment in business. People do not want to pay huge charges to cross the Forth road bridge to use just one area—it is a local authority scheme. As far as most people are concerned, the cost of getting to business across the bridge could be a deterrent. As Bruce Crawford said, park-and-ride facilities, the bus services and ferries are simply not enough, and there is not enough capacity on the railways. We are penalising people for their use of the current bridge.

I turn to the 1958 order. Mr Ewing is of course a lawyer of some repute—or so he tells us. The order was superseded when the Labour Party set up FETA as a charging organisation. Mr Ewing ought to look more closely at what he said.

This afternoon, I have simply sought clarity—and I believe that we have received some, certainly from the SNP. I am delighted to hear the nationalists' open endorsement of our position on the Forth road bridge. However, I am amazed at the reticence of Mr Arbuckle, the Liberal Democrat committee member, and the minister to explain their use of this issue to fight a Westminster by-election campaign. Once again, the Liberal Democrats unashamedly do one thing there while, in this Parliament, they do something completely different. To be fair, the minister has not given any opinion on the matter, apart from providing a semi-technical response to members' questions. However, I take Mr Arbuckle's silence to mean that he understands and has some sympathy with what I am trying to demonstrate today.

Moreover, apart from a couple of comments from the convener, the Labour Party has not said very much on the subject either. That the Executive is split is obvious from certain committee members' body language when the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications gives evidence to us.

The long and the short of the matter is that anything that we as parliamentarians can do to look after the interests of those who use roads should be supported.

16:45

The Convener: The question is, that motion S2M-3899, in the name of David Davidson, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Convener: There will be a division.

FOR

Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)

AGAINST

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)

The Convener: The result of the division is: For 1, Against 7, Abstentions 1.

Motion disagreed to.

The Convener: That decision will be reported to Parliament.

We move to the second motion in David Davidson's name. Mr Davidson has the opportunity to make a speech on this motion; however, he indicated earlier that he would make all his remarks in one speech. Mr Davidson, do you wish simply to move the motion formally?

Motion moved,

That the Local Government and Transport Committee recommends that nothing further be done under the Road User Charging (Penalty Charges) (Scotland) Regulations 2005 (SSI 2005/652).—[Mr David Davidson.]

The Convener: As no member has indicated a wish to speak in the debate, I will move straight to the question. The question is, that motion S2M-3900, in the name of David Davidson, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Convener: There will be a division.

FOR

Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)

AGAINST

Arbuckle, Mr Andrew (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
Crawford, Bruce (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)

The Convener: The result of the division is: For 1, Against 7, Abstentions 0.

Motion disagreed to.

The Convener: Mr Davidson, in light of the minister's stated intention to revoke the Road User Charging Schemes (Keeping of Accounts and Relevant Expenses) (Scotland) Regulations 2005 due to a technical flaw, do you wish to move motion S2M-3901?

Mr Davidson: On the basis of what the minister said, I will not move the motion. I have to say that, had he not made those remarks, I would have raised the very issue that he highlighted.

Transfer of Functions from the Strathclyde Passenger Transport Authority and the Strathclyde Passenger Transport Executive to the West of Scotland Transport Partnership Order 2006 (draft)

16:48

The Convener: The final item is consideration of a piece of subordinate legislation under the affirmative procedure. It looks as if the minister will have another changeover of officials for this item.

After the minister makes some opening remarks, members will have an opportunity to ask technical questions. We will then have a formal debate on the motion to agree the order.

Tavish Scott: I hope that I will not delay colleagues too long.

I am pleased to lay before the committee this order, which will ensure the smooth transfer of the functions of Strathclyde Passenger Transport Authority and Strathclyde Passenger Transport Executive to the new west of Scotland transport partnership. This is the first order to transfer functions to any of the new regional transport partnerships, and function-transferring orders for RTPs in other parts of the country will be laid over the next 18 months as they develop their regional transport strategies.

The west of Scotland transport partnership is the first RTP to take on functions in this way, because from the outset it will take on the substantial public transport responsibilities that Strathclyde Passenger Transport already exercises in the west of Scotland. SPTE is a strategic public transport body that employs a large number of staff to deliver transport services to the travelling public.

All those involved in planning the transition have acknowledged the need to ensure that there is continuity in the delivery of those services. The order is designed to support a smooth transition. It transfers the functions with effect from 1 April 2006. If Parliament approves it, a further order will be lodged affecting the transfer of property rights and liabilities on the same date.

Apart from a small number of staff who are transferring to the Executive in connection with the national concessionary travel scheme and the rail staff who have already transferred, all the staff of SPTA and SPTE will transfer to the new body on 1 April. SPTE is managing the transfer of its staff and is engaging closely with staff and unions to ensure continuity for all the affected employees, who will transfer under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations. Similar arrangements are being put in place for the small number of west of Scotland transport partnership staff who will also transfer to the new body.

I am grateful for SPT's co-operation in drawing up the order and to the officials of SPTE and WESTRANS who have been in regular discussions with the Executive over the past 12 months to ensure as smooth a transition as possible.

I continue to be impressed by the readiness of councils, SPTE, the voluntary RTPs and others to work with and within the new partnerships to make them a success. The first meetings were held in December. Councillor members and chairs are in place and other members will be appointed next month. I announced two-year capital allocations before Christmas and the statutory guidance on regional transport strategies will be published soon.

I have every confidence that over the next 12 months the RTPs will crack on with drawing up regional transport strategies that will form the foundation for making significant improvements to transport throughout Scotland. I encourage the committee to approve the order and am happy to answer questions.

The Convener: You will recall that I corresponded with you some time ago about remuneration payments to the vice-chair of WESTRANS. Your response at the time was that the general question of responsibility payments would be addressed fully in consideration of councillors' remuneration and the work of your colleague the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform in that regard. However, given that payments were made to the former Strathclyde Passenger Transport, it was your intention to allow the west of Scotland authority to continue to make such payments on an interim basis. Does anything in the order allow that to happen, or would further work need to be done to enable it?

Tavish Scott: Ian Kernohan can keep me right, but I think that the position is rather that nothing in the order would stop any arrangements continuing. You are right to point out that such arrangements have been subject to internal discussions with the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform to ensure that we get the overall package right.

Ian Kernohan (Scottish Executive Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department): The power to pay remuneration, allowances and expenses, which currently rests with SPTA, will be transferred by the order, because the order transfers every function with the two exceptions that it sets out, which are to do with the keeping of accounts. The ability to pay will be transferred.

The Convener: That clears that up.

Fergus Ewing: I want to ask the minister about the financial effects of the order, which paragraphs

8 and 9 of the Executive note deal with. Paragraph 8 states:

"The financial impacts of the creation of regional transport partnerships were set out in the ... Transport (Scotland) Bill 2004."

Paragraph 9 states that the

"transitional costs ... were estimated at ... £1 m."

The costs of the RTPs was a matter of some controversy during the passage of the bill. There were submissions, not least from Shetland, that the estimated, budgeted costs would not be sufficient to allow an optimal operation.

First, on paragraph 8, have the costs relating to the RTPs increased and, if so, what are they now? The Executive note does not explain that. Secondly, on paragraph 9, what are the estimated transitional costs, given the transfer of functions? They were stated previously to be £1 million.

Tavish Scott: The short answer is that we are waiting for clarification on both those issues. We look to the RTPs. There has been a process with which the committee will be familiar. We await assessments of both the transitional and the transfer costs. We will be happy to write to the committee when we have received that information.

Mr Davidson: Still on costs, I heard some clarity from you in response to an answer from some time back, but I would like to know whether the £1 million covers the cost of renewing signage, uniforms, labelling, badges and colour transfers on the rolling stock.

Tavish Scott: As far as the west of Scotland is concerned, we had a previous discussion in committee about the importance of branding and of maintaining identity. The transport market has grown, which has been advantageous for people living in that part of Scotland. We are continuing to hold discussions to get that right.

Let me be clear about the £1 million. It is for the transitional costs of all the RTPs throughout the country and relates more to what the RTPs need to do to stay up and running than to detailed costs for painting rolling stock and so on. We will continue to take that matter forward.

I can assure Mr Davidson and you, convener, that we will not spend lots of taxpayers' money on a rebranding exercise. Rather, as Mr Davidson would expect, we will deal with that incrementally, working with the west of Scotland transport partnership as trains need to be repainted, which, according to my understanding, is roughly on a five-year rolling basis.

Mr Davidson: So there will be no changes to staff uniforms, official signage, stationery or anything else that you will pay for.

Tavish Scott: I suppose that, indirectly, we pay for everything. We will certainly work with the new west of Scotland authority on, for example, station signage. We both agree that there are things that could be done to improve signage, and we want to ensure that the branding achieves the maximum impact. Ian Kernohan might be able to clarify matters of cost further.

Ian Kernohan: Mr Davidson mentioned stationery. Some of the other regional transport partnerships will be retaining the same stationery and the same name. For example, in Tayside and central Scotland, the position will be slightly different. The name TACTRANS has been come up with—it did not exist before. Some small costs will be associated with providing partnerships with new stationery and new branding.

The Convener: There are no other questions, and I get the feeling that the order is not going to be opposed. On that basis, I ask the minister—perhaps rashly—simply to move the motion for the committee to recommend the order's approval.

Tavish Scott: I rashly move,

That the Local Government and Transport Committee recommends that the draft Transfer of Functions from the Strathclyde Passenger Transport Authority and the Strathclyde Passenger Transport Executive to the West of Scotland Transport Partnership Order 2006 be approved.

The Convener: The question is, that motion S2M-3868, in the name of Tavish Scott, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Convener: There will be a division.

FOR

Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
McMahon, Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)

ABSTENTIONS

Davidson, Mr David (North East Scotland) (Con)

The Convener: The result of the division is: For 4, Against 0, Abstentions 1.

Motion agreed to.

The Convener: I thank the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications for his participation in the various debates this afternoon, as well as the three different teams of Executive officials who have been supporting him.

Meeting closed at 16:59.

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