

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 25 April 2006

Session 2

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

12th Meeting 2006, Session 2

CONVENER

*Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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

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

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab)

*Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)

*David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con)

Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)

*Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP)

*Ms Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP)

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 GAVE EVIDENCE:

Barbara Barnes (Network Rail)

Jim Barton (Transport Scotland)

Iain Coucher (Network Rail)

Nigel Wunsch (Network Rail)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Martin Verity

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Alastair Macfie

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): A week should be long enough.

Local Government and Transport Committee

Tuesday 25 April 2006

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:04*]

Interests

The Convener (Bristow Muldoon): Before we welcome our first panel of witnesses, there are a couple of items that we need to deal with. First and foremost, I welcome Maureen Watt, who has been appointed by the Scottish National Party to replace Bruce Crawford, who served as a member of the committee from September 2004 until last week. I convey my thanks to Bruce Crawford for his contribution to the committee over that period, during which he also served as deputy convener. I always found him co-operative and easy to work with in that role. Bruce certainly contributed to the committee's work, so I extend our best wishes to him in whatever role he will be playing from now on.

I congratulate Maureen Watt on her election to the Scottish Parliament last week. I am sure, Maureen, that you will find this a busy committee and one on which you can get your teeth into a number of important issues. I look forward to working with you and I wish you well.

I formally invite Maureen to declare any relevant interests.

Ms Maureen Watt (North East Scotland) (SNP): I do not think that I have any interests that I ought to declare, although perhaps you should know that my husband is involved in the offshore shipping industry and my uncle is an independent councillor in Moray.

The Convener: Thank you for that declaration. I am sure that your husband will be busy at the moment with the events that are taking place in Moray.

Bruce Crawford's resignation from the committee means that we need to elect a deputy convener. The deputy convenership is allocated to the Scottish National Party, so I propose that we choose a new deputy convener at the next committee meeting, by which time those in the Scottish National Party group will have had time to decide which of their members they intend to propose for the position. Do members agree to consider that at our next meeting?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Subordinate Legislation

14:06

The Convener: There are six items of subordinate legislation to consider. Members will be aware that Fergus Ewing has asked a number of questions in relation to some of the instruments, and copies both of Fergus's questions and of the response from the Executive have been circulated to members. I think that Fergus wants to refer to one or two points in the course of our deliberations. We shall take each instrument in turn.

Local Government Pension Scheme (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2006 (SSI 2006/123)

The Convener: No points have been raised by the Subordinate Legislation Committee and no motion to annul has been lodged. This is not one of the instruments on which Fergus Ewing wishes to comment, so do members agree that the committee has nothing to report on the instrument?

Members indicated agreement.

Non-Domestic Rates (Levy) (Scotland) Regulations 2006 (SSI 2006/124)

The Convener: The Subordinate Legislation Committee raised a point on the instrument, and an extract of its report is annexed to the covering note. In response, the Executive has accepted that the instrument was defectively drafted and has agreed to lay a new instrument correcting the error and revoking the defective instrument. The new instrument—SSI 2006/158—is also on today's agenda. On that basis, do members agree that the committee has nothing to report on the instrument?

Fergus Ewing: The correcting instrument—the Non-Domestic Rates (Levy) (Scotland) (No 2) Regulations 2006—states that the transitional relief provisions are to be self-funding. I asked whether, if that is so—and I understand the reasoning set out in the regulations—the transitional relief scheme for the 2000 revaluation was self-funding, now that the outturn figures should be available. The answer that I received from the civil service stated that, in the limited time available, it was unable to locate the calculation. It would be interesting to see whether the previous scheme was self-funding, as that might provide some pointers for the future. I hope that that information will be forthcoming.

On a more political note, the SNP would like to see a far better deal for small businesses in

comparison with the likes of Tesco, which has today reported profits of more than £2 billion. We believe that the burden of rating should be shifted from small businesses, which are penalised at the moment, to larger businesses, without increasing the overall tax yield. So although we will support the regulations today, we do not think that they go far enough.

The Convener: I note that position, although I also note that the Scottish Executive's response states that a majority—72 per cent—of businesses in Scotland benefit from the existing small business rates relief scheme.

Are members content that we have nothing to report on SSI 2006/124?

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): It appears that we can report a change in policy. Fergus Ewing supports increased taxation of business profits, which I think the committee will welcome, because large businesses should pay more tax—I take it that by "large" Fergus Ewing means "profitable". I hope that the SNP suggests changes that will generate a greater yield from more profitable businesses and impose fewer penalties on less profitable businesses.

The Convener: We note your comments, but we are moving away from consideration of the regulations. Are members content that we have nothing to report on the instrument?

Members indicated agreement.

Non Domestic Rating (Rural Areas and Rateable Value Limits) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2006 (SSI 2006/125)

The Convener: The Subordinate Legislation Committee raised no points on the order and no motion to annul has been lodged.

Ms Watt: I note that Turriff, in Aberdeenshire, is spelled wrongly in the list of excluded localities in designated rural areas. I would hate someone to find a legal loophole because of that.

Fergus Ewing: It was not immediately evident from the information that was supplied to the committee which localities would benefit and which would lose out. In fact, a number of places will benefit and only one—Newtonhill in Aberdeenshire—will lose out, but that was impossible to ascertain unless one had sight of the Non Domestic Rating (Rural Areas and Rateable Value Limits) (Scotland) Order 2005, which the Executive did not supply. Perhaps in future the committee could be given less opaque explanations of the impact of subordinate legislation.

The Convener: We will draw the misspelling of Turriff to the Executive's attention. Fergus Ewing

makes a fair point, and it would be reasonable to point out that explanatory notes that are supplied with instruments should make clear the instruments' purpose. An explanation that identified the areas that will lose out on rural rates relief could have been supplied with the order.

On that basis, are members content with the order?

Members indicated agreement.

Gambling Act 2005 (Licensing Authority Policy Statement) (Scotland) Regulations 2006 (SSI 2006/154)

The Convener: The Subordinate Legislation Committee's comments on the regulations are attached to the briefing note that members received, but no motion to annul has been lodged. Are members content that we have nothing to report on the regulations?

Members indicated agreement.

Erskine Bridge (Temporary Suspension of Tolls) Order 2006 (SSI 2006/157)

The Convener: No points were raised by the Subordinate Legislation Committee and no motion to annul has been lodged.

Fergus Ewing: I was curious to know why the tolls on the Erskine bridge are being scrapped by an order the title of which refers to "Temporary Suspension of Tolls", because I thought that the Executive had eventually agreed that the suspension would be permanent. However, when I read the Executive's explanatory notes it became apparent that there are technical reasons for the wording.

Although the Executive cannot quite bring itself to say this, the Erskine Bridge Tolls Act 1968 remains on the statute book and the Executive has been unable to confirm to me that it will be repealed. As long as the 1968 act is extant, tolls can be reimposed by a future Executive—although a Scottish National Party Executive will not do that—so a Frankenstein option is available. The SNP wants to revoke the 1968 act, but the order will serve during the short period before we are able to do so.

The Convener: I note that the written response to your questions indicates that ministers intend to repeal both the 1968 act and the Erskine Bridge Tolls Act 2001. I am sure that they will welcome your full support when they introduce those measures.

David McLetchie (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Con): Can you clarify, convener, whether this means that until the principal statute is repealed

statutory instruments to suspend tolls for three months will appear regularly?

14:15

The Convener: That is not the case. My reading of the Executive's explanation is that the Erskine Bridge Tolls Act 2001 extended the tolling period by five years. You will remember the controversy over that. Basically, if the Erskine bridge tolls were to continue beyond July, there would have to be a new Erskine bridge tolls act or a new order to extend the tolling period by a further five years. The order before us is just to cover the period from April to July.

Do members confirm that we have nothing to report on the order?

Members indicated agreement.

Non-Domestic Rates (Levy) (Scotland) (No 2) Regulations 2006 (SSI 2006/158)

The Convener: The final instrument is the Non-Domestic Rates (Levy) (Scotland) (No 2) Regulations 2006 (SSI 2006/158). We partly dealt with this instrument when we discussed the incorrect regulations that these regulations replace. The Subordinate Legislation Committee raised no points on the regulations and no motion to annul has been lodged. Do we agree that we have nothing to report on the regulations?

Members indicated agreement.

Freight Transport Inquiry

14:16

The Convener: I welcome to the meeting from Network Rail Iain Coucher, deputy chief executive, Nigel Wunsch, principal route planner in Scotland, and Barbara Barnes, head of customer services. As you will be aware, we are in the midst of an inquiry into freight transport in Scotland and its economic, environmental and social impact. We welcome your presence as the operator of the rail service network in Scotland. I am sure that you are aware that in recent weeks we have touched on issues that relate to the rail network and its freight capacity. I will give you the opportunity, Iain, to make introductory remarks on how Network Rail thinks the freight industry will develop, particularly in relation to rail. After that, we will move on to questions and answers.

Iain Coucher (Network Rail): Thank you, convener and committee members. We do not have any opening remarks. We would rather not waste your time giving you platitudes about what we do and how we do it. All I will say is that we actively support the growth of the rail network in Scotland for freight and passenger services and we are working hard to achieve that. If you are happy with that, we will go straight to questions.

The Convener: I invite questions from members.

Fergus Ewing: Good afternoon, lady and gentlemen. The new Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line is being established primarily to promote freight and open up opportunities for new passenger lines. I want to ask about its consequent impact on the Forth rail bridge. It was reported in *The Scotsman* last week that Transport Scotland is planning to introduce additional charges on a section of the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line. English Welsh & Scottish Railway Ltd is opposed to that, as it would cost £400 a train and £5,000 a day. Moreover, the promoter's idea for the new line, which the Parliament supported, is that the coal traffic that goes to Longannet via the Forth rail bridge will be diverted on to the new line. What would be the impact on the rail network if the growing coal traffic remained on the Forth rail bridge? Would it have consequences for freight and passenger traffic?

Iain Coucher: We are working with the Scottish Executive and Transport Scotland to ensure that we get the right allocation of freight and passenger trains on the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line and over the Forth rail bridge.

EWS has access rights to the Forth rail bridge that are enshrined in a contract that runs for many years. It was expected that freight trains would

move over the alternative route to free up paths on the Forth rail bridge for additional passenger services, but currently, as you rightly say, EWS objects to the incremental charges, which it does not believe it should pay. There is an on-going discussion between us, the Office of Rail Regulation, Transport Scotland and the Scottish Executive.

Fergus Ewing: Am I right in saying that EWS has a contractual right to use the Forth rail bridge until 2015?

Iain Coucher: I would have to confirm that it is 2015, but it certainly has contractual rights to run over that route.

Fergus Ewing: I see Barbara Barnes nodding.

Barbara Barnes (Network Rail): EWS has those rights for 10 years.

Fergus Ewing: So that takes us until 2015 or 2016. I think I am also right in saying that in the light of the recent devolution of powers to the Scottish Executive, the legal position remains that neither Transport Scotland nor the Scottish Executive has the power to direct Network Rail as to how track should be used, so they have no legal competence to direct that EWS should cease to use the Forth rail bridge either now or after the expiry of the 10-year period.

Iain Coucher: That is true.

Fergus Ewing: Transport Scotland's business plan was published last week. Do you think that if the measure is forced through by Transport Scotland, as it stated it will be in the press release to *The Scotsman* on 21 April, it will help or hinder the attainment of the objective set out by Transport Scotland, which is to

"Ensure that Scotland's rail and trunk road systems are managed efficiently, economically and effectively"

and to increase passenger traffic by 2 per cent?

Iain Coucher: I will comment on the generalities of the situation. What you describe is not uncommon. There are many instances of the services that train operating companies, Transport Scotland and the Scottish Executive would like to run conflicting with services that have been negotiated by freight operators. We are well used to moving trains around and entering into modified contracts with freight operators.

The circumstance that we are discussing is slightly unusual, in that we are seeking a differential pricing mechanism for a new bit of railway that is different from any other part of the railway, so it is causing problems.

Although I cannot speak for EWS, I understand that its position is, "Why would I want to move trains to which I have a right elsewhere on the

network and pay for that privilege?" I am fairly certain that the situation will be resolved through dialogue in the short to medium term, then we will be able to meet the expectations as published in Transport Scotland's business plan.

Fergus Ewing: By what method will it be resolved, since you are reasonably certain that it will be resolved?

Iain Coucher: We will use our experience. As I said, we have done it countless times. A good example of where we have managed to reach an agreement is the recent increase in coal flow from Hunterston port and the Scottish coalfields to English power stations. We did a huge amount of re-timetabling and re-patterning of freight and passenger trains to enable that to happen. That is a good example, and it illustrates how the industry overcomes such problems, which we face all over Scotland and the rest of Great Britain.

Fergus Ewing: Can you refer to a single precedent that is similar to Transport Scotland's proposal?

Iain Coucher: I am sorry; I missed your question.

Fergus Ewing: You said that the situation is slightly unusual, but then said that similar situations have arisen. Is there another example in the UK network, not just in Scotland, of tolls being imposed and, if so, where?

Iain Coucher: As far as I am aware, there are no other instances of seeking to recover incremental benefit and pass on higher tolls to freight operators. The case illustrates the problems that we face when we seek to improve the railway and some beneficiaries regard it as a free good. All I am saying is that we are used to resolving conflicting train paths. However, the case is unique, because the aim is to pass on the incremental toll.

Fergus Ewing: I am grateful that you have confirmed that the case is without precedent. Obviously, it is not for Network Rail to—

Iain Coucher: I believe that it is without precedent, but I cannot guarantee it.

Fergus Ewing: Perhaps you will let us know if you find a precedent.

Iain Coucher: Of course.

Fergus Ewing: EWS has described the proposal to charge £5,000 per day as "flawed thinking" given that ministers are trying to take lorries off the road by encouraging more rail freight. The proposal seems perverse. We will pursue the matter with the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications and Transport Scotland.

Convener, I hope that at some point during the meeting we will receive confirmation that as well as the minister, the right people will attend the committee, that is, people who can provide detailed answers, whether they are civil servants from the Scottish Executive's transport group, people from Transport Scotland or both.

The Convener: I will address that at the end of the meeting.

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): There seem to be different opinions about the rail network's capacity to deal with additional freight. What additional capacity is there?

Iain Coucher: Are you asking about the future growth in capacity?

Paul Martin: Yes.

Iain Coucher: I ask Nigel Wunsch to say a few words about that.

Nigel Wunsch (Network Rail): We acknowledge—and we state in our business plan—that we need to examine certain hot spots on the network to understand whether there is capacity for growth at those locations. However, in general, we do not think that there are major issues with accommodating the growth in freight traffic.

Two major exercises are on-going. First, at the Great Britain level there is the freight route utilisation strategy, which covers long-distance freight flows. Secondly, I am leading the work on the route utilisation strategy for Scotland, which is examining all the issues around how we use the network in Scotland, and it will identify where we need to change the way we use the network and possibly do some incremental work.

Paul Martin: What percentage increase do you expect? Increasing freight by 40 per cent has been mentioned, but Network Rail seems to disagree with that. I ask you to see the matter from our point of view. These days, most companies work towards a plan or strategy that sets out the growth they envisage.

Iain Coucher: We expect the number of freight paths on the Scottish part of the west coast main line to increase by between 30 and 40 trains per day by 2015. On the Glasgow and south-western line, we expect freight to increase by about 20 to 30 trains per day. On the east coast line out of Edinburgh, we expect growth of about 10 to 20 trains per day. Elsewhere on the network in Scotland, we expect growth of no more than five trains per day. That capacity is achievable in terms of train numbers and train paths. We will have to do some reintegration with the passenger operators, but we do not regard that as a problem for growth per se.

We will run into some problems with the type of freight that we would like to run on the network. Some of the routes that we use are constrained both by the gauge—the size of the freight that we take down the line—and by the weight of the train. However, those problems can be resolved.

Paul Martin: There is an issue about reconciling maintenance and overnight freight traffic. Obviously, some logistical analysis will be required. What work will be done to improve the situation? It is accepted throughout the industry that we are not examining those logistics as effectively as we should be.

14:30

Iain Coucher: You are right. We have a conflict all the time with access to the network. During the day, we try to run as many passenger train services as there is demand for. Where there is freight, we either interweave freight trains among passenger trains or we run them in the lightly loaded times and, sometimes, into the night. Sometimes we need to carry out work on the network. We normally work around that and try to get as many trains on the network as possible. For example, when we increased the number of coal trains and moved them out of the central belt and on to the Glasgow and south-western line, we had to change a lot of our maintenance regimes. Before, we had the luxury of unlimited access during the night, but we changed our maintenance procedures to enable that movement to happen. It can be done; it just requires a bit of planning and foresight. We can usually accommodate freight trains.

Paul Martin: You will appreciate that everyone who comes to the committee says, “Yes, we can look at this,” and, “It will take a bit of planning, but I think we can improve that.” What action is Network Rail taking to reconcile maintenance and overnight freight, and to do so in a specified period? Every other business has to take such action.

Iain Coucher: We do that. The situation is demand driven and at the moment we do not have the demand from the freight people to move freight around. Where there is such demand we accommodate it. There is plenty of capacity in the network, as it stands today, to accommodate freight trains without affecting maintenance regimes. We can run freight trains in the early evening or the early morning and we can carry out maintenance overnight. That has not yet been a problem. We always sit down with our customers and ask them what they would like to run; where they would like to run; what times they need to achieve; whether their delivery is time critical or whether it can take slightly longer; and what size of trains are required. Barbara Barnes’s team does just that.

Paul Martin: I want to pick up on the situation being demand driven. If a business, for example EWS, tells you that it needs to deliver on a particular track, will you always accommodate it, bearing in mind the economics of the situation?

Iain Coucher: We do our very best, although sometimes there are constraints. I will give you an example. If a freight company came to us and said that it would like to run a freight train that arrived and stopped at Edinburgh Waverley at the peak time in the morning, we would probably say that there was no spare capacity and ask where it was trying to get to. Freight trains are very good at being put into passing loops and being held and then moved on. We bend over backwards to accommodate as many trains as we can.

Paul Martin: So companies should never come to us and say, “We tried to do this with Network Rail but we couldn’t,” but we have received evidence from people who have said that they would really like to do something but Network Rail does not have the capability to do it or it will not work with them.

Iain Coucher: I would like to think that there are fewer examples of that now than there were a few years ago. We have worked long and hard on the situation. However, I do not want to mislead the committee: there are times when freight companies would like to run things that are bigger or heavier than we can accommodate on the railway. In such cases, we have to say that it would require infrastructure works for which we are not funded. We always try to accommodate as much freight as we can.

The Convener: I want to pursue further some of Paul Martin’s questions on issues that you have referred to in the utilisation strategies. One of the key investments that witnesses have drawn to our attention—which should, in their view, be Network Rail’s top priority—is investment in the upgrading of the Glasgow and south-western line, both to accommodate the growth that has taken place in coal traffic and that could take place in timber traffic and, potentially, to act as an alternative route to the west coast main line for 9ft 6in containers. I appreciate that you may be considering that in your current freight route utilisation study. Do you broadly agree that that would be likely to be a high-priority investment in the medium term?

Iain Coucher: I appreciate what Paul Martin said about people saying that they are looking at something but not taking action. However, we are actively looking to make improvements to the connection between Annan and Gretna on the Glasgow and south-western line, as that is a big bottleneck in the network. There is a range of other things that we would like to do down there.

As part of the freight route utilisation study, we are contemplating the extent to which the recent demand for coal—which has increased heavily over the past six months—is a permanent feature of the economic climate in the UK. If we continue to see 150 trains a day, or whatever it is, coming up and down the Glasgow and south-western line, we can make a much stronger business case for investment in that line. If the demand for coal shrinks back to previous levels, we would have a slightly different conversation.

We regard the Glasgow and south-western line as a main freight route for us, as well as a diversionary route for the west coast line. If there were plans to develop Hunterston as a container port, we would have to consider the extent to which the freight traffic coming out of that port could be accommodated on the existing network. That might mean increases in gauges to take the 9ft 6in boxes. That is something that we are considering. The whole purpose of the freight and Scotland route utilisation studies is to ensure that such things are properly considered and that we have workable, costed solutions.

The Convener: Thank you for that. Another issue, which came up in our most recent evidence session in relation to the coal traffic from Hunterston to England, is the aspiration of some of the freight companies to operate longer services using up to twice the number of containers that they use currently. Could Network Rail accommodate that on the existing infrastructure, or would trains of the length that the operators aspire to use be unsustainable on the current infrastructure?

Iain Coucher: Barbara Barnes has looked into that and can give you a more detailed answer. In general, we try to run longer trains and have been adding to the length of trains. Our constraints include the steep gradients that we have in Scotland. It is difficult to drag a very long train up some of the steep bits using the locomotives that we have and we cannot afford to have trains slowing down too much while they crawl over steep hills. We can put two engines on the front of the trains, but that becomes a bit expensive for EWS and the other freight people, who have resisted that in the past.

Another constraint is the passing loops where we can hold trains to allow passenger trains to overtake them. The fact that there are some small passing loops limits the size of trains. If there were a strong business case for increasing the length of the trains—if rail were to be a sustained part of the long-term coal movement between Scotland and England—we would consider upgrading the passing loops. However, if it were to be a temporary situation, we probably would not.

Nevertheless, that is certainly an option if we need to release additional capacity on the network.

Barbara Barnes: There is not much to add to that. We have been working with EWS and Freightliner, the two principal coal hauliers between Scotland and England, to increase the length of the trains. We have been running a trial using trains of twice the length for EWS. As Iain Coucher says, in judging how sustainable that length of train is in transporting coal, we find that the issue tends to be one of gradient and the power of the locomotive. We are willing to consider any of our customers' suggestions, provided that they do not impact adversely on the performance of the network for other operators or mean that we end up with a diminished network capability through the trains being slower. It is a trade-off.

The Convener: That leads me on to my next question, about the impact of freight on the reliability of the passenger services. You may be aware that written submissions that we have received from First ScotRail and Great North Eastern Railway argue that the reliability of their passenger services is currently being impaired by rail freight services. However, EWS contends that First ScotRail and GNER are exaggerating the impact that freight is having on passenger services. What is your perspective on that debate?

Barbara Barnes: It is clear that we have had a few issues, over the past year, with the robustness of the timetable that we had principally for the central belt between Hunterston and Longannet, which was impacting quite severely on First ScotRail services. The situation has been reviewed, we have a new timetable in place and that has all changed. The reliability of all the services has been increased and the problem has gone away. All operators are responsible for ensuring that their services are operated in a robust manner, just as Network Rail is responsible for ensuring that its infrastructure is working properly.

Iain Coucher: I will provide a bit more detail, as I know that you guys like some detail. Over the past year, passenger services experienced a 50 per cent increase in delays caused by freight traffic as we started to ramp up the number of freight trains. Timetable changes and repathing of trains down the Glasgow and south-western route have radically reduced those delays so that they have now returned to the levels that we experienced before the increase. Clearly, we are committed to increasing the level of freight, so we hope that the problems have gone away. We will continue to ensure that such delays are minimised.

Tommy Sheridan: Network Rail's recently published business plan estimates that there will

be a significant increase in freight traffic in Scotland that will far outstrip the increases that are expected in England and Wales. Over the next three years, the plan estimates a cumulative growth in freight of 25 per cent. Was that business plan published before that significant increase in coal traffic over the past six months took place? Will it be possible to upgrade the capacity to accommodate such significant increases in freight?

Barbara Barnes: The level of growth in the business plan is unconstrained. As Iain Coucher said, the existing network has the capability to take some of that growth. As part of the freight RUS, we will consider the consequences of that unconstrained demand and identify what infrastructure improvements need to be put in place to accommodate it. We have worked with the freight operating companies and industry to understand what their aspirations are. It may be that not all those aspirations will be able to be met without significant investment, but that will be considered as part of the freight RUS activity that is on-going at the moment.

Tommy Sheridan: Was the increased coal traffic of the past six months part of the original projection?

Barbara Barnes: Yes, we have known about the increase in coal volumes for quite some time. Over the past six months, we have found ways of accommodating that additional traffic. Previously, the Glasgow and south-western and Settle to Carlisle route was operated and timed in a way that did not allow the full capacity of the route to be properly exploited. By retimetabling, we have provided an increase of 40 per cent in the number of paths that the freight operators can use if they wish to do so.

Tommy Sheridan: So the growth in freight transport was not a surprise because there was plenty of time to anticipate it.

Barbara Barnes: Yes, that is absolutely correct.

Tommy Sheridan: What is the estimated cost of the necessary upgrading of the Glasgow and south-western line for which many people have campaigned?

Iain Coucher: If I may, I will reserve judgment on that until we have completed the freight RUS, as that will contain estimates.

There are two major possibilities. If the line needs to be upgraded to accommodate only the expected increase in coal, the necessary enhancements will be fairly minimal. On parts of the line, especially down near Gretna, we would like to reinstate the former twin track—it will not be a new twin track, as we will just be putting back the twin track that was once there—but that could

be quite cheap. The cost will be in the order of £10 million to £15 million.

If the line needs to be upgraded to take the big freight containers, we might have a different calculation on our hands. When the line was upgraded so that Pendolinos could be loco hauled on it as a diversionary route for the west coast line, the bill was about £25 million. That was to get gauge clearance and height clearance for those trains. If the line had to be upgraded to take the bigger boxes, then, given the number of bridges and tunnels, the cost could be considerably more.

14:45

Tommy Sheridan: I am sorry to press you, but I asked about timescales because you have had time to chew over the figures and have given some estimates. Any figure that you give the committee will not be taken to be definitive, but we want to get a grasp of the level of investment that we are talking about. You say that a minimal upgrade would cost around £15 million, but a top-grade—

Iain Coucher: No. Let me have another go at explaining. We can accommodate coal growth today, although there are some performance issues and we would like to twin track the bit of railway down near Gretna, which would cost about £10 million to £15 million. Although that would provide some performance benefits, it would not provide a great deal of additional capacity. As things stand, there is capacity on the G&SW route to meet coal growth.

If we want to upgrade the G&SW line so that it can take a completely different type of freight, such as the container boxes, that will require bridge strengthening and tunnel widening right the way through to Hunterston, which could be very expensive. When we publish our freight RUS, it will indicate how much that might be.

Tommy Sheridan: So figures will be produced soon.

Iain Coucher: Yes. We are planning to publish the freight RUS in September.

Tommy Sheridan: Given the projections in your business plan and the evidence that we have heard—whether accurate or not—from people who say that they would move more produce by freight but fear that the capacity does not exist, is it your evidence that Network Rail could make the necessary changes to provide the modal shift that we are talking about? Are there major or immovable constraints that mean that we are nearly at the limit of the amount of freight that can be carried by rail?

Barbara Barnes: That probably depends on the type of traffic that you are talking about and the

markets that we are trying to attract. I would need to look at the specifics because the devil is always in the detail. On coal, we think that we have a plan that can get us to where we need to go. Obviously, a lot will depend on what happens with the coal market. Once Longannet is able to meet its emissions targets as a result of changing its emissions equipment, there might be a change in the source of supply, which we will have to address. As far as other markets are concerned, we are working actively with EWS and Freightliner and their customers and when we understand what their needs are, we will deal with any issues that arise. The answer to your question depends on the type of traffic that you are talking about and whether gauge improvements—which can be quite expensive—would be involved.

Tommy Sheridan: I have two final questions. A constraint that has been flagged up by the Highlands and Islands strategic transport partnership, for example, is the lack of intermodal terminals. As you will probably be aware, HITRANS has argued that Inverness should have an intermodal terminal. Do you agree that that would be beneficial?

Barbara Barnes: I understand the Inverness issue and know that our customers believe that there is a market for them there. We are working actively with them to ensure that if there is an economic case, the terminal can be provided.

Tommy Sheridan: Will any of the planned rail enhancements that we are aware of, which include the two airport rail links, the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line, the line to the Borders and the extension of the Edinburgh to Bathgate line, be of significant benefit to freight transport or will they be dedicated passenger lines?

Nigel Wunsch: At present, the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line is the only one that will offer significant freight benefits. Although it is designed to accommodate both freight and passenger services, its main purpose will be to serve Longannet. We are in discussions with Transport Scotland and the promoters of the various projects about the specifications for each of them. According to the current specifications, the remaining lines will be for passenger services only.

Tommy Sheridan: Could any of those lines be dual purpose? Given that we are investing a huge amount of money in them, it would be a shame if they could not be dual purpose.

Nigel Wunsch: The potential exists to upgrade the specifications for those routes so that they can take freight. For example, the Airdrie to Bathgate line could be upgraded to provide another freight route connecting the east and the west of the country.

Tommy Sheridan: Is there an economies of scale argument that you would be better doing such an upgrade now, while you are making the proposed improvements, rather than deciding to do an upgrade later? Might there be an economic benefit from making the line dual purpose now?

Nigel Wunsch: The time to make a line dual purpose is when building it from scratch. Obviously, it is more expensive to achieve once an operational railway exists, which means disruption on that railway in order to change it.

Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): One of the growth areas in freight will be the timber industry, given that much of the forest is now coming to maturity. Is Network Rail making any plans to tap into the growth in that sector? In some areas, the tracks are not there, but are there any instances in which you are seeking to maximise forestry freight?

Barbara Barnes: The timber traffic seems to ebb and flow. As with any customer demands to move traffic, we talk to the customers about their aspirations and we try to find solutions for them where there is capacity on the network to move the traffic. Timber has always been a little problematic in its loading ability and its general remoteness from centres of population. We are aware of a number of instances in Scotland where people have aspirations to move timber by rail. We are working with the freight operating companies to understand where that is and to determine what solutions we can find.

Mr Arbuckle: What would make a difference? You say that customers come and go. Is there anything that could commit people to move their wood as rail freight?

Barbara Barnes: It is about the economics of the business. The access that we charge the freight operating companies is a standard tariff. I do not believe that there is an issue with the charges that companies pay us for using the railway. The real issue is the economics of the business and whether the freight operating companies can make a business case that makes sense to them, and I cannot comment on that, I am afraid.

Iain Coucher: Freight on the railway works best when big, heavy, cumbersome products need to be shifted long distances. We would love to get more timber on to the railway, which is suited to hauling big, heavy logs for long distances around the country. However, it is not so efficient for shifting them 50 miles or so, particularly when loading times are taken into account.

The other problem is that moving timber from where it has been felled to the terminal requires lorries, and people will often prefer to keep the timber on the lorries rather than transferring it to

rail. As Barbara Barnes says, we need to work quickly, efficiently and cheaply to persuade people to see the benefits of taking timber on to the railway, rather than moving it by road.

Mr Arbuckle: Is it possible that, instead of having recognised railheads or loading points for timber, you could operate using informal loading points in forests, particularly in the evening or through the night, when the lines will not be used for passenger transport?

Barbara Barnes: Yes. We already do that in certain areas. We call that loading on the running line. That means setting up a temporary compound beside the running line and loading trains there, provided there are no other trains running at the time. We can do that during slack periods. We have done that in the past and we will do it again in the future when it is safe to do so.

David McLetchie: Could you explain to us how tariffs are set using particular references to particular lines and particular customers? In your answer to Andrew Arbuckle's question, you referred to a standard tariff. Does that mean that there is a standard level of charge or scale of charges across the network in Scotland and the UK? To what extent are tariffs differentiated by route and by customer?

Barbara Barnes: Under the current arrangements, the charging mechanism that we use for our freight operating companies is set by the Office of Rail Regulation. The tariff is published on the ORR and NR websites. The mechanism works by differentiating between different types of traffic; the wear and tear that particular types of vehicle and load cause to the network is taken into account in the changes that are applied. At the moment, the charging mechanism for freight is differentiated not by the type of route but by the type of traffic.

The Convener: That brings us to the end of our questions for the panel. I thank the three representatives from Network Rail for their evidence this afternoon, which was very helpful.

Iain Coucher: It was our pleasure.

The Convener: Our second panel is Jim Barton, who is the director of trunk road network management for Transport Scotland. Welcome to the committee today, Jim. Perhaps you will make some introductory remarks about the relationship between the trunk road network and freight carriage in Scotland, after which we will move to questioning from the committee.

Jim Barton (Transport Scotland): Thank you very much. As you said, I am the director at Transport Scotland who has responsibility for the operation and maintenance of the Scottish trunk road network. As I understand it, I have been

asked to appear before the committee today to provide a better understanding of the trunk road network in delivering freight and of the challenges that that brings. In that context, I note that although the trunk road network represents only around 6 per cent of the entire Scottish road network—it is some 3,500km long—it carries around two thirds of all freight mileage.

The Convener: Thank you. We move to questioning from the committee.

Mr Arbuckle: My question is on maintenance. As you indicated, although the trunk road network accounts for only a small percentage of the overall road network, it carries much of the heavy goods vehicle traffic. Is it true to say that the network gets almost 80 per cent of the Scottish roads maintenance budget?

Jim Barton: When compared with the maintenance budget for local roads?

Mr Arbuckle: Yes. I understand that local roads get 20 per cent and the trunk road network gets 80 per cent of the available budget.

Jim Barton: I cannot say what the percentage is, but my budget for structural maintenance—repairs to the road pavement—is £62.5 million this year, which is £12 million more than last year. The trunk road network carries two thirds of all HGV mileage. As the committee has heard in evidence on many occasions, the impact of HGVs on the road pavement is significantly greater than that of cars. It is therefore necessary to spend a larger amount on the structural maintenance of the trunk road network than is spent on local roads.

Mr Arbuckle: Is part of the £62.5 million being used to upgrade trunk roads to the proposed 44-tonne limit, or were they already built to that standard?

Jim Barton: In general, we repair the road pavement when it comes to the end of its useful life. We also reinstate the surface so that there is skid resistance and so on. We repair the road when it has no residual life. Our programme of bridge strengthening is directly connected to the 44-tonne vehicle limit. We are about halfway through that programme.

Mr Arbuckle: Is that halfway through in terms of the timescale? When will the programme be completed?

Jim Barton: Our target is to complete the bridge-strengthening programme by 2010, although doing so will depend on the availability of funds. I should say that no trunk road bridge has a weight limit, although we are closely monitoring some of them.

15:00

Paul Martin: You will be aware that there are dedicated lorry lanes on stretches of the M62 in England. Does the agency have any proposals for adopting a similar approach here?

Jim Barton: That matter is outside my immediate area of responsibility, but I know that we have no such proposals at the moment. However, one target in our corporate plan is to consider the use of road space on the trunk road network, including hard shoulder run-ins and bus lanes. We may also consider lorry lanes. I suspect that we will do so in the context of the national freight transport strategy as that strategy is developed. You probably know that policy responsibility for freight lies with the Executive transport group and that the agency has operational responsibility.

The Convener: Should the designation of trunk roads and non-trunk roads be revisited? You are undoubtedly right that the majority of lorry miles in Scotland are travelled on the trunk roads, but important A roads that are currently the responsibility of local authorities carry significant amounts of freight. Do you envisage Transport Scotland revisiting the question whether some important arterial routes through the country should be regarded as trunk roads?

Jim Barton: There is a possibility that we will carry out a review of the trunk road network, but that will probably be done when the regional transport partnerships are fully established. It may be appropriate to consider the trunk road network once the regional transport partnerships are fully established and have produced regional transport strategies. My thoughts are more about whether it is entirely appropriate for some trunk roads to remain as trunk roads under strong regional transport partnerships. However, there is not a one-way street—we could consider all aspects of the matter, as we did in the previous review of the trunk road network.

The Convener: Could consideration of whether roads should be trunk roads involve consideration of whether certain bridges should be part of the trunk road network? It seems to me that the Forth road bridge in particular is—or should be—as much a part of the trunk road network as, for example, the Kingston bridge in Glasgow.

Jim Barton: As you know, a review of the bridges has just concluded, but I am not sure whether bridges will be included in the review of the trunk road network.

Tommy Sheridan: Operators have countered what has been said about heavy lorry problems on our roads—which witnesses have commented on—by referring to speed limits and restrictions on trunk roads, for example. Has the trunk road

network management directorate considered the potential benefits and costs of allowing an increase in speed limits for heavy goods vehicles?

Jim Barton: We have not specifically considered those. However, I am aware of the Freight Transport Association's views on routes such as the A9, as is my colleague David Eaglesham, who deals with freight transport policy in the group. I understand that the national freight strategy consultation document will cover the question whether speed limits should be increased.

Again, there is not only a one-way street. Increasing vehicle speeds on the A9 to 50mph may reduce the platoons of traffic because lorries will move faster, but they are more difficult to pass if they travel at 50mph than they are if they travel at 40mph. The issue is therefore not straightforward. It has been argued in the evidence that it would be safer to increase speed limits, but I have not been able to find any evidence that that would be so.

Tommy Sheridan: I asked you the question because I hoped that Transport Scotland might have analysed this important issue. Safety is the primary concern, but is there not also a concern that greater damage could be done to the road networks at higher speeds? Has your organisation not considered that issue, or has it been taken on board?

Jim Barton: It is possible that higher speeds could result in greater damage. There is logic in that suggestion, but I do not know to what extent that is the case. Obviously, the more undulating the road surface, the more damaging higher speeds would be.

It is not that I am not interested in the matter, but the way that the process works is that if a policy decision were made to examine the matter we would look at it. My responsibility is the operation of the network under the rules as they stand. I know that that sounds narrow, but that is where my responsibilities lie.

Tommy Sheridan: The most important feature, if we are to encourage more freight to be transported by rail, is the ability to access via the trunk road network the existing rail freight terminals. Much of the evidence that we have received is to the effect that inadequate trunk-road linkages are a barrier to the development of rail freight transport. Do you accept that the current trunk-road linkages to our main railway freight terminals are inadequate, or do you think that they are fine? If you think that they are inadequate, have the costs of improving the network links been investigated?

Jim Barton: It has never been brought to my attention that the links are inadequate.

Tommy Sheridan: I do not know whether you heard the evidence given by the previous panel.

Jim Barton: I was present for only part of their evidence.

Tommy Sheridan: One of the Network Rail representatives said that the distance between the site of felling and the rail freight transport terminal was often a problem for timber companies. If they have to load freight on to lorries for one part of the journey, they might as well keep it on the lorries for the whole journey. If there was improved access to a rail freight terminal they might consider it economic to shift to rail. Has that not been discussed within your organisation?

Jim Barton: I suspect that the witness was probably talking about the transport facilities from the place where the trees were felled to the railhead. It is unlikely that that would be trunk road all the way as it is very unlikely that trees would be felled adjacent to a trunk road. I suspect that that is why I have not been involved.

The Convener: I will develop Tommy Sheridan's point. Transport Scotland has obviously just started up, so it is too early to judge it. However, I would expect Transport Scotland to try to bring the different modes of transport together, particularly within its own organisation. In addition to yourself, with your responsibility for trunk roads, I would expect your colleagues who are responsible for the railways to be involved. I hope that Transport Scotland will also examine the interaction between non-trunk roads, trunk roads, the railway and so on. Is that taking place within your organisation now or are the processes still evolving?

Jim Barton: Transport Scotland is a new organisation, but I did substantially what I do now before I moved to it. We still talk to colleagues in the Scottish Executive's transport group, who deal with matters such as the freight facilities grant and deliver on many matters. I am sure that you will have heard about the number of lorry miles that have been taken off the roads by virtue of the freight facilities grant. We work with our colleagues who deal with that and with our rail colleagues to find areas of synergy. To date, my organisation has not been involved directly in the sort of things that Mr Sheridan mentioned. That is not to say that we would not be receptive to it, but it has not been brought to our attention that that is an area to which the trunk road network can contribute.

One of our corporate targets is to find ways in which the trunk road network can contribute to integrated transport policies on the freight side as well as the passenger side. There is a broad requirement to consider that within the next year or so. We have already started that process.

The Convener: That is reassuring. I was a bit concerned that everyone appeared to be in different silos and that no one was talking to anyone else.

Jim Barton: Absolutely not. We do not want to be in different silos.

The Convener: Earlier, Tommy Sheridan asked about the upgrading of the speed limit on the A9. I think that I speak for all members of the committee when I say that such a change should happen only if it were robustly proved that it would make the road safer and would have no undue impact on the quality of the road surface. It has been brought to our attention that New Zealand recently increased the speed limit that applies to some sorts of lorries. You might want to examine that example, as much of the terrain of New Zealand is similar to the terrain of Scotland. For example, it has long stretches of rural road, just as we have. You might be able to access some of the research that has been done in New Zealand into the impact on road safety and the quality of the road surface.

Jim Barton: Yes.

Fergus Ewing: How frequently do you use the A9, Mr Barton?

Jim Barton: Probably about three, four or five times a year. Something like that.

Fergus Ewing: I use it most weeks and I can assure you that, if the speed limit were increased from 40mph to 50mph, which is what is proposed under the special roads provision, the effect would be to alleviate the delays to some extent. However, on a single carriageway, which is what the A9 consists of for most of its length, it does not matter whether the vehicle at the front of the queue—which is almost always a lorry—is driving at 40mph or 50mph because, if traffic is coming in the other direction, people cannot overtake anyway. Do you accept that that is a fair point?

Jim Barton: Yes. There is no doubt that some of the sweeping bends on the A9, which make it such an attractive road, also make it quite ambiguous in terms of overtaking. You will probably know that we have been introducing a new standard that we call WS(2+1), which involves having a wide single carriageway with two lanes in one direction and one in the other. That will release platoons of traffic at marginal cost. When we reconstruct a section of the road, we can improve its standard and provide guaranteed overtaking.

Fergus Ewing: I am aware of the initiative that you mention. I am sure that you will be aware that I have written frequently to the minister about the issue. The WS(2+1) standard adds an element of danger, particularly for foreign drivers, who will be

unfamiliar with the rapid alternation of the carriageway from single to dual to three lane and back to dual or single. That is extremely confusing and I hope that we do not end up with more tragic accidents of the sort that we saw at the Ballinluig junction a few years ago.

I appreciate that you are not responsible for policy decisions, so I will ask one or two questions in relation to the freight inquiry.

You say that you are unaware of any evidence that suggests that there would be not be an element of increased danger if the speed limit were to be increased from 40mph to 50mph for lorries. What evidence can there be? Have you sought to obtain such evidence?

Jim Barton: Yes. I have read Gavin Scott's evidence. He said that a speed limit of 50mph would be safer. I have been unable to find the evidence for that, although I am not saying that it does not exist. I think that Gavin Scott undertook to provide that evidence to the committee; I do not know whether he has done so.

Fergus Ewing: Has the Executive not asked for evidence on this question, which has been around for some time? Advisers such as you seem to be so hostile to the measure that you do not want to find evidence on the consequences of introducing it. Given that the matter has been raised with you during the past few years, what measures have you taken to find such evidence?

15:15

Jim Barton: We will not find the evidence unless we raise the speed limit on single-carriageway roads from 40mph to 50mph. We can consider the situation in other countries, but we do not know the baseline in such places.

Fergus Ewing: Those are fair points. However, are you saying that there is no evidence from the UK or that you have not looked for evidence?

Jim Barton: I have not been able to find evidence.

Fergus Ewing: Have you sought evidence from other countries?

Jim Barton: No.

Fergus Ewing: As you know, the committee has heard evidence from the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland on the general state of the trunk and non-trunk road networks. Expert road engineers from SCOTS work for local authorities, which remain responsible for the maintenance of non-trunk roads. During our inquiry, witnesses from the road haulage sector expressed great concern about the impact on business and safety of the state of our roads. One driver told us that potholes in motorways are

extremely dangerous because lorries often cannot avoid them.

Witnesses from SCOTS told us that just to bring all roads in the network and other street apparatus up to standard would cost a substantial amount of money—I think that the estimate was around £3 billion. However, the Scottish Executive and local authorities spend only just over half of what is required. Do you accept that that is a fair and factual analysis of the problem?

Jim Barton: Audit Scotland produced a report on the maintenance—

Fergus Ewing: Was the analysis from SCOTS factually correct and broadly fair?

Jim Barton: The figure is about right in relation to the maintenance backlog in the non-trunk road network—

Fergus Ewing: Do you accept—

The Convener: Mr Ewing, please let the witness answer before you ask a supplementary question.

Jim Barton: The maintenance backlog in the Scottish trunk road network is around £230 million, which is about four times my annual spend. I want to reduce the backlog and the situation is slightly better than it has been during the past few years. We have been reducing the maintenance backlog during the past two or three years, but we cannot do that overnight.

It would not be appropriate for me to answer the question whether local authorities spend enough on local road maintenance.

Fergus Ewing: Okay. The money that is spent on the trunk road network is insufficient by a large factor, but the situation is not as dreadful as it used to be. We can agree on that.

Jim Barton: I do not agree. I said that we have a maintenance backlog, which we are reducing.

Fergus Ewing: In that case perhaps we disagree. You accept that a large proportion of the repairs that are required this year on trunk roads will not be done. I suggest that the same situation applies to non-trunk roads. Do you agree that by next year the weather will have done its work and constant usage will have made potholes and craters larger, so that a repair that would have cost £10 this year will cost £20, £30 or £40 next year? Is that a fair point to make about the cost of not carrying out road works?

Jim Barton: That is sometimes the case, but not always. Sometimes, maintaining a road too early in its life cycle means tearing out good bits as well. There is a balance to be struck.

Fergus Ewing: When do you envisage that any significant improvements will be made to the

standard of the main arterial trunk routes that serve central Scotland and the Highlands, namely the A82, the A9 and the A96? Do you anticipate that there will be any dualling of those roads within the next 10 years?

Jim Barton: I am really here to talk about the trunk road network as it is, but I will answer that question in a minute. On improving the existing road infrastructure, we have a 10-year plan to reduce the maintenance backlog. The target in the most recent spending review is to

"Improve the condition of the ... road network over a 10 year period against measurable milestones."

You will be aware that the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications recently announced plans for the A82 and the A9. However, as you know, there are funding pressures, because we have a full programme.

Fergus Ewing: For the record, is it correct that there are no plans to upgrade to dual status any of the trunk roads that serve central Scotland and the Highlands in the next 10 years and that, in fact, there has been little improvement to those trunk roads since 1999?

Jim Barton: There has been significant improvement in the condition of the roads.

Fergus Ewing: I was talking about improvements to the major arterial routes, which is a theme on which we have received much evidence from many witnesses. The issue is a serious one for road hauliers and their customers. To be clear, do you agree that there have been no significant improvements to the A9, the A96 or the A82 since 1999 and that, other than for the proposed improvements at Pulpit Rock, possibly at Ballinluig junction and one or two other relatively minor improvements involving tens, twenties or thirties of millions of pounds, there are no significant plans to improve any of the main trunk routes that serve the Highlands in the next 10 years?

Jim Barton: We have spent a lot of time on and put a lot of effort into improving the operational characteristics of those roads in the past few years.

Fergus Ewing: But there are no major plans for improvements to any of those roads. There has been maintenance, but is it not the factual position that no major improvements are planned for the next 10 years?

Jim Barton: I refer you to the minister's announcement.

The Convener: In the course of our evidence taking, the Scottish Trades Union Congress raised the issue of safety on long-distance routes. One specific issue is that for lorries, outwith the central

belt, there are not many custom-built stopping places with a restaurant and restroom facilities. Do you accept that criticism of the trunk road network? Is the Scottish Executive trying to alleviate the problem on the long-distance routes between the central belt and the north of Scotland?

Jim Barton: We could consider that issue with the relevant organisations. You have taken evidence on the A9. There is a history to the lack of certain facilities on that road, which relates to the bypassed communities. However, if any proposed facilities were to be off the road, our role would probably be to provide access to them from the trunk road network. If they were adjacent to the trunk road network, we could consider the provision of stopping places.

David McLetchie: I have a couple of questions about the maintenance contracts. When do the current contracts expire and when will the contracts next be up for negotiation?

Jim Barton: As you probably know, there are four trunk road maintenance contracts. Those for the north-west and the south-west were retendered last year. In the south-west, Amey, which ran the unit for the previous five years, successfully retendered and won the contract. In the north-west, BEAR Scotland was not successful and a new organisation, Scotland TransServ, has been appointed. Both the contracts, which we call the third generation trunk road maintenance contracts, started on 1 April this year. The north-east and south-east contracts are being retendered at the moment and they will commence on 1 April 2007.

David McLetchie: Are you satisfied that the tender packages are appropriate—in other words, that those chunks are the proper way to procure maintenance for the sections of road that are covered by those geographical areas? Is that something that you have evaluated or considered between one contract and the other?

Jim Barton: I am not responsible for procuring the contracts. I am responsible for administering them. However, I believe that they are good contracts and that they are appropriate for the type of work that we want.

David McLetchie: Procurement falls within the domain of the transport group, but it is not your particular responsibility.

Jim Barton: Yes.

David McLetchie: Thank you.

Ms Watt: Where are the most serious bottlenecks for freight traffic in Scotland and are there any short-term plans to alleviate them?

Jim Barton: The bottlenecks for freight traffic are probably similar to the bottlenecks for other traffic. Freight traffic gets stuck just like other traffic. Crossing the Forth road bridge is quite an effort—I witness that every morning. Other bottlenecks include anywhere around the Edinburgh city bypass and the M8 in the rush hour. The bottlenecks are mostly in the central belt.

Ms Watt: Do you agree that one of the serious bottlenecks is the A90 around Aberdeen? Have you been campaigning to make sure that a western peripheral route is built?

Jim Barton: I would not say that I have been campaigning, no. New roads are the responsibility of my colleague John Howison. It is his part of the organisation that is responsible for new works and has been taking forward proposals for the Aberdeen western peripheral route.

I know that there are traffic problems going into Aberdeen in the morning because my daughter lives in Aberdeen.

Ms Watt: One of the other serious bottlenecks is on the A96 at Pitcaple rail bridge. Are there any proposals to upgrade the road there?

Jim Barton: I understand that the section is being looked at as part of a route strategy, but I am not absolutely certain.

The Convener: Fergus Ewing has one final, short question.

Fergus Ewing: The bridgemaster said that it is likely that the Forth road bridge will have to close to freight traffic—to lorries above a certain weight—by 2013. Has the Scottish Executive considered—whether by producing a study, by considering the matter in policy terms or by appointing consultants—the impact that the closure of the bridge to such traffic would have on traffic and on the economy?

Jim Barton: First, it is by no means certain that the bridge will have to close to freight traffic by 2013. What the bridgemaster said is that he has some concerns about certain cables in the bridge corroding. We are working closely with the Forth Estuary Transport Authority to consider whether that will manifest itself. Certain measures are being taken to arrest it, such as dehumidification. Again with FETA, we are considering the possible consequences should that scenario arise.

Fergus Ewing: That does not really answer the question that I asked.

Jim Barton: I think that the answer is yes. We are considering the consequences of the bridge having to close, either to heavy goods vehicles or completely.

Fergus Ewing: Have you produced a study on that? How have you considered it? Will you share the fruits of your consideration with the committee and its inquiry into freight? As I understand it, it will take up to 10 years to replace the Forth road bridge and we face what the bridgemaster described as the likelihood of the bridge being closed to freight traffic within seven years. The consequences for Scotland of losing a Forth road bridge crossing are dire. I would have expected the Executive to have studied that and given the committee such a study as part of its evidence for the inquiry, but we have not received that. Even if Mr Barton cannot do so now, could he provide a more considered answer than he has given today before we see the minister in two weeks' time?

15:30

Jim Barton: I will certainly do that. I am saying that we are studying the matter, but the study is not complete. Such studies take time.

Fergus Ewing: When was the study initiated?

Jim Barton: I cannot say offhand.

Fergus Ewing: Could you tell us that tomorrow, for example, and tell us when the study will be completed?

Jim Barton: I will tell you exactly that.

The Convener: That brings us to the end of questions, so I thank Jim Barton for his evidence.

Fergus Ewing suggested to me that we should hear evidence from representatives of Transport Scotland's rail operations, but we have been unable to identify individuals to give evidence. I have suggested through contact between clerks and the minister that, if we cannot hear separately from Transport Scotland before the minister appears before us, it would help if the minister were supported by someone from Transport Scotland who could assist him in answering rail questions.

The other possibility was that we would hear from rail operations representatives only after we had taken evidence from the minister. I am not sure whether that would be helpful because, if issues arose on which we wanted to question the minister, we would have to call him back and delay progress on the inquiry. I have suggested that it would be useful for the minister to be able to answer rail questions fully and that it would therefore help if a senior representative of Transport Scotland who is knowledgeable about that part of its business were present.

Fergus Ewing: I appreciate that answer. I would like to think that Transport Scotland's chief executive, Mr Malcolm Reed, could come along and take the opportunity to expose himself to

questions as part of the accountability process. I understand that he received notice to come to today's meeting just last week and that—perhaps unsurprisingly—he had other engagements. I hope that, as we have a further two weeks, we might consider reinviting Mr Reed.

I will make a wider point. As a result of last week's so-called announcement about some trunk routes, and throughout the inquiry, we have heard lots of evidence from the road haulage industry about the state of the trunk road network, so I hope that supporting the minister will be officials who can talk not just about maintenance but about the whole picture—about strategic plans, projects and improvements that are to be made. As well as hearing about rail, I hope that to support the minister we will have officials from Transport Scotland and the Executive's transport group who can answer all the questions that have emerged throughout the inquiry, which cover a wide range, as we all know. I hope that officials who can discuss trunk road improvements and rail will come along. I hope that they will be led by Mr Reed and that he will not be shy about appearing before the committee.

I understand from the clarification that the clerk obtained this morning in trying to find out who is responsible for freight transport in Scotland that the transport group is responsible for something that is called the "overview" and that Transport Scotland is responsible for something that is called "specific aspects of freight". That is as clear as mud. I am reminded of Janette Anderson's criticism back in September that the whole thing is a bit of a guddle. I hope that we can end the guddle by having clarity before the inquiry is over.

The Convener: I do not want us to debate issues that are not on today's agenda. If you want to put those matters to the minister, you can do so—that is the appropriate place for them. If we go down the road of initiating unscheduled debates, I will have to think twice about whether to put information in the committee arena as I did. I do not want to provoke an unscheduled debate for which we do not have the appropriate witnesses. I do not want to add to what I have said. It would help to have appropriate support for the minister, so that he can answer questions. The minister and the Executive are ultimately responsible for deciding which roads and railways are priorities for the Executive's investment programme. The minister will give evidence and respond to questions on such matters.

Fergus Ewing: With respect, convener, as you well know, I gave the clerk notice of my concern not about policies, with which you know we disagree, but simply about who will come to give evidence.

The Convener: The issue is not on the agenda and I will not debate it.

Fergus Ewing: I point out that, in the circumstances, this morning was the first opportunity that I had to raise that concern.

The Convener: The issue is not on the agenda.

Fergus Ewing: The issue, of which I gave the clerk notice, is who will give evidence. I slightly resent your suggestion that I am trying to open a debate.

The Convener: The issue is not on the agenda.

Fergus Ewing: I suggested that Mr Reed should come along to give evidence.

The Convener: I ask Fergus Ewing to cease his contribution. The issue is not on the agenda and I will not debate it today. No further issues are on the agenda, so I close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 15:35.

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