

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 23 October 2001
(Morning)

Session 1

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

12th Meeting 2001, Session 1

CONVENER

*Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dorothy-Grace Elder (Glasgow) (SNP)

*Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con)

*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

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

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP)

Augusta Greenlees (Borders Against the Cuts)

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

ASSISTANT CLERK

Ruth Cooper

LOCATION

The Chamber

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Tuesday 23 October 2001

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:04*]

The Convener (Mr John McAllion): I welcome everyone to the 12th meeting in 2001 of the Public Petitions Committee. I also welcome members back from the recess—I hope that they are all refreshed and raring to go. I remind members to turn off any phones or electronic equipment that they have with them, rather than disturb the meeting.

We have received no apologies, and I welcome to the meeting Ian Jenkins, Christine Grahame and Robin Harper, who are here to support individual petitions.

New Petitions

Borders (Education Budget) (PE402)

The Convener: The first petition is PE402 from Augusta Greenlees, who asks the Scottish Parliament to hold an inquiry into Scottish Borders Council's education budget overspend, to bring to account those who are responsible and to assess the impact on educational provision in the Borders. The petition had more than 10,000 signatures when we received it. Since then, we have received an additional 100 signatures from Ian Jenkins and others.

Ms Greenlees is present and I ask her to address the committee. You have three minutes, following which we will ask questions.

Augusta Greenlees (Borders Against the Cuts): I come before the committee today with a simple request from the people of the Borders. They want to know why their children and teachers are paying the price for what is—it is now obvious—the council's total financial mismanagement. We have no confidence in the council's ability to sort out the situation. There is no long-term strategy for education in the Borders.

From the start, we have been given inadequate information. In August, we were told that the cuts that were being made would be the only ones and that they would not affect our children. Both those statements were untrue. In our petition, we ask for those who are responsible to be called to account. The elected members of the council have failed to take responsibility: they have blamed their officials

and passed the buck. However, they are quite prepared for our children and schools to carry the burden of their mismanagement and we feel that that is nothing short of outrageous.

Our children have one chance to get an education that must often take them out of the Borders to compete in the big wide world. Allegedly, the cuts that are in place, and which we know will not be the only cuts, will not affect their education. How can that be? The cuts include a reduction in devolved school management funds. In plain language, for parents, that means cuts in books, papers, pencils and equipment.

Children who have special needs face a double whammy and have been hit very hard. They suffer the reduction in resources and changes to school meals along with their chums, but the reduction in auxiliary and learning support time also directly affects access to education for them. The reduction in speech and language therapy time does not directly affect only their access to education; it also affects their wider communication needs.

Transport arrangements have been changed to save money, but the changes have made children's and families' lives miserable. For example, one child must spend two and a half hours travelling to Edinburgh.

The freezing of staff development time will obviously affect children, because when teachers take part in staff development, they gain new ideas, new enthusiasm and can help with all the new initiatives that come their way. The national grid for learning is struggling to find funds to complete the computer programme for the Borders. Nowadays, computers are not a luxury—they are an essential part of classroom education.

In the Borders, we have always been proud to have a high standard of education, but now we watch as the education service is dismantled. There is no long-term strategy, only knee-jerk reactions. We fear that, by the time this debacle is over, we shall be left with the minimum that the council is obliged to provide. We have already heard that teaching modern languages in primary schools will not continue. We are meant to accept that as acceptable for our children, who have had nothing to do with this financial disaster. We have heard and read of an underspend in the Scottish Executive of what appears to us to be a fantastic amount. That puzzles, upsets and angers us when we see our children being penalised and short-changed. Education is a vital part of their lives. This is the only chance that they have—they will not get a second chance to have an education.

We hear about precedents being set and about having to wait for procedure to run its course, but our children do not have the luxury of time. They

cannot wait and see; their education is taking place now—today and tomorrow—and they are watching it become poorer and poorer. In the Borders, we feel that there is no one out there to help us. We come before the committee today to ask members, through what I have said, for help. We have come to ask for your help now.

The Convener: Before I invite committee members to ask questions, I ask Ian Jenkins and Christine Grahame whether they want to say anything in support of the petition.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I share many of Augusta Greenlees's anxieties, although I hope that the picture that she paints is gloomier than it needs to be. Nevertheless, the cuts will affect the provision of services in a damaging way.

The terms of the petition, which calls for an external inquiry, have been overtaken by events. The auditor's report that is to be presented to Borders Council on 7 November is now public property, to which extent there has been the opportunity for external scrutiny. Members might recall that, on 28 June, I said that there should be external scrutiny of the financial matters. I suggested that Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education be brought in to examine the management of the council, and Mr McConnell has said that that will happen. The scrutiny is being made public. The Education, Culture and Sport Committee will visit the Borders and I do not doubt that Augusta Greenlees will have the opportunity to speak to that committee. I say that without authority, but I would be surprised if it were not the case.

I hope that the Public Petitions Committee will pass the petition to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee for its consideration. That committee is especially interested in the effect of the cuts on special educational needs provision, which is highlighted in the petition. By the end of the process, this will be the most scrutinised failure of local government in a long time.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I commend Augusta Greenlees, who was central in collating signatures from throughout the Borders, from the east coast to the western side.

Cuts of a further £2 million are probably in the pipeline, and nursery education is now being affected. I note what Ian Jenkins says about the audit; however, the auditor has made it plain that assessment of the impact on educational provision in the Borders is not part of the auditor's remit. Therefore, if the committee chooses to refer the petition to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, a full and independent assessment should be an essential component of that committee's inquiry.

Those who are responsible for the overspend have not been brought to account: they are all still in their jobs and nobody has done anything about that. That might be something else for the Education, Culture and Sport Committee to consider. I trust that one of the committees of the Parliament will put pressure on—or guide—the Executive to spend some of the £718 million underspend in the Scottish budget on a financial rescue package for the Borders. The region has been losing money hand over fist following the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, the decline in farming and the electronics and textiles industries, and now because of the council's mismanagement. The Borders region does not even have a railway station. The community there deserves some help, and I hope that an inquiry will be the trigger for a financial rescue package for the council and the people of the Borders.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): In your opening statement, you said that the elected members are accepting no responsibility for the overspend, but are blaming the officials in the council. Have they taken any steps to bring those officials to account for the mistakes that were made?

Augusta Greenlees: The chairman of the education committee has resigned from that office, although he remains on the council. The assistant director has been dismissed, but allegedly on a different count. The director of education—or lifelong learning, or whatever it is called now—is on sick leave, and the chief executive of the council has been on sick leave and is now being granted early retirement. I am sorry to say that none of those facts fills us with a huge amount of confidence, nor do we feel that the council is accepting responsibility. We feel that the council is passing the buck and hoping that the schools will sort out the muddle for it.

Rhoda Grant: So there is no way to get the information, especially if people are on sick leave. You cannot get information about whether officials were guided by councillors or vice versa.

Augusta Greenlees: No, not as far as we know. Rumours have started flying, which has produced misinformation, the like of which we have never seen. We feel abandoned.

Dorothy-Grace Elder (Glasgow) (SNP): I am inclined to go along with Rhoda Grant's train of thought, which is that ultimately councillors have overall responsibility. Has the affair been reported to the local government ombudsman?

10:15

Augusta Greenlees: I do not know. The matter is so public that one would have to be asleep not to notice what is going on. On comments that

there should be an investigation within the council to see where responsibility lies, an inquiry would be all well and good, but we come back to the problem that our children must wait for that to happen. Some parents suggested that a task force should go in and sort the situation out so that our children do not carry the burden now. We do not have time.

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): Is it appropriate that the term "budget overspend" is being used? Do we have information about how the council finances were allocated at the outset of the financial year? The percentage that was allocated to education might have been underestimated at the start of the financial year.

Augusta Greenlees: I went, as a representative of a school, to a meeting of school boards with the director of education and the director of finance. We had a long and heated discussion. We asked that question. We asked how the muddle arose, what was the funding and whether it had been underestimated. We asked whether that was the problem. We emerged from the meeting without having received many facts and figures but with the feeling that there was perhaps underfunding of the total budget for education. That does not explain how it got into such a terrific muddle and why the council did not notice it for so long.

Despite that meeting, school board chairpeople and parents are no wiser about the financial situation. The officials seem to be able to juggle figures and years. I find it difficult to understand and have not yet been given an answer.

The Convener: I understand that Christine Grahame might have more information.

Christine Grahame: It is my understanding that the council is setting up a working group with officials to consider disciplinary issues that arise from the situation. I do not know how far that will take us, because the officials are close to the situation.

The audit report is clear about how budgets were either overspent or underfunded—depending on how one looks at it. The report provides a full analysis of where the money went and how it disappeared.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): I apologise to Ms Greenlees for arriving late and not hearing all her comments. One point that strikes me about this is the issue that is very much before us: what happened in the past? Did Scottish Borders Council make representations to the Scottish Executive, the then Scottish Office or the funding body of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities about the amount of money that it was receiving? Education costs in rural areas tend to be extremely high.

Augusta Greenlees: The first that parents and teachers knew of the problem was when the council woke up to the fact that there had been a huge overspend. When we asked how that had happened and why the council had not—as far as we could see—gone for help beforehand, we were given no direct answer. There seemed to be a lack of inclination to ask for more money. The council thought that it could manage within the budget.

I do not know what the answer is. As a parent, I do not seem to be able to get a straight answer. We have asked the council whether it will now go cap in hand to ask for help, but it seems to be loth to do so. The council talks of good housekeeping and the lowest council tax, as if the situation is part of a good package. When we tell the council to ask for financial help, it tends to back off. As a parent I do not have an answer to the problem.

Phil Gallie: That is also my understanding. Bearing in mind the criticism when the Scottish Parliament was set up that it would tend to become over-involved in local government matters and would in effect take away aspects of local government management, what do you see as the solution? Do you feel that the only way out now is for the Scottish Executive to inject extra funds and in effect to show extraordinary concern about this particular local authority's interest?

Augusta Greenlees: You can probably guess from my accent that I am not local, so it is a bit cheeky of me to answer. However, having learned as much as I can in the short time that I have lived up here I feel that it is easy to hide behind the statement, "We must not interfere with local government." There are moments of crisis, and this is one of them. I feel that that is what the Scottish Parliament is here for. In moments of crisis, the Parliament can step in quickly and deal with the crisis. We do not have to think about going to Westminster; the Parliament is here on our doorstep to help us. On occasions such as this, the Parliament ought to step in—that is what many people in the Borders feel.

Phil Gallie: If that were to happen, would it undermine the structure of local government and its responsibilities to the electorate properly to manage its affairs?

Augusta Greenlees: No, I do not think so. On the whole, local government runs its budgets and so on very well, and Parliament can step back. However, Parliament cannot always do that. In a crisis, surely Parliament has the wherewithal, the imagination and the brains to see that this is an occasion when it must step in. That does not set a precedent and it does not undermine local government.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): In the newspaper reports that supplement what you have

said this morning it is suggested that, following the publication of Mr Hinds's report, the Accounts Commission might ask for a public inquiry. Has that been announced?

Augusta Greenlees: I do not think that it has been announced publicly. It has been heard of—we know that it is rumbling around.

Dorothy-Grace Elder: I congratulate you on the geographical area that you have covered in putting together your petition. If we were to boil the matter down, could we say that you would like parliamentary intervention not to be confined to, for instance, the education committee, but to extend to local representatives?

Augusta Greenlees: That is what it boils down to. The council should be considered from top to bottom.

Dorothy-Grace Elder: I agree.

Augusta Greenlees: I have enjoyed discovering the Borders via the petition.

The Convener: Obviously, there will be parliamentary intervention because, as has been said previously, the Education, Culture and Sport Committee has announced its intention to hold a short inquiry. From what you have heard about that inquiry are you content that it will get to the bottom of the problems in the Borders?

Augusta Greenlees: Content is too strong a word. We are fearful that the inquiry might get bogged down and disappear in a mass of paperwork, but it needs to be done, so we keep our fingers crossed that it will be to our benefit.

The Convener: I, too, am concerned. I have been a terrible stammerer for most of my life and, for my sins, I am the vice-president of the British Stammering Association. I am concerned about special needs education. This week, the BSA is launching an awareness week. It talks about the need for speech therapy services and so on. Is there any indication that speech therapy services are being withdrawn?

Augusta Greenlees: Very much so. Eileen Prior, who works hard for special needs children, wanted to be here this morning, but regrettably could not attend. She would have been able to give members more information. A catalogue of shame is being put together, which shows how individual children are being affected. Funds are being cut enormously. Special needs children are the most vulnerable children in the Borders and there is no two ways about it: they are suffering right now.

The Convener: Is it the intention that this catalogue of shame be submitted to the inquiry?

Augusta Greenlees: Yes.

Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands)

(SNP): The report of Audit Scotland has been passed to the Accounts Commission, which will consider it. Do we have any influence over how long that will take? Can we ask the Accounts Commission when a decision will be made?

The Convener: Are you asking me or the petitioner?

Dr Ewing: I am sorry. I arrived late at this morning's meeting because I went to the wrong room.

The Convener: The clerk tells me that the matter is for the Accounts Commission. However, it will be aware that the Education, Culture and Sport Committee is holding an inquiry.

There is an atmosphere of crisis in the Borders and an early response to the situation will be needed. I assume therefore that the Accounts Commission is giving the matter the priority that it deserves, as the Scottish Parliament appears to be doing.

Christine Grahame: I do not think that one must wait for one thing to happen before another thing happens. All the evidence that will be submitted, including that of Augusta Greenlees, shows that for individual children the crisis is happening now. The Education, Culture and Sport Committee can examine that matter at the same time as work is being done in relation to accountability and liability. The people who should be dealing with the situation that has arisen should not get tangled up in how it came about. Speech therapy is being cut considerably, along with a lot of other auxiliary services for children who have special educational needs.

The Convener: I thank Augusta Greenlees for her evidence, which was clear and has affected the committee deeply. We will now discuss what to do with the petition.

The suggested action is that we refer the petition to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee for further consideration with the recommendation that the petition be taken into account as part of its inquiry into the reported shortfall in the Scottish Borders Council's education budget.

Phil Gallie: Given the urgency of the situation—and acknowledging my reservations about trespassing on local authorities' business—I think that not only should we pass the petition to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee, but we should advise the Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs of what we have done. We should express to him our concerns about the situation and ask him to re-examine the matter.

The Convener: We could certainly pass a copy of the petition to the minister and state that the committee has recommended that there should be

an early response to this critical situation.

Phil Gallie: We could also send the minister a copy of the *Official Report* of our meeting. That would enable him to pick up any additional points that have been made.

Rhoda Grant: There is a need for a task force to examine the education provision in the area and to sort it out now. There must be an inquiry into how the situation came about. However, that will not help the children who are losing out at the moment. We need to ask the minister to consider creating a task force to assist those children, if that is within his powers, given the problem that Phil Gallie mentioned about the Scottish Executive interfering with council matters.

The Convener: I have been told that the best way for that suggestion to be taken up by the minister would be for the committee to tell the Education, Culture and Sport Committee that that is the view of the Public Petitions Committee.

Dorothy-Grace Elder: It would take some time to set up a ministerial task force. Perhaps local MSPs from the various political parties should set up a task force.

The Convener: The meeting in Galashiels is on 5 November, so it is less than a fortnight away. The Education, Culture and Sport Committee will receive a copy of the *Official Report* of this morning's meeting and will be fully informed of the evidence.

With all those addenda, is it agreed that we pass the petition to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee and recommend that it becomes part of the inquiry?

Members indicated agreement.

Water and Sewerage Industry (Competitiveness) (PE399)

10:30

The Convener: Petition PE399, from Dr D H S Reid, is on the lack of competitiveness in the water and sewerage industry. The petition calls on the Parliament to introduce democratic and competitive instincts into the water and sewerage industry in Scotland by converting the existing water boards into three or more public liability companies, half-owned by the taxpayers and half-owned by people who want to take shares. As members know, the Executive introduced the Water Industry (Scotland) Bill to Parliament on 26 September. That bill will create an all-Scotland public water authority, to be called Scottish Water, which is aimed at improving services in this area. The policy memorandum accompanying the bill makes it clear that Scottish ministers have ruled out the privatisation model as incompatible with

their commitment to maintaining Scottish Water as a publicly owned water and sewerage authority. No doubt that will be debated at some length in the Parliament.

It is suggested that we refer the petition to the Transport and the Environment Committee with the recommendation that it be taken into account during that committee's stage 2 consideration of the bill. Is that agreed?

Helen Eadie: I support that proposal. However, I should declare an interest in that I am sponsored by the Co-operative Party as well as by the Labour party. I want to highlight the fact that I am very disappointed that we are not going down the route of supporting the mutual option. That is something that I am keen to see in Scotland, although that option appears to have been ruled out by the Transport and the Environment Committee.

The Convener: At 12 o'clock today, I will be receiving a petition from the Co-operative Party about water and sewerage, which I suspect might have something to do with the mutual option. Therefore, that matter will come before the committee in due course.

Does the committee agree to refer the petition to the Transport and the Environment Committee?

Members indicated agreement.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing People (Social Work Services) (PE400)

The Convener: Petition PE400 is from Clare McCann on behalf of the Deaf Equality and Accessibility Forum. Clare McCann wanted to come to give evidence to the committee this morning, but was unable to attend. She has said that she hopes to be able to watch the committee live on the internet and looks forward to seeing the way in which we handle the petition. I am not sure whether that is a warning to members that we are under particular scrutiny.

The petition calls for the Parliament to investigate the provision of social work services to deaf and hard of hearing people in South Lanarkshire and to take steps to ensure that all local authorities in Scotland provide adequate social work services to deaf and hard of hearing people in their catchment areas. The petitioners are concerned about the removal of a specialist worker post for hearing impaired people in South Lanarkshire Council area. The council funded such a post until the end of 1998, but removed the post without any consultation with service users.

The suggestion is that we agree to seek the views of the Executive on the issue and send a copy of the petition to the Equal Opportunities Committee for information and comments.

Dr Ewing: The position of the deaf in Scotland is tragic. We have only 35 fully qualified sign interpreters. Finland has a smaller population, but has 350 sign interpreters. In my time as chairman of the European Parliament Culture, Youth, Education, Media and Sport Committee, the Parliament passed the view that the deaf sign language in each member state should be given official status. Only three member states have complied with that: Finland, Sweden and Austria. Britain has simply ignored the question. The situation in Scotland is terrible.

Without going into too many details about people learning to speak and sign, I point out that signing comes naturally; babies sign—they point when they want something. For a really deaf person to learn speech requires enormous intellect and skills that only some have, so learning speech is more or less ruled out for most deaf people. Most profoundly deaf people do not learn to speak. If they are able to learn, their parents have to send them to a specialised deaf school from the age of three, but there are not enough places in those schools.

The situation is chronic. My view is that we need more signers, but we are not helping to make that happen. The Parliament had a debate on the matter, but I am going to raise the subject in Parliament again. I thought that I would wait a year to let the Executive look at the whole issue, as it promised. It probably is doing so. The point is that, if one wants to become an interpreter or signer, one must attend weekend courses at Heriot-Watt University, but one does not get a grant. The situation can be simply cured by giving a grant to the people who are prepared to learn signing skills. There is a queue of people who are anxious and ready to do that. I have discussed the matter in detail with people at Heriot-Watt.

It is dreadful that a person giving a service to those disadvantaged people is not supported. Blind people, in a way, would rather be blind than deaf. It is terrible to be unable to communicate, which is, after all, what we do all our lives. I want to ask the Scottish Executive what guidelines it lays down—if any—for local authorities to make provision for signers. Some local authorities employ such a person, but the local authority referred to in the petition does not. The Scottish Executive could surely solve that problem by issuing guidelines that say, "You must have such a person." Signers are clearly needed.

We should all have an interest in the chronic problem that there are only 35 signers, who are exhausted and are getting a disease of the fingers because of the enormous amount of activity that they have to do. Underlying the issue is the enormous gap in our provision for disablement. The deaf do not look disabled. They feel that their

needs are not being sufficiently met. Surely we can solve this problem by an Executive guideline that says that local authorities must employ signers.

Phil Gallie: I read and thought about the petition, but Winnie Ewing has confused me further—although I am sympathetic to her point. It seems to me that the matter falls between two stools. Is it the health department's responsibility to provide facilities or, given what Winnie Ewing said, is it the education department's responsibility? Is it the responsibility of the social work department in a local authority area? The problem seems to extend further than the social work department that the petition refers to. Colleagues might want to consider that.

Helen Eadie: It strikes me, from what Phil Gallie has said, that this is another area in which the Parliament could get into difficulties if it tries to intervene at local level, either with a health board or with local government. However, Parliament could take action about setting standards throughout Scotland. If we had such standards, it would be down to local authorities to assess how they finance them. If there are issues about finance not being available, the local authorities and the health boards—through the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and other organisations—would need to take them up with the Executive and with MSPs.

I agree with colleagues that being deaf or having a hearing impairment must be one of the most profound social handicaps that a person can have. I suffer sometimes from hearing impairment and cannot always pick up clearly what colleagues are saying. That creates problems for everyone, because perhaps my eyes do not light up like theirs or I laugh a few moments later than they do, because it has taken me a bit longer to get the point.

We all have a real obligation to address the problem, but we have to be a bit careful and perhaps say to Parliament and the Executive that we ought to be setting standards in this matter.

Dorothy-Grace Elder: I want to make a couple of points. The Minister for Health and Community Care has put particular emphasis on joined-up government and on the need for social work departments and health boards to pool budgets, so we should be able to make progress. As Phil Gallie said, the matter falls between many stools. However, since the health side of the Executive is pulling things together, we should send the petition to the Minister for Health and Community Care and a copy of it to the Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs.

Winnie Ewing is probably the expert on this subject in the Parliament and I endorse everything

that she said. A few years ago, I made a documentary at Donaldson's College in which the children told me through sign language that they would rather be blind than deaf. They meant what they said. Apart from anything else, deaf children are subjected to mockery. No one mocks the blind. The children are mocked because they sometimes make noises and are not able to articulate words properly. One or two children who were trying to learn to speak had been sent to a boarding school in England. Imagine what it must have been like for that wee girl of five or six years of age, who had become deaf after having mumps at the age of two. She was separated from her parents to be sent away to a boarding school in England, because it was the only full-time place that could teach her to speak. There is a major crisis, which we and the local authorities have ignored.

The number of people who are affected by this problem is huge. In the greater Glasgow area, 90,000 people are deaf or severely hard of hearing. Indeed, deafness is on the increase. To think that an area the size of South Lanarkshire should be without even one specialist worker for deaf people is shocking. There are times when we should have no hesitation in intervening in local authorities. Of course we should set a standard, but standards sometimes take a long time to set. The urgency of this case means that we should approach the Minister for Health and Community Care and others now.

The Convener: On Winnie Ewing's first point, we can certainly take up her suggestion when we seek the views of the Executive. We will ask the Executive for information on what guidelines, if any, it imposes on local authorities and, if no guidelines exist, whether the Executive intends to introduce any.

The petition concerns social work service provision for the deaf and hard of hearing—although I have no doubt that the councils are being affected by resource implications. When we copy the petition to the Equal Opportunities Committee to ask it for its comments, we could perhaps also ask it which of the Parliament's committees should best deal with the petition. We should also ask South Lanarkshire Council for its comments on the matter.

Rhoda Grant: We should ask COSLA what provision exists throughout Scotland for the deaf and hard of hearing. It is important that we find that out.

The Convener: Yes. We can do that as well.

Dr Ewing: We do not know why South Lanarkshire Council stopped the post. People skilled in sign language are scarce and the council may simply not have been able to find someone. We do not know the facts of the case.

The Convener: That is why it is important that South Lanarkshire Council gets a chance to respond.

Dr Ewing: The council may have stopped the post simply because there was no one available. Such people are very scarce and they have to pay their own fees. Usually, the burning motive for people to learn sign language is that they have a family member who is deaf. The way that the hard of hearing and deaf are treated is a blight on our society. We should give South Lanarkshire Council a chance to explain the reasons for its decision.

The Convener: Absolutely. The petition says that the council used to employ such a person. We will find out whether that person retired or whatever.

We will ask the Scottish Executive about guidelines and send the petition to the Equal Opportunities Committee to ask that committee for its views. We will also ask South Lanarkshire Council and COSLA to respond to the petition. Once we have received those responses, we will consider the petition again. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Civil Service Jobs (Tayside) (PE401)

The Convener: Petition PE401 is from Mr Ian Williams on behalf of Perthshire Chamber of Commerce and concerns the relocation of civil service jobs to Tayside. The committee considered a similar petition, PE383, from Dundee and Tayside Chamber of Commerce at its meeting of 11 September. Petition PE401 should have been presented at the same time but was not. It is suggested that both petitions should be considered when we receive the Executive's response to the issues that were raised on 11 September. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Trunk Roads (Commercial Developments) (PE403)

The Convener: The last of the new petitions is PE403, from Mr Allan McDougall, about planning guidance in relation to commercial development on the trunk road network. He is concerned that the Scottish Parliament should take urgent action on the problem of commercial development directly on the trunk road network in order to reinforce the guidance in national planning policy guideline 17.

Petition PE357 called on the Scottish Parliament to support calls for the necessary investment in transport infrastructure in the Aberdeen area. We considered a response from the Scottish Executive and agreed to refer the petition and the

response to the Transport and the Environment Committee, which has decided to take evidence from Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire local economic forum. It is understood that the meeting will take place in November.

10:45

In view of the close links between petition PE403 and the issue that was raised in petition PE357, I suggest that we refer petition PE403 to the Transport and the Environment Committee for thorough consideration. I suggest that we recommend that the petition be taken into account as part of the committee's inquiry into integrated transport issues in Aberdeen. I recommend that the Transport and the Environment Committee considers whether there is a requirement to consider further the wider issues raised in the petition relating to planning guidance and public consultation. Do members agree to that suggestion?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Current Petitions

Wildlife Legislation (PE387)

The Convener: We will take the last of the current petitions, PE387, first because Robin Harper is present this morning. He has other appointments, but wants to contribute to our consideration of the petition.

Members will remember that the petition was submitted by Mr Stuart Housden on behalf of RSPB Scotland. The petitioners take the view that the legislation governing the protection of wildlife in Scotland is out of date and requires strengthening. Although the petition welcomes the proposals that the Executive made for legislation in "The Nature of Scotland", the petitioners are concerned about the time that has been taken to make those proposals.

We wrote to the Scottish Executive about the petition and received a response from Rhona Brankin, the Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development. I draw members' attention to the fact that Rhona Brankin wrote directly to the principal petitioner, welcoming the support of the RSPB and the signatories to the petition for the proposals that are contained in "The Nature of Scotland". It is good that ministers write to petitioners; we should welcome that and Rhona Brankin should be congratulated on setting that precedent.

Rhona Brankin indicated in her letter that pressure of parliamentary time has prevented her from being able to introduce a bill in the current session. She intends to introduce such a bill at some point in the future. She also says that the Executive hopes to implement many of the proposals that are contained in "The Nature of Scotland" through

"policy measures and positive incentives".

In view of the Executive's clear commitment to introduce appropriate legislation at the earliest opportunity, I suggest that the committee make a copy of the response to the petition available to the Transport and the Environment Committee for information only and recommend that no further action be taken. Before we come to that, I invite Robin Harper to make a contribution.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I thank the committee for rearranging its timetable to suit mine. I declare an interest in the matter. I am a member of the RSPB. I ask whether, in the light of the Executive's response, the committee could seek further clarification of its proposal to address some of the concerns that are expressed in the petition through

"policy measures and positive incentives".

It is not unreasonable to ask the Executive to explain precisely what it means by that. As an addendum, I ask the committee to ask the Executive whether it plans to bring in legislation in the next session.

Dr Ewing: I must say that my memory does not serve me well. I ask Robin Harper to explain in a nutshell what is defective about the present legislation.

Robin Harper: The defectiveness of the present legislation, in a nutshell, is that English legislation is ahead of Scottish legislation because it provides protection against the raiding of birds' nests—that is why the RSPB introduced the petition. Other details in English wildlife legislation have been improved. When it comes to depredations on wildlife, Scotland is now a target for egg collectors, who can get away with things in Scotland that they cannot get away with in England. People are coming from the continent to raid Scottish nests. That is one of the principal defects.

Dr Ewing: The criminal aspect.

Phil Gallie: I apologise to Robin Harper, because I did not hear everything that he said.

Some years ago at Westminster, George Kynoch introduced legislation that was in line with the RSPB's requirements regarding protection from those who steal eggs. From recent contact with the RSPB, I understand that that legislation has been reasonably but not wholly successful. Might a few additions to the miscellaneous provisions of the criminal justice bill that the Executive is about to introduce strengthen the existing legislation? If such a measure helped with the problem that Robin Harper has highlighted, would it not be worth asking the Executive to consider it?

Robin Harper: I am sure that the RSPB would welcome such a move, which is why I am asking the committee to seek further clarification from the Executive. As it has said that it will examine

"policy measures and positive incentives",

I would like to know its exact proposals in this area. The response is rather vague.

Phil Gallie: Clarification is one thing. However, if simple steps can be taken to protect birds of prey, we could be a bit more positive and ask the Executive to build them into its criminal justice bill.

The Convener: As Robin Harper has suggested, we can perhaps seek clarification of the

"policy measures and positive incentives"

that will be used to introduce some of the required measures, draw the Executive's attention to Phil Gallie's comments about that problem and ask

when the legislation will be introduced. There must be clarity on this issue. We need to know whether the legislation will be introduced before 2003 or whether it will be put off until a future parliamentary session.

Helen Eadie: I do not oppose any of the proposals that have been suggested this morning. It is vital that we protect birds of prey, because we do not do so at our peril. However, how do we balance that with the protection of other activities in Scotland? For example, the Scottish pigeon-racing fraternity feels that its sport is being threatened by the increase in the number of birds of prey, which it believes has led to the loss of large numbers of its pigeons.

Robin Harper: That is an issue for full-scale investigation and considered legislation. It could not be addressed simply by the Executive's short-term measures.

The Convener: I remind members that a petition from the Scottish Homing Union is being considered by other committees. I am sure that, whenever legislation is introduced, it will address the issue in a forthright manner.

Dr Ewing: I want to put on record the fact that I, too, am a member of the RSPB. However, the motive for my membership is to keep an eye on the organisation, because I do not always agree with some of the extraordinary things that it does. In fact, it has done some really wicked things. For example, although locals in Fair Isle have taken eggs out of the skuas' nests on the cliffs for hundreds of years, the RSPB asked them not to do so for 20 years. Fair Isle is a great place for twitchers—birds pass the island on their various journeys—but as a result of the RSPB's actions, the skuas now have control. Not only do they take the eyes from lambs, they attack children and have stopped them using the one place where they can take their tricycles. Furthermore, they have more or less destroyed many of the other species of birds.

We should point out that the organisation is not necessarily the goody. Often the crofter is the best protector of the birds; indeed, the birds exist only because of hundreds of years of crofters respecting nature. Sometimes organisations such as the RSPB come in, make rules and alter the balance, not always for the good. That is why I am a member—to keep an eye on the organisation.

The Convener: That is exactly why I am a member of the Labour party.

Dr Ewing: I suppose that that remark was off the record.

Phil Gallie: My understanding is that we are talking about targeting bird-egg collectors, not about preventing people from looking after the

land and other species, as they feel appropriate. I made my comment to target egg collectors.

The Convener: I think that we should stick with the first two parts of the recommendation—to copy the response to the petitioner as well as to the Transport and the Environment Committee for its information. However, rather than then taking no further action, I suggest that we write to the Executive to ask for clarification of the interim measures that it intends to take and to ask when it intends to introduce the legislation. We should also draw its attention to the issues raised by Phil Gallie and ask for a response. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Allergy Clinics (PE276)

The Convener: PE276 is a petition from Ms Elizabeth Girling on behalf of Lothian Allergy Support Group, which calls for the establishment of specialist clinics for the diagnosis and treatment of allergies in national health service hospitals in Scotland. At our meeting on 24 October 2000, we agreed to seek the comments of the Scottish Executive on its current policy and to ask whether it had any proposals to establish such clinics. Members will note that the Executive's response has been received almost a year after it was requested and that the officials who prepared it have apologised for the delay. We need to take that into consideration.

The detailed response offers information on the current provision of immunology and allergy services. It makes it clear that it is not the Executive's policy to establish clinics for any condition directly and that the NHS in Scotland is funded in a way that gives maximum flexibility to NHS boards and trusts to allocate funds and develop services according to their assessment of local needs. It points out that the Executive is making funding available for two new consultant immunologist posts, which was the main recommendation for improvement in the Scottish Medical and Scientific Advisory Committee report of September 2000.

It is suggested that we send the Executive's response to the petitioner and to the Health and Community Care Committee for information and then take no further action—unless anyone has further comments.

Helen Eadie: I would like to place on record my concern that it has taken almost a year for the Executive's response to come. However, I am pleased at the reassurance that money can be made available for research. At the end of Trevor Lodge's letter, it says that the chief scientist officer would be pleased to consider any proposals for allergy research. I am pleased about that, because I am particularly interested in that area and I

happen to agree with a lot of the comments made by the petitioners.

I would like to receive a copy of the full report from the clerks. It would be interesting to find out what else is being said on the subject. By and large, I am pleased with what the Executive has said, because it seems that we are pushing at an open door and that the Executive is willing to be helpful. It is incumbent on the rest of us to push the health boards and the trusts to ensure that we get the local provision that we need.

The Convener: I am sure that the report is available to any members who want it.

Dr Ewing: I have had asthma all my life and was subject to infant eczema, but I was never aware that I had asthma until I was an adult. I thought that my breathing difficulty was related to the tuberculosis that I got at the University of Glasgow and not to asthma.

I know that young children get a marvellous, really wonderful allergies service—I speak as a grandparent. Most allergies can be detected in young children. People who have escaped the net might be looking for a service that does not exist. I believe that young children get an allergies service and can find out what they are allergic to from the time that they are born, which is good.

Is it the case, perhaps, that England can afford to have so many clinics because it is a more populous country? Members who represent the Highlands and Islands will know right away that it is unlikely that there are specialist allergy clinics there. I notice that England has a professor solely for allergies. Could not we ask the British Medical Association for its view on whether enough services are available to analyse people's allergies?

11:00

The Convener: I imagine that we could, but I am not sure that the BMA is necessarily the best organisation to ask.

Dr Ewing: The petition mentions NHS services in England and that there is a full-time professor in one of the universities.

The Convener: As Dr Ewing knows, the Scottish Medical and Scientific Advisory Committee published a report in September 2000. We could ask the SMSAC whether it thinks that the steps that the Executive is taking are appropriate and in line with the findings in the report or whether it thinks that more should be done. We will do that rather than ask the BMA.

Dorothy-Grace Elder: I am concerned that it has taken almost a year for the most basic of replies to come from the Executive. We all have

sympathies for people who have a paper mountain with which to deal—and the Executive has more of a mountain that most—but to take a year to reply is ridiculous. Other cases of tardiness are referred to in the documents for the meeting and regularly in other committees' documents. We hear a lot about information technology nowadays; the Executive is always talking about it, but it seems to use pigeons to communicate. It is not good enough that a committee or a petitioner receives a response almost a year after the petition has been submitted.

The response from the Executive does not contain great detail or research and it could have been written within at least a few months. It is easy-peasy stuff. Although I am delighted about the £223,000 of funding for three projects in the related field of asthma, which is near the top of the heap of problems in Scotland, the Executive's reply does not address the type of allergies to which the petition refers. The petition refers to allergies to "foods, chemicals or environment". There is no mention of that in the Executive's response or of the 50 specialist clinics in NHS hospitals throughout England and Wales. We should have roughly five specialist clinics in Scotland, but we have none. The problem of eczema is massive and there are all sorts of food-related allergies because of the increasing amount of chemical-laden trash that is pumped down the throats of the population.

The reply from the Executive is neither satisfactory nor respectful, considering the length of time that the petitioners had to wait. For instance, I want the Executive to tell us more about links with the Transport and the Environment Committee on the matter.

The Convener: The Executive's response refers to

"consultant-led immunology and allergy services ... in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow."

Are those the kind of specialist centres that the petitioners want? There are four in Scotland and they act as reference centres for other areas in Scotland. When we ask the Scottish Medical and Scientific Advisory Committee for its reaction to the Executive's response, that point might be covered.

I understand that the Executive is taking action to try to address the problem of the time required for replies. The Executive took six months to reply to the petition that we will consider next and at the end of that response Trevor Lodge, who is the official dealing with the matter, gives an apology for

"the trend of lengthy delays at this end in responding to you on Petitions."

He goes on to state that

"there may be very good reasons why it may not be possible to comply with your deadlines".

However, he also states that

"we ought to be able to improve significantly on our past performance. I shall be looking into this. In future, I shall ensure that, where it is not possible to respond within your deadline, you are sent a holding reply explaining the reason for the delay and when you may expect a substantive response."

The Executive is beginning to react to the delays.

Do members wish to write again, emphasising the need for sharp responses to our letters?

Dorothy-Grace Elder: If a Government or an Opposition were to deal fairly, well and fast with the public, that would be the best spin that they could put on anything. The Executive spends a fortune on spin-doctors, but most members would prefer it to spend a fortune on clerical services and researchers to help the public. That would give the Executive all the good spin that it wants, for nothing.

Helen Eadie: Pigeons can travel from France to Scotland in three weeks.

Dorothy-Grace Elder: Exactly. In that case, people should get a reply in three weeks.

The Convener: Never a Public Petitions Committee goes by but one learns something new.

Can we resolve this issue? We must send the Executive's response to the petitioner; perhaps we should ask both the petitioner and the Scottish Medical and Scientific Advisory Committee for their reactions to the Executive's response. In the meantime, we will send the petition to the Health and Community Care Committee for information. Do members agree?

Members indicated agreement.

Cancer Rates (East Lothian) (PE349)

The Convener: PE349, on cancer cases in East Lothian, is from Mr Thomas Stevenson. Members will recall that we agreed to pass the petition to a series of organisations for their responses. We have now received responses from British Energy, East Lothian Council, the National Radiological Protection Board Scotland, Lothian Health, East Lothian Environment Group and the Scottish Executive. Those responses are detailed in the papers that are before members.

The responses from Lothian Health and the Scottish Executive make clear their view that the figures from the information and statistics division's report, which gave rise in the spring of 2001 to the original press reports that East Lothian had higher cancer rates than elsewhere in Lothian, had been taken out of context. They claim that

when the age of the population in East Lothian is taken into account, the figures are broadly similar to those for other areas of the region.

There are two suggested courses of action. We could agree that the explanation that has been provided by Lothian Health and the Scottish Executive for the higher cancer rate figures in East Lothian is reasonable and take no further action, other than to pass copies of the correspondence to the Health and Community Care Committee for information only. Alternatively, we could agree to invite comments from the Health and Community Care Committee on whether it considers that further investigation should be carried out into the issues raised by the petition, without formally referring the petition to that committee at this stage.

It is clear that not all the responses agree with one another. The Executive and Lothian Health seem to think that there is nothing in the figures, but other organisations are less certain. For example, East Lothian Council thought that an inquiry should be held and that such an inquiry should report back to the Public Petitions Committee.

Helen Eadie: It would be useful if we were to follow the suggestion of asking the Health and Community Care Committee to consider conducting further investigations without formally referring the petition to that committee. Although we see what is said in the papers about East Lothian having a larger proportion of elderly residents, it is equally true to say that the other papers that we have received take account of that fact. Both sides of the argument have addressed that point, but neither agrees with the conclusion that the other arrives at. We must be seen to be lifting every stone in our efforts to ascertain that there is nothing in the petition. That can be done only by making further inquiries.

Dr Ewing: I believe that there is a cancer cluster in Caithness, but that has always been denied. From my decades of representing the Highlands and Islands, I know the amount of money that people will get if they move out of the district and die elsewhere. However, no one for whom I acted would allow their name to be put in the press. That is still going on. When people say that there is no cancer cluster, I simply do not believe it, and I certainly do not believe the letter from British Energy.

The response that we received was insufficient. There is an elderly population in East Lothian, but we will never be able to prove anything. All we can do is hope that our treatment of cancer continues to improve, which seems to be happening.

The Convener: Winnie Ewing is right. British Energy failed to respond to the petition in any way.

Dr Ewing: Such companies always do that. They do not admit that people have died in the Dounreay area, although people do not die there, because they are paid to move away.

Helen Eadie: Convener, just because you have an energy plant does not necessarily mean—

Phil Gallie: I wish to correct a point. Dounreay has nothing to do with British Energy.

The Convener: It also has nothing to do with this petition.

Dr Ewing: All the bodies, including one of the ones that has a letter—

Helen Eadie: Convener, I was going to say that just because you have an energy plant in a given area does not mean that it is the problem. Many factors govern whether people have cancer. I know that national studies have suggested that the movement of itinerant workers into an area can bring viruses and spread germs. None of us knows the reasons. As I said at the beginning, more light should be shed on the issue. We should ask the Health and Community Care Committee to think about it and when it can hold an inquiry.

The Convener: Do we agree to approach the Health and Community Care Committee informally and ask it to indicate whether it would be prepared to consider the petition further, and put it into its forward work programme? There is uncertainty in the responses that we have received from different groups. It is for the Health and Community Care Committee to decide whether it wishes to consider further the issue, but we will not refer the petition to the committee formally. The Health and Community Care Committee will respond to us and we will consider its response at a future meeting. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Local Authority Homes (PE356)

The Convener: The next petition is PE356, from Mr Hendry Williams, on behalf of Troqueer homeowners committee. We agreed to refer the petition to the Local Government Committee on the basis of information that we received. The Local Government Committee has written to us, saying that following its meeting on 11 September, it agreed that the petition would be better dealt with by the Social Justice Committee. Therefore, it is suggested that the petition be referred to the Social Justice Committee, as suggested by the Local Government Committee, together with the related petition PE391, with the recommendation that the issues raised be taken into account when the report of the housing improvement task force is considered. The Local Government Committee originally asked for petition PE356, but then discovered that it was not for the Local

Government Committee, but for the Social Justice Committee.

Do members agree to transfer petition PE356 to the Social Justice Committee?

Members indicated agreement.

Sleep Apnoea (PE367)

The Convener: PE367, from Mr Eric Drummond, is about services for the diagnosis and treatment of people suffering from sleep apnoea. We received responses from the Scottish Executive, Greater Glasgow Health Board and Lothian Health at our meeting on 11 September, and agreed to write to Lothian Health, asking it to provide details of the results of its review of the sleep service when they are available.

We now have the results of that review, and the three recommendations are, first, to explore ways of improving the interface between primary and secondary care for the patient group; secondly, to maintain the same level of service this year as last year; and thirdly, to ensure that future plans to develop the sleep service are widely debated as part of the health plan for 2002-03. Most significantly, Lothian Health has put forward the case that the consumables that are associated with the treatment of sleep disorders—that is, the machines that cost about £300 a time—should be included in the Scottish drug tariff, which, means that in future, the cost would not come out of the budget for the sleep service, but would come out of the primary care budget. That is positive, and would be a good thing.

That appears to be a fairly positive response, but in view of the petitioner's direct involvement with the sleep service, it is suggested that we agree to seek his views on the action that is being taken by Lothian Health before dealing further with the petition. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Foot-and-mouth Disease (PE386)

The Convener: PE386, from Mr Les Ward, on behalf of Advocates for Animals, concerns the handling of the recent foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in Scotland and calls for an independent public inquiry into all aspects of that outbreak. We agreed at our meeting of 11 September to refer the petition to the Rural Development Committee for further consideration, and to seek the views of the Executive on the issues raised. We now have the Executive's response, and as we have already referred the petition to the Rural Development Committee, it is suggested that we simply pass on the Executive's response to the Rural Development Committee for it to consider as part of its consideration of the petition. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Dr Ewing: The Executive's letter states:

"A number of inquiries are already established".

That is true, but it is not the stated intention of the Governments in London or Edinburgh to have a public inquiry, which is what the petitioners are asking for. A public inquiry must happen, because we must know more about what happened to cause that devastation.

The Convener: The petition calls for a public inquiry and the committee agreed that that should be referred to the Rural Development Committee as a matter of urgency; it is for that committee to pursue it.

Dr Ewing: Have we heard from that committee yet?

The Convener: No. It has probably not received the Executive response yet. We will pass this on to it.

Dr Ewing: We will wait. I am very much in favour of a public inquiry.

11:15

Dorothy-Grace Elder: The wording of the petition is "including ... animal welfare." The major concern of Advocates for Animals and many similar groups is whether, as a result of this tragedy, we will improve matters so that there is no more mass live animal transportation, except for breeding animals. Could letters be sent to the appropriate ministers asking what—if anything—they propose to do on the transportation of live animals, on the transportation of carcasses only and on the reopening of local abattoirs? I am sure that a truthful inquiry will find that it was the transportation of animals into all sorts of areas of the country that caused the foot-and-mouth outbreak. Could we also write to the Minister for Environment and Rural Development to ask him what his intentions are concerning future animal welfare during live transportation?

The Convener: The problem is that it is not our petition any longer; it is now with the Rural Development Committee. All we can do is pass the Executive response on to that committee and draw its attention to the points that you have raised. It is up to that committee to pursue the issue; it is not for us, because we would then cut across that committee's investigation, and we should not do that.

Dorothy-Grace Elder: Could we emphasise that point to the Rural Development Committee?

The Convener: Yes.

Sea Cage Fish Farming (PE96)

Hepatitis C (PE185)

The Convener: We have already dealt with petition PE387, so we move to the paper that gives us an update on various petitions. Does anyone wish to raise points on any of those?

Dr Ewing: On the petition about salmon, it looks as if things are going ahead there.

The Convener: Which petition is that?

Dr Ewing: PE96.

On the hepatitis C petition, have we extended the original decision to help some but not all people?

The Convener: That was the recommendation in the Health and Community Care Committee's report. The committee has not agreed to a full public inquiry, but it has recommended that compensation be paid to all affected people.

Dr Ewing: That is good news.

On the salmon petition, it is always surprising to people that it is the fish farmers themselves, a great many of whom are in Shetland, who are demanding a public inquiry. They are not against it, but for it. It seems that things are happening there.

The Convener: It is actually going ahead.

Criminal Injuries Compensation (PE375)

Helen Eadie: The report about Mrs Elaine Crawford's petition PE375, with regard to the criminal injuries compensation procedure, says that the Justice 1 Committee agreed to consider the issue of sentencing policy once the outcome of its current research study on attitudes to sentences was known. It also agreed to write to the Public Petitions Committee to ask it to contact Victim Support Scotland to inquire whether that organisation is content that recent improvements instigated by the Home Office and the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority are sufficient. Have we written to Victim Support Scotland?

The Convener: The letter from the Justice 1 Committee was received only recently and we have not yet written to Victim Support Scotland.

Helen Eadie: I am pleased to hear that, because I was going to ask the clerks to ask Victim Support Scotland whether there has been widespread concern over the issue of compensation for victims of sexual abuse. I understand that such victims are inhibited from going back prior to 1979 to seek compensation. I would hope that we would take some interest in that.

The Convener: I do not know whether the

clerks heard those comments. Perhaps when we write to Victim Support Scotland to ask it whether it is content with the proposals, we should also ask the organisation whether it can identify any widespread concern about the fact that compensation is seemingly not available to victims of sexual abuse involved in cases before 1979.

Dorothy-Grace Elder: I want to make a point about this particular case, as the petitioner lives in my constituency area and came to me for help. The case is not connected with sexual abuse at all; it centres on a particularly horrible murder in which the petitioner's husband was killed by a gang that chased him down the street. I wonder whether we could also ask Victim Support Scotland whether it has any views on what can be done to maintain victims or families of victims in their own homes after such horrendous happenings. Very often people have to flee from the area, especially if a gang is involved. Now this lady and her four children are about to be evicted. She fled to her mother's house—which is rented from a local housing authority—after her husband was killed in their own bought home. Because the mother has subsequently died and the petitioner is not the rightful tenant, the housing authority says that the house is overcrowded; it cannot find her anywhere else to stay and is proposing to evict her very soon. I do not know how much more can happen to this poor lady.

Could we therefore ask Victim Support Scotland whether it can give any help or advice to victims and their families about keeping their roof over their head? It is not uncommon for an innocent person to flee with their family after a crime is committed in case they are harassed further.

The Convener: We can certainly ask Victim Support Scotland for its comments on that issue.

Convener's Report

The Convener: The final item on the agenda is the convener's report. I remind members that at our next meeting on 6 November we will be joined by the European Parliament Petitions Committee. Members will receive the full programme, which will involve a lunch with members of the Petitions Committee after our committee meeting. There will also be a presentation on electronic petitioning in the afternoon, which should benefit us all, and of course there will be a dinner in the evening. I hope that members will be able to attend.

Dr Ewing: I received a letter from Fiona Henderson that tried to provide me with more information about equal access to Gaelic as the national second language of Scotland. Am I the only member who received that?

The Convener: All members received the letter.

Dr Ewing: Will it be included in the agenda for our next meeting?

The Convener: We are still waiting for a response from the Executive.

Dr Ewing: I have not had time to read the whole letter, but apparently Fiona Henderson has new information on the issue.

The Convener: The letter will be taken into account and will come before the committee when we receive the response from the Executive.

Meeting closed at 11:22.

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