

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Wednesday 28 April 2004
(*Morning*)

Session 2

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

7th Meeting 2004, Session 2

CONVENER

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

DEPUTY CONVENER

*John Scott (Ayr) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
*Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
*Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP)
*Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP)
Campbell Martin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
*John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West)
(LD)
*Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP)
Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con)
Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED :

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab)
Muriel Colquhoun (Scottish Equestrian Association)
Ben Connelly (Monifieth High School)
Beverly Dobson (Monifieth High School)
Richard Lock (Midlothian Rural Schools Action Group)
Angela O'Hagan (Oxfam in Scotland)
Nina Melville (Monifieth High School)
Alan Murray (Scottish Equestrian Association)
Irene Stewart (Midlothian Rural Schools Action Group)
Rebecca Urquhart (Monifieth High School)
Dr Tim Watson (Scottish Equestrian Association)
Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jim Johnston

ASSISTANT CLERK

Joanne Clinton

LOCATION

The Chamber

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 28 April 2004

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:05*]

Item in Private

The Convener (Michael McMahon): Good morning and welcome to the seventh meeting of the Public Petitions Committee in 2004. As usual, we have a busy agenda. As regards item 1, the fact that the new member has sent his apologies means that he cannot make a declaration of interests, so we will move straight to item 2. The committee is invited to take consideration of item 5 in private, as it relates to a paper from the clerk on procedural issues. Do members agree to do that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

New Petitions

Global Campaign for Education (PE734)

The Convener: The first new petition is PE734, which is from Angela O'Hagan, on behalf of Oxfam in Scotland. The petition calls on the Parliament to endorse the aims of the global campaign for education to achieve the millennium development goals and make the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child a reality in Scotland and asks the Parliament to consider practical steps through which it and the Executive could promote those aims. Ben Connelly, Rebecca Urquhart and Nina Melville, who are pupils at Monifieth High School in Dundee, are present to give evidence in support of the petition. They are accompanied by their teacher, Beverly Dobson, and Angela O'Hagan from Oxfam in Scotland.

I welcome everyone to the committee. You have three minutes for your opening remarks, after which members will have the opportunity to ask you questions.

Nina Melville (Monifieth High School): More than 100 million children in the world are not at school and 56 million of those children are girls. Education for girls can help to stop child malnutrition when they become mothers. The amount of money that is needed to enable everyone to have an education is a third of what is spent on make-up, a quarter of what is spent on video games and half of what is spent on ice cream.

Ben Connelly (Monifieth High School): I support the petition because of what Nina Melville said—she stole all the answers that we were told. There is not enough education in Scotland for people such as those who move around in caravans. If they do not have an education as well, they will not get the advantages that people who have an education get.

Rebecca Urquhart (Monifieth High School): As Nina Melville said, more than 100 million children in the world are not getting an education. Even a little bit of education would ensure that those children had a better life and could live longer.

The Convener: Well done, everyone. Before we take questions, I turn to Linda Fabiani, who has been involved in the global campaign for education, as she might want to add something.

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): I was the sponsoring MSP when the petition was drawn up—which was just last week, I think. I was impressed by the commitment that was shown by all the schoolchildren who came along and took part in the global education day. The 129 schoolchildren who were here in the chamber

fitted in very well—they looked the part. Aside from that, we worked with a group of 20 children in Cannonball House on putting together the petition. I want to stress that it was that group of 20 pupils, which included Ben Connelly, Nina Melville and Rebecca Urquhart, that hammered out the wording of the petition and honed it down to get it to reflect exactly how they felt about the situation. They are highly knowledgeable and I know that the way in which they will answer the questions that committee members are about to fire at them will make us all feel humble.

The Convener: Before we move to questions, I want to circulate some material that the committee has received from Cradlehall Primary School in Inverness, which has also been considering the issues that the campaign raises. In the documents that they have provided, the pupils state:

“We, the children of Cradlehall Primary School of the year 2004, believe that every child worldwide should have free, basic education.”

Members may wish to note some of the statistics and comments that the primary school pupils have provided so that we can get them on the record. I will send round the material.

Do members have any questions to put to the petitioners?

Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): I should probably declare an interest. I am a member of Oxfam, so I very much welcome the campaign. The United Kingdom Department for International Development puts quite a lot of resources into development education in schools, but I am not sure how much of that translates into Scottish education. My first question for the school pupils who are here today is on that point. What teaching do you get on international development and third world aid, as opposed to the specific point that you raise today, in the school curriculum?

Ben Connelly: We get some of that in second-year geography. That is when we learned about that.

Mike Watson: So that is a brief introduction to the area.

Nina Melville: When we are growing up and we see things on the news, we know that there are people who are worse off than us—that is common knowledge.

Mike Watson: On the global education campaign, how much have you been able to do to make contact with schools in less fortunate and less developed parts of the world? Are there opportunities to make such links, perhaps through a video link or something like that?

Ben Connelly: Not so far.

Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP):

Thank you for your presentation this morning, which was very good. Will you expand on your opinions on the European convention on human rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly with reference to the right of the child to an education free from violence? What is the biggest problem internationally that prevents children from receiving such an education? What is happening in your school? Is enough happening to protect you so that you can receive your education free from bullying, for example? What action do you think is necessary to make that better?

Nina Melville: In poorer countries, Governments are putting aside education and saying, “They are poor anyway, so what’s the point?” If Governments in developing countries paid even a little more attention to education, an improvement could be made.

Ben Connelly: At our school, bullying is stamped out big time by the rector. Everyone is totally against that sort of behaviour in class because it is unacceptable.

Carolyn Leckie: Mike Watson referred to international development. Do you think that enough resources are transferred from the developed world to the developing world to help the Governments that you talked about to provide decent education? I am thinking about all the wars that are being conducted, particularly the war against Iraq. How do you think that that helps children to have an education free from violence?

Nina Melville: It does not. Children who are in countries that are at war are scared to walk around. If they walk out of their house and step on a landmine, they will be dead. I know that that is an extreme example, but if a country is at war children are scared to go to school because of what might happen.

Ben Connelly: We could educate the whole world for just three days of the world’s outlay on armies. If we could take that money away from the armies, we could provide an education for everybody. We spend a lot on armed forces.

Carolyn Leckie: That is an excellent point. Thank you.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Welcome to the committee. We do not often get such fresh-faced people here, so it makes a change for all of us sad, tired people on a Wednesday morning. In one of the final events in the previous session of Parliament, a bill was passed to create a commissioner for children and young people. Most of us prefer to call her a children’s champion because that trips off the tongue more easily. Her role is to promote and safeguard the rights of children who live in Scotland. Do you see her as

having a role not just in promoting and safeguarding your rights but in ensuring that your education is appropriate? How would you like her to develop that role, because she will have to listen to children and young people in deciding what she should do?

10:15

Beverly Dobson (Monifieth High School): That is a difficult question.

Jackie Baillie: Let me put it slightly differently. If you had an adult who was on your side and who could change your experience of education, what would you have them do? Pretend your teacher is not here.

Nina Melville: They could make it more enjoyable. Everyone at some point has said, "I can't be bothered going to school." When it is a nice day and it is roasting in classrooms, we could be taught outside or do activities and still learn. If school were more enjoyable for children, they would think, "Oh yes, let's go to school." That would encourage more children to go to school, instead of a lot of them skiving off or leaving early and getting jobs that are not well paid.

Jackie Baillie: That is a valuable point. You suggest the commissioner should do more to encourage those people to be in school who, for whatever reason, do not go to school.

My other question is about the millennium development goals, which are wide ranging and aspirational. What do you want us to do to make the millennium development goals real?

Ben Connelly: You could make the Scottish public more aware of those goals by having a day for them. We could make money for global education by wearing no uniform, and send it to countries to provide education.

Nina Melville: I had never heard of the global campaign for education before it was mentioned in one of my classes about five weeks ago. People are not aware of the goals. If they were, more could be done.

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): Good morning, folks, and welcome to the Public Petitions Committee. Despite what the petition says, I am sure that you agree that the education system in Scotland operates to a high standard, and that you all benefit from it. I take it that your petition is directed at education on a global scale. You mentioned that you glean much of what you know about world education from radio broadcasts or news items on television. What would you say about the fact that in some countries young ladies such as yourselves are not permitted to be educated?

Nina Melville: It is not fair. Why is it that women are not educated? It was said at last Tuesday's event that if a bag of seeds were given to a man, he would eat them straight away, but if the seeds were given to a woman, she would grow them. That stayed in my head, and I think it is true. Women are more resourceful and they have more initiative—no offence to the men.

John Farquhar Munro: You agree that the situation in which young ladies find themselves in underdeveloped countries—where the boys are educated and the girls are not—is terrible.

Nina Melville: Yes, it is diabolical.

John Farquhar Munro: Even if we could change that for the better, so that everyone enjoyed an education wherever they lived, we would be achieving something.

Nina Melville: Yes, because even if young girls like me were educated in how to bring up children—not in literature or anything like that—that would be better because when, or if, they became mothers, they would know how to bring up their children and fewer children would suffer from malnutrition or die early, because their mothers would know what to do. Many children die young because their mothers do not know what to do. If their mothers could read and write, they would know where to go to the hospital and be able to read instructions on medicines.

John Farquhar Munro: Very good. You are talking about basic education.

Nina Melville: Yes.

The Convener: I have a question for the petitioner, Angela O'Hagan. We have heard from the students what they think of education in Scotland, how it can be improved, and how we could take a lead in the campaign. What assistance do those involved in education in Scotland require to allow the ambitions of these young people to be achieved? How far away from that standard are we?

Angela O'Hagan (Oxfam in Scotland): I am grateful that you have touched on that subject. It goes back to Mike Watson's earlier point about development education in schools in Scotland. The experience that we have gained from Oxfam in Scotland's well-established development education programme is that there is certainly an appetite for it within the core cohort of teaching staff in modern studies, religious education, geography and English, but there are not sufficient resources to support sustained education programmes on global citizenship or development education.

Currently there are five or six development education centres in Scotland. Those centres are extremely effective resources and are well used by

teachers throughout Scotland. However, they are resourced by a combination of funds from local authorities, charitable organisations such as Oxfam, and other international development agencies. That is not sustainable.

Our experience of working with schools throughout Scotland as part of the global campaign for education revealed an interesting picture. The participation of schools in that campaign has been very much down to the initiative, enthusiasm and energy of individual class teachers, principal teachers or rectors.

There were two major parts to last week's global campaign for education event. There was the parliamentary event, in which 129 young people from throughout Scotland took part in the chamber, and 800,000 children across the world took part in their national legislatures. In the second part, on 23 April, MPs, MSPs and other elected politicians were invited to go back to school and listen to young people in their classroom environment. There was a positive response to that in Scotland, which demonstrates that there is an appetite, as well as revealing that the core curriculum is very hit and miss in its content of development education, critical thinking, and global citizenship. There are provisions within the core curriculum to address those issues but sustaining that part of the curriculum is a question of resources, and that is within the competence of the Parliament.

The Convener: Having put you to work this morning, I will ask the teacher who is here whether she does not mind answering a question. When my children were going through secondary education, they were fortunate enough to be able to take social science subjects such as modern studies and geography. They would have benefited in the way in which the children here today have benefited from seeing some dimension of the global picture. However, it seems to me that a subject such as personal and social education—a subject that we in the west of Scotland are familiar with—is seen to be a filler-in. Many students do not treat it as a genuine subject. Do we have to develop that side of education more to allow everyone, regardless of whether the subjects that they study are technical, scientific or social, to study PSE? Should there be a bigger place for subjects such as PSE in our schools?

Beverly Dobson: I am fairly new to teaching here in Scotland; I have been here just over two years. I am a support-for-learning teacher, although my subject was history. In PSE, I think a place exists for development of the idea of global citizenship. I agree with you on that, convener, and I have heard from senior students that what they do in first and second year of PSE is repeated later on, so time could be available then.

In our school, development is dealt with in about a month during the second year of geography. That, too, could be developed a bit more. Unfortunately, we do not do modern studies in our school.

Linda Fabiani: I hope that Jackie Baillie and I did not seem rude there, but we were having a whispered conversation about the fact that some schools do not have modern studies departments. Whatever we decide to do with PE734, we should keep that fact in mind. At last Tuesday's event, one of the teachers—not Beverly—felt that because pupils in her school did not have modern studies classes, they were missing out on things such as knowing how the Parliament works and knowing how to submit petitions.

I crave your indulgence, convener. If members are about to recommend what we should do with the petition, I want to read some comments from the petition from the children of Cradlehall Primary School. The first one is from Hannah Mackay:

"If you don't give all children a free education you're not doing your job properly."

So there we are, folks. The second is from Glen Howitson:

"Give all children education or your fayerd."

The Convener: That is a pretty clear message.

Mike Watson: I want to follow up on what Ms Dobson said. Linda Fabiani mentioned the Scottish Parliament and I was surprised to learn that some schools do not offer modern studies. I realise that the decision will not have been yours, Ms Dobson, but do you know why Monifieth High School does not offer modern studies? Without that subject, how do your pupils learn about the Scottish Parliament or about current political events in Scotland or, just as important, further afield?

Beverly Dobson: I will answer to the best of my knowledge. I do not know why the school does not offer modern studies. As I said, I was originally a history teacher, and the question that you ask is a question that I have asked, because my daughter is at another school and is doing modern studies.

In the second year of the history curriculum, there is a month block in which I believe—although I have not sat in on any of the classes—that the Scottish Parliament is dealt with. Is that right?

Nina Melville: Yes, that is right. I remember doing that.

Beverly Dobson: The block lasts approximately a month, although it could be a month to six weeks.

Carolyn Leckie: We seem to be getting into the wider issue of asking under whose control the

curriculum is. One of the rights in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the right for children to participate in decisions that affect them. A big topic for the children's commissioner and the Executive will be to ensure that children have an input into decisions on what sort of curriculum there should be. For example, why should children not have a right to modern studies classes? I have two teenage daughters and it strikes me that they have limited choice and that the business community now has much more influence on the curriculum than children do. I would like to hear a response on such issues. If we are serious about the right of children to have an input into their education, they will need to have an input into the curriculum. How will we allow that?

The Convener: Do members have any suggestions on what we should do with this petition? I suggest that, whatever other people or organisations we write to, we should certainly write to the children's commissioner, to put the types of questions that have been put to us this morning. We should ask what input she can have in raising the profile of the campaign and the issues that underpin it.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I think that we should write to the Scottish Executive asking what it can do to further the goals of the petition and how it can influence and further world education, which is a laudable goal.

10:30

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): We could perhaps also write to the Scottish Executive asking why not every school teaches modern studies. That fact has come as a revelation to me this morning. I expected every school in Scotland to teach modern studies, so I am concerned.

I would also like to pick up the suggestion that was made by Ben. He made a good suggestion that we should encourage people to set aside a day every year on which we address this issue not only in schools throughout Scotland, but in every aspect of our lives. We should ask the Scottish Executive whether it could consider that suggestion, making it clear that it came from Ben. I went back to school last week and that is where I saw the videos—at two local primary schools. I found it a worthwhile way to spend my day and I met many young people, too.

Linda Fabiani: Ben talked earlier about promoting awareness of the issues and ensuring that people in Scotland know about them. The petition is partly about resourcing education, so we should be quite direct in writing to ask the Executive how it sees such issues fitting into schools' current curriculum and how it feels that that kind of thing should be promoted.

Carolyn Leckie: I would like some information—it may already be available, in which case I am at fault for my ignorance—on whether the Executive is measuring its performance on education against the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Does the children's commissioner intend to monitor the Executive's performance? Can we get some evidence that we are delivering on that in our own back yard as well as trying to promote the rights of the child internationally? Those are obviously big political questions. What are we doing in our own back yard? I suspect that we are not being 100 per cent effective.

A comment in the material accompanying the petition asks, "Why 2015?" I echo that. Given comparisons that were made between investment in education and investment in armaments, why should we wait until 2015? This would be entirely feasible tomorrow within the world's existing resources.

The Convener: Are members happy for us to take up those questions with the Executive and the children's commissioner?

Members indicated agreement.

Jackie Baillie: I am happy with that. However, I would like to enlighten my colleague of the fact that the Executive reports as part of a UK-wide report on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Indeed, the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2003 is about protecting and safeguarding those rights and has regard to them. That information is available somewhere.

The Convener: Thank you. We will take those questions up with the Executive. I thank the petitioners—especially Nina Melville, Ben Connelly and Rebecca Urquhart—for bringing this important issue to the Scottish Parliament and addressing it so well. You have educated us this morning, and that is a start. Thanks very much for coming along this morning. We will let you know what the Executive and the children's commissioner tell us.

Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department Equine Industry Team (PE723)

The Convener: Petition PE723, which is from Ms Muriel Colquhoun, calls on the Parliament to urge the Executive to appoint in its Environment and Rural Affairs Department a dedicated equine industry team with responsibility for co-ordinating equine-related policy decisions. Muriel Colquhoun is present to give evidence in support of her petition. She is accompanied by Dr Tim Watson and Mr Alan Murray. The petitioners have submitted further evidence in support of the petition, which has been circulated to members.

I welcome the petitioners to the committee. You have three minutes to make a statement, after which we will ask questions.

Muriel Colquhoun (Scottish Equestrian Association): The time starts now.

Good morning. Tim Watson, who is on my right, is the Scottish Equestrian Association's vice-chairman, and Alan Murray, on my left, is well versed in all the political procedures. I gave the committee a note about the petition, which I hope that all members have received. The petition's purpose is to raise awareness among all politicians of the horse industry and of the association and to secure a dedicated horse team in SEERAD, or at least someone in the Scottish Executive who knows and understands the diverse interests and expanse of sport and industry in the equine world, which is massive and touches on nearly every Executive department. No other sport or industry has the amount to put into local economies that the equine industry has.

The Scottish Equestrian Association is the governing body of equestrian sports and is the umbrella organisation of 24 member societies. It covers 90 per cent of the equine sports and industry in Scotland and its membership is growing. It is vital to remember that. In the south, the industry is still fragmented, so Scotland has a unique advantage in the association's existence. That is a major plus and an achievement for the association, which was established five years ago. The other home nations struggle to have an all-inclusive discussion forum, but Scotland has that.

The points to consider are in the Henley report, which I am sure that all members have read, because it was sent to them to give them an idea of what the petition is about. The report covers the United Kingdom. The UK Government commissioned that research, but the strategy for the horse industry is for England only. I attended steering group meetings and was disappointed that nobody from the Scottish Executive represented Scotland at them until the final meeting.

Scotland desperately requires a strategy for equine sports and the industry. It must be understood that our plea is not for funding, but for recognition. Equine sports and industry's input into the Scottish economy is vast, but is being undermined by the Executive's lack of understanding and knowledge. If England, Ireland and Wales have strategies for the horse, where does that leave any future growth of the economy by equine sports and industry in Scotland?

With SEA, Scotland has led the way. It is considered to be a good example of how a united organisation can work and promote growth. To continue to do that, we must have a level playing

field with the other home nations. Equestrian sports and industry are worth well over £200 million to the Scottish economy. The Henley report estimated that equine sports and industry in the UK were worth £3.5 billion, so if Scotland's share were 10 per cent, it could be worth anything from £200 million to £350 million. Every week in Scotland, 200,000 people ride, drive or vault, and Scotland has approximately 100,000 horses and ponies. The number of subscribers to equestrian organisations is 17,500; those people compete in unaffiliated or affiliated competitions. Scotland has more than 500 equestrian clubs and 3,500 people compete every weekend. The number of volunteers in equestrianism is between 8,000 and 9,000.

I am happy to take any questions on the equine industry.

The Convener: Andrew Welsh will make a short comment in support of the petitioners.

Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): The Scottish Parliament motion that is based on the petition has all-party support and has also been supported by an independent member. The equine industry in Scotland is a sleeping giant that could and should be harnessed for the benefit of Scotland's rural economy. That is what the petition is about.

The false impression has been gained that the industry concerns just a few wee lassies in a field somewhere and not much more. The fact is that, as members have just heard, equestrianism in Scotland is worth at least £200 million to the Scottish economy. Hundreds of thousands of people are involved; there are weekly competitions and equestrianism is a major contributor to rural employment and services. Massive potential exists for input to the economy and society through, for example, sports tourism, bed-and-breakfast equestrianism, riding schools, pony trekking and riding for the disabled.

The industry is not asking for money, but for recognition and the ability to co-ordinate its efforts for the benefit of Scotland's economy and society. Equestrianism is a key that can be used to unlock Scotland's rural economy, given that, as members know, agriculture and fishing have recently had massive problems. The industry involves myriad small businesses, in rural and urban areas, such as farriers, saddlers and all kinds of equine suppliers. The problem is that Scotland is in danger of being left behind England, which has a dedicated team for the equestrian industry within Government and a minister who is responsible for developments.

The opportunity to give Scotland the advantage of an overall umbrella organisation will be lost without positive input from the Scottish Executive. The petition asks for a dedicated horse team, or at

least an individual, in the Executive that is responsible for the equine industry, in order to fulfil the industry's potential. Scotland is in danger of losing out unless action is taken now. We seek the committee's help in enabling Scotland's equestrian industry to fulfil its potential for Scotland's economy and people.

Linda Fabiani: Muriel Colquhoun said that the Henley report covers the United Kingdom, but that it will underpin the future strategy for England only. She said that Wales and Ireland also have strategies. How were those strategies devised if they were not based on the Henley report?

Muriel Colquhoun: Those countries are working on strategies, as is happening in England. The problem is that the industry is diverse and involves myriad activities. The subject is difficult to get a handle on. The Henley Centre was asked to pull together past research, much of which was more than 10 years old. When the Henley Centre got into the subject, it realised the expanse of the industry. Wales and Ireland were represented at all the steering group meetings, but the Scottish Executive attended only the final meeting, which involved stakeholders. That I had to go to the meetings to show a face for Scotland was disappointing.

Wales and Ireland are working on their strategies. They have similar problems to those that the Henley report highlighted. The industry is vast, which means that it is difficult to get a handle on where it starts. The horse passport is one measure that will help. There are two factors in deciding how big the industry is: the number of horses and the number of people who ride. If one thinks of the number of horses that are scattered about the countryside, one can imagine just how big the industry is.

The Scottish Equestrian Association is already losing out. Sport England awarded the British Equestrian Federation £200,000 to help pull together the strategy for England. Nobody in the Scottish Executive understands how vast the industry is. SEERAD sees the horse as a pet on one hand and as an agricultural animal on the other; the department has a problem understanding where horses fit in.

Linda Fabiani: Are you saying that England already has a strategy that is underpinned by the Henley report—I read somewhere that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is taking that on board—and that Wales and Ireland are aiming to create strategies?

Muriel Colquhoun: Yes.

Linda Fabiani: But Scotland is not doing that at all.

Muriel Colquhoun: No. DEFRA has Alun Michael and an official for horses, which means

that two people are pulling together all the fragments, which, like confetti, are spread everywhere.

Linda Fabiani: Thank you. I just wanted you to make that clear.

John Scott: What support is being given to the horse industry in England that is not being given in Scotland? What benefits are likely to accrue from having someone who is dedicated to looking after the industry?

10:45

Muriel Colquhoun: I will ask Tim Watson to respond to that question. I should say that the basic difference between what is happening in Scotland and in England is that the statutory instrument that introduces the horse passport has come into force in England, but not in Scotland. Every horse will have to have a passport by the end of June, but I reckon that only 20 per cent of the general horsey public and horsey bods in Scotland are aware of that. The issue is on our doorstep right now.

Dr Tim Watson (Scottish Equestrian Association): A year ago, in having an organisation that supported equestrianism Scotland was well ahead of England, where the situation was very fragmented. However, with the establishment of a minister with responsibility for the horse and much direction from the UK Government over the past 12 months, there has been a move in England towards creating a federation-type structure for equestrianism. That has suddenly opened up many funding opportunities, because funding bodies now only have to speak to one organisation instead of to a confetti of organisations. As a smaller country, we are in danger of losing out in that process, as we have a quieter voice when it comes to campaigning for funding.

The change in the past year has been due to the fact that the UK Government has recognised the importance of the horse. We are missing out on that in Scotland. Only through the efforts of volunteers such as the people at this table have we been able to attract funding for top athletes. However, it is uncertain how long we can sustain that against competition from a much more professional outfit in England.

Muriel Colquhoun: The Scottish Equestrian Association has 24 members with a couple of applications pending. South of the border, there is a whole mass of different elements such as the British Horse Industry Confederation, British horse breeders associations, the British Equestrian Federation, the introduction of horse and pony passports and so on. However, in Scotland, we have managed to pull everyone together into the

24-strong membership of SEA. That is a huge advantage. Indeed, at a meeting in London, the official for the horse, Graham Cory, told me that the fact that we have one voice and organisation gives us an advantage. We have a forum in which people get together four or five times a year to discuss our problems. However, although they have massive problems in the south, they have someone who knows what they are talking about and understands the industry.

The split is clear. Although the Scottish Equestrian Association knows where we are going, what we are doing and what we require to do to keep abreast of the times, we do not have someone in Government who is aware of the situation. They have such a person down south.

John Scott: So making Ross Finnie the minister for the horse would have tangible benefits for the equine industry in Scotland.

Muriel Colquhoun: You had better ask Ross Finnie that. It might be rather difficult for the Scottish Executive to appoint a minister for the horse, but it would be helpful to have someone in the Executive who has a broad knowledge of the industry. I mean no disrespect to Ross Finnie, but it is not much use appointing someone who has not got much of a clue.

Mr Welsh: As far as lack of information is concerned, I have to say that you cannot have a policy unless it is based on information. In that respect, when I asked parliamentary questions about fundamental issues such as funding the industry and its effect on the economy, the Executive's answer was that there was no information on those matters. It does not know the facts on which any policy could be based. It is not simply a matter of gathering together aspects such as encouraging the use of horse passports; if a minister had that fundamental information, the Executive would know exactly what the situation was. That could only benefit the whole industry. There is a massive information gap. I refer the committee to the answers to parliamentary questions that I have received, which show that the Scottish Executive does not know some very basic facts about the industry.

Jackie Baillie: Let me attempt to clarify matters. You are raising some process issues, but I am not clear about your objectives. Is it your objective to have an all-encompassing strategy that focuses on the complexity of the equine industry, or is it simply for there to be one person in the Executive who has knowledge of it? I challenge the suggestion that that would be the most useful way forward for you. Given the complexity of the issues that you have raised, the preferred objective might be to have a strategy, rather than one person in the Executive attempting to span issues that are of interest to the Environment and Rural Affairs

Department, the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department and the tourism, culture and sport portfolio. I would like to debate that point further.

I understand that in May you will meet the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport—and all good things. I assume that you will pursue with the minister precisely the issues that you have raised.

Muriel Colquhoun: Obviously, I would like there to be both a strategy and one person in the Scottish Executive who has knowledge of the industry. I wonder how we will get a strategy without having someone in the Executive who has that knowledge. The strategy would be the outcome of having a group or person in the Executive who could pull it together. I am sure that the Scottish Equestrian Association would be able to handle much of the work for a strategy for the horse. I do not know parliamentary or Executive procedures, but I think that we need both a strategy and a person with knowledge of the industry who can help to write it, in co-operation with the Scottish Equestrian Association, which is the industry's governing body.

Jackie Baillie: I do not want to open up a wider discussion of how the civil service is constructed, but let us assume that it is made up of generalists rather than specialists. Surely any civil servant who is tasked with this responsibility—provided that they listen—can draw on the knowledge that you and the association helpfully have?

Muriel Colquhoun: Yes. It would certainly help if the civil servant concerned had a listening ear.

Mr Welsh: I suggest that England has answered Jackie Baillie's question. Because the industry is diffuse and complex, there is a need to create a focal point in Government that will get recognition for it and harness its potential. England has understood the importance of the industry and made it part of the Government's responsibility.

Jackie Baillie: My question was less esoteric than that. Which is more important—a person or a strategy?

Mr Welsh: Both are important.

Dr Watson: The Scottish Equestrian Association can draw up a strategy, but that would be to take a unilateral approach. We would prefer to take a bilateral approach and to have someone in the Executive as a focal point, with whom we can work. I agree that it is important for that person to have a listening ear, to be sympathetic to the needs of the industry and to be able to help us work through the detail of the strategy. Such an approach would work. Setting up a team is unfeasible, given the size of the industry and the Government.

Muriel Colquhoun: The Scottish Equestrian Association has a further four-year plan, which covers the period from 2004 to 2007. I was fortunate to get help from sportscotland in employing a consultant to draw up the plan, which is an in-depth document and covers many parts of equine sports and industry. However, the first point is to have a listening ear in the Executive. If that person were aware of the Scottish Equestrian Association's strategic four-year plan, they could draw a great deal from it.

Mike Watson: I am not unsympathetic to the case for having one person who is responsible for the equine industry. However, from the list of your members that has been distributed I note that they include very diverse organisations: competitive groups, such as the British Show Jumping Association, the British Show Pony Society and Scottish Racing, which is a major industry; animal welfare groups; the Scottish Countryside Alliance, which is a general rural organisation; and organisations with tourism links, such as riding schools and the Trekking and Riding Society Scotland.

While I think that there should be a person who has an overall idea of what the industry can do, there seem to be a lot of compartmentalised departments that do not touch each other except to the extent that they involve horses. For example, if, say, Ross Finnie, the Minister for Environment and Rural Development, were that person, he would have to interact with the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport on the issue of Scottish racing, which is the biggest earner in the sector. Having one person would not avoid the need for liaison between two or three other Government departments.

Muriel Colquhoun: The link with racing relates to the new racing school, which the Scottish Equestrian Association is starting up at Oatridge land-based college before going on to involve Dunbar in the scheme. I sit on the committee that is involved in the racing school. The project is being funded by various organisations, including Scottish Enterprise.

All the people involved already sit at the table within the Scottish Equestrian Association. We are all aware of the problems, programmes and initiatives in the volunteer sector—I should stress that the sector is mainly made up of volunteers. The Scottish Equestrian Association has been in existence for only five years. I cannot see the problem with our suggestion as we are all used to the fact that the horse is the one basic thing that joins us together. I show jump, I event, I dressage, I go racing, I judge show ponies, I judge hunters, I judge sports horses and I am a sports horse breeding judge—I am already involved with nearly every member of SEA. I do not have a problem with seeing how the whole industry works.

Alan Murray (Scottish Equestrian Association): Mike Watson has grasped the subject; he has stated how broad the industry is. If Ross Finnie were the minister in charge of the industry, he could not carry out the task on his own; he would need to have a link with SEA.

As Mike Watson just said, the promotion of the horse industry in Scotland is going to increase because of the nature of the tourists who are coming to Scotland. We can handle that rise and provide the interesting and diverse activities that they seek.

The Convener: Do members have any views on what to do with the petition?

Linda Fabiani: We have noted that SEA is to meet the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport next week. I do not think that this committee can do anything until we find out what his response is.

John Farquhar Munro: Good morning, folks. There is no doubt that you have made quite an impression on the committee, not least because of the number of organisations that you list as members. I note that one of those is the Scottish Carriage Driving Association. I know that, this year, Scotland has been chosen as the venue for the carriage-driving championships for drivers with disabilities. I have been trying to promote that event through the Scottish Parliament and get funding for it, but I have not been able to. That demonstrates why you need someone in the centre to support the industry.

What is happening with that event? Is it going ahead with the support of all your members or has it fallen due to a lack of support from the central organisation?

Muriel Colquhoun: Without any help or funding from any other body, the Scottish Carriage Driving Association—which, with only 110 members, is one of the smaller organisations that is involved with SEA—has managed to raise the full £40,000 that is needed to stage the event at Hopetoun. That is a typical example of what happens in the equine industry in Scotland; we all get down to it and we push on, but there is damn little recognition of what we are about. That is frustrating.

On various occasions I have asked for a meeting with the Minister for Environment and Rural Development, but that has fallen through. I am grateful to Frank McAveety for giving up time to discuss the matter in a couple of weeks' time, but it would be good to speak to the ministers who are responsible for rural affairs, lifelong learning and all the other matters that the horse industry touches. We will make progress only when everyone realises just how many departments are involved. It exasperates the blazes out of me to find out that, although we have led the way—we

have 24 members and we are one voice, which is not the case in England—there is a team in Westminster that is helping the equine industry. That seriously annoys me.

11:00

John Farquhar Munro: I understand that the carriage-driving championship represents a prestigious international event to be held in Scotland, as you said. One would have thought that the event would have received massive support, but it has not.

You mentioned that there will be passports for all horses in England and that that might or should happen in Scotland—

Muriel Colquhoun: It must happen.

John Farquhar Munro: Would such a system include every horse and pony in Scotland? There are places in my constituency where Highland ponies are bred for training and other purposes. Would all those animals have to have passports?

Muriel Colquhoun: Yes indeed, because they might otherwise end up in someone's meat pie in Brussels. Tim Watson is the expert on passports, but every horse should have one.

I wanted to make it clear that our attempts to meet the Minister for Environment and Rural Development have fallen through and that although I am grateful to Frank McAveety for making time for us, we want to make an impact throughout the Executive.

The Convener: We must consider what we do with the petition.

John Scott: Notwithstanding the forthcoming meeting between Frank McAveety and SEA, I suggest that we write to the Executive to ascertain whether it plans to introduce the provisions that are being introduced in England and Wales, or to carry out a study to establish whether it can do more to develop the industry to its benefit.

The Convener: Obviously we should await the outcome of the meeting with the minister, but are members happy that we ask the Executive about the specific point that John Scott raised?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank the petitioners for coming. We will keep you updated on the response that we receive from the Executive.

Rural Schools (Proposed Closures) (PE725)

The Convener: The next petition is PE725, on the closure of rural schools, which was lodged by Richard Lock on behalf of the Midlothian Rural

Schools Action Group. The petition calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to restore the presumption against closure of rural schools and asks that

“any departure from the presumption in individual cases shall be on the grounds of the balance of educational advantage to the children of those schools being clearly”—

and independently—“demonstrated”.

Richard Lock is here to give evidence in support of the petition and he is accompanied by Irene Stewart and Colette Pemberton. I welcome you to the committee; you have three minutes in which to make introductory remarks and members will then ask questions.

Richard Lock (Midlothian Rural Schools Action Group): There should be an assumption in Scotland that rural schools should stay open unless the case for closure can be thoroughly proven. Any suggestion that a rural school should close should be scrutinised closely by the Minister for Education and Young People and the Minister for Environment and Rural Development, and detailed assessments of the educational and community impact of the proposed closure should be carried out. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, any proposal by a local education authority to close a rural school is called in by the minister responsible for a decision. The local education authority has to present a strong case before closure is considered, and the presumption is against closure.

Proposals to close rural schools are contrary to the Scottish Executive's report “Social Justice ... a Scotland where everyone matters” of 2000, which states that rural Scotland faces many obstacles because of isolation. Rural areas are defined as postcode sectors with a population density of fewer than 100 people per km², or as areas with fewer than 10,000 people. Eighty-nine per cent of Scotland's land mass is considered to be rural, and 27 per cent of Scottish employment is based in rural areas. Small rural schools are a legitimate investment in areas where there is less benefit from other Government spending on services, for example on street lighting, roads, public transport and, recently, new 21st century technologies such as broadband internet access.

There is no evidence to suggest that a small rural school is not capable of providing a good cross-curriculum education. In fact, it has been shown that rural schools generally outperform the attainment levels of their urban counterparts. The children who come out of small rural schools benefit from having a much broader understanding and appreciation of their citizenship roles, which on the whole are gained because of the broad social mix and age ranges of pupils in composite classes.

From a financial point of view, it can be claimed that there is a higher per-pupil cost in small rural schools. However, any indirect costs of closure—such as the loss of benefit to the wider and local community—are not taken into account, and knock-on effects are not always quantifiable in monetary terms. Why should rural schools be given a higher priority in England, Wales and Northern Ireland than in Scotland, where rural schools play an equally, if not more, important role in the education system?

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Lock. The petitioners are joined by Rhona Brankin. Do you have anything to add to the information that the petitioners have provided?

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): I have a couple of quick points. When the Education, Culture and Sport Committee in the previous session examined school closures, it received evidence and recommended that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities draw up new guidance. That was way back in 2001. COSLA then referred the matter to the Scottish Executive, which said that it would consider the issue in the context of the estates review. There is no specific guidance on rural schools in Scotland, yet we have many such schools.

We have fallen behind the other countries in the United Kingdom. The issue is hugely important. We have good policies on sustainable rural development, but there is no read-across from those policies to the importance of keeping rural services going. Nobody is suggesting that no schools in rural areas should ever close but, where rural schools are sustainable, have healthy rolls and are bringing people into the community, it is important that the Scottish Executive recognises the important role that they play.

The Convener: Do members have questions?

Carolyn Leckie: Thank you for presenting your petition. I have a couple of questions in reference to Rhona Brankin's comments. It perturbs me that although guidance was asked for back in 2001, here we are in 2004 with five schools proposed for closure. What stage is the guidance at? Has the minister indicated a willingness to take a view on those school closures? I am concerned that the Executive's tardiness in producing guidance has meant that those five schools—and no doubt others—are in danger that could have been avoided.

I just want a wee bit more information on what is happening with the five schools, in relation to representation to the Executive. I would also appreciate a wee bit more information about rural schools that have closed and the negative impact that those closures have had on the vibrancy and viability of their communities.

Richard Lock: The Scottish Executive says that, because of the guidance, closure is a local authority issue and that the decision has nothing to do with it. The Executive defers to the local authority.

The situation with our fight to keep the schools open is that the consultation period closes on Friday of this week. The local director of education will produce a report that will go before Midlothian Council at the end of May or the beginning of June and the members will then vote on what to do with the schools. The report does not cover just those five schools; it will mention many other issues such as refurbishment and new schools in the urban areas of Midlothian. Our five schools are a small portion of the overall project.

Carolyn Leckie: You are entitled to express a view. I am concerned that the Executive says that it does not have guidance or a role that enables it to intervene. There are statutory concerns about occupancy that would allow ministerial intervention. COSLA intended to produce its own code of practice and guidance, but did not do so because the Executive was going to produce guidance. Now there is no guidance.

The Executive was not prepared to intervene on your five schools but, in effect, it intervened to prevent COSLA from producing guidance that might have helped you. What is your response to that?

Rhona Brankin: COSLA referred the issue of guidance to the Executive. There is guidance at the moment, but it is not specifically for rural schools. I understand that the minister has said that the Executive will reconsider the guidance, but we have not had any more information than that.

Irene Stewart (Midlothian Rural Schools Action Group): The current guidance, which is very basic, comes from the Education Department on a single sheet of paper. All that it says is that there must be a minimum of 28 days' notice of closure, and that the decision can be referred to ministers only if the school has more than 80 per cent of its roll, or if it is more than 5 miles from the school to which the children would be transferred. Those are the only tests that the closure process has to pass before it can go ahead.

It is outrageous that a school can be closed under those conditions and that is why we lodged the petition.

Richard Lock: In addition, the local authority gets to set and interpret the rule on the school roll. Two of the schools are contending the roll issue. We believe that their rolls are above the 80 per cent that is required, but the council is not coming back on that—it is just keeping quiet.

John Scott: If guidance has not been issued, and the Scottish Executive has been aware of that for some time, one must assume that the Executive does not intend to issue such guidance. Does one have to wind back the clock a little further? Perhaps we should invite the Executive to make its position clear on the matter. In England and Wales, the stated position is clear. Given that the COSLA guidelines do not exist, should the Executive follow the line that has been taken in England and Wales, which is that there should be a presumption against closure?

Richard Lock: Yes, there should be a presumption against closure. Scotland should be in line with the rest of the UK.

Irene Stewart: If we are not in line with the rest of the UK, the Executive should explain why we are not.

John Scott: I support what you are saying. My experience of rural schools is that, when a school is lost from the heart of a community, it is not long before the doctor or the bank also goes and the heart of the community is lost. When any one of the services in a community is lost, whether it is the village shop or the garage, the village starts to crumble. Those services are an essential part of rural communities.

Richard Lock: Definitely.

11:15

Mike Watson: The question of school closures is always fraught. I represent an inner city constituency. Things are bad enough there and yet distances are shorter. The old cliché applies—nobody can tell you which school to close, but everybody can tell you which school not to close. It does not help that there seems to be confusion on the matter. Irene Stewart has just confused me—unwittingly, I am sure—by reading out some proposals about the minimum time periods that are involved. I know that the consultation in Midlothian has just finished. How long did it last?

Irene Stewart: In total, the consultation lasted for about eight weeks. Originally, it was supposed to last for six weeks but it was extended for a further two weeks. The council voted to close the schools on 25 February and yet the formal consultation period ends on Friday. The problem for us, however, is that there has been no informal consultation period. We went straight to formal consultation. The guidelines that were issued by the Department of Education, which apply in England and Wales, include guidance on a long period of assessment and information gathering—an informal consultation period, as it were. During such a period, it would be possible to have a more productive dialogue.

I understand that our petition relates to the whole of Scotland, but I will bring the debate back to the Midlothian example. Our problem is that, when we ask specific questions of our elected councillors in Midlothian, they cannot, under the rules of the formal consultation, answer the questions. If councillors take one side or another of the argument, I think that they are precluded from participating in the final vote. When we go to see councillors to ask them questions, they have to sit there and say, "I can't tell you that. I can't answer that question." Apart from anything else, that is immensely frustrating for those of us who are trying to find out about the situation. There is nothing in our petition that says that rural schools should not be closed; the petition simply says that they should not be closed without a proper process of review.

Mike Watson: Thank you; that is helpful. I was concerned in the main about the 28-day period, which seems ludicrously short. It stacks everything up in favour of the councils rather than local parents.

Irene Stewart: That is the current legal minimum in the guidelines.

Mike Watson: I believe that 28 days is far too short a minimum period.

Further confusion arises from a reference that I note in our committee papers to the "proportionate advantage" guidance that was issued in 1998 by Brian Wilson, when he was the minister with responsibility for education. The minister asked whether

"the educational and financial gains deriving from a closure stand up to scrutiny and do they outweigh the negative effects - on that rural community and the children and their families - which that closure will have?"

It seems that that guidance ought to be capable of being used as a presumption against closure. I would have thought that it would be quite difficult to argue that it would be of benefit to families if schools were to be closed.

My second point concerns what happened between COSLA and the Minister for Education and Young People. On 1 April, the Minister for Education and Young People said, in reply to a parliamentary question:

"Following discussions with COSLA, we will prepare guidance for parents and local authorities, to raise understanding of the processes and the responsibilities of the respective parties."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 1 April 2004; S2O-1886.]

That is a pretty broad statement, which could not, in any sense, be taken as guidance. It would seem that we need something stronger than that.

I am not saying that the situation in Scotland should necessarily be the same as that which

applies in England and Wales, as different circumstances apply there. However, it seems that everything is too vague and that we need to have firmer guidance. Two years ago, COSLA stood back from producing its own guidelines because of an understanding that the minister was going to do that. For more than two years to pass and nothing to appear is not something that we should regard as acceptable.

John Scott: At the moment, there is nothing; neither COSLA nor the Government has issued guidance, even though they have both undertaken to do so. Schools are closing all the time, and that is not satisfactory.

Richard Lock: Midlothian Council proposes to close in one fell swoop more schools than were closed in the whole of England and Wales in the past year, I think, and it is one of the smallest authorities in Scotland.

Jackie Baillie: This is less of a question and more of a comment. Every area is experiencing the problem, to a greater or lesser extent. The problem is not that there are no regulations, but that the regulations are woefully inadequate and do not spell out clearly the way in which school boards and parents should be involved. You are quite right—the regulations set out a circumscribed period of 28 days during which certain things have to be done. They go further, and talk about the criteria by which any closure will be referred to ministers, but I suspect that something could be done to expand that set of criteria, and that that might cover the points that you raise.

At a basic level, it would be enormously helpful for guidance to be sent out to tell local authorities the optimal way to have a dialogue with parents about contentious issues such as school closures. To turn to my recommendation, specific guidance about the closure of rural schools would be welcome, building on the comments that were made by Brian Wilson and endorsed by the minister, Peter Peacock. We should ask the Executive to review the legislative framework in broad terms, rather than to consider the case of the particular schools that are referred to in the petition, and to consider bringing forward the guidance that has long been promised.

Helen Eadie: We are not reporting accurately what COSLA has done. Our papers state that COSLA attempted to produce draft guidelines but that it had to abandon the work because it was advised that the Scottish Executive was producing such guidelines. I mention that point in the interest of not misrepresenting COSLA's work—it is a minute point in today's discussion, but it is always important to give credit.

I agree with my colleagues' comments about the importance of the matter throughout Scotland. We

are all involved; I represent a semi-rural and urban area and I know that if the issue arises there, as it may do, I will be faced with the challenges that Rhona Brankin mentioned this morning. I do not want to be left in a position in which there is inadequate consultation. Irene Stewart made the key point that informal consultation is vital because it enables everyone to get the answers to the questions that they ask. I recommend that we write to the Scottish Executive to raise all the issues that have been raised this morning and, specifically, to ask when it will produce guidelines to the standards that the committee has defined this morning.

The Convener: We have some clear recommendations, but I will take one more point, from Carolyn Leckie, before we move on.

Carolyn Leckie: I support Helen Eadie's recommendation, but I ask for a tight timescale to be put on the Executive's response. I am sure that the Education Committee would be interested to find out, if it has not done so already, what has happened since its predecessor asked COSLA to produce guidance on rural schools, and to follow that up. I ask for our deliberations to be copied to the Education Committee and drawn to its attention. We should write to the Executive with a tight timescale and we should refer its response to the Education Committee as a matter of urgency. The situation that the schools in the petition are in, and that other schools throughout Scotland are in, is unacceptable, and there is fault to be applied.

John Scott: I agree with what Helen Eadie and Carolyn Leckie said, but the committee should appreciate the irony of this morning's deliberations. In relation to our first petition, PE734, we agreed to write to the Executive to ask it to do what it can to expand education in a worldwide sense and yet it seems that the Executive is making it harder for people to easily access education in rural areas in Scotland. There is a delightful irony in that.

The Convener: I take Carolyn Leckie's point about the timescale. Are members happy that we write to the minister and say that we expect a response within a month? Shall we give the Executive 28 days?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank the petitioners for coming and for bringing the matter to our attention.

No more petitioners are here to give oral evidence this morning.

Rules of Court (PE722)

The Convener: Petition PE722 is from James Duff, who calls on the Parliament to urge the Executive to introduce legislation to abolish rule

4.2(5) of the rules of court. Rule 4.2, which is referred to by the petitioner, is one set of rules that governs court procedures in the Court of Session. Rule 4.2(1) provides that, in relation to certain types of actions that are brought before the Court of Session, party litigants cannot sign the document that must be lodged with the court to commence the action and that they must get an advocate, a solicitor or a solicitor advocate to sign the document. However, rule 4.2(5) provides that, when the party litigant cannot get such a person to sign the document, he or she can ask the court for leave to proceed with the action without the relevant signature. A judge's decision on that matter is final and not subject to review.

One type of action in which party litigants cannot sign the document commencing the action and accordingly might have to rely on rule 4.2(5) is an action that is brought under the Bankruptcy (Scotland) Act 1985. The petitioner appears to have brought an action several times under section 3(7) of that act and was refused leave to proceed without a signature from the qualified person.

Linda Fabiani: We need further information before we can discuss the petition properly. I suggest that our first step should be to write to the appropriate bodies and ask them to send us their views about the matters that are raised in the petition.

The Convener: Are members happy with that suggestion?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Skye Bridge Tolls (PE727)

The Convener: Petition PE727, by Robbie the Pict, on behalf of the Scottish People's Mission, is on the Skye bridge tolls. The petition calls on Parliament to urge the Executive to order the immediate suspension of tolls on the A87 between the Isle of Skye and mainland Scotland. The petition is similar to PE711, which was also submitted by Robbie the Pict and was considered by the previous committee at its meeting on 4 February 2003. The committee agreed to take no further action on PE711 on the basis of the recent and full consideration that it had given to PE445 on the same issue. Members will recall that the committee agreed to take no further action on PE445 at its meeting on 17 September 2003 on the basis that the Executive is clearly committed to working towards ending the current Skye bridge tolling regime and that the documents in question have been found to be valid and in order by the courts and relevant authorities in the United Kingdom Parliament. The petitioner has submitted further evidence in support of his petition and it has been circulated to the committee.

John Farquhar Munro: The decision that was previously taken by the committee should be adhered to because we have a commitment from the Executive to remove the tolls—that is a firm guarantee. The petition has been repeated several times through the committee and has not proved to be successful in the law courts. We should adhere to our original decision to support the Executive in its efforts to remove the tolls from the bridge.

Carolyn Leckie: I suspect that I might be in a minority, but many of the arguments that have been proposed today and previously in petitions are valid. We have not had adequate answers from the Executive and the legality of continued charging of tolls on the Skye bridge is seriously in question.

It is nowhere near enough for the Executive to say that it is committed to working towards ending the current Skye bridge tolling regime. We need a firm commitment that the Executive will end the regime, and we need to know when. More important, compensation is due to the community that has had to pay the tolls. I therefore ask that we write to the Executive about its intentions. The Executive should at least end the regime—although, for me, that would not go far enough. We should not simply accept that the Executive is working towards a commitment.

11:30

John Scott: I do not agree entirely with Carolyn Leckie; I incline more towards John Farquhar Munro's view and I welcome the fact that the Executive is working towards ending the tolls. However, we have received an additional comment from Mark Poustie, who is a professor of law at the University of Strathclyde. He raises some interesting points. I am perfectly content that the Executive has made the correct decisions thus far, but Professor Poustie raises what is apparently new information and I would like to hear the Executive's views on it.

The Convener: I do not think that that information changes the situation in respect of the review. John Farquhar Munro's view was that the committee has looked into the matter and awaits the result of the review. However, that does not preclude us from asking questions—such as Carolyn Leckie's—on timescales. There is no harm in asking for such details. We can also ask for the Executive's view on Professor Poustie's views. The more information we have the better. However, that will not change the fact that we await the outcome of the review. Are members happy that we should ask those questions?

Helen Eadie: The Minister for Transport answered a parliamentary question last week on

the review. It might be useful for us to refer to his answer, although I do not think that he mentioned a timescale. I have also raised the issue of the Forth road bridge and I know that Jackie Baillie has raised the issue of the Erskine bridge. The point is that the review is needed for toll bridges all over Scotland.

John Farquhar Munro: The minister's response, as regards time, was that it would be done "in due course".

The Convener: There is no harm in asking questions about the progress of the review, although that does not change the legality of the decision of the Court of Session in respect of the tolls as they stand. Will we ask those questions?

Members indicated agreement.

Scottish Judiciary (Freemasonry Membership) (PE731)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE731, which calls for a declaration by the Scottish judiciary of membership of the freemasons. The petition, in the name of Hugh Sinclair, calls on Parliament to initiate any steps, including necessary legislation, to require members of the Scottish judiciary to declare masonic membership. The issue of membership of the freemasons by the judiciary has been considered in the context of PE306 by Thomas Minogue, PE652 by William Burns, PE693 by Sidney McKechnie Gallagher, and, most recently, PE720, again by Thomas Minogue. The committee agreed to take no further action on the basis that the issues had been raised fully and considered by the Justice 2 Committee in relation to PE306 during November 2000 to January 2003. Do members have any views?

Mike Watson: When we dealt with the previous petitions, did we ask the Executive why the question that is asked of new judges in England and Wales, and in Northern Ireland, does not obtain in Scotland?

The Convener: I think that the Justice 2 Committee, in its 18-month investigation, looked into that. At our previous meeting, at which this issue was raised, we decided that for us to look into the issue again would be to second-guess the outcome of the review by the Justice 2 Committee. Unless the question that Mike Watson raises was missed out entirely in the inquiry—the clerks can clarify whether it was—I do not know what more we can do with the petition.

Mike Watson: I wonder whether the Executive explained why it did not think that what applies in England and Wales would apply here. I do not know whether that specific issue has been dealt with.

The Convener: Do we want to ask the Justice 2 Committee to clarify that?

Mike Watson: I do not want to prolong the issue, but it seems to be odd that the approach here is different from that in other parts of the United Kingdom.

The Convener: There is no harm in clarifying whether that question formed part of the inquiry, which ended about a year and half ago. It may be that since the inquiry an issue has come up that merits some clarification.

Do members want to take a break at this point?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Okay. We will take five minutes for a comfort break.

11:35

Meeting suspended.

11:48

On resuming—

Current Petitions

Scottish Prison Service (Age Discrimination) (PE404)

The Convener: The first current petition is PE404, which is on the Scottish Prison Service pension scheme. The petitioner calls on the Scottish Parliament to instruct the SPS to return to the pre-1987 agreement, as per the principal civil service pension scheme rules for groups of staff who are forced to retire before reaching the age of 60.

At its meeting on 7 January 2004, the committee considered the petition further and agreed to seek an update on developments in the continuing discussions between the SPS and the Prison Officers Association Scotland on retirement age rules for staff. The committee also agreed to write again to the Scottish Trades Union Congress to seek its views on the issues that the petition raises. From the responses of the POAS and the SPS, it appears that discussions between the two sides on retirement age in the prison service continue in the context of consideration of the impact of United Kingdom legislation on age discrimination, which is due in 2006. Do members have any views on the information that is before them?

Carolyn Leckie: I hope that the discussions are productive. I would be interested to know how many members of staff have suffered through being forced to retire. I imagine that the potential exists for employment tribunal cases and I encourage the Prison Officers Association to pursue any such cases. I would like the committee to keep an eye on progress and to keep open information lines, in the event that it becomes appropriate for us to pursue matters in the future, should the discussions come to an impasse.

The Convener: The issue is certainly not closed yet, so we need to keep an eye on it.

John Scott: The situation in England and Wales has been referred to several times today and it appears that the opportunity to continue in employment is available to prison officers there. It seems to be at best anomalous that the matter is only under discussion here, but I am sure that there is a lot of background information of which I am not fully aware. The situation seems to be odd.

The Convener: Are members happy for us just to await the outcome of the discussions and to keep open the petition until we get an update on progress?

Members indicated agreement.

Sex Offenders (Home Office Project) (PE486)

The Convener: The next petition is PE486, which is on projects to stop reoffending. The petitioners call on the Parliament to note the progress of the Home Office project to help sex offenders to avoid reoffending and the work of the Scottish Quakers to apply the scheme in Scotland, and to consider the scheme's possible application in Scotland.

At its meeting on 7 January 2004, the committee noted from the Scottish Executive's response that an evaluation of the effectiveness of the three pilot projects on circles of support and accountability that were sponsored by the Home Office was expected to take place, and that an exploration of the possibility of establishing similar projects in Scotland was at a very early stage. The committee agreed to seek an update from the Scottish Executive on whether such an evaluation had taken place, and to request details of developments of any plans to introduce similar pilot projects in Scotland.

The Executive states that, although it has received an application from Safeguarding Communities Reducing Offending—SACRO—in partnership with the Church of Scotland,

"it was decided that the Executive required more evidence of the effectiveness of the approach before committing funding to pilots in Scotland."

The Executive provides details of developments on reducing the risk of reoffending by sex offenders,

"which continues to be a high priority for the Justice Department."

It is continuing to follow the progress of the circles of support project in England and Wales and to await the Home Office's three-year comparative study on the projects. I invite members' comments.

Linda Fabiani: I have a request for information. On those pilot projects, does anyone know when the three years will be up? We should find that out. We will obviously want to learn from the Executive the outcome of the review, but it would be useful to know when that is likely to come.

Carolyn Leckie: I agree. I would also like to know how many offenders of the type who are under discussion are involved in progressive programmes of any kind and whether those programmes are being compared. I apologise if that is covered in the information that has already been provided. I would like wider information about how many sex offenders are outwith any progressive programmes, because that would help to put the circles of support experiment in context.

The Convener: Are members happy for us to keep pursuing the questions on the issue?

Members indicated agreement.

Smoking in Public Places (PE503)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE503, which relates to the banning of smoking in public places. The petitioners call on the Scottish Parliament to take the necessary steps to ban smoking from all public places in Scotland. The committee will be aware that the Health Committee has agreed to call for evidence from all interested parties on the general principles of the Prohibition of Smoking in Regulated Areas (Scotland) Bill, which was introduced as a member's bill by Stewart Maxwell MSP on 3 February 2004. The closing date for receipt of evidence was 23 April 2004.

At its meeting on 3 December 2002, the previous Public Petitions Committee agreed to seek the views of the pupils of Firrhill High School on responses to the petition and to request an update from the Executive on progress in its public information campaign. Comments by the pupils at Firrhill have been circulated to the committee. The Executive states that it intends to adopt a two-phase approach to a consultation on smoking, which will include consideration of passive smoking. Phase 2, which is due to begin in the summer, will involve a period of comprehensive and inclusive consultation.

Jackie Baillie: I suggest that we pass the petition to the Executive as part of its consultation. Stewart Maxwell is promoting a member's bill to ban smoking, so perhaps it would be helpful to pass him a copy of the petition.

Helen Eadie: I agree. We might also want to pass the petition to the Health Committee. As I am a member of that committee, I know that it is about to consider Stewart Maxwell's bill.

John Scott: Will we close consideration of the petition after that?

The Convener: Will we consider the petition to be closed after passing it to those interested bodies? Will that be our last dealing with it?

Members indicated agreement.

Strategic Planning (Fife) (PE524)

The Convener: Petition PE524 concerns the strategic planning review. The petitioners call on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to reconsider its proposal in the "Review of Strategic Planning" to replace Fife as a single planning area.

At its meeting on 5 November 2002, the previous Public Petitions Committee noted that the

Executive had made it clear that any strategic planning regime changes would require primary legislation and that a planning bill was likely to be introduced in this parliamentary session. In view of that, the committee agreed to defer further action on the petition until legislative proposals had been made. The committee has now received a response from the Scottish Executive that says:

"We expect to introduce a Planning Bill during the current Parliamentary session."

In relation to the call in the petition for Fife to be retained as a single strategic planning area, the Executive said that following the "Review of Strategic Planning",

"there would be city region plans for only the four main cities".

Helen Eadie: I suggest that we copy the Executive's response to Iain Smith and invite his comments, which we could consider at our next meeting.

The Convener: Are members happy with that?

John Scott: When is the planning bill to be introduced? Does anyone know the timetable for that? Is there a timetable?

The Convener: The bill's introduction has not been scheduled.

John Scott: If it has not been scheduled and the petitioner was told in May 2002—in the previous parliamentary session—that the bill was likely to be introduced in that session, that must be cause for concern. We are now being told that the bill will be introduced in this session.

The Convener: The petitioner was told in 2002 that the bill was expected in this session, not in the previous session.

Mike Watson: The planning consultation was announced just two or three weeks ago. I question what John Scott means by a session. If he means the period between 2003 and 2007, that period will have a planning bill, but a bill might not be introduced in the current parliamentary year.

Helen Eadie: The consultation finishes on 22 July.

The Convener: Will we do what Helen Eadie suggested?

Members indicated agreement.

Solvent Abuse (PE580)

The Convener: Petition PE580 concerns measures to deal with solvent abuse. The petitioner calls on the Scottish Parliament to recognise the serious problems with solvent abuse in Scotland and to introduce preventive safety measures to help to combat it.

At its meeting on 21 January 2004, the committee considered a response from the petitioner to a response from the Executive. The committee noted that John MacDougall MP had proposed a private member's bill on the sale of butane gas and agreed to seek information on whether the legislative timetable would be likely to have sufficient time to allow the bill to be introduced in the UK Parliament. The committee also agreed to write to invite the Deputy Minister for Justice's response to the points that the petitioner made.

The committee has received a response from John MacDougall, which has been circulated to members. He says that he has not yet secured an adjournment debate on the subject but that the issue has been added to the ballot and that he will continue to make every effort to secure a debate.

In his response, the Deputy Minister for Justice says that he

"will be happy to keep the Committee informed of developments in respect of the issues highlighted in my original response."

Helen Eadie: John O'Brien and his daughter are attending our meeting and I repeat our best wishes to him for the stalwart work that he has done. The suggestion in our papers is that we ask the minister to keep the committee informed of developments in addressing the issues. That would be good, but we should also ask him to keep us advised of the pilot that he has helped to organise in Fife. That would be useful. An information paper has been handed out to us today by Mr O'Brien, which is good.

There is one other thing that I would like to ask. I have been working with Shell UK Ltd: members will see from the note in the papers that the point has been reached at which it would not be commercially viable to proceed with the project without full industry support. We could pick up on that point and write to the Department of Trade and Industry to ask whether it could collaborate with the industry. Shell UK has said clearly that that is possible and that the technology is available to inject a substance into the cartridges—although Shell would not do that; it would be done by the company that manufactures the cartridges—that would that would give off a noxious smell that makes people feel sick if they inhale it. The industry and the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on oil and gas believe that that would be a good step. I am a member of that group and I believe that it would be good to ask Patricia Hewitt MP to take up the issue and take an industry-wide approach.

12:00

The Convener: Do any members have views on that? Are we happy with that suggestion?

John Scott: It seems to me that we have almost exhausted the possibilities.

The Convener: Yes, but it would be useful to get a reply from the DTI about its involvement, if any, and we can consider that when we get a reply.

Members indicated agreement.

High Court (Appeals System) (PE617)

The Convener: Our next current petition is PE617, which concerns proposals for a system of independent appeals against High Court decisions of the Crown. The petitioner calls on the Scottish Parliament to take the necessary steps to establish a system of independent appeals against High Court decisions of the Crown.

At its meeting on 27 November 2003, the committee considered a response from the Scottish Executive along with one from the petitioner and the Crown Office, and agreed to invite the petitioner to comment further on the responses from the Crown Office and the Executive. The petitioner states

"It would appear that the Scottish Exec. has totally misunderstood the point of my petition. We have never at any time sought to have the right of appeal to court decisions".

The petitioner also raises concerns as to why, after spending considerable time in the witness room, witnesses are not offered an explanation when they are not called to give evidence.

The Executive's response makes it clear that it would not, in principle, be in favour of a third-party right of appeal in criminal proceedings in the High Court. The Executive also explains why it considers the petitioner's proposals to be unworkable.

Carolyn Leckie: We have to be sensitive in our dealings with the petition. Mr Crossan and his family have every right to be angry about how they have been treated.

The Executive's response seems to be geared towards a specific aspect of the petition and not towards helping Mr Crossan and his family to find a resolution or reassurances that there will be measures to help others avoid some of the events and injustice that they describe. I am not qualified to judge whether Mr Crossan's specific request is workable or right, but there has been a misunderstanding about what he is asking for. Many of the concerns he raised about the procedures, the evidence that was submitted, the length of the trial and the actions of the police are informative about what should happen and what we would like to happen.

I propose that we seek Mr Crossan's views about what he is specifically asking for. It is not

exactly clear to me what he means by a right of appeal if it is not what the Executive is responding to. I would like Mr Crossan to be more specific about that, so we should seek that information. Thereafter, it would be worth while for one of the justice committees to examine everything around the case. If we do not allow the petition to progress in some way, we would be doing Mr Crossan and his family a disservice.

The Convener: I do not disagree with that, although it might be a bit premature to say that we will make a decision to send the petition to a committee before we have seen the petitioner's response. I am, however, open to that being the eventual outcome. Your initial proposal to ask the petitioner to clarify specifically what he wants would allow us, once we have that information, to decide whether to ask a parliamentary committee to consider the issue. We should proceed in two stages rather than make a commitment now to do both things, if that is okay.

Carolyn Leckie: I am happy with that.

John Scott: We have to clear up the inherent contradictions. The petition begins:

"I, James Crossan, call on Parliament to establish a system of independent appeals against High Court decisions of the Crown".

However, the letter from James Crossan states:

"We have never at any time sought to have the right of appeal to court decisions."

We need to clarify what the petitioner means.

Carolyn Leckie: I surmise, perhaps wrongly, that what the petitioner is looking for is almost a grievance appeal to get redress for how a case is handled, rather than an appeal against the outcome of a trial. However, we should clarify that.

The Convener: That is a useful suggestion.

Mike Watson: Point 7 in our brief is about witnesses not being offered an explanation when they have spent considerable time in the witness room but have not been called to give evidence. Neither the Crown Office nor the Executive dealt with that point, although I suppose that the matter is for the Crown Office. I have come across examples of people being perplexed when they are simply told, "You are not needed today—away you go." An effort could be made to explain why that happens. A court officer should have that responsibility.

The Convener: What do you suggest we do?

Mike Watson: We should ask the Crown Office about the matter. As far as I can see, the letter that we received from the Crown Office does not deal with that point; it is more about the victim information and advice service. We could ask a general question, not relating to Mr Crossan's

case, about why witnesses who are called to give evidence are suddenly turned away. That can often be seen by those involved in the case to make no sense, particularly given the outcome.

The Convener: Are members happy to write those letters and to keep the petition open until we receive the replies?

Members indicated agreement.

Childhood Vaccines (PE676)

The Convener: Petition PE676 calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to inform all health boards, health practitioners, immunologists and organisations that are involved in the childhood vaccination programme in Scotland of the opportunity that is now available for parents to choose the mercury-free Infanrix instead of vaccines with thiomersal, which contains mercury, for the immunisation of children against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis.

At its meeting on 26 November 2003, the committee agreed to write to the Scottish Executive to seek its comments on the issues that are raised in the petition. The committee expressed concern that parents may not be aware that the mercury-free vaccine Infanrix is available on request, despite an apparent commitment by the Executive to the provision of choice about the vaccine during a parliamentary debate on 6 February 2003. The Executive's response states that the balance of benefits and risks of thiomersal-containing vaccines remains overwhelmingly positive. However, it has for some time been the intention of the UK health departments to phase out the use of thiomersal-containing vaccines as and when equally effective thiomersal-free alternatives become available and are licensed for use in the UK. Work is proceeding to that end.

Members will recall that there was a members' business debate on the removal of thiomersal from vaccines on 6 February 2003, during which the Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care stated:

"It is at the heart of our policy to ensure that parents are given facts about vaccines in a dispassionate and accurate way, in order to enable them to make informed choices."—
[*Official Report*, 6 February 2003; c 17983.]

Carolyn Leckie: I am extremely concerned about a number of issues because of the insufficient explanation that the Executive has offered. There is a wee bit of playing with words. The response mentions the recommendation of the thiomersal-containing vaccine, but it does not explain why it is recommended and does not go into issues such as the fact that the thiomersal-containing vaccine is cheaper. Perhaps the Executive is not trying to represent the matter in

this way, but the response is constructed to make it sound as if a preservative that increases a vaccine's shelf life somehow has some relationship to its efficacy and ability to provide immunity. That is utter nonsense. The response does not help us to get right into the issues in question.

Since the petition was submitted and presented to the committee, further research carried out in the US suggests that thiomersal might have a relationship with autism. On the basis that we should follow the precautionary principle, a thiomersal-free alternative should be available and the matter subject to parental choice. The vagueness of the timetable and the Executive's lack of willingness to ensure that there is publicity and that parents can make a proper, informed choice about a thiomersal-free vaccine are unacceptable.

As someone who has worked in the health profession, I know that there is an absence of audit of, consistency in or control over informed choice across a spectrum of drug and vaccine administration issues. I am not convinced that parents are aware that there is a choice. The Executive has a responsibility to make that choice available.

More important, given that developed countries have withdrawn vaccines that contain thiomersal and that there is certainly evidence to warrant concern and the application of the precautionary principle, I want the Executive to tell us why that has not happened here and whether it comes down to cost. I am always concerned when I see references to the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, because its members have more than 100 direct and indirect vested interests in pharmaceutical companies, research and so on.

As a result, I am disappointed but not surprised by the Executive's response. We should raise some of the concerns that I have referred to and perhaps ask it to reconsider its decision on promoting thiomersal-free vaccines. For example, is the Executive able to show that parents are being informed about alternatives in the health service? I am not convinced that that is happening.

Linda Fabiani: I want to focus on the fact that the Executive has not responded adequately to the contents of the petition, which urged it to inform health boards, GPs and so on about the thiomersal-free option. Has the Executive done so? If so, what method did it use? After all, such information can be set out in a wee paragraph in a 10-page circular that goes into a filing cabinet drawer and is forgotten about.

Moreover, the response appears to contradict what ministers have been saying about parents

being given every opportunity to make informed choices. For example, the letter says:

"The Executive has no immediate plans for further publicity"

on this matter.

As I have said, I want to know what has been done, how it was done and how the Executive plans to give people an informed choice if it is also saying that it is doing no further publicity. Our concerns and the question at the petition's core have not been answered.

Mike Watson: I do not disagree with Linda Fabiani's point; however, I feel that Carolyn Leckie went over the top a bit. The Executive's response says that the chief medical officer's advice

"is that there is no evidence of harm caused by doses of thiomersal in vaccines".

Who are we to say that such harm has been caused? I do not know whether Carolyn is suggesting that the chief medical officer is not being truthful. Why would he give that advice if it was not the case? We are in no position to question the chief medical officer's opinion, which is down in black and white. Indeed, what reason would we have to raise such questions, other than the information that we have received from the petitioners? I think that Carolyn has overreacted. I endorse the point about keeping parents informed, but to suggest that the chief medical officer is lying is to make a serious charge and I see no basis for that.

John Scott: Carolyn Leckie said that vaccines that contain thiomersal have been withdrawn from use in other countries. In which countries has that happened?

Carolyn Leckie: The United States of America.

John Scott: Have any other countries withdrawn vaccines for the same reason?

12:15

Carolyn Leckie: Many other developed countries have done so.

I respond to Mike Watson's comment, because he makes a serious allegation. I have not accused the chief medical officer of lying. I do not dispute that the chief medical officer has his opinion on the matter, but I think that that opinion is wrong when considered in the context of the available research. I have scanned the research and there is a swathe of evidence that it is not appropriate to use vaccines that contain thiomersal. That evidence has been accepted by the United States Senate. We should ask the chief medical officer and the Executive why they consider that that evidence should be disregarded.

Mike Watson: It is interesting that Carolyn Leckie prays in aid a decision of the United States Senate. She might not care to endorse some of the Senate's other recent decisions. That is not a solid basis on which to proceed and I cannot understand why she is taking such a strong line on the matter. If we do not accept that the chief medical officer is taking advice on the basis of medical opinion in this country, we are basically saying that he or she is a liar, which is a very serious allegation. I do not think that I am overstating the case.

Carolyn Leckie: I do not accept the infallibility of anyone.

Mike Watson: I would prefer to accept the opinion of our chief medical officer than that of the American Senate, if I had to make the choice.

The Convener: If we question the chief medical officer's decision, we will stray into dangerous territory, because that is not the subject of the petition.

Mike Watson: That is a separate issue.

The Convener: The petition calls for parents to be informed. I also point out that the regulation of vaccines is a reserved matter. We should not stray into territory that does not relate to the petition.

I am happy to ask questions, but we must ensure that those questions relate to the petition and are valid in the context of what the Public Petitions Committee can consider.

Carolyn Leckie: I think that we can all agree that the Executive's claim to favour parental choice in the matter is contradicted by its actions. We should ask the Executive what it has done to inform health boards about alternative vaccines, as Linda Fabiani suggested. We should ask what freedom health boards have and whether the financial implications of using alternatives are the motivation behind the Executive's failure to provide information and promote choice.

The Convener: I am happy to ask such questions and I do not suggest that Carolyn Leckie is not asking valid questions. However, we must remain focused on the petition's aims. We will serve the petitioner better by asking the Executive the questions that the petition raises than by challenging the chief medical officer's decisions. Are members happy to focus on the petition's aims?

Members indicated agreement.

John Scott: We are being pulled back into line.

The Convener: We will await a response to our questions.

Bone Marrow Register (PE687)

The Convener: The final current petition for consideration today is PE687, on the donation of bone marrow and blood stem cells. The petitioners call on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to run a campaign that encourages the donation of bone marrow and blood stem cells through a bone marrow register and to recognise and support organisations that recruit bone marrow donors.

At its meeting on 10 December 2003, the committee agreed to write to the Minister for Health and Community Care to seek his views on the issues that the petition raised. In his response to the committee, the minister states that he met one of the petitioners, who lodged the petition on behalf of the Anthony Nolan Trust, and suggested that they might

"apply for project grant funding from the Scottish Executive ... A project could be designed to address both the areas identified in the petition."

The minister's letter also says:

"I agreed that officials would investigate ways in which the Executive might be able to assist in the promotion of the work of the Trust in Scotland."

We could ask the petitioners whether they are satisfied with the Executive's response. Do members agree that that should be our starting point?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That concludes our consideration of current petitions.

Carolyn Leckie: I do not know whether this suggestion is procedurally competent, but can we also ask the petitioners on childhood vaccines to respond formally to the Executive's response to their petition PE676?

The Convener: I have no problem with that.

We come now to item 5, which the committee has agreed to take in private.

12:19

Meeting continued in private until 12:39.

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