

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Wednesday 22 December 2004

Session 2

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

20th 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)

Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP)

*Campbell Martin (West of Scotland) (Ind)

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

*Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)

*Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

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:

Chris Daly

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Helen Holland (In Care Abuse Survivors/In Care Abuse Support)

Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)

Don Macneish (Community of Arran Seabed Trust)

Tom Vella-Boyle (Community of Arran Seabed Trust)

Howard Wood (Community of Arran Seabed Trust)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jim Johnston

ASSISTANT CLERK

Joanne Clinton

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 22 December 2004

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:02*]

New Petitions

Lamlash Bay (No-take Zone and Marine Protected Area) (PE799)

The Convener (Michael McMahon): Good morning and welcome to the last meeting of the Public Petitions Committee in 2004. We have apologies from Rosie Kane.

Our first new petition is PE799 by Tom Vella-Boyle, who calls on Parliament to urge the Executive to support the Community of Arran Seabed Trust's proposal to close an area of Lamlash bay to all forms of marine life extraction—a so-called no-take zone—and the rest of the bay to mobile fishing gear as a marine protected area.

Before being formally lodged, the petition was hosted on the e-petitioner site, where it attracted 704 signatures between 1 November 2004 and 10 December 2004. Tom Vella-Boyle is here to make a brief statement to the committee in support of his petition. He is accompanied by Don Macneish and Howard Wood. I welcome the petitioners to the committee. We will hear your comments, then we will ask questions and discuss your petition.

Tom Vella-Boyle (Community of Arran Seabed Trust): Good morning and thank you for giving us the chance to come along today—we very much appreciate it. We are just three ordinary chaps, really; we have no great expertise in marine science. However, we are here to represent the community of Arran and we do not speak for that community on any other matter. We have been working on this project for 10 years or so.

I have four relevant points to make in my presentation. I presume that everybody is aware of why we are here and that they are aware of what the petition says. My first point is about community involvement. We called our organisation COAST because we are the Community of Arran Seabed Trust. We have a membership of 1,240 people. We have always tried to represent the grass-roots views on the matter so we have from the outset been determined to go through a democratic process. We regard the presentation of our petition to Parliament as being the end of the democratic process—we can go no higher than this, so here we are. Members will recall that the

First Minister and certainly our local member of the Scottish Parliament have said that communities must have a voice, especially in matters that affect them. We feel that the community has not until now had a voice in the matter with which our petition deals.

My second point is about the process that we have been through. We have consulted everybody from the chap who runs the little ferry from Lamlash bay to Holy Isle right through to the directorate-general for fisheries in Brussels, which has been kind enough to sponsor some of our work. We have, of course, spoken to the commercial fishermen, to the Scottish Executive, to all our local councillors and to many MSPs. We have spoken to our member of Parliament in Westminster and even to members of the European Parliament.

My third point concerns the scientific evidence that backs up what we say. A great deal of it—not just in this country, but all over the world—says that what we propose will lead to a sustainable fishery.

My fourth point is about the people of Arran and what the proposal means to them. We recall that during the 1970s and 1980s, there were successful fishing festivals in Arran, some of which were international. At least 300 people used to turn up, bringing much-needed revenue to the island. We feel that our having the chance to introduce the measures that we propose would bring some of those people back to the island. There is a great deal of interest in the environment these days; green and eco-tourism would bring people back. Divers would return to the island to see what we are doing. There would be great educational advantages and schoolchildren, to whom we already speak, would come back to see what we are doing.

We believe that the summing up that we attached to the petition encapsulates all that we are saying:

“It must be remembered that fish and marine life are the property of **all** Scottish people. With inshore measures it is up to the Scottish Parliament to manage those stocks for future generations to enjoy and for future jobs and livelihoods. Unfortunately not all management can take place by consensus. Unless decisions are taken to investigate modern fisheries management techniques this generation of Scottish Politicians will be remembered as the ones who presided over the final destruction of Scottish marine life. Past generations can be partly forgiven because scientific information available today was not available then. Today's politicians have no such excuse.”

I thank you for listening to me.

Campbell Martin (West of Scotland) (Ind): I should declare an interest in that I am a long-term supporter of the Community of Arran Seabed Trust, the people behind it and the end result that

it seeks to achieve. I have known Don Macneish, Tom Vella-Boyle and Howard Wood and their work for some time. It has been a long process and I hope that they eventually get the result that they seek.

It is probably important that committee members are aware that the Community of Arran Seabed Trust has about 800 members on Arran, which might not sound like a huge number in global terms, but represents almost 20 per cent of Arran's population. The project has huge support among the local community.

The first parliamentary question that I lodged in May 2003 was on that subject. The then Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development answered it by saying:

"We are working, with the UK Government where appropriate, to identify marine Special Areas of Conservation under the EU Habitats Directives; and we support the ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management under the revised Common Fisheries Policy." —[Official Report, Written Answers, 3 June 2003; S2W-233.]

In June 2003, that seemed to be good news, but there has not been a huge amount of progress since then, which is why the guys are here today to make their case to the committee.

COAST organised a day in which it presented its case to schoolchildren in Arran, which was extremely informative. The RV Aora came across from the marine biology station in Millport and showed the children and everybody else who was present the effect of dredging in Lamlash bay, which was quite incredible to see. It was like a comb along the sea bed; everything had been lifted and broken up. That effect is the reason why the petitioners are asking for a no-take zone and a marine protected area, which would allow the sea bed and marine life to regenerate.

I support what the petitioners are here to ask for and what COAST seeks to achieve, but I have a question for Tom Vella-Boyle. He mentioned in his presentation that COAST had spoken to fishermen. With what fishermen's organisations has COAST spoken and what fishermen or fishing organisations would be affected by the proposals for a no-take zone?

Tom Vella-Boyle: I ask Don Macneish to answer that question.

Don Macneish (Community of Arran Seabed Trust): We talk about fishermen, but they clearly divide into inshore and offshore fishermen. The fishing in the Clyde area about which we are talking is inshore fishing and there is a subdivision within that inshore fishing between fishermen who trawl the sea bed with mobile gear and those who use pots and creels, which are static gear. Two associations represent fishermen in our area—the

Clyde Fishermen's Association, which represents those who use mobile gear, and the Clyde and south-west static gear association, which represents those in potting—but there is also a large number of independent fishermen who are not represented by either organisation.

We went to Carradale and gave a presentation to the Clyde Fishermen's Association and have been in negotiation with Patrick Stewart, its secretary. We have also had several meetings with the Clyde and south-west static gear association and we continue to go to fishermen's associations and to negotiate independently with the rest of the fishermen.

Four commercial fishermen live on Arran: they are all independent and none is represented by either association that I mentioned. From our consultation of fishermen and the Scottish Executive, we gather that many fishermen are not represented. We continue to negotiate with the Clyde Fishermen's Association, but the static gear association supports our case with one reservation: it feels that our proposal is not big enough and that the area should be much more extensive.

We are asking for a trial. Everybody is talking and nothing is being done, but we want to find a small chink in the armour of the problem and find out whether the no-take zone and marine protected area will work. If they do not work that is not a problem, but if they do the approach could provide a template. We have set up an off-the-shelf solution for the community to pick up and run with. While everybody else is talking and negotiating, we could have the scientific trial and provide some useful data.

Campbell Martin: You have spoken extensively with different Government departments. What sort of reaction have you had from the Government?

10:15

Don Macneish: We have never had no as an answer, which is part of our problem. We have always heard, "Well—yes, we think this is possible, but I don't think you're speaking to the right people. Why don't you go and speak to those people, or those other people?"

We have ended up with the inshore fisheries branch, which is part of what we are looking for. We are looking to increase the biodiversity of the area, but we are also looking to increase the fisheries. Those are the people with whom we have been negotiating. Initially, when we went to the fisheries people, we asked whether what we ask for is possible, because the last thing we want to do is raise within the community the expectation that it is possible, only to have people's expectations dashed. They said that what we are

suggesting is possible. We went through the process of consulting everybody and cutting everybody into the frame, and we went back to the inshore fisheries department which said that although that was very good, we had to get complete consensus from all users of the bay. Unfortunately, there is conflict between the mobile gear people and the static gear people; getting them into the same room at the same time is hard enough without trying to get them to agree about anything at all.

We went back to the Scottish Executive and said, "We've got a problem here. There's a massive conflict between static gear and mobile gear and we don't think we're going to get consensus. Have you got consensus?" The Executive people said, "Well, we can't afford the luxury of consensus." It seems that although the people who make the policy cannot afford the luxury of consensus, the people of the community that is trying to get the process started must afford it.

We have been given an impossible job. Each task that we have been given we have met, until we were given the Herculean task of getting consensus among the fishermen, which just does not work. No-take zones have been set up in many places in the world. They have worked, but they have never been done with the consensus of fishermen. Fishermen have always been dragged to the table in the end, but have supported no-take zones only once they have seen the benefits of them.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I want to pick up on the trial period that you mentioned. How long would that period last?

Tom Vella-Boyle: We see the trial taking shape over a 10-year period. Of course, the zone must be strictly monitored throughout that 10-year period, and we have people who are already doing that. The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation trust has given quite a large amount of money to ensure that we have a base audit of what is there already. That has been undertaken by the Millport marine biology station. Callum Roberts, the world expert on no-take zones, who holds the cash for the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, has been very much involved in that monitoring. The money that has been allocated will certainly stretch for three years, but we will be looking for more money after that. Of course, it is important that the zone is monitored right from the beginning.

Ms White: Do you envisage that monitoring would be done by you, or would it eventually be done by the Scottish Executive under the Inshore Fishing (Scotland) Act 1984? Would you start off by monitoring the zone yourselves?

Howard Wood (Community of Arran Seabed Trust): We started doing the monitoring. We were trained by the Marine Conservation Society to do amateur surveying, which continues. This year, the marine biology station in Millport has also started monitoring, even before anything is in place, so that we know what is in the bay. We are also involved with the marine laboratory in Port Erin in the Isle of Man and with the universities of Liverpool, York and Strathclyde in considering possible ways of monitoring the bay. We are also speaking to people in Cornwall from English Nature, who have set up Lundy as a no-take zone. We shall be looking at how they do their scientific monitoring so that scientists can set it up themselves. I am sure that, within a year or two, the inshore fisheries and Government scientists will also be interested in how the no-take zone is progressing.

Ms White: It seems to me that the structure is already in place and that you have the proper procedures. You need merely to get permission for the trial period to continue.

Howard Wood: Yes. We have received a huge amount of support. The proposals are not going ahead because of a very small, vocal minority of fishermen.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I would like you to help me to understand exactly what you are after. Is there a difference between a closed area of inshore waters and a no-take zone? I understand that the Executive is able, and has the power, to establish closed areas to protect fish stocks and marine habitats and—interestingly, given your previous comment—to resolve conflicts between fishermen who are fishing with different types of gear. Mike Watson reminds me that the Executive has established closed areas. It sounds to me as if you are seeking such a solution. I would welcome clarification of that point.

In August 2003 and August 2004, consultations were undertaken on the strategy for inshore fisheries. Were you involved in those? Were you consulted? Do you know when an outcome is likely to emerge?

Howard Wood: I will deal with the last question first. We have been involved in the consultations, but only slowly in the past year to 18 months have we begun to be consulted. Because we are a community organisation and are not registered fishermen—although our members include four registered fishermen—it was not considered necessary to consult us on anything. In the past two years, we have had to make a lot of noise so that we can be involved in the consultations, to which we have submitted our views.

On closed areas in fisheries, we believe that although such things are possible, they are not

possible—if you know what I mean. The Inshore Fishing (Scotland) Act 1984 allows for closed areas, but it is not up to speed with what is happening around the world. Closed areas and no-take zones are very similar, but the language is different. A closed area could be established, and we would be happy with that, but we believe that Scotland needs to move with the rest of the world and to establish no-take zones and marine protected areas. The European Community is already using those phrases and pushing for the establishment of such zones.

Jackie Baillie: You are right about the need to modernise the language, but I am trying to establish whether fundamentally, in terms of outcome and effect on the local community, there is a difference between closed areas and no-take zones.

Howard Wood: I do not think that there is. The problems we have with closed areas are that they tend to be established for very short periods—six or 12 months—and that certain types of activities can be allowed there. A no-take zone is a no-take zone for everyone, including sea anglers; there is no extraction whatever from it. We have split up the bay so that one third would be a no-take zone and two thirds would be a marine protected area.

The proposals were drawn up in consultation with all the local people. There is one local person who survives from sea angling and who would still be allowed to take people out angling for mackerel in the summer in the marine protected area. The proposals have been thought through and discussed by the community for 10 years, so they reflect the community's wishes. That is why we have proposed the establishment of a no-take zone and a marine protected area.

The proposals are also interesting from a scientific perspective. There would be three experimental areas: a no-take zone with no extraction; an area with a small amount of extraction through sea angling and potting; and an outside area in which the status quo would be maintained. Over 10 years, we would be able to see exactly what happened in those areas.

Jackie Baillie: Am I right in saying that closed areas can be permanent?

Howard Wood: I am not sure.

Jackie Baillie: I think that they can.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): You say that there is some opposition to the proposals from local fishermen. How much opposition is there? Are 20 per cent, 40 per cent or 100 per cent of the fishermen opposed?

Don Macneish: That is very difficult to determine, as no information about the fishing organisation has been made available to us.

We attended a conference on fishing in the Clyde at the University of Glasgow's marine biological station at Millport, at which a series of six or seven questions was asked on various aspects of fishing in the Clyde. Gear conflict came up in about five out of seven questions. There were about 80 or 90 fishermen at the meeting and the head of the inshore fisheries branch of the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department said that there had been a lot of talk about no-take zones and marine protected areas and asked the fishermen whether they would be prepared to accept the implementation of such measures in the Clyde. About four or five people said, "We have nothing to lose, so we could give it a go." However, a tremendous amount of peer pressure operates in such situations. We are unable to say whether 20 or 30 per cent of local fishermen oppose the proposal. We cannot answer your question.

Howard Wood: When we talk about local fishermen, we are talking about the isle of Arran. No local fishermen oppose the proposal, because they are all members of COAST. If you are talking about local fishermen on the Clyde, I would guess that the Clyde and south-west static gear association is in favour of our proposal, with the proviso that the association does not think that the area that we would designate is sufficiently large. We have spoken to many independent fishermen, who have mixed views, but in general think that something needs to be done. The Clyde Fishermen's Association's general policy is not to support the proposal at present, but we have talked to many individual members of the association and we think that there is about 50 per cent support for change. Some fishermen are concerned that the proposal would represent the thin end of the wedge, which is a problem.

John Scott: As I understand it from examples elsewhere in the world, if such proposals are to work, a huge amount of community buy-in is needed. Everyone must gain something from the loss of fishing opportunities, perhaps through benefits to tourism and diving. Could your proposal bring benefits other than conservation?

Don Macneish: Absolutely. Arran's environment is its crown jewels; it is the reason why people come to the island. If we could extend that beyond the mountains and the coast to include the environment below the water, the socioeconomic implications would be massive and there would be a spin-off, even if it just meant that people would come to learn about the experiment and see how it worked or to participate in a project such as seasearch, in which amateurs investigate the species in the sea and feed back data to the scientists. People could participate in the experiment.

Tom Vella-Boyle: We have all sorts of ideas and we even have funding for some of them. There are basic ideas such as the production of calendars to inform people about what is going on. We even thought about using closed-circuit television cameras placed under water to enable people to watch what is happening. We could put interpretive boards around the coastline. Many ideas are being fed in about how we might inform people about the potential benefits of the proposal.

The Convener: I invite comments from Rob Gibson MSP, who has come to the meeting.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am a member of the Environment and Rural Development Committee and am interested in the issue. We will soon receive the results of the Executive's consultation on Scotland's marine environment. It is clear from what Jack McConnell said last April in Mallaig in the region that I represent that we must strike a balance between protection of the precious environment and promotion of tourism and other industries on which many communities depend. Is the configuration of the sea bed around Scotland well known, or do we know only a small amount about it?

10:30

Don Macneish: When we started this process in 1984 or 1985, we got in touch with Brian Wilson, who was our MP at the time. We asked for an area of protection, but our request was denied by Jamie Lindsay—Lord Lindsay—who was the then Scottish Office's minister for environment. He was told by Scottish Natural Heritage's predecessor that the sea bed around Arran was not of any particular interest. In response to that argument, we said, "Okay—it might not be of interest to you, but it is our back garden and we think it is interesting." We simply wanted to protect the area around our island.

That was why we engaged in the seasearch project, which started to find a number of important species. The bay in question was studied by the Millport marine biology station, which produced a report that showed how important the area was to the Clyde. In fact, the area is probably unique because it supports maerl, which is a European protected species. When we went back to the inshore fisheries department, it eventually admitted that SNH did not know what was around Arran. Basically, we realised that many decisions in the process that we had gone through had been made with incomplete data about what was on the sea bed. There is a need for empirical data.

In answer to the question, we feel that there is not much specific data. That is really what our proposed trial is about. We need data on a specific

small geographical area of 7 square kilometres. If we can get some hard facts out of that, people may or may not be able to apply those data to the rest of Scotland, depending on how they come out. If we were to impose a restriction on the enclosed area that we propose, it would not be a matter of winding the video tape backwards until we get to lots of fish. The dynamics of the ecosystem have changed, but we hope that we could get back to fish at some point. However, it is impossible to predict exactly how that might happen.

The Convener: Are there any recommendations on how we should handle the petition?

Campbell Martin: We should ask the Scottish Executive for an update on its inshore fisheries strategy and for its opinion on the petition. Obviously, we should also consult the Scottish Association for Marine Science, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Clyde Fishermen's Association. Given what the petitioners have said today, I suggest that we also approach the Clyde and south-west static gear association and the commercial fishermen on Arran, including the local sea angling association, for their views.

The Convener: That sounds as if it would cover all the bases. Has anyone anything to add to that? I support Campbell Martin's proposal, which is a comprehensive list of who should be consulted.

John Scott: We should perhaps also consult North Ayrshire Council.

The Convener: Are members happy that we write to all the organisations that have been mentioned?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will collate the responses and keep everyone updated on progress. I thank the petitioners, with whom we shall keep in touch, for their evidence this morning. Unusually, theirs is the only oral evidence that we are taking on new petitions this morning.

A78 (Fairlie) (PE796)

The Convener: The next new petition is PE796 from Mr C Vassie. The petition calls on the Parliament to urge the Executive to introduce a pedestrian crossing and speed cameras on the A78 trunk road at Fairlie. The petitioner argues that there is a need for pedestrian crossings to be placed on the A78 at both the north and the south ends of the village of Fairlie, due to heavy traffic and commonplace speeding.

In a letter to the petitioner dated 20 January 2004, the Scottish Executive confirms that the surveyed traffic flows on the A78 through Fairlie are well below vehicular capacity. However, it

would be prepared to re-examine the situation if the traffic flow increases substantially in the future. The Executive also stated:

"Whilst I note your comments about pedestrian fatalities in the past, an investigation of accident data supplied by the police has identified only one pedestrian fatality in 1988 ... The police have not indicated that there is a specific problem with traffic speeds within Fairlie, however the introduction of 'Rippleprint' in the next few weeks should assist in reducing traffic speeds."

In a letter to the committee dated 11 December 2004, the petitioner highlights the fact that the Executive has

"put down a monitor on the A78 Trunk Road on 2 December 2004"

and that a police camera has also been installed on the road. What do members suggest we do with the petition?

Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): I understand that this would be an issue locally, but the police say that a very small minority of motorists in the area merit police attention. The Executive is already monitoring what is happening, so I am not sure that there is any other action that we can take on the petition.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): I agree. The Executive has put down a monitor on the A78. We need to give that measure and the introduction of rippleprint surfacing time to bed down and to take effect. Like Mike Watson, I suggest that we take no further action on the petition.

Campbell Martin: I come from Ardrossan, and Fairlie is just up the road from there. Although the A78 is a trunk road, the petition relates to a very narrow stretch through the village. Because the road is narrow, speeding on it is particularly dangerous. This may sound like a silly question, but is the camera that has been installed on the stretch an active camera? Will it be used to prosecute people, or is it there to scare them and to slow them down?

The Convener: I am not sure that there is any way in which we could know that. However, I am sure that the police have installed the camera with the intention of slowing down traffic. If it does not do that, it will not have proved its worth. Whether or not the camera is active, its impact must be monitored. I do not know the answer to Campbell Martin's question.

Campbell Martin: That is fair enough. The actions that have been described show that the Executive and the police are taking this issue seriously. It is right that we close the petition, as the action that the petitioner has requested is being taken.

The Convener: Do members agree to close the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

Current Petitions

Institutional Child Abuse (PE535)

10:38

The Convener: The first of our current petitions is PE535, from Chris Daly, which calls on the Parliament to urge the Executive to conduct an inquiry into past institutional child abuse, in particular of those children who were in the care of the state under the supervision of religious orders, to make an unreserved apology on behalf of the said state bodies and to urge the religious orders to apologise unconditionally.

At its meeting on 29 September 2004, the committee agreed to bid for a committee debate in the chamber on the petition and, in the meantime, to invite further views from the Minister for Education and Young People, the petitioner, the In Care Abuse Survivors/In Care Abused Support group—INCAS—Quarriers Homes and the Catholic Church. Responses have been received from the minister, the petitioner, Quarriers, the Catholic Church and INCAS. Correspondence has also been received from a number of victims of past institutional child abuse and has been circulated to members.

The Parliament debated PE535 on Wednesday 1 December, following a ministerial statement by the First Minister. The petitioner, Chris Daly, is here to respond to the points that were raised in the debate. He is accompanied by Helen Holland, who is the vice-chair of INCAS. I welcome you both; you may take some time to make initial comments, after which we will discuss the points that you make.

Chris Daly: I thank the committee for allowing me to attend the meeting to give my personal response to the debate on institutional child abuse, which took place on 1 December. I thank the INCAS committee, which came on board at a crucial stage to support the petition and guide me through the process. Without the backing of INCAS and individual survivors, which provided strength in numbers, I am not sure that I would have had the resolve to continue. It was very much an uphill struggle to secure recognition of the wrongs meted out to people who survived abuse in children's homes and other child care institutions such as list D schools.

The work of the Public Petitions Committee was key to the progression of the petition to secure a debate in the chamber. I understand that mountains had to be moved to achieve that and I thank Michael McMahon, the committee's convener, for his determination. I also recognise the input and hard work of members of the

committee—there was clear cross-party support for the petition. Other MSPs took an interest as their constituents told them about their own experiences of institutions. I thank my MSP, Janis Hughes, who was very supportive at different stages, for her hard work and for her input to the debate.

The full recognition by the First Minister of what happened to many of Scotland's most vulnerable children, who were placed in institutions for their care and protection, was a huge leap forward. His apology on behalf of the Scottish people was a very emotional moment for me and I believe that his apology was heartfelt and meaningful.

The First Minister said:

"we are anxious to do the right thing by the survivors of past abuse."—[*Official Report*, 1 December 2004; c 12391.]

I hope that the experienced, independent person that Peter Peacock said that he would appoint does the right thing by survivors. To use the words of the petition, I hope that the independent expert will

"establish a picture of causes, nature and extent of physical, sexual and emotional abuse of children in institutions from around 1940 or before until the present",

and

"compile a report and make public, on the activities and findings of"

the independent expert. The report should contain "such recommendations as" the reporter "considers appropriate".

The reporter's hands should not be tied. In particular, if the reporter concludes that a public inquiry should be initiated, such an inquiry should happen. The independent expert should also consider the continuing effects of abuse. It is also important that the Minister for Education and Young People and civil servants take account of the views that MSPs expressed in the debate when they put detail to and present in writing Mr Peacock's proposals.

Helen Holland wants to join in the question-and-answer session and to give the response of INCAS to the debate.

The Convener: On behalf of the committee, I say that without your courage and tenacity, we would not have taken the issue as far as we did. You are to be commended for your efforts to raise such an important issue in the Scottish Parliament and we congratulate you. Do members want to comment?

Ms White: It is nice to meet you again, Mr Daly, and to meet Helen Holland. As the convener said, we thank you—personally and professionally—for the work that you put in. You mentioned the First Minister's statement and the independent review

that is proposed. Is it still the intention of the petitioner and INCAS, on behalf of everyone who suffered abuse, to push for an independent inquiry, or were the answers that you received in the debate on 1 December sufficient?

Chris Daly: I will let Helen Holland answer your question.

10:45

Helen Holland (In Care Abuse Survivors/In Care Abuse Support): INCAS has met the Scottish Executive only once since the debate. We are not sure what powers the independent adviser or investigator will have. We have not been able to go back to the body of INCAS and say, "This is what is on offer", because we do not know what is on offer. We have not had anything in writing. Our concern is that the Scottish Executive has said that it will address only the response of the Minister for Education and Young People to the debate. We find that disheartening because although a lot of MSPs made valuable contributions to the debate and offered guidance it seems as if that has been ignored. The Executive is going to proceed only on the basis of the minister's statement. We have no clear guidelines on what package will be put in place, so it is difficult to answer your question. We would obviously have to go back to the body of INCAS and have a vote on what way we want to go. It is difficult to explain to people what is happening when we are not having it explained to us. We are still very much in the dark.

Chris Daly: We do not know what the remit of what Peter Peacock is now calling an experienced, independent person will be. I hope that they will look into all the issues, but that is difficult to know when we do not have the information in black and white.

Ms White: People have said that they were pleased with what came out of the debate, but, as you said, you have not received anything in black and white. I am loth to close the petition on the word of the minister, given that you do not know what is going to happen. That is why I sought clarification. If we close the petition today and you are not satisfied with the independent reporter, we are back to square one. I want to clarify the point that you really do not have a clue what is expected of the reporter.

Helen Holland: On behalf of INCAS I was going to ask that the petition not be closed until we have clarification of what will be involved and what the Scottish Executive's input will be.

Ms White: That is why I asked the question. We still need lots of answers and I think that an independent inquiry would suffice. I am open to suggestions from you and from Executive

ministers. In order to move on, we have to get evidence on how what happened was allowed to happen. We have not been able to get that yet, but I hope that either an independent reporter or an inquiry would allow us to get it. I would not be happy to close the petition without getting further information from the minister.

Chris Daly: I hope that it would be within the remit of the independent expert to call for a public inquiry if they deemed it necessary, given the findings of their report.

Ms White: We do not have a guarantee that that would happen. I would be loth to close the petition until we have such a guarantee.

Jackie Baillie: I had not intended to debate whether to close the petition. My understanding is that the minister has to report back to Parliament, because he undertook specifically to do so. If he does not do so, Parliament would take a view on that, rather than it being a matter simply for the Public Petitions Committee. I do not want us to get caught down a sideline. The matter is for Parliament as a whole, irrespective of what happens to the petition. Have Chris Daly and INCAS been asked to contribute to drawing up the remit of the independent review? Have they been asked to identify anyone to carry out that review? I heard you say that you had had one meeting. Is there the prospect of more? I got the sense from the minister that that was the start of a process of engagement that would result in the kind of outcomes that you are looking for.

Chris Daly: That is right. We have been asked for our input into the membership of the short-life working group on childhood sexual abuse, which will be an extension of the group that did not examine the specifics of institutional abuse. We have been asked to contribute our ideas on the membership of the short-life working group, but I am not sure that we will have a great deal of say in deciding who the independent expert will be.

Jackie Baillie: Have you been asked to contribute to that decision?

Helen Holland: We were asked whether we knew anyone who could hold that position but, unfortunately, we did not. The answer that we got was that the person might need to be from down south because of the political aspects. I think that the issue is still being considered and that no decision has been made so far.

Chris Daly: Given that some previous inquiries were seen by some people to be biased towards members of staff in the institutions, we must be careful that the independent expert has a balanced view that takes on board the opinions of the survivors. In some recent inquiries, children had to give evidence about the abuse that they suffered in institutions, but there appeared to be a

bias towards members of staff. We have concerns that an even balance might not be achieved. The position will obviously be difficult to fill. We need someone who is fully independent but who has the necessary expertise, such as a social work-type background.

Helen Holland: In direct response to Jackie Baillie's question, I should say that we have not been eliminated from any decisions. Regardless of what the final decision might be, I imagine that the Scottish Executive intends to come back to us to tell us who the person is and to give us some information on their background. I imagine that we will be asked whether the person is acceptable to INCAS. In all fairness, the Executive has been open in its discussions with us up till now.

John Scott: You may have just answered this question. Given that you have no one suitable in mind to carry out the inquiry, are you content to allow the Scottish Executive to find someone and then seek your agreement to that person's appointment?

Helen Holland: We need an element of trust somewhere along the line. Obviously, the Scottish Executive has more contacts than our membership has. If the Executive comes back to us with some background information on the person, I imagine that it would take on board any comments that we might make if we felt that there was a discrepancy or if we were unhappy about something. At this moment in time, we trust the Executive to choose someone who will fit the bill.

Chris Daly: I gave the civil servants in the Scottish Executive a videotape of Kieran Prendiville's dramatisation "Care", which has a factual basis in the abuse that was uncovered in Wales at the beginning of the 1990s. After that dramatisation, there was a discussion programme that included input from people who were experts in child abuse in institutions. I suggested to the civil servants that they might get some ideas from that discussion about what type of person they should look for to fill the position of independent expert.

John Scott: On a different subject, you will have seen the letter from Peter Peacock dated 21 December, in which he outlines all the measures that he is taking. Should the minister be taking other measures, which are not outlined in his letter?

Chris Daly: I received a copy of the letter just before today's meeting—

John Scott: So did we.

Chris Daly: I have not really had a chance to consider the letter. The minister highlights various points. He says that he will

"appoint someone with experience to analyse independently the regulatory requirements".

That would certainly fit the bill in relation to what the petition calls for.

John Scott: We can take a minute to go through the letter. The letter says that the minister will give you access to information and that files have now been redacted. It says that the minister is involving the Scottish information commissioner, considering the law on limitation and establishing a short-life working group and that he has had discussions about whom he will appoint.

Chris Daly: There is a difficulty with independent institutions. Will they be compelled to hand over files? In my experience of trying to access files I have been given many different reasons why files are missing. For example, I have been told that the files have been lost in a fire, mislaid during building works and lost in transit from one institution to the organisation's headquarters. The Scottish Executive has started the process of redacting its own files, which will be finished at the beginning of the new year, but the difficulty is that some institutions have given no firm commitment to allow access to the files that they hold.

John Scott: The minister might want to take up that point. I am sure that he will be made aware of this discussion. However, I think that he said during the debate that he has no powers to compel bodies outwith the Executive or local government to open up their files.

Are there other, fundamental issues that have not been addressed?

Chris Daly: I hope that the fact that other agencies are opening up their files will force the institutions that have given no firm commitment in that regard to give access to their own files.

The Convener: Linda Fabiani MSP and Janis Hughes MSP are here. Do you want to comment, Linda?

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): I have just received a copy of the letter to which John Scott referred. When the witnesses met the Executive, were they given an idea of the timescale for the appointment of the investigator and the duration of the investigation?

I think that everyone appreciated the First Minister's apology on behalf of the state. Has that been followed up by other parties that have been involved over the piece?

Chris Daly: Unfortunately, we received the same response from the Catholic Church that we received a couple of years ago. The Church has reissued the apology that was given on the back of the publication of the book, "The Pyjama Parade", by the priest, Father Steve Gilhooley, who wrote about his experiences of abuse during his time in a seminary. We did not regard the church's

statement as an overarching apology—as the church would call it—because it did not include children in institutional care. Other survivors did not regard themselves as included in that apology.

11:00

Helen Holland: The apology was made about three years ago through the media and, as far as I know, it was published in only one newspaper. When we contacted Archbishop O'Brien, as he was then, we were told that the apology was in direct response to the accusations that Steve Gilhooley had made against the seminary that he had been in. When we asked why the apology was given through only one newspaper, we got the answer that the archbishop leaves it up to his public relations person who to give the apology to. Nobody has ever been given a direct apology.

My understanding of the Catholic Church's practice is that, if an apology is going to be made, it tends to be done through the archdioceses. The apology is sent to every diocese in the country and, I imagine, read out at every mass on a Sunday or perhaps a Saturday evening as well. It is therefore directed at survivors who are carrying on with their faith. That is a difficult issue, because many survivors have waived the faith and are not practising at the moment.

For the Catholic Church to apologise through one newspaper is like my going out and slapping somebody and then sending somebody else to apologise on my behalf. It has not come across as an apology to survivors. I had hoped that after the First Minister's apology, others would follow his example.

Linda Fabiani: That is what we all hoped.

Helen Holland: I hoped that there would be an immediate response from the churches, Quakers and other organisations, but that has not happened.

Linda Fabiani: Has there been no response from anyone?

Helen Holland: No.

Mike Watson: I ask for clarification in light of what Ms Holland has said about what the Catholic Church said through a newspaper. Committee members have received an e-mail from John Deighan at the Catholic parliamentary office, in which he says that it was the bishops' conference of Scotland that apologised. Are we talking about the same apology? In December 2001, Archbishop O'Brien stated:

"I apologise unreservedly to those who, over the years, have suffered any form of abuse at the hands of those representing the Catholic Church."

Are you in a position to say whether that is the apology that you are talking about? It came through the bishops' conference and would obviously carry greater weight than an apology given through an individual newspaper.

Chris Daly: That paragraph is taken from the newspaper article, which I read recently. I think that it was in *The Scotsman*. It followed by saying that there was a specific apology to Steve Gilhooley.

Mike Watson: Was that on a personal basis?

Chris Daly: Yes. The paragraph that you quoted is taken from the newspaper article in which Archbishop O'Brien apologised. There was further detail in it, which mentioned Steve Gilhooley specifically.

Linda Fabiani: Are you saying that, since the First Minister's apology, INCAS has had nothing from anyone else who we might have expected would have followed the spirit of what the First Minister said?

Chris Daly: No, we have not. We had hoped that there might be some reconciliation. We have on many occasions held out an olive branch to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. For years, we have been asking the bishops whether they would sit round the table with survivors in some kind of reconciliation process, as has happened in America. Reconciliation has also been going on in Ireland and, in some cases, with particular orders down south.

To get away from the Catholic Church, I also noticed that Quarriers had sent a letter to the Public Petitions Committee. In some ways, it appears to be making some moves towards reconciliation with survivors. However, it does not recognise fully that the abuse took place within its institutions, to the point where it has said "if abuse happened". In the case of that organisation, there have been court cases that have proved that abuse took place and there have been convictions in criminal cases.

Helen Holland: I do not mean to harp on about the Catholic Church, but Alan Draper, who is the chairman of INCAS, used to be an adviser to the Catholic Church and therefore has lots of contacts in that church. I understand that he intends to try to open up some kind of dialogue with the appropriate party in the church in the hope that it will issue a public apology, perhaps through INCAS. I understand that INCAS would expect the church to apologise via INCAS because it is a point of contact for a lot of people who have been abused.

Since the petition was raised, more people have come forward. One of the MSPs said that, given that an apology had been made, the doors might

be opened for more people to come forward. That has happened. I would like Alan Draper to have the opportunity to open dialogue with the Catholic Church and perhaps get some kind of response from it. However, to date, the answer to your question is that we have not had any other responses.

Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): Like Linda Fabiani, I am saddened to hear that other organisations have not taken the opportunity to come forward, given the fact that the Executive and the First Minister have gone so far in their efforts to address the situation. Although INCAS has put a lot of work into trying to liaise with those organisations, it would be nice if those organisations were to come forward voluntarily after the petition is progressed. I hope that there will still be an opportunity for them to come forward through INCAS to open up a dialogue, which might help the situation.

I accept what you say about the element of trust in the Executive's selection of an independent expert who will be able to do the work and I know that you have had a meeting with the Executive since the subject was debated and that you are keen to be involved in deciding the work that that person will undertake. Are there plans for further meetings at which you will discuss the independent expert's remit or are you waiting to see a proposed remit?

Chris Daly: We are waiting to see a proposed remit for that person in black and white. Additionally, we are told that negotiations are continuing with the lawyers before matters concerning the independent expert can be finalised.

Ms White: Jackie Baillie mentioned that the minister had given assurances that the matter would return to Parliament. However, in his letter to the convener on 21 December, all that Peter Peacock said was:

"I confirm my undertaking to Parliament to report outcomes of this work".

By that the minister meant the appointment of an independent adviser and the establishment of a short-life working group. I have gone through the *Official Report* of the debate and, although he talked about appointing someone, working with INCAS and the survivors, and setting up the short-life working group, nowhere did he mention having an inquiry.

As the Public Petitions Committee has done such a good job in this area—I was not on the committee when the subject first came up—and it has the faith of INCAS and the survivors, I would hate to think that the work would be taken from the Public Petitions Committee if the result that the people want was not achieved. There has not

been an inquiry and it has not been said that there will be one. I have looked through the *Official Report* of the debate and most of the questions that were raised there were raised by members of the Public Petitions Committee.

I would like to keep the petition live. I do not think that there will be a public inquiry. If there is, that will be great, but if not, at least we will be able to monitor what is happening. I know that the convener has the final say, but I do not think that the questions in the petition have been answered.

Jackie Baillie: I do not want to open up a big debate, but my understanding of the minister's response was that he believed that an independent review would be more productive than an inquiry. However, I hear what the petitioner says about the possibility that the person who carries out the independent review will suggest that there is merit in holding an inquiry. The minister has provided an answer, although it may not be the answer that the petition seeks.

I would like to keep open the petition for a slightly different reason. This morning we have heard an expectation that others would follow suit, which has not been met. That expectation is contained in the petition, so it is legitimate for us to keep it open. I suggest that we do one other thing. We should write back to the Catholic parliamentary office, give it an indication of the discussion that has taken place and clarify the nature of the apology that was made. Clearly, people are under the impression that it was made to one individual, rather than generically. We should also pursue the question of access to files. The minister said that he would do that, but there would be no harm in the Public Petitions Committee doing likewise.

The Convener: Are members happy with that approach?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will keep the petition open, investigate the issues that Jackie Baillie has raised and pursue them in the way that she has recommended. Are you happy with that, Mr Daly?

Chris Daly: Yes. Obviously, it is difficult for us to take a firm decision on the review until we see the remit in black and white.

The Convener: I will make one comment that may be of significance when we come to examine the petition again in the future. I am always careful to ensure that we treat all petitioners who appear before the committee as equally as possible. In the past, we have never allowed something to be added on to a petition while it is being considered; we have always kept to the remit of the petition. We must be careful that we do not advance this petition by widening its scope or considering other

issues. We have turned down previous requests to do that, and it would set a dangerous precedent if we allowed that to happen in this case. INCAS or Mr Daly may need to submit a new petition to allow us to consider further issues in the future. The committee would be very open to that. If what the minister has proposed is not satisfactory, but what you are seeking is not within the remit of the initial petition, you may be required to submit a new petition to allow us take matters forward. Is that okay?

Chris Daly: Yes.

Helen Holland: INCAS is happy with that approach.

The Convener: We will keep an eye on the situation, as Jackie Baillie has recommended, and will keep the petition open until further inquiries have been made.

Chris Daly: Thank you.

Alcohol and Drug Misuse (PE531)

The Convener: Our next current petition is PE531, from Mr and Mrs Robinson. It calls on the Parliament to urge the Executive to provide adequate funding to local agencies to support and treat those suffering from alcohol and drug dependency, to provide a properly funded network of support groups for carers and to recognise the extent of alcohol and drug misuse in Scotland, especially alcohol abuse in women.

At its meeting on 11 March 2003, the committee considered responses from the Scottish Executive and Perth and Kinross health and social care co-operative and agreed to invite the petitioners to comment on those responses. Despite a number of reminders having been sent, no response has been received from the petitioners. Do members have views on what we can do with the petition, other than close it?

Helen Eadie: If we have not received a response from the petitioner, the committee can do little more than it has already done. Given that we have made numerous approaches to the petitioner, I suggest that we close the petition.

The Convener: Do members agree to close the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000 (PE573)

11:15

The Convener: Current petition PE573, by Dr J Beatson, calls on the Parliament to amend section 47 of part 5 of the Adults with Incapacity

(Scotland) Act 2000 and its code of practice, to remove the assessment and certification workload requirements from general practitioners in favour of the appointment of dedicated personnel to fulfil that requirement.

At its meeting on 7 January 2004, the committee agreed to defer further consideration of the petition until the Scottish Executive's proposals on facilitating the aims of part 5 of the act were published. In its response, the Executive states that the Minister for Health and Community Care announced on 2 July that he was minded to put forward two changes to part 5, when a suitable bill becomes available. The two changes are: to allow health professionals other than registered medical practitioners to issue certificates of incapacity under section 47, provided that they have the necessary skills and expertise to assess capacity; and to extend the maximum duration of section 47 certificates from one year to three years in certain circumstances, such as in cases where the adult has a degenerative or progressive illness with no prospect of improvement or recovery.

Do members have any comments?

Jackie Baillie: I think that the Executive's response is very helpful and addresses Dr Beatson's concerns, so I move that we close the petition.

John Scott: I too think that the response is extraordinarily helpful, and it is actually quite a victory for the Public Petitions Committee. Essentially, what we have done is to review legislation that, despite the best intentions, has been found to be slightly inadequate. My only concern is about the time at which a suitable bill may be introduced for those alterations to be enacted. The question that I have is whether the relaxation in the guidelines will be sufficient to satisfy the petitioners. I just wonder if it might be worth asking the petitioners if the relaxation in the guidelines accommodates their position—in the mean time, at any rate—while we wait for a suitable piece of legislation to be introduced.

Jackie Baillie: I might be wrong, but I understand that the bill will shortly be before us. I forget its title, but it is about to be introduced, if it has not already been introduced. The Executive is availing itself of an early legislative opportunity.

The Convener: There is a health bill that was initially intended to include organ retention, but it may now be the case that it is the smoking bill that will encapsulate that. The bill will probably be a vehicle for those changes. We can certainly ask whether the minister intends that to be the bill that he discusses in his letter.

John Scott: I would be grateful if you would ask. I am sure that Jackie Baillie is right, and I would be happy if she is, but—

The Convener: But we should just get that clarified.

John Scott: Yes. If everybody is happy with that, I would be very grateful.

The Convener: Okay.

Solvent Abuse (PE580)

The Convener: The next petition is PE580, by John O'Brien, calling on the Parliament to recognise the serious problem of solvent abuse in Scotland and to introduce preventive safety measures to help combat solvent abuse.

At its meeting on 20 April 2004, the committee agreed to ask the Executive to inform it of any developments addressing the issues raised in the petition, including the test purchasing pilot in Fife. The committee also noted from a response from Shell UK that a report published in 1995 by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs led to an announcement by the Department of Trade and Industry that it would seek the co-operation of industry in establishing an industry-led forum, with the involvement of the DTI, to co-ordinate the activities of the cigarette lighter refill companies in the UK. The committee agreed to write to the Department of Trade and Industry inquiring whether it has any plans to collaborate with the industry along the lines outlined to take that project forward.

In its response, the Executive stated that it would be mounting a Scotland-wide campaign in the autumn to raise awareness among retailers of the law governing the sale of cigarette lighter refills, which makes it an offence to sell those products to under 18s, and highlighted the fact that the Scottish Retail Consortium is planning to distribute a new booklet to retailers reminding them of their responsibilities in relation to age restricted sales generally. The DTI states in its response that although it supports initiatives by companies to tackle social issues, it does not have specific views on the initiative.

Do members have any comments?

Helen Eadie: I have been following the progress of the petition since it was first considered by the Public Petitions Committee. My colleague Marilyn Livingstone, who represents the constituency next door to mine, has done a power of work with John O'Brien, who is to be commended for his dedication and commitment to the issue.

I am concerned that the DTI has not addressed a key measure that we wanted to be taken. Despite the best endeavours of Shell UK, which has been helpful and has tried to co-operate, I understand that the DTI has not achieved the goal of ensuring that a substance is inserted into the product to ensure that young people, or others,

who want to sniff solvents are physically put off doing so. Chemists at Shell tell me that it is possible to insert such a substance, but that that must be done by the solvent manufacturers, rather than by Shell. We must find a way of exerting pressure and I endorse the suggestion in our briefing papers that we invite John MacDougall MP to the committee.

The Convener: We can certainly ask John MacDougall if he wants to attend a meeting of the committee or submit written evidence, to help us to consider the matter further.

Mike Watson: I am surprised that John MacDougall has not been able to secure an adjournment debate—that was the situation when the committee discussed the petition in April. No doubt there is much competition for the slot. It would be advisable to invite John MacDougall to the committee. We could invite Marilyn Livingstone to give evidence at the same time, given that she has been working on the matter, as Helen Eadie said.

The Convener: Are members happy to invite John MacDougall and Marilyn Livingstone to meet the committee and discuss the matter or at least to submit information?

Members indicated agreement.

Bone Marrow Register (PE687)

The Convener: Petition PE687 was lodged by Ms Geva Blackett, on behalf of Millie's Campaign and Ms Katie McCulloch, on behalf of the Anthony Nolan Trust. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to run a campaign encouraging 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 29 September, the committee agreed to invite the Minister for Health and Community Care to comment on responses from the petitioner and the Anthony Nolan Trust. The committee also asked whether the Executive intends to publicise the donation of bone marrow and blood stem cells at blood donation centres and doctors' surgeries throughout the country. In his response, the minister says that the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service

"has recently reviewed its policy on the recruitment of bone marrow donors and has agreed that this should be changed so that new blood donors would be invited to also become bone marrow donors. SNBTS hope to be in a position to introduce this change in the near future and will produce information leaflets to raise awareness of the facility."

The minister also said:

"the Executive, SNBTS and NHS Scotland recognise and appreciate the importance of the work of the Anthony Nolan Trust and have taken on board the concerns which have

been expressed in relation to the need to raise awareness and recruit more bone marrow donors in Scotland."

Do members have views on the petition?

Jackie Baillie: The minister's response was very helpful. I am glad that SNBTS is taking the action that his letter describes, which meets the points that the petitioners raised. We should close the petition.

The Convener: Do members agree to close the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

Public Water Supply (Fluoridation) (PE775)

The Convener: Petition PE775 was lodged by Lois MacDonell on behalf of the Highland movement against water fluoridation and calls on the Parliament to take the necessary steps to prohibit the addition of any artificial water fluoridation to the public water supply in Scotland.

At its meeting on 27 October, the committee agreed to ask the Minister for Health and Community Care why it has taken so long for the Executive to take action on the issue and to provide details of the timescale for the publication of conclusions from the consultation and for the announcement of its decision on the fluoridation of drinking water. In his response, the minister says:

"the First Minister set out the Executive's position on this issue in his response to Nora Radcliffe at Question Time on 18 November. He confirmed that we are currently considering our full response to our consultation on improving the oral health of children in Scotland. The First Minister also said that, having listened to the views expressed in the consultation, we will not be changing the current legislation on fluoridation of water supplies in this Parliament."

Does that conclude the matter? What do members think?

Jackie Baillie: On the basis of the minister's response, I suggest that we close the petition.

The Convener: Okay, we will leave it at that. That ends consideration of current petitions.

Public Petitions System (Promotion)

11:24

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is a report on our event in Inverness to promote the public petitions system. Following our event in Dundee in June 2004, we agreed at our meeting on 15 September 2004 to have a rolling programme of events with the aim of raising awareness of the public petitions system among those groups and individuals who are traditionally marginalised from the political process.

The committee held its second participation event on 29 November at the Highland Council chambers in Inverness. The event was attended by 60 representatives from local community and equality groups and from voluntary sector organisations. Positive feedback has been received. A draft report on the Inverness event has been circulated. Do members have any comments or recommendations on the report?

Mike Watson: I was one of those involved in the Inverness event, which I found to be a worthwhile experience, like the event in Dundee. It was gratifying that so many people responded to our invitation to find out more about what we do. The event also helped change people's attitude. That is reflected in the comments in the report, which say things such as, "I never thought we could have contact with the Parliament, so it is good that the Parliament comes out and makes contact with us." I was particularly struck by one comment, which said:

"This session has reduced my habit of cynicism to a manageable level."

On that basis alone—although we do not know how the person has coped since then—the event must have been worth while.

The comments indicate how people can be surprised in a positive way about what our committee does and about the links that they can have with it. Therefore, I am glad that we have established a policy of having other such events this parliamentary session, although where those events should be held is a matter of discussion. As a member, I also got a lot out of the event. It was a two-way process.

The Convener: Absolutely. I also learned a lot from the Inverness event. I listened more than I talked to the community groups that were present.

As Mike Watson pointed out, we gave a commitment to hold such an event in each of the Parliament's electoral regions. We have done two, but we still have six to go, so we will need to identify appropriate venues and times for future

events. I think that the clerks are already working on where our next event might take place, but that the location has not yet been firmed up.

Jackie Baillie: I suspect that the deputy convener might have a hand in the location.

The Convener: We are working on the basis that the next event will be held in Ayr.

Jackie Baillie: Surely not.

The Convener: Our next event will be in Ayr, if that can be arranged.

Obviously, such events are also a learning process for us. Do members have any other comments?

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): The event in Inverness went down very well and was quite a success. It received a lot of favourable comment in the press as well as from the people who attended. The process of taking such events into peripheral areas is to be welcomed. I leave it to the convener and to Dr Jim Johnston to arrange where the events should be held.

Campbell Martin: I want to comment on the location of the next event—I am not against it, so John Scott need not panic—which it has been suggested will be Ayr in the South of Scotland region. Given that the West of Scotland region takes in a good part of Ayrshire, perhaps we should approach West of Scotland organisations that operate in Ayrshire. Such organisations might be more likely to attend an event in Ayr than somewhere such as Strathkelvin and Bearsden.

The Convener: That is just a practical issue.

Campbell Martin: It is just that people in the West of Scotland region who live in Ayrshire will be more likely to attend an event in Ayr. It might be good to invite such people to our Ayr event.

The Convener: I understand what you are saying, but I think that the issue is one of practicality. Perhaps you could ask Jim Johnston about the practicalities of reaching communities that are beyond the region that we are visiting. However, that is useful information to know.

Mike Watson: Campbell Martin makes a good point about how the regions are structured. Many people would be surprised to find what areas are encompassed by the South of Scotland region, which I seem to recall has a horseshoe shape.

We previously discussed trying to identify where petitions come from so that we can work out, by a process of deduction, where they do not come from. Perhaps we could try having regions within regions when we hold our events so that we can attract more people from those areas from which,

for whatever reason, we have not received a proportionate number of petitions.

The Convener: That is a useful suggestion.

John Farquhar Munro: According to some of the comments in the report, there was not much evidence that petitions have ultimately been successful. Perhaps we should highlight two or three petitions that have been successful.

The Convener: It is always good to do that.

Helen Eadie: As well as visiting geographical areas, we should also consider engaging with different communities of interest. Scotland has a great number of disadvantaged communities of interest, such as disability groups and ethnic minority groups. As well as holding events based on geography, we should reflect on whether we need to bring together people from across Scotland who are disadvantaged in a particular way.

The Convener: Again, that point is worth considering.

Ms White: Perhaps the convener and clerks should speak to the Equal Opportunities Committee, which is carrying out an inquiry on disability that involves going out to the different regions. We would not want the two committees to clash by inviting the same groups. That committee will be going out and about in April next year.

The Convener: The clerks are obliged to check that that does not happen, but such practicalities are always worth taking into consideration.

Do members agree that we should publish the report on our website and circulate it to those who attended the event?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank everyone for their attendance. I wish everyone a very happy Christmas and a good new year.

Meeting closed at 11:30.

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