

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Monday 6 June 2005

Session 2

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

10th Meeting 2005, 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 :

Marilyn de Blicke (Ayrshire Voices)
Sheena Borthwick (West Sound, West FM and South West Sound FM)
Councillor Peter John Convery
Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con)
Alan Gordon (Stena Line)
Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP)
Councillor Alistair Kerr
John Kerr (Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry)
Bob Leitch (Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry)
Lauren Redmond

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jim Johnston

ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Hough

LOCATION

Council Buildings, Ayr

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Monday 6 June 2005

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:41*]

The Convener (Michael McMahon): Good morning everyone and welcome to the 10th meeting in 2005 of the Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee. I note the apologies of Rosie Kane, John Farquhar Munro and Jackie Baillie. The committee is delighted to be in Ayr this morning as part of the Ayr 800 celebrations. I thank South Ayrshire Council for allowing us to meet in this splendid chamber.

This is the third time that the Public Petitions Committee has met outside Edinburgh. The committee is pleased that so many people have come along to observe our proceedings. We will hear shortly from a number of local petitioners and this afternoon we will hold the third in a series of events across Scotland, which are aimed at promoting the public petitions system. The committee looks forward to hearing people's views on how the public petitions system works.

We are out of our normal surroundings, therefore it might be best if members of the committee were to introduce themselves before we take agenda item 1, so that members of the public who have turned up have an idea of who is sitting in front of them. I am the member of the Scottish Parliament for Hamilton North and Bellshill and the convener of the committee.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I am MSP for the Ayr constituency and I am delighted to see so many of my constituents and other people from Ayrshire at committee today.

Campbell Martin (West of Scotland) (Ind): I am the MSP for the West of Scotland.

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): I am the MSP for the South of Scotland. I am not a member of the committee, but I am here to observe and—I hope—participate in the meeting.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I am an MSP for Glasgow.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): I am the MSP for the Dunfermline East constituency. It is lovely to be in Ayr, in this fantastic setting. Thank you for having us today.

Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): I echo Helen Eadie's comments. I represent the Glasgow Cathcart constituency, which is in the south-east of Glasgow.

New Petitions

A77 (Southern Section Upgrade) (PE859)

10:43

The Convener: Our first new petition is PE859. The petitioner, Sheena Borthwick, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to upgrade the southern section of the A77 between Ayr and Stranraer, including providing passing places every 6 miles and developing a bypass at Maybole.

Before it was lodged formally, PE859 was hosted on the e-petitions section of the Parliament's website, where it attracted 529 signatures. Sheena Borthwick is at the committee today, along with Alan Gordon, and will make a brief statement in support of the petition. I welcome both of you to the committee. You have a few minutes in which to make your opening remarks, after which we will discuss matters that are raised.

Sheena Borthwick (West Sound, West FM and South West Sound FM): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am the managing director of West Sound, West FM and South West Sound FM. I am joined by my colleague, Alan Gordon, who is the route director of Stena Line. I thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to present our sizeable petition, which has attracted just over 5,000 signatures in its e-format and in the area.

The petition calls for upgrading of the southern section of the A77. West Sound asks that the 5,000 signatures on PE859 be added to the 48,000 signatures that the radio station gathered two years ago, which were presented to Iain Gray, the then Minister for Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning. Unfortunately, the Scottish Executive did not acknowledge that petition in writing or otherwise.

We have been allocated three minutes to sum up three years' work, investment and commitment to road safety on the A77, so please bear with me. West Sound and our partner Stena Line believe that it is imperative that the A77 southern section be upgraded as a matter of urgency. The northern section is now complete, and driver psychology dictates that changing from driving speeds of 70mph or 80mph to 40mph is difficult and problematic and causes drivers to take unnecessary chances that ultimately exacerbate and contribute to the high casualty rate on the road. It is well known that one of the main causes of accidents on the A77 is driver frustration. West Sound and Stena Line believe that, in its current state, the A77 southern section is no better than a B-class road. Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway

deserve a better road; indeed, Scotland's future growth depends on it.

The petition calls for major upgrading work that would include a Maybole bypass and passing places every 6 miles to alleviate driver frustration. West Sound asks for the exclusive right to erect poster sites in those suggested passing places, to signpost drivers to tune in to one of the West Sound radio services for up-to-the-minute, real-time robust traffic and travel information that is pertinent to Ayrshire and to Dumfries and Galloway, which will allow the radio station to talk directly to drivers who need that information while they are driving. West Sound has the only stable of radio services that is able to perform that function; no other media owner can talk directly to drivers on the A77.

Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway are great attractions for tourists and it could be argued that those transient drivers are completely unaware of the A77 frustrations and are more vulnerable. It is therefore even more important that the West Sound guardian angel signs, which would impart the radio station frequencies, be erected so that all drivers know to which radio station to tune in for the information that they need. To show the radio station's commitment to road safety, especially on the A77, we have employed two ex-traffic policemen to gather, assess and impart the traffic and travel information, which is broadcast hourly. If there is a major incident, the frequency of the reports increases accordingly.

Over the past three years, West Sound has received two national awards for its commitment to road safety and the work that it has done so far to highlight the dangers of driving on the A77. It is our opinion that education of the general driving public is just as important as engineering and enforcement. I hand over to my colleague Alan Gordon to explain what the route means to the communities.

Alan Gordon (Stena Line): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am the route director for Stena Line in Stranraer. Stena Line is the only company on the Irish sea that employs only United Kingdom seafarers. That brings major economic and social benefits to Stranraer and the surrounding area, where Stena Line is the biggest employer. Stena Line also operates the biggest fast ferry in the world. It is the size of a football pitch and can take up to 375 cars, or a combination of cars and lorries, which brings major benefits to Scotland through tourism and through imports and exports.

However, as a result of the road infrastructure on the A77 there are major disadvantages to the world's largest fast ferry operating to Stranraer. All the traffic from the ferry discharges from the port in the course of 15 minutes, which leads to

platooning of vehicles on the 50 miles from Stranraer to Ayr. All the cars move at the pace of the slowest vehicle, which leads to driver frustration. That is why we have worked with West Sound on its road safety campaign—the excellent guardian angel initiative. As well as the campaign, however, we believe strongly that we must address the basic problem, which is the road itself. If we really want to reduce the number of road accidents on the A77 south of Ayr, we should remove driver frustration by providing passing places every 6 miles and a bypass at Maybole.

Stena Line is committed in the long term to the south-west of Scotland. The two new ports for the service to Northern Ireland that we have announced will be the largest single investment in south-west Scotland for about 20 years. With improvements in the road infrastructure, we can improve safety for all road users, including our customers, and we can improve the overall economy of south-west Scotland and Scotland as a whole.

The Convener: I will allow members who wish to make points or to ask questions to do so, but before that I will seek clarification from Mr Gordon.

A few months ago the Local Government and Transport Committee, of which I am also a member, visited Stranraer to talk to the community there about the impact of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001. P&O and Stena Line gave us a presentation about the transport difficulties, but made it clear that the priority was the transport links between Stranraer and the A74 just north of Carlisle. Is that still the case?

Alan Gordon: I gave that presentation. Both roads are a problem. If I were asked to say which road is worse, I would say the A77 because of the quality of the road. The A75 between Stranraer and Newton Stewart is also very poor. That is the section of that road that has the worst accident rate.

The Convener: So the A77 is your priority.

Alan Gordon: Yes.

Helen Eadie: I notice that there is a map in the paperwork that we have just received. From my understanding of it—perhaps you can confirm whether I am right—there seems to be a plan of work that will be carried out. Can you talk us through the plan?

Alan Gordon: We have worked in partnership with the Scottish Executive. With the investment in the new port at Cairnryan, four passing places have already been identified on the A77. Our problem is platooning of vehicles. People in Ayr can tell when the ferry has discharged because the traffic is all together by the time it arrives here. Statistics for the A77 and the A75 show that over

the day the roads are not that busy. The problem is that all the traffic comes in a 15-minute spell. The other problem is that not only Stena Line but P&O operate from the port. Because all the traffic moves slowly, the vehicles from one ferry catch up with those from the previous ferry, so the amount of traffic that comes up the road at one time is doubled.

Helen Eadie: The yellow boxes on the map represent the planned work that is in preparation. Is there a timescale for that work?

Sheena Borthwick: There no timescale that we know of.

I am part of the A77 working group. At first glance it looks as if a lot of work is being done on the road, but the point is that there are not enough passing places and there is no signage. Every accident that happens is down to driver frustration. People take unnecessary chances because, as Alan Gordon said, they get stuck behind slow-moving traffic. An awful lot of heavy goods vehicles use the road.

Helen Eadie: The red boxes on the map represent schemes that were to be announced in February 2003. Were those announcements made?

Sheena Borthwick: Some of the announcements were made.

Alan Gordon: That was when Stena Line announced that it would invest in the new port. The First Minister came down with the Minister for Transport to announce that the sections would be built.

We see this as a long-term partnership that we need to develop over time. The problem is that there has been no investment in the road for about 10 years, so there is now a catch-up process. The point was to allow Stena Line to invest more than £30 million in a new port; the A77 is the worst road connection to any port in the United Kingdom. The aim was to try to get us to a reasonable position, so the problem is how we develop the roads in order to move us forward.

Helen Eadie: Have the Scottish Executive and the local authorities given you timescales in response to the approaches that you have made to them? If so, what have they said?

Alan Gordon: For some of the proposals that are outlined in the red boxes on the map, commitments have been made that they will be ready for the opening of the new port in 2007. However, the question is about where we go after 2007. We know what has been committed to, but how will we develop the schemes as we go forward?

Campbell Martin: As a resident of Ayrshire—albeit that I live in north Ayrshire—I argue that Ayrshire has problems overall in respect of the roads into and out of the county, but even those of us who are from north Ayrshire accept that the A77 is an exceptional case. Congestion is not the only issue—there is also a very busy port and slow-moving heavy goods vehicles exacerbate the problems.

When the Arran ferry comes into Ardrossan, which is where I am from, the whole main street is blocked and things are made much worse if there are people trying to come up from Stranraer. It is ironic that the existing improvements have perhaps exacerbated the problems on the bit of road that remains unimproved. As Sheena Borthwick said, vehicles' speeds do not come down as they move on to the bit of road that has not been improved.

There is an old adage that there is no such thing as a bad road, only bad drivers. However, that is untrue. In Scotland, the A9 and the A77 are bad roads. Your campaign is worth while and I hope that it is successful. It is right to advertise the fact that West Sound is a local radio station that gives updates on local traffic conditions because many people who are travelling down to, or coming up from, Stranraer will not be tuned into West Sound because they will be outwith its broadcast area.

An answer to a parliamentary question by Alex Neil showed that 19 people have lost their lives on the A77 between Ayr and Stranraer since the Scottish Parliament was created. Is there any resistance from the Scottish Executive to what you ask for, or does it accept the case for the A77 and that it is simply a matter of funding and when it will become available? Does it accept the case for improvement?

Alan Gordon: About three years ago, there was no awareness of the ferries' importance in Scotland, but there is now much more awareness in the Scottish Executive, which has led to more acceptance. We have worked in partnership with the Executive to see how we can develop schemes.

The problem goes back some time because no improvements were made for 12 years. Therefore, the road went backwards. Both ferry operators have introduced bigger ferries, which has worsened the problem. Some 375 cars coming out one after the other will cause major frustration. People from Stranraer always leave before the ferries come in—that says it all.

Ms White: I have driven down the road to take my car on to the ferry and know exactly what you mean. On Saturday, I spoke to a person from Dumfries and Galloway who said exactly what you

have said about passing places and heavy goods lorries, which are obviously slow-moving traffic.

Sheena Borthwick said that she is part of the A77 working group. Is Alan Gordon part of it? It has not been mentioned that Stena Line has been part of that group. Exactly what has come out of that working group?

Adam Ingram may want to pick up on this issue, as I think that he lodged a parliamentary question on it. Do you know about a report by Atkins Highways and Transportation, which is going to the Scottish Executive?

Sheena Borthwick: I have no knowledge of that report.

Ms White: I sympathise entirely with the petitioner; something must be done about upgrading the A77. What input has Stena Line had to the working group? What has come out of that group? As I said, there will be a report this year and the Executive has said that it will spend money and so on in the light of that report. Do you know what is in the report by Atkins Highways and Transportation? Has that organisation spoken to anyone in the working group to get ideas from them?

Sheena Borthwick: I cannot comment on that matter. Alan Gordon and I—Stena Line and West Sound—decided to work together because the working group was not working fast enough. I think that that answers your question.

Ms White: Is Alan Gordon involved in the working group?

Alan Gordon: We were never invited to join it.

Ms White: My other question is about whether you have been approached by the Executive or Atkins Highways and Transportation. Am I right that you have never been asked about the matter, although you had a petition with 48,000 signatures and now have another one with 5,000 signatures?

Alan Gordon: That is right.

11:00

Mike Watson: I would like to ask a couple of questions about the paper that you gave us this morning and about a piece of information that was in the papers that we got prior to the meeting. I have to say that I am not familiar with the A77 south of Ayr, but I notice that the papers mention that the latest improvement is a 7.5km upgrading from Spittalhill to the Dutch House roundabout. Could you tell me where that is? Is that the area that skirts round Ayr?

Sheena Borthwick: That is the northern section.

Mike Watson: Where is that?

Sheena Borthwick: It is between Glasgow and Ayr.

Mike Watson: I am just looking at the map and wondering whether it was one of the projected yellow boxes, but it is not. So that is completed. It is not a—

Sheena Borthwick: It is difficult to pinpoint the road works, the upgrades and what has or has not been done. I am still waiting for clarification from the Scottish Executive, because I wanted a definitive list of work that is planned and work that is completed and of where we will go from there. I am part of the A77 working group and I am still waiting for that.

Mike Watson: It is the area south of Ayr down to Stranraer that is obviously the major issue. I would like to ask about the Maybole bypass, which has been mentioned. I am not sure whether Helen Eadie or Sandra White asked the question, but the response was that a report on the Scottish transport appraisal guidance analysis that is currently under way is to be published later this year. You said that you were not involved in that.

Sheena Borthwick: No.

Mike Watson: Has there been local involvement and input? Do you know who has been consulted locally about whether the project should proceed?

Sheena Borthwick: I do not know who has been consulted locally, but South Ayrshire Council has on its website quite extensive plans for the Maybole bypass.

Mike Watson: As there are two major businesses in the area, I would have thought that you and many other business people would have been consulted, but it seems that that is not the case and that you have not been asked for your views.

I turn to the report that you gave us this morning. At one point—the pages are not numbered but it is in the section on traffic and travel information—you talk about traffic information for drivers, which West Sound and associated stations have taken on. As Campbell Martin said, people who travel through the area would tend not to tune in to local stations. Are there not road signs to advise drivers? There are certainly signs on motorways that advise drivers of where to tune in for local information. Is there no such service?

Sheena Borthwick: No, there is not because we do not have a motorway in Ayrshire. Under an agreement that was made by the original Scottish Office dating back 30 years, motorways have blue and white signs for Radio Scotland and the local commercial radio stations, but the rules on broadcasting have changed considerably in 30 years. The problems now are, first, that we do not have a motorway from Glasgow to Stranraer and,

secondly, that there are so many commercial radio operators that motorway signs would have to list about 20. In Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway it is slightly different, because there is only one commercial operator, which is West Sound.

We have a West Sound guardian angel who talks to drivers; they are used to that service now. It has been going on for three years and is part of the education process on road safety. We are using that service and developing it with poster sites in passing places, and the important information that is given at those sites is the radio station frequencies. We are the only radio station that gives traffic and travel information that is pertinent to the area. Until Christmas, the information was provided by AA Roadwatch, which no longer exists. All radio operators now have to source their own traffic and travel information. I thought that that was so important to the area that I employed two people to do that on shift work; I have been lucky enough to recruit two former traffic policemen who know the roads and are very familiar with the area. The scheme that we have now set up will now be rolled out in the rest of Scotland throughout the Scottish Radio Holdings network of stations.

Mike Watson: Thank you for that explanation. You are dealing with a special case here, I think.

Sheena Borthwick: It is a very special case.

Mike Watson: You and Mr Gordon have outlined the fact that the problem is particularly exacerbated by the ferry traffic, because the traffic flow is not even; of necessity, it comes in bursts. It seems to me that there ought to be some means of having an equivalent to the motorway signs in that area.

West Sound is the only provider of traffic information, because AA Roadwatch no longer provides it. I understand that there might be some commercial benefit to your company, but there is no competition because no one else is doing the same thing. It seems to me that there is a case for approaching the Scottish Executive Development Department, which decides where and when road signs can be applied. The basic information that people can tune in for road safety information should be made public.

Sheena Borthwick: The rules are so old that they are lost in the mists of time. All sorts of political debates are going on in the background, but we have asked many times for road signs that give the radio station frequencies and we have been refused.

Mike Watson: To whom have you made that request?

Sheena Borthwick: We asked civil servants at the Scottish Executive.

Mike Watson: On what basis did they refuse?

Sheena Borthwick: They say that such signs would advertise the radio station. My response is that I would not have given three years of commitment and investment to road safety if it was just a commercial matter. I could go out and buy advertisements on the backs of buses, poster sites in the middle of town, liveried taxis and so on, but that is not my concern. My concern is about road safety information. Some 55 per cent of the population in the area tune in to the radio stations every week, but drivers who come into the area are completely unaware of them. They leave Alan Gordon's ferries at Stranraer, they do not have a clue about the A77 and they take their chances. The statistics show that nine times out of 10 it is local people who are killed by people who come into the area and are unaware of the road.

Mike Watson: I think that we can progress the issue. I can see that there is commercial competition with BBC Radio Scotland in terms of general broadcasting, but the road traffic information that it gives has to cover the whole country. I think that the committee would like to look at that.

John Scott: I apologise to Sheena Borthwick and Alan Gordon for missing the latter part of their presentation.

My first question is particularly for Alan Gordon. Have you done any research on the likely increase in traffic volumes on the A77 in the years to come as a result of the connection with Ireland?

Alan Gordon: One of the reasons for the investment in the new port is that we will be able to take 25 minutes off the journey time, but it will also allow us to run an extra peak departure of the high speed service, so we expect traffic volumes to increase. The volume might grow by between 5 and 10 per cent. This is a changing world—we expect the business to grow. It is a quality service between two good destinations.

John Scott: My other question is for Sheena Borthwick. Your petition calls for

"passing places every six miles"

Have you or the Transport Research Laboratory done any work on that? Why did you pick an interval of 6 miles? Why not 3 miles or 16 miles? Is 6 miles a figure that you plucked out of the air as a starting point?

Sheena Borthwick: It is a starting point. We have not invested any money in research on the matter. Alan Gordon and I examined the route and that is our starting point. We have no money to invest, but suffice it to say that we are committed to the proposal. We have the same goal.

John Scott: Like everyone else in Ayrshire, you will be aware of the new traffic cameras on the A77 between Spittalhill and Ballantrae, which measure the time that vehicles take to travel a certain distance. Do you think that they will have an impact on speed reduction?

Sheena Borthwick: You are talking about the SPECS system.

John Scott: Yes.

Sheena Borthwick: Enforcement is all very well, but the emphasis should be on engineering and education. Things do not bode well for that system. The public feel that they are continually penalised for driving on the route. I do not know whether the system will make a difference. As with all speed cameras, people slow down when necessary and then put their foot down again. We are talking about realities, and that is the reality of the way in which people drive on the roads. We would all like to live in a perfect world but we do not.

John Scott: I should perhaps warn my colleagues, who will have come through the new cameras this morning, that they are not speed cameras as such; rather, they time journeys over a certain distance. My colleagues are all law abiding, but I point that out in case they are tempted to put their feet down on the way home. I do not know whether the system is switched on yet, but that is how it works.

Mike Watson: We will be tuned in to West Sound anyway, so it won't be a problem.

Sheena Borthwick: Of course.

The Convener: If anybody gets stuck behind a works lorry as I did this morning, they will be in no danger of getting caught by speed cameras.

Mr Ingram: I do not think that many people are aware that the Stranraer-Cairnryan port is the second-largest ferry port in the United Kingdom—at least, that is what I understand. There is already a fair bit of traffic on the A77 but, in his answer to John Scott, Alan Gordon did not give any indication of the likely increase in traffic when the new ferry port developments come on stream. I ask him to give us a better idea of that and particularly how it will affect Maybole, which is the bottleneck on the A77. Maybole has a narrow main street and huge, juggernaut lorries have to weave in and out of the cars parked there, which is damaging the fabric of the town. There has been a campaign for a bypass for about 50 years. I ask Alan Gordon to give a ferry operator and haulage perspective on the Maybole problem.

Alan Gordon: About 360,000 units of freight go through Loch Ryan a year, which is way above the amount that any other operator in the United Kingdom handles. The problem at Maybole is that

there is parking in the streets and it is terrible for lorries to have to weave in and out of the parked cars through the town—it must be terrible for the residents as well. We have worked with the north channel partnership, which includes South Ayrshire Council, to help to put pressure on for a bypass, which we support 100 per cent.

Mr Ingram: Mike Watson asked who had been consulted. I understand that South Ayrshire Council has proposed a fairly detailed scheme, which the consultants whom Sandra White mentioned are considering. The Minister for Transport made a commitment to consider the proposals for a Maybole bypass, so it might be worth the committee's while asking him how proposals will be taken forward and when the consultants' report is likely to arrive.

Ms White: Sheena Borthwick mentioned passing places. I ask her whether she proposed to the A77 safety group that there should be passing places.

Sheena Borthwick: No, not to the safety group.

The Convener: I started by asking a question about prioritising what has to be done and where it needs to be done. The committee hears a lot of petitions that are not dissimilar to the one to which you are speaking—if they are not about the A9, they are about the A90 or the M74. Everyone has their special pleading, but the reality is that not everything that people ask for can be delivered when they require it, even though a report might say that it has to be. Have you had any indication that the Scottish Executive considers your proposal to be a priority?

Alan Gordon: We have had indications that the Executive will invest in four schemes in each direction on the A75 and the A77. When Stena Line invests in a port, that investment is for a lifetime—the port of Stranraer has been there for 100 years. Stena Line wants to invest heavily. We invest heavily by having our people in Stranraer—we are the biggest employer there—and we want to continue with that. We are playing our part in the investment; the question is how we can get a partnership over time. We do not expect everything to be in place within the next week but, if we had a commitment that a certain number of schemes would be invested in each year over a period of time, we could achieve what we want in partnership. For us, the priority is upgrading the roads closest to the port, because that is where the frustration starts.

The Convener: You talked about partnerships. When considering transport infrastructure on other occasions, the committee has had discussions with the construction industry, which has made it clear that it is under severe pressure to build what is already in the programme of road building. Have

you had discussions with the construction industry about how high a priority it would be for the industry to get involved in building what you require for the A77?

11:15

Alan Gordon: We see it as the Executive's role, rather than our role, to have such discussions. Our role is to build the port and to rebuild the links.

The Convener: I understand that. I was just wondering whether you had had discussions about the practicalities of building what is required.

Alan Gordon: We had meetings with the minister and have said that, if any new sections of the roads are to be built, construction must be phased. If three new sections are built at once, frustration levels will rise much higher. We have said that we would like construction to take place in a phased fashion and that sections should be built one at a time. We would like to avoid building in July and August, which is the time of peak traffic flows.

The Convener: How do members think we should progress the petition?

Ms White: I have a couple of suggestions. Like Adam Ingram, I would like an indication of when the report on the proposed Maybole bypass will be ready and whom Atkins Highways and Transportation consulted when carrying out its Scottish transport appraisal guidance analysis of the project. I would also like to know whether the A77 safety group has concluded its report. As Sheena Borthwick said, no feedback has been received. The group was set up by the Executive and people need to know whether it has reached any conclusions, so that those can be considered. Are the parties involved talking and passing on information to one another? I have three questions for the Executive. First, has the report that it commissioned in June 2004 been concluded? Secondly, when will the report on the Maybole bypass be ready? Thirdly, who was consulted by the Executive working group on the bypass?

Helen Eadie: I would like to add to the reasonable suggestions that Sandra White has made. We should ask the Royal Automobile Club, the AA, the Road Haulage Association, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and—last but not least—the Scottish Executive for their observations.

We need to consider the issue in the wider European context. What is the ultimate destination of goods coming in from Ireland? Is it local or is there a trans-European theme? What will be the major trans-European route to Rosyth, for example? The Scottish Executive has invested about £12 million in developing the Rosyth port. We are keen to see freight maximisation of that

route. People locally envisage the future development of Rosyth as being dependent on bringing freight traffic in from Ireland through south-west Scotland. From Rosyth, goods can be transported to the Baltic and other European markets.

Today, I came down from a place in Fife near to the Rosyth port. The drive was excellent, even through the busy city centre of Glasgow. I managed to get down here in less than two hours, which I thought was amazing. All credit should go to the Scottish Executive and others for developing the new A77.

I would like to know what thought is being given to the point that I have highlighted. There is no doubt that, if people have the bigger picture in mind, it is absolutely right and proper for that to be factored into the equation. Whichever route becomes the major route, it is imperative that the issue is given urgent attention, because Baltic and other markets are opening up to us all the time. The expansion of the European Union into eastern Europe provides more peripheral areas such as Ireland and the west coast of Scotland with tremendous opportunities to get their goods into those areas and to bring other products back here.

Sheena Borthwick: The Road Haulage Association has signed the petition and given us its support. Its signature accounts for about 1,500 members in Scotland and Ireland.

John Scott: I agree with Helen Eadie, who made a valid point about the trans-European networks agreement.

I know the road particularly well. My home is in Ballantrae and I have driven that road perhaps more than any other. Having driven from southern Ireland all the way to Rosyth, I can say that the section of the A75 between Ayr and Cairnryan is the weak link in the route—it is the goat track. The reality is that, in Maybole town, people drive through streets that have not essentially changed since the time of Burns. The roads were designed for the horse and for pony and trap. That makes for a bottleneck and a huge danger to people on Maybole's streets. I expect that the European dimension to seeking funding has already been explored, but if the Scottish Executive has not properly considered it, we should draw its attention to that.

Campbell Martin: I reiterate what Mike Watson said. I have commented on West Sound signs. The idea is good, so we should not knock it back simply because the Executive says that erecting such signs is impossible as they would advertise the station. When we ask the Executive to respond to the petition, can we ask it to say what could be done to get round that?

The Convener: There are several questions to put to the Scottish Executive. If we write to all the organisations that have been suggested, we will form a bigger picture of what must be done and we will have the specific questions answered. We will keep the petitioners updated on the responses that we receive and we will see how far we can progress the petition. We will keep in touch.

I am led to believe that Sheena Borthwick has an event on Friday—she is getting married. On behalf of the committee, I wish you a very happy day, Sheena. I hope that the weather holds up.

Sheena Borthwick: So do I, as the wedding is taking place in a marquee in a garden.

The Convener: We wish you all the best for the future. Thank you for presenting your petition.

Sheena Borthwick: Thank you.

Singing Tuition (PE860)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE860 from Marilyn de Blieck, on behalf of Ayrshire Voices, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to develop a coherent national policy on the teaching of singing and in particular to ensure adequate provision of vocal tuition for young people throughout Scotland. Marilyn de Blieck will make a brief statement to the committee in support of her petition. She is accompanied by Lauren Redmond. I welcome you to the meeting. You have a few minutes for your statement, after which we will discuss the subject.

Marilyn de Blieck (Ayrshire Voices): I am not fond of microphones, but I will use one on this occasion. I am much more used to raising my voice and projecting, but I hope that the microphone is all right and that I can be heard.

I am a singer first and foremost, but I have acquired several other skills over the years. I am the joint artistic director of Ayrshire Voices, which is an educational organisation that teaches young singers. We have about 200 young singers in the Ayr and South Ayrshire area. I am also the chief executive of the Keynote Trust, which is an Ayr-based charitable trust for the promotion of the arts and in particular of the performing arts among young people. The trust supports the work of Ayrshire Voices; the two organisations work closely in partnership.

I will now make a short statement to open my case before the committee. "Voice" is a commonly used and potent word in the political vocabulary: it is used frequently and even, on occasion, unthinkingly. We speak of giving people a voice, we acknowledge that disadvantaged persons or groups in the community might lack a voice in society and we read of the silent majority, who—from necessity or choice—do not make their voice

heard, unless the occasion is one of great importance.

The word "voice" is so much part of the common currency of our political and civic life that we take its importance for granted. However, we have forgotten that the voice not only speaks but sings. In so forgetting, we are denying a voice to a section of the population whose main or only form of creative life is, or should be, the singing voice.

It amazes me that, as a society, we are prepared to spend large sums of money on the often-doomed attempt to set right the effects of antisocial behaviour among our young people, particularly among our young men, and neglect to take the action that would prevent them from behaving like uncivilised beings in the first place. Because I have seen it happen over and over, I have no doubt that singing in particular, and performance work in general, has a huge effect on ensuring that the difficult adolescent years are filled with a constructive and enormously satisfying creative activity whose effects are far more potent than any drug.

No one who has experienced the high of performance is likely to turn to an artificially induced high—there is simply nothing better than the high of performance. Someone who has had that experience will take skills into adult life that will enable them to make a real and positive contribution to the society in which they live. Most people can sing, particularly if they begin to do so at an early age. Singing is not an expensive activity: there is no need to purchase an instrument or to have fancy equipment—it requires only a piano, a decent acoustic space and, most important of all, a skilled tutor.

According to research by the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, communal singing is good for mind and body: it improves breathing and muscle tone and it alleviates depression, stammering, stress, low self-esteem, asthma and chronic pain. According to me, solo singing does all those things and more: it provides a creative outlet that nothing can surpass. Indeed, it is an expression of excellence that could make our small country the envy of Europe. All those benefits could be achieved within a short space of time for a small investment of money and a somewhat larger investment of foresight and imagination.

The Convener: Thank you. Did you wish to say something, Miss Redmond?

Lauren Redmond: I have gone right through the Ayrshire Voices system; I started when I was six years old and finished just last year when I was 18. Not only have Marilyn and Raymond taught me how to sing but they have improved a lot of things in my life. I went to secondary school in

South Ayrshire and was never encouraged in singing. I am now at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. When I told my teachers about my place, they asked me why I could not go and do a proper degree. I was never encouraged at school; the encouragement always came from Marilyn and Raymond at Ayrshire Voices. It is clear that a number of the 200 youngsters in Ayrshire Voices could end up doing what I am doing.

11:30

Mike Watson: Thank you and welcome to the committee. I was interested in what you said. The information that has been provided to the committee says that Ayrshire Voices was founded to

"cater for the educational needs of young singers at a time when singing was rapidly disappearing from the state school music curriculum".

That was quite some time ago, but what is the current situation? I have some form on the matter, because I was Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport in 2003 when the Executive announced that it would provide £17.5 million for music tuition in schools. That investment is beginning to filter through. However, if you had asked me at the time whether the money would be used for singing tuition, I would have had to say that I did not know. It is clear that singing is an integral part of music. I am sure that you have contacts not just in Ayrshire but throughout Scotland. Does the money that is being spent, particularly by local authorities, include funding for singing tuition?

Marilyn de Blieck: Yes, it does. When I heard about the youth music initiative funding, I knew immediately that singing would have to form quite a large part of the initiative, although that was not stated at the outset, because otherwise the targets in primary schools could not be met. Singing is the activity that can involve the most children. The target is for all children to have a year of music tuition before primary 6, but if we attempted to offer all those children instrumental tuition we would fail miserably—no budget would cope with doing that and the tutors would not be able to cope, either. I do not think that the matter was considered at the time, but I knew that singing would have to be taught, for want of any other way of meeting the target. As a result, there has been greater input into the teaching of singing in primary schools.

I am more concerned about the model that we use, because the school model for singing represents only part of the picture. Undoubtedly, the best model would involve work out of school as well as work in school. Primary school singing tuition is needed and forms the bedrock, but there must be a way of identifying special talent and a

way of providing a progression and achievement structure for all the children who have their year of singing tuition before primary 6, or for the ones who are naturally inclined to want to continue singing.

Mike Watson: In your submission, you talk about the financial situation that Ayrshire Voices faces. You say that the funding that you received from South Ayrshire Council was stopped and that you currently receive support from the common good fund, which by definition is temporary support. What will happen when the common good fund funding comes to an end?

My second question relates to my first. As I recall, the money that the Scottish Executive announced for music tuition was to be delivered not just through local authorities, but through other groups or individuals. Has Ayrshire Voices sought to access that funding?

Marilyn de Blieck: Yes, I applied last year, in the most recent funding round, but I was turned down.

Mike Watson: Were you given a reason?

Marilyn de Blieck: I was told that my operation was unsustainable.

Mike Watson: However, Ayrshire Voices has been in existence for—

Marilyn de Blieck: We have been in existence for more than 20 years. In the light of the withdrawal of local authority education funding, I think that the Scottish Arts Council thought that we would not survive. However, we have survived.

Mike Watson: You proved the SAC wrong.

Marilyn de Blieck: I am not at all sure how much longer we will survive.

Mike Watson: This may not be a fair question to ask you, but when the assistance from South Ayrshire Council's common good fund ends, do you intend to go back to the council to try to have mainstream funding restored? You make the point that project funding is not hard to come by, but core funding is.

Marilyn de Blieck: It is virtually impossible to get core funding in our field. The only option is if the local authority runs an education system for singers, but South Ayrshire Council does not. The answer to your question is that I do not know. In 20 years, I have never known where my next bit of funding was coming from, but the situation has sometimes been better than it is at present—at present, it is terrible. In the past year, I had to lose huge swathes of my operation to keep the core activity. Ayr common good funding allows me to operate only in Ayr, but it has been part of our funding package for several years. I hope that the common good funding will continue in the 2006-07

financial year, but I have no hope whatever of receiving education funding. In 2007, there will be a council election and no council will commit for the period beyond the next election. I expect to stagger on for a couple of years, after which I might have to bring my operation to a complete close, which will leave young singers in South Ayrshire in a dire situation.

I am equally concerned about the national picture, which, overall, is probably no better than it is in South Ayrshire. As I said, there are pockets where the provision is better, but, in many places, it is worse. I have been singing all my life and in the course of my singing career I hoped that, when I got to the age that I am now, the situation might have improved; in fact, it has got much worse. The petition is a last, desperate attempt to bring to the attention of a national body—the Parliament—the fact that singing provision at the grass roots is a disaster area. Some local authorities provide music initiative funding, but only where there is the odd person with a spark of imagination, which, in my experience, does not happen often. Forgive me—I speak as I find. Unless such funding exists, the matter comes down to individuals in the local authority who might have some influence, such as senior politicians or officers. Where there are no such people, children are completely without provision.

Mike Watson: I have a closing comment. The point of the SAC funding was that where local authorities choose not to put resources into music tuition—for singing or other forms of musical activity—organisations should still be able to get funding. I would like the committee to ask the SAC why it found Ayrshire Voices to be, as you said, unsustainable, when its record shows otherwise.

John Scott: Good morning, ladies. I am sorry that we will not hear you sing today, because I know what wonderful voices you have.

Marilyn de Blieck: Lauren Redmond is the one for that at the moment.

John Scott: Mike Watson has asked all the questions that need to be asked, but can you give us an idea of the number of children and young people with whom you deal annually? Have you done a rule-of-thumb calculation of the number of children and young people whom you have helped bring to the enormously high standards that I have witnessed in the 20 years in which your organisation has existed?

Marilyn de Blieck: That is a good question. I suppose that we have compared one year with another at various times, but I have never really sat down and reckoned up the total.

John Scott: At the moment, then, how many are in your programme?

Marilyn de Blieck: We have 200 children in regular tuition. In my view, we should have a minimum of 500 in an area like this. We are obliged to charge a fee—albeit small—for our services, but we have a scholarship fund that deals with any case in which there is a genuine inability to pay that small fee.

I have a large number of boys, which is encouraging, but that is largely the result of the formation of South Ayrshire boys choir four years ago, which was funded partly by the council and partly by a national choral body. When my funding from education was removed, the funding for South Ayrshire boys choir—the enormous sum of £3,000 a year—was also taken away, but I could not run it without that money. A number of boys have transferred over to the core class operation, so we have a good balance with boys.

Over the years, at any one time, we have had anything from 150 to 200 people. We have never had fewer than 150, even at the beginning. Sometimes we have had more than 200, when we have had special performance projects and have gone out and identified talent in primary schools and, occasionally, in secondary schools, although that is more difficult.

In total, we are talking about thousands of people, all of whom have had their lives enhanced. Many of them have gone on to be performers in all sorts of fields and have worked not only as singers but as actors, all-round performers, directors—there might even be the odd choreographer out there—and in music theatre. Lots of backstage staff have also come through our system. So many people have taken part that it is hard to be accurate, but, in 20 years, perhaps 15,000 or 20,000 have been affected in one way or another by the programme. I had hoped that, in partnership with the council, I would be able to achieve more, because this is definitely a growth area. I have so many people knocking on my door. With our funding and staffing ratios, we are doing as much as we can.

John Scott: People cannot be expected to work for nothing.

Marilyn de Blieck: Well—almost.

John Scott: I know that you do, and that determination and bad temper keep you going. *[Laughter.]*

You mentioned building self-esteem and confidence. I, too, am a great believer in their value. Can you refer to any work, such as university research, that shows the benefit of singing in building confidence and self-esteem?

Marilyn de Blieck: I am not sure that anyone has done a specific study on that, but my experience and that of my colleagues tell me that

there is a benefit. We have given many performances over the years. As you know, we give two major performances with all the children in Ayr town hall every year; we also do a lot of smaller gigs for community organisations. We used to be able to do a children's opera once a year, for which we commissioned three new works.

I can speak only of my experience of what people who come to see the children actually see. Our work is up there to be seen on a public platform on a regular basis. The showcases are attended by people who often are not singers and are not that interested in music as a whole, but who are very interested in what it does for the children. I know from what they tell me and write to me about that the evidence of progress among the children is enormous, and that they see a difference from one concert to the next. The children have a proper stance and can present themselves and display poise on a public platform, not only as singers but as speakers, speechmakers and interviewees. All those things benefit from the teaching of singing. Our children learn to be articulate and, as I am sure you know, articulacy among the young in Scotland is not common. As a nation, we are not good at it.

11:45

Helen Eadie: Who trains the trainers—people such as yourselves?

Marilyn de Blieck: At the moment, nobody.

Helen Eadie: Can you describe the network of people like you in Scotland?

Marilyn de Blieck: I do not think that there is a network. There is fragmentation. The picture is like a jigsaw puzzle that has a lot of holes in it where pieces have not yet been added.

The skills base is small, which has been a constant worry to my husband and me for many years. As time has gone by, and because there was no need to train people to teach singing in schools—singing was not part of the music curriculum, particularly in secondary schools—the skills base has become smaller and smaller. I would love to train new people, but I do not have the funding for it.

The most recent meeting that I had with an arts officer who works for the local authority was about whether we and other organisations might make other applications to the youth music initiative. He asked what our training needs were and I told him that we needed desperately to train staff, because we are not getting any younger. He said that that was not what he meant; he was asking what my training needs, and my husband's training needs, were. Basically, he was asking what we thought

we should retrain for; I am sorry, but I thought that that was patronising in the extreme, considering that we have spent a lifetime doing this work. I will not bother making applications for funding if that is what they are about. I would rather not.

Helen Eadie: What kind of singing do you teach? Is it operatic, folk singing or all sorts of singing?

Marilyn de Blieck: We train our singers on the classical basis. There is no other way to train young singers that is accepted across the profession. We can train them later as folk singers, jazz singers or music theatre singers, where there is quite a lot of specific postgraduate training. It is noticeable that the commercial professional companies that cast for the big musicals—that is where a lot of work for singers lies—want classically trained singers, because they are the only ones whose voices will stand up to the strain of eight or 10 performances a week, even with microphone assistance. I regard it as the safest way to train singers. My singers have gone out into the world and proved that they can turn their hand to anything.

Lauren Redmond: I started off when I was six or seven years old, singing lighter classical stuff. Now that I am in my first year in London, I have started on folk songs, jazz and musical theatre. With what Marilyn and Raymond gave me, I feel that I can branch out in different directions.

Ms White: In Glasgow and elsewhere, numerous groups have, unfortunately, had their funding withdrawn as a result of duplication of services. Do other groups in your area provide the same services that you provide, and are they being funded by the council?

Marilyn de Blieck: I would say an emphatic no. North Ayrshire has a good system and real efforts have been made to ensure that it is delivered by the local authority and its staff. That works well, in that the area has big choirs that give good performances, but I am not convinced that the local authority only model is necessarily the best way forward as far as this issue is concerned.

The Convener: We are joined this morning by Phil Gallie. Phil, do you have a question?

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Ayrshire Voices has not only built confidence in children by getting them to perform on stage, but has provided fuel for excellent amateur organisations such as Ayr Amateur Opera Company, the Ayrshire Philharmonic Opera Society and Ayr Fort Players by giving its members their first taste of this activity. Does that form part of the argument for expanding such activities on the national scene, particularly since Scotland has a range of such amateur organisations?

Marilyn de Blieck: Yes. I believe that we should have co-operation in the extracurricular sector—or the informal sector, as it is now called. For example, I would like to know where the singers of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra Chorus, the Edinburgh Festival Chorus or any other national choral organisations come from. Obviously, it all starts with young people. If they want to continue, they have to go into an adult organisation of some kind.

However, I am concerned that people are simply ignoring the grass-roots work of teaching singing. It is important that we in this local community should see our children move on and take part in adult organisations. After all, without the kids, where does the feed come from? For example, I know that everyone is short of male singers. The very good reason for that is not that they do not exist, but that they have never been caught at the right moment.

My concern is that our quality work is not being acknowledged nationally, because people still feel that such work can be done only at national level or in the big cities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee or wherever. I do not believe that that is the case. Good work can be done anywhere, but I would like people to pay attention to the quality work that is being done outwith the central belt. I have reached a point in my life at which I am getting tired of this; I simply want people to acknowledge that the work is worth while.

Phil Gallie: The Edinburgh festival was just mentioned. Do you agree that people's interest in performing at such a level can be created only when they are children?

Marilyn de Blieck: Yes. We also need audiences for Scottish performers, not just for the rich and famous people from abroad. Only yesterday, I was saying to Lauren that the really starry performers in any field who have natural, great-quality voices and a natural grasp of good singing technique—which is something you probably need in order to survive—will always rise to the top. They will never be held down. I am much more concerned about the people who are one or two levels below that and who could be very fine performers but will not make it without support. I am also concerned about the vast mass of kids who are losing a creative outlet. I am afraid that, without such an outlet and with all that energy to burn, they will find destructive outlets instead.

The Convener: Do members have suggestions on what we should do with the petition?

Mike Watson: If I may repeat my earlier point, I would say that we should write to the Scottish Arts Council. We should ask how it spends the Executive's money and to what extent it includes non-public sector organisations such as Ayrshire

Voices, given that they have a role to play in addition to the major role that local authorities have. Although it is not the committee's function to ask the SAC why it did not fund a particular organisation, we can ask how many local groups have received funding—

Marilyn de Blieck: I am sorry to interrupt, but not many local groups down here receive funding. I think that ours is almost the only one.

Mike Watson: We could ask for that information on a Scotland-wide basis to find out the extent to which funding is given to groups such as yours, which have a major contribution to make.

Ms White: I agree with Mike Watson's suggestion. I know that the committee has limited powers, but can we ask the SAC why the request from Ayrshire Voices was turned down, given that it is the only such group in Ayrshire?

The Convener: We cannot really ask questions about a specific group. As Mike Watson said, it is not our responsibility to investigate why an individual group was not supported. We can find out in general terms what the criteria or funding levels are, but we cannot get involved in the decision on a specific organisation.

Ms White: I take that point on board, but perhaps one of the local MSPs will take up the issue with the Scottish Arts Council.

Marilyn de Blieck: Our MSP, Cathy Jamieson, wrote to the Scottish Arts Council, but she received practically the same reply as I did. Given that the criteria have changed and singing is no longer the priority this year that it was last year, I felt that it was not worth putting in the considerable effort that is required to make an application.

If I may say so, above all I would like the committee to ask for a survey to find out what the position is, both nationally and by local authority area. It would be great to have evidence that was not simply anecdotal or experiential. I do not think that that has been done.

The Convener: My suggestion is that we write to the local authorities that cover the area in which Ayrshire Voices operates. The picture that we have been given this morning is in stark contrast to the experience in my local authority areas. The two local authorities in my constituency have such an outstanding record of support in music tuition that the youth music initiative was launched in a primary school in my constituency. In fact, the two authorities support music and singing so well that they need to hire Glasgow Royal Concert Hall to stage their annual concert, which is very popular. The annual concert involves many young people and it has all types of music, including orchestral and jazz. There are also two huge choirs for North Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire.

Marilyn de Blieck: Yes, they made music a big priority and the results are phenomenal.

The Convener: An incredible number of young people go on to the royal academies, which is terrific. A school in my area outperforms expectations because of the head teacher's focus on music; in fact, she received an honour as a result of that work in the recent honours list. What I have heard this morning is in complete contrast to the experience in my area, so I would like to know why the Ayrshire authorities do not support music in the way that other authorities do.

Marilyn de Blieck: The problem is not universal. As I said, North Ayrshire Council has a very good system and East Ayrshire Council is working hard at provision, but there is no question that things are more difficult here.

The Convener: I would like to get a clearer picture of why that is the case. If support can be given in some local authority areas, I would like some clarification of why it is not given across the board.

Helen Eadie: I echo the convener's comments. In my constituency, Fife Council gives some powerful support to music. Indeed, last year or the year before, I attended a major concert at the Usher Hall in Edinburgh that was full of pupils from schools throughout the wider Edinburgh area. I was absolutely impressed with that and thought that it was just fantastic. The concert included music of all sorts in the widest sense.

I am interested in getting a wider perspective, because I am keen for the petitioner's proposals to be progressed. I suggest that we find out what is happening across Scotland by asking Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, the Executive, the youth music initiative reference group, the Heads of Instrumental and Teaching Services and VOCAL—the Voice of Chief Officers for Cultural, Community and Leisure Services. Writing to all those bodies would be good for us as MSPs, as it would allow us to understand what is going on.

Marilyn de Blieck spoke about confidence building and all the other benefits that singing brings for an individual, which I am sure that she is right about. I was fascinated to hear about her experiences, and those of Lauren Redmond and the other people who have come through her programme, and I hope that progress can be made.

Marilyn de Blieck: That would be nice.

12:00

John Scott: Can we find out about provision by local authority area? Would the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities be able to provide us

with that information? We will leave that in your capable hands.

Marilyn de Blieck: COSLA will not give you information on the informal sector, which is important. There must be a way of finding out what is happening outside the school sector.

The Convener: We will write to organisations such as the Scottish Arts Council to give us a picture of the situation. Once we receive responses, we will keep you posted on developments as we try to progress the petition on your behalf.

Marilyn de Blieck: Thank you very much.

The Convener: Thanks for coming this morning.

National Burns Heritage Trail (PE861)

Robert Burns (Culture and Tourism Policies) (PE824)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE861, which Bob Leitch has lodged on behalf of the board of directors of Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to take immediate action to create a task force to integrate and develop all Burns assets, properties and locations throughout Scotland, which will result in the establishment of a national Burns heritage trail that will be ready for the year of homecoming in 2009 and which will also be available for promotion internationally by the end of 2006. Before the petition was lodged, it was hosted on the Parliament's e-petition website, where it attracted a total of 171 signatures.

Bob Leitch will make a brief statement to the committee in support of the petition. He is accompanied by John Kerr. Welcome to the committee. You have a few minutes to address us, following which we will discuss the petition.

Bob Leitch (Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry): I thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to speak to our petition. Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry lodged what was just the second petition to the Public Petitions Committee in 1999, on completion of the M77 between Malletshead and Fenwick. I am delighted that, as a result of that petition, that road recently opened. We hope that our current petition will have similar success and that, in time, the Burns trail will be up and running.

Our petition is about the Burns product and its importance for Scotland, Scottish tourism and—ultimately—the Scottish economy. If we consider England and think about Shakespeare and look at Dublin and think about Joyce, we realise how much better marketed and better known they are as international products throughout the world, not just in their native countries.

When we began to research the issue, we were fascinated to find the number of Burns heritage trails that exist. If one goes on to the worldwide web, one can find at least a dozen—their number seems to grow day and daily. We are not concerned about their existence because, of course, the fact that they exist is most commendable; the problem is that there seems to be a great lack of joined-up thinking. Recent changes at the Burns national heritage park have brought the whole issue of Burns and the Burns product more to the fore. We, of course, commend and support the previous petition that came before the committee; I understand that the committee will hear responses to that petition later today.

We are looking at a bigger, broader and more international picture. We believe that the Burns product should be promoted internationally throughout the world, probably starting with the countries where Burns is best known and supported at the moment, although promotion should grow outwards from that base. We are concerned with the bigger picture, not just with Ayrshire. Of course Burns is an important product for Ayrshire: we endorse and acknowledge that. However, we believe that there are much bigger opportunities throughout Scotland and outwith Scotland to promote Burns.

John Kerr (Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry): If there is a positive will to pursue a national Burns heritage trail, there should also be positive discrimination in the Scottish education system to ensure that the indigenous population gains an appreciation of Burns's works, which is sadly lacking at this time. A national trail will also provide an appreciation of Burns's works throughout the calendar year, rather than there being just one dominant day at the end of January with his works forgotten for the other 364 days. A national trail would support both those suggestions; they should be taken into account if such a trail is given the opportunity to exist.

The Convener: As Mr Leitch pointed out, the committee has another petition on the same subject on its agenda. If we take that petition and the responses to it at the same time as PE861, we could discuss all the points that have been raised by the petitioners this morning and by the previous petitioners. Do members agree to that?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: PE824 by Peter Watson on behalf of Alloway and Doonfoot community council called on the Scottish Parliament to review the policy and commitment of the Scottish Executive to placing Robert Burns and his legacy at the heart of its culture and tourism policies, and to urge the Scottish Executive to assume responsibility for bringing together all interested parties to ensure that the flagship assets of our Burns heritage are

properly restored and developed in good time for the major events that are planned for the 2009 year of homecoming, which marks the 250th anniversary of the birth of the national bard.

At its meeting on 16 March 2005, the committee agreed to seek the views of the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport, the Burns national heritage park, VisitScotland, South Ayrshire Council, the Burns Monument Trust and the National Trust for Scotland. We have received responses from all those organisations and people, so if members want to use that information in the discussion, we can talk about both petitions at the same time.

John Scott: I have a question for Bob Leitch. Has Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry done any work on the possible benefits and potential increased number of tourists that an integrated trail across the south-west of Scotland would bring? Have you any back-of-an-envelope calculations on that?

Bob Leitch: They would be back-of-an-envelope calculations at this stage. As time has gone on, we have become more aware of the opportunity to create a bigger product. The facts show that more than 70 per cent of people who visit Scotland go to Edinburgh; many do not get much further than that. We say that that should not be the case. Although we accept that we will not be the only holiday destination, we have to work to link up with other major holiday destinations. After all, Burns spent time in Edinburgh, so if we get the product all joined up, we could create a globally known product that will attract people to Ayrshire as part of their Scottish holiday.

John Scott: We appreciate the letter from Patricia Ferguson, which was given to the committee this morning. She is enthusiastic about such matters. As a representative of Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry, will you explain local feeling? Is there frustration that matters are not progressing? Is there antipathy towards the Burns concept and the feeling that, as a local man, your finger should be well on the pulse?

Bob Leitch: We have just restructured VisitScotland and now have a new VisitScotland Prestwick, a partnership that we are pleased to be part of. Mr Riddle, the chief executive of VisitScotland has said that tourism is everyone's business; that is very much the case. As a representative organisation that looks after the interests of business in Ayrshire, we are becoming increasingly aware of the need to spread that message and encourage other people to become involved in the product.

Recent happenings locally in Alloway have underlined that fact and drawn it to our attention.

There have been meetings of the local authorities with VisitScotland and Scottish Natural Heritage. We are keen to promote those meetings, but we must set up a world-class project in Alloway that will attract people from throughout the world. We do not want it to be a visitor centre for people in Ayrshire, but for people outside Ayrshire as well as those of us who are lucky enough to live here. If we look out of the window this morning, we can see the weather that visitors to Ayrshire always enjoy; I hope that it stays like that. However, our VisitScotland product it is not about sun, sea and sand, but much greater things, one of which is certainly Burns.

John Scott: In the past, one of the difficulties of establishing the Burns tourist trail in Ayrshire has been access. Do you acknowledge that access to Ayrshire is now better than it was? Do you wish to discuss that, bearing in mind the M77, the airport and improved rail services?

Bob Leitch: Absolutely. We are lucky in Ayrshire to have a good transport infrastructure, which is improving all the time. Of course, there will always be room for improvement, and we support Sheena Borthwick and the need in South Ayrshire to improve the condition of the A77. If we look back over the past five, six, seven or eight years, we see that transport infrastructure has improved considerably—something that must be to Ayrshire's advantage. The airport now serves 17 destinations with flights running daily to and from Ayrshire to Europe, something that we used not to have. We now have the new road and those who travel regularly to Edinburgh have slight smiles on their faces for a change because the journey is 10 to 15 minutes quicker than it ever could have been in the past. That is great and it represents another opportunity to broaden the base of tourism in Ayrshire. The new bypass at Ardrossan and Saltcoats is a great improvement in North Ayrshire and we have a reasonable railway infrastructure. I know that we want it to be improved and believe that it should be better, but we have a frequent train service from the city centre in Glasgow to all parts of Ayrshire. Yes, we are lucky and things are getting better. We will always want more, but that is human nature.

Ms White: That is absolutely right. Although Burns is very important to the economy and the people of Ayrshire, it is even more important that people throughout the world can access sites to find out about Robert Burns. It is a national disgrace that we do not have anything for Robert Burns. As someone who has been a member of the Wallace Society for more years than I care to remember, I find it difficult to obtain funding for joined-up thinking. As you mentioned, we are lax in this country in respect of putting our heroes on pedestals. We should know about such people.

I have read the responses from various organisations to PE824 and the letter from the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport dated 2 June. I welcome the responses, but matters are still at the planning stages. Much has been said about the project, but nothing has happened. Hopefully, if the committee writes to the minister and the Executive, matters can be followed up. Has a proper audit been undertaken of any heritage trails, buildings or sites by VisitScotland or the Scottish Tourist Board?

Bob Leitch: An audit is on-going at the moment. I do not know the specifics of the audit, but I understand that Scottish Enterprise Ayrshire, the local authority and other parties that are involved in the Burns product have been looking at the current situation. That progress is good and commendable, and it is the first sign that we have seen that people are beginning to work together as far as the Burns product is concerned. That is an important step. We would like to be more involved in the process but, so far, we have not been invited to do so. It is in the interests of business in general across Ayrshire for that to happen—indeed, it would be useful if all of us were to be involved.

12:15

Ms White: You have practically answered my second question, which was to ask you about the organisations that are involved in the project, when the project was set up and when it expects to have results. You have just told us that the Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry has not been involved so far. Why is that? When was the project set up and when is it expected to finish?

Bob Leitch: My understanding is that the project was set up only in the past few months. Everything that has happened at the Burns national heritage park has jolted people into being more aware of the need to do something more concrete.

Helen Eadie: The letter that we received today from Patricia Ferguson shows her enthusiasm. She makes it clear that the project is

“personally important to me and that is why I have worked hard with partners”.

She then goes on to outline all the partners. It is very encouraging to see such a committed response, and the fact that she mentions

“the Executive's plans to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Robert Burns' birth in 2009 as the Year of Homecoming.”

The context of the minister's response is the problems with the Robert Burns national heritage park. Clearly, PE861 raises another dimension, which is your call to be embraced in the wider

partnership through the establishment of a task force. That seems to be an entirely reasonable proposal.

I recommend that one of the actions that we take today is that we write to the minister welcoming her positive statement and asking her whether she will embrace the points that have been raised this morning. We should urge the minister to include in the partnership, if she can, organisations like Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The minister does not mention VisitScotland in her letter. One of the things that impressed me when I went to Zeebrugge last year was that I found VisitScotland literature on our arrival at the port for our return journey. I picked it up and remember seeing no mention of the Tam O'Shanter experience. Surely literature that specifically highlights Burns should be on display at ports of embarkation, airports and other points of departure from which people travel to Scotland.

Two weeks ago, at the international conference that Bob Geldof addressed, Burns was mentioned on more than one occasion. Clearly, Burns is in the minds of people from Africa and all over the world. Let us be proud of that fact and let us project it. Good progress has been made, as shown by the letter from the minister.

Campbell Martin: First, I endorse Bob Leitch's statement on the weather in Ayrshire. However, as I am from the sub-tropical paradise of Ardrossan, I am finding it a bit chilly in Ayr today. You mentioned that Burns moved around the country a bit. That may be because it is harder to hit a moving target; given his history, it was probably a good idea.

My question follows from Sandra White's line of questioning. Clearly, a number of buildings around Scotland that are associated with Burns are in various conditions of repair and are under different ownership. In an ideal world, what would your best initiative be to secure the buildings and make them part of a successful Burns trail?

Bob Leitch: That is all to do with marketing and a commitment to, belief in and understanding of the product. To return to something that John Kerr said, people will not understand the product and Burns will be alien to them if, as school children, they do not get to know about Burns as they are growing up. Alongside a marketing project that creates the trail, puts it together and brings together all the loose ends, an elementary educational job must also be done to inform children and young people about Burns and what an important asset he is to our country and to our economy. If we approach the project properly, the sky is the limit: the potential is massive. If we think of Stratford we think of Shakespeare. That is the

kind of product that Burns should become for Scotland.

Mr Ingram: The petitioners will be aware of the National Trust for Scotland's involvement in Alloway. Do you endorse its view of Alloway as a hub, both as the starting point for a national tourism tour or a tourism trail throughout the south-west of Scotland, and for co-ordination of the national collections? Until now, we have not even had that kind of facility available to us. Have you had any discussions with the NTS? Are you aware of on-going developments?

John Kerr: One difficulty in respect of whether Alloway could be a hub is that that might severely depress Burns enthusiasts in Dumfries. Alloway is certainly a starting point because it is his birthplace. A difficulty that we have with Burns is that he moved around and the properties in the areas that he moved to may be under local authority control, NTS control or private ownership. The diversity of ownership of the properties creates difficulties in ensuring that there is a cohesive strategy.

I have no problem—neither does Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry—with Alloway being used as the hub and the starting point. If there is an opportunity to have a central control base, it should be located in the most natural place it can be, but because of the nature of Burns's life and his works there are certainly other areas in Scotland on a potential tourist or heritage trail that would have equal importance to Alloway for different reasons. There is not a problem with having one starting point that is the hub, as long as it gives a view to the rest of the trail—whether it is done in succession or in isolated sections.

Mr Ingram: Has Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry recently had discussions with the players at Alloway?

Bob Leitch: No, we have had no such discussions. We have been involved around the fringes of everything that is going on and we are concerned about everything that is going on. As I said to Sandra White in response to a previous question, we would be happy to be much more involved than we have been until now.

Mr Ingram: My second point is about the 2009 year of homecoming. As you are probably aware, Professor John Lennon has been commissioned by the Scottish Executive to consider how we can take full advantage of 2009. He has looked at similar events that have happened elsewhere in Europe. For example, in Ireland there is the James Joyce experience in Dublin, in Denmark there is Hans Christian Andersen and in Austria there is Mozart. There is a lot of international experience. From a business perspective, you want to ensure

that you take maximum advantage and that opportunities are fully realised. What are your impressions of that effort? Have you been involved in it or consulted?

John Kerr: The year of homecoming is obviously a unique opportunity in the lifetime of everybody here. If it can be used as a bounce point to increase appreciation of Burns beforehand and to encourage it thereafter, that can only be a good thing. I would bow to the good Professor Lennon in whatever he comes up with in his report and deliberations. From a business and continuing heritage point of view, the year of homecoming will be an opportune time for appreciation of Burns in general. We support whole-heartedly anything that comes about from the homecoming report and that pushes matters forward once 2009 has passed.

Bob Leitch: That is a very important point for us. The petition is not only about the year of homecoming. The year of homecoming can be the beginning of something very big, but we need to develop a sustainable product that will continue for much longer. That is our objective in lodging the petition.

Mr Ingram: Will the gentlemen use their influence to persuade the authorities at Prestwick airport to change the airport's logo to a more Burns-oriented one?

Bob Leitch: We are tenants of the airport and had nothing whatever to do with the logo. However, whether people like it or not, the plus side is that it has generated enormous press publicity, which Prestwick would not have received after its revamp if it had not chosen that slogan. There are pluses and minuses to everything. The slogan is "Pure dead brilliant", in case the convener is wondering.

The Convener: I was just going to say that Prestwick airport is pure dead brilliant.

Mr Ingram: John Kerr mentioned the teaching of Burns in schools. The Robert Burns World Federation does much good work in schools. What initiatives should there be in schools in that regard?

John Kerr: The teaching of Burns is not currently part of secondary education. If a student is lucky enough to develop an appreciation of Robert Burns as a result of his or her English studies, that is normally because their English teacher or head of department appreciates Burns and wants to promote him as a poet who is worthy of review. The primary education programme in the three local authorities in Ayrshire is very good. I think that almost every Ayrshire primary school pupil has the opportunity to learn about Burns and is encouraged to participate in Burns competitions. However, I am aware of no formal structure for Burns study in the Scottish secondary education

system. As I said, there should be positive discrimination on the matter. Irrespective of the petition's call for a national heritage trail, it is appalling that our education system pays no more than modest lip service to the work of our national bard. There is certainly much adult appreciation of Burns's work, but unfortunately some of that happens in the haze of Burns night once per annum, when the work is appreciated not for its poetic merit but in relation to something more liquid.

The Convener: We will want to pursue the matter with the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport. Like Helen Eadie, I am pleased by the minister's commitment to the issue. However, it is important that we ascertain her views on Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry's call for the establishment of a task force. Are members happy to write to the minister for clarification on the matter?

John Scott: I, too, welcome the minister's response, which we received this morning. However, we must press on. It is 2005 and the year of homecoming is not far away. As Bob Leitch says, we are not talking about an event that happens once a year; we are talking about the sustainability of Burns and the absolute necessity of grasping with both hands the opportunity that marketing Burns offers Ayrshire and south-west Scotland. It would be foolhardy not to grasp that opportunity. We should ask the minister when plans will be forthcoming. We have all shared in the talking and the wringing of hands and we need to press on. We welcome the involvement of the National Trust for Scotland and I have every confidence that Patricia Ferguson will deliver on her welcome commitments. However, we would like the plans to progress.

Ms White: I agree. We have the minister's letter, but it is important that we find out what is going to happen. Bob Leitch said that an audit process has started, but Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry is not involved in it. We should ask the council who is involved and what is happening with the audit of heritage trail sites. There needs to be joined-up thinking.

12:30

The Convener: We will start by seeking a response from the minister and then consider what is happening at local level. This is a policy that must be pulled together from the centre. Members are not always happy with that approach, but the policy is not specific to one local authority because it covers the whole of Scotland and all of us will benefit from it if it is implemented properly. At some point, we could find out how everything ties in.

When we communicate with ministers and call them to give evidence to us, we have usually not been happy with the responses that we have received. In the light of the commitment that the minister has given us, it may be worth our exploring in person with her what we can do. Would members be happy for me to extend an invitation to the minister to discuss the issue with us in committee? Given the time constraints, we do not want to put off doing that for too long. We could give the minister the options of responding to us in writing or accepting an invitation to discuss the issue with us. We will not be able to progress the matter before the autumn, but if my suggestion is taken up we may be able to move forward more quickly.

John Scott: The point should be made—it is better that I make it than that Mike Watson and Helen Eadie do so—that we would welcome hearing from the minister, given that thus far we are pleased with what she has done. That contrasts with what has happened in the past, when we have called ministers before us because we are less than happy about what they have done. The convener talked about the need to drive the project from the centre. That is important, because the project requires partnership working and leadership. The little that I have seen suggests that the minister is best placed to provide that. Once the project has been established sustainably, there may be an opportunity for the minister to divest herself of the responsibility that she has taken on. In the meantime, the matter is in her hands.

The Convener: Are members happy to write to the minister, extending to her an invitation to meet us? If she is unable to do so, we will seek a detailed response to PE861 and will continue to have a dialogue with her, either in writing or in person.

Members indicated agreement.

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

Before we close PE824, shall we write to Mr Watson and ask him what he thinks about the responses to his petition?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I will keep members posted on progress.

If members of the public wish to leave the room for comfort breaks, they are entitled to do so. People should not feel that they must remain here or that they may not come back in if they leave.

Telecommunications Masts (Council Land) (PE839)

The Convener: The last new petition is PE839, by Councillor Peter John Convery, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to develop clear and concise guidance for local authorities on the use of moratorium to exclude telecommunication masts from being situated on council land.

Councillor Convery will make a brief statement to the committee in support of his petition. He is accompanied by Councillor Alistair Kerr. Welcome to the committee. You will have a few minutes to introduce the petition. There will then be a brief discussion.

Councillor Peter John Convery: Councillor Kerr and I are grateful for the opportunity to speak in support of the petition today. After hearing what Ayrshire Voices said, we would dearly love to persuade the committee that we are from North Ayrshire Council, but I do not think that members would believe us. What happened with Ayrshire Voices was not one of our best moments and I am not particularly happy about it.

We are here not on behalf of ourselves or of South Ayrshire Council, but on behalf of those who genuinely and realistically believe that their lives have been blighted and that their environment and homes have been badly affected by the consequences of the moratorium that we put in place in 2000 on the siting of telecommunications masts on council-owned land. The moratorium was a response to a 1998 World Health Organisation report, which set the ball rolling for a precautionary approach to be taken, given the potential health hazards. The approach was taken up in national planning policy guideline 19 and supplemented in planning advice note 62. The precautionary approach is still relevant because, as the committee well knows, the Stewart report, like the 1998 Gothenburg report, came to the conclusion that the jury is still out on the health issues.

NPPG 19 set the tone in relation to the sensitivity of sites and the precautionary approach. In 2000, the council took such an approach, primarily in relation to the very young and the sick, that is, to schools and hospitals. Those were the two drivers of our decision to put in place a moratorium. However, at the time, we were not conscious of the implications of the third generation of mobile phones, which was our fault more than anything else. Obviously, the Government gave the 3G licences in 2000. Along with the rest of the council, I take responsibility for applying the total moratorium while not realising that, because of the weaker signal that 3G phones use, many more masts would be needed. Another

issue that emerged was that of cell breathing, from which the first and second generations of mobile phones did not suffer—that was the price of having technology that was up to 200 times faster than 2G. It became necessary to have masts in line of sight and much closer together.

As my briefing note states, what we did in good faith in 2000 has come back to bite us with a vengeance. Alistair Kerr will give a brief explanation of what happened when the council tried to address the problem.

Councillor Alistair Kerr: I moved a motion at the appropriate committee calling for a review of South Ayrshire Council's moratorium. At the time, the relevant director's reason for not moving from the existing position was that he required guidance from the Scottish Executive on the harm that telecommunications masts might cause to the population. The council rejected the motion. That is the background to the situation.

John Scott: If I understand correctly, you are saying that there is a conflict of interest. On the one hand, the council is not prepared to grant planning permission for masts on its own land but, on the other, it is prepared to grant planning permission for masts next to housing, even though there is a query about the health hazards. Your point is that the conflict of interest exists throughout Scotland, not just in South Ayrshire.

Councillor Convery: We are not talking about removing the moratorium; we suggest that it should be much more specifically related to the two initial key drivers for the moratorium, which related to schools and hospitals. From looking at different websites, I am sure that the situation in which we have ended up is not unique.

O₂ identified sites on neutral ground on two golf courses in Troon, although that could have happened anywhere, but it was not allowed to consider or use those sites simply because of the moratorium. As a consequence, both 14m masts are being parachuted into the middle of built-up urban housing—one has already arrived.

One mast will be in Alistair Kerr's ward, but I have a good example of one lady who has three young children and who is not willing to wait a decade to find out about issues of radiation or anything else, so she must leave her home. That is a consequence of the moratorium. That was not our intention, but the living reality is that people must leave their homes. I do not believe that our situation is unique.

Despite circulars—I think that we have reached circular 5—we have been given clear advice from the highest authority of the director that we cannot make a move and that the status quo should remain until the Scottish Executive provides further clarification.

John Scott: You have explored all the possibilities that you as local councillors can do. You have spoken to the council director, who still seeks further guidance, although he is an expert on all the planning guidelines and guidance.

Councillor Kerr: I am sure that members of the Parliament are aware of this, but I will reiterate it for the public's benefit. Members of the council planning committee are not allowed to take into account health issues or use them to reject planning applications for telecoms masts. If we did so, the applicants would appeal and the reporter would certainly agree to the masts.

Campbell Martin: I have much sympathy for the councillors' motivation behind lodging the petition. They tried to do the right thing and found that it came back to bite them, as they said. I wonder about the decision by the council director that the council appeared to endorse. I understand that the council decided to impose a moratorium. That is right, because the councillors—not a director or any other official—are supposed to run the council. If the council took the decision, what prevents it from lifting the moratorium?

Councillor Kerr: I am sorry if I misled the committee. The director did not take the decision; he gave us advice and councillors chose to act on it.

Campbell Martin: Ultimately, the councillors—the elected representatives—take the decisions, so what prevents the council from reversing its decision?

Councillor Kerr: I moved a motion to review the situation, but the relevant committee did not go along with it.

Campbell Martin: That was a decision of elected representatives.

Councillor Kerr: Absolutely.

Campbell Martin: The accompanying documents say that a director took the decision, but it was elected councillors who took it. I wanted to clarify that.

I have huge sympathy for what the petitioners are trying to do, but I do not see how the committee and the Parliament can force what you are asking for. Local councillors in South Ayrshire who took the original decision must make a further decision. That is democracy. If councillors take decisions that the local people do not like, it is in the people's hands to take other decisions at election time. I have huge sympathy for what you are trying to do, but I am not sure what the committee can do.

12:45

Councillor Convery: I have great sympathy with that view. We were elected to make decisions

rather than to prevaricate over what a director says. The reality was in front of us. We brought the moratorium to life and we have maintained it for the past five years. As the roll-out of third-generation technology starts in earnest, the hope is that 80 per cent of it will be rolled out by 2007, so that will be the reality.

I could not possibly comment on my fellow councillors; I was not on the committee in question. On the day, the councillors on the committee made their decision because the director, having taken advice from the council officers who deal with such things, made it clear that the council should maintain the status quo until there was further clarification from the Scottish Executive on the use of moratorium. You are dead right that they could have said, "It is tough. We know what is happening and we know the consequences of not allowing O₂ or another company to land a mast in a neutral zone on a golf course." However, they chose to ignore that.

Mike Watson: Welcome, gentlemen. There are a couple of things that puzzle me. Like almost every other member of the Parliament, I have had cases like this in my constituency. They always create interest and concern.

In the supporting document that you have given us you say that the imposition of the total moratorium in 2000

"was done in good faith to protect both children and the sick from any possible long term effects".

If that is the case, why is the council allowing masts to be erected in any part of South Ayrshire? Councillor Kerr said that any developer would succeed in an appeal if the rejection was based purely on the ground of unspecified health concerns. What would happen if a company wanted to site a mast on the top of this building and it was refused permission? Could it not appeal on the ground that the council had rejected its application to site a mast on council property only because it was worried about health concerns? If that is the reason that the council is giving for the moratorium, why cannot that be challenged by a potential developer?

Councillor Kerr: I am not sure of my legal ground, but I think that any mast operator needs the consent of the owner of the property before it can install a mast, except if the site is on a public road or footpath. Council property is private property, like any other. That is my understanding of the situation.

Mike Watson: So, an application to site anything on South Ayrshire Council property would not get past stage 1 and could not be submitted. Thank you for that clarification.

The other issue that I want to address is the motion that you presented to the council on 6

April, which was defeated. According to the supporting document, the motion was defeated

"on the advice of the relevant director who felt that until the Scottish Executive issued clearer guidance to Local Authorities the Status Quo should not be tampered with."

On what was clearer guidance sought?

Councillor Kerr: From memory—and my memory is not particularly good—I believe that it would be on the perceived harm that these masts may or may not cause to people who live nearby.

Mike Watson: So, the official position of South Ayrshire Council is that it believes that telecommunications masts are at least potentially harmful to the local population. Yet—no doubt, as in any other part of the country—there is a wide network of masts to enable us all to use our mobile phones.

I have one last point for clarification. Your supporting document talks about O₂ applying to site a mast on a council-owned golf course. It continues:

"As this site was debarred O₂ have had to install a 14 meter mast into another heavily built up area largely populated by families with young children."

Can you explain why the company has had to do that? Was that necessary to meet the needs of mobile phone communications in that area? Was that the only alternative?

Councillor Convery: Sorry. I think that the mast would have been that size anyway simply because of the topography of the ground. If the masts are closer together, smaller ones can be used, but the mast at that location had to be 14m high regardless of whether it was going to be on the golf course or in the middle of a pavement.

Mike Watson: Am I right in thinking that 14m is not a height that has been chosen at random? Do additional qualifications not come into play for masts that are 15m or over?

Councillor Kerr *indicated agreement.*

Helen Eadie: I have considerable sympathy with your petition. I am one of the MSPs who have had a substantial case load on the matter and, as a consequence, I met the Scottish Advisory Committee on Telecommunications and all the mobile phone operators in my area. They agreed to hold an annual meeting to show local councillors the roll-out map for the area. As Mike Watson rightly points out, we all want improved telecommunications. It is certainly part of the Westminster Government's policy that we major in that area. Have you had a meeting with the mobile phone operators in your area to see the roll-out map and discuss what will happen during the coming year? Such meetings give a good basis for negotiation on where masts can be placed and what sort of masts are used.

Councillor Convery: I am on the planning committee so I do not see the information until a planning application comes in. Another committee would deal with it first. You are correct in that we are entitled to ask operators whether a roll-out is planned. Of course, although they might identify the sites that are best in terms of the interconnection between masts, they might have to discount them at a later date. That was certainly the case with the two most recent cases, which were very contentious.

Unlike a lot of people, I have a great deal of sympathy for telecommunications companies. They do not want bad publicity. They do not want people to be aggrieved about masts coming into the middle of their housing schemes when there is an alternative. There are difficult decisions to be made. Even if there were no moratorium, it is inevitable that at some point, for technical reasons, we would have to put masts in locations that we did not want to use. That is the hard choice that we have to make as a planning authority, but it is galling. How do I answer the woman who said to me, "Your precautionary approach has a much greater and safer effect on the rabbits on the golf course than it does on my neighbourhood"? She was not being facetious. She was deadly serious. That is the sting in the tail. The roll-out has to take place and we want it to take place, but we want to protect our citizens.

Helen Eadie: The Scottish Executive is keen for operators to collaborate with local authorities and councillors by holding an annual or biannual meeting to examine the overall plan so that contentious issues can be resolved when they arise. I was a member of the Transport and the Environment Committee when it carried out a major inquiry on the issue. To return to what Campbell Martin said, the local government officer who gave you the advice needs to be pointed to all the deliberations that have taken place on the matter in the Scottish Parliament and to the various documents that are available. They support the view that it is up to local councillors to make the best choice for their local area. I support that point of view.

Ms White: Most of the questions that I wanted to ask have been answered. This morning, I had a long conversation with Helen Eadie, who was on the Transport and the Environment Committee, to find out what was what. You say that you took advice from your executive at the council, and ultimately the matter is the council's responsibility. I do not think that the Public Petitions Committee can do anything at this stage.

We have been inundated with petitions on mobile phone masts. All members of the committee have been approached by people who are campaigning to get rid of masts at the bottom

of their gardens and so on. You have the moratorium, but could you not put a new proposal to the council, even if it is just for selected areas, to allow certain applications to go through?

I would like to see councils throughout the country being given that choice, because that would certainly make it easier for them. You could start the ball rolling in your council. You would have to put the idea to the full council. Either the moratorium should be lifted completely or each planning application should be taken on its merits. Getting that decision passed through the council is the only way that I can see of getting anything resolved. As you know, once a decision is passed it takes six months to overturn it at a full council meeting. I advise you to lobby some of your councillors and put forward the idea at a full council meeting. I do not think that we can do anything.

Councillor Convery: I do not disagree. If I were sitting in your seat, I would think, "What a bunch of tubes!" We created the situation and now we are wringing our hands and saying, "Oh my God." Deadly serious things are happening that affect people's lives. Alistair Kerr's motion was not even about changing the process; it was simply asking for a review after five years. Everyone said, "Oh no—it's too dangerous. It's too scary, so let's just leave it. There's nothing we can do about those people who have already had their lives blighted." We are trying to find a way forward. Even if the committee chooses just to note what we have said, that is a big contribution for the people out there who are liable to have their lives blighted again because we did not revisit the issue. The exercise has not been negative for us, because we have to stand up for the people whom we represent. We have the power to change the use of the moratorium. If we choose not to, some of us will get our comeuppance. We should be able to do that and I am pretty cheesed off that we do not seem to be able to. It is like saying, "I'm the baby. I've dropped my toy out the pram. Can you come along and pick it up?"

Phil Gallie: I apologise for not being here at the beginning. Although I sympathise with what Helen Eadie and Campbell Martin have said about councillors responsibility, it seems to me that the petition hangs on confusions that arise in NPPG 19. It is brave councillors indeed who, on occasion, go against the advice of the highly paid senior executives. In this instance, NPPG 19 has a lot of characteristics that could cause confusion and it does not allow council officials to judge issues in the way that they could if there was a level playing field. Is that the point of the petition?

Councillor Convery: Yes, I believe it is. I sympathise with where you are coming from. Ultimately, the responsibility lies with the

councillor. However, the advice from the director was given in good faith on advice from his professionals, who were not being belligerent. The issue will not go away, because the same advice will come back if we take the matter to full council. We will be told to keep the status quo until further clarification is given. I think that we are on circular 5 at the moment. I am not saying that we do not have experts to deal with the stuff, but it is a mire in which we can really get bogged down. I am just a squaddie.

Phil Gallie: If the committee were to decide to ask the Scottish Executive to revisit NPPG 19 with a view to clarifying some of the points that you have identified, would you feel some satisfaction?

Councillor Convery: Yes. We get hung up on the precautionary approach on health issues, but we should remember that section 40 of NPPG 19 talks strongly about detriment to the visual amenities, so siting is extremely important. There are the health issues, on which the jury is still out, and the visual impact on the locality, and those two things together can blight someone's life terribly. I think that there is still an issue there for the Parliament, although whether it should be dealt with through the Public Petitions Committee I do not know.

13:00

The Convener: I want recommendations on how to deal with this, because I think we know what the issue is.

John Scott: Before we come to a recommendation, I want to say something about the odd situation that we have arrived at. All over the country, chief executives or officers of councils appear to be giving guidance and advice in good faith, but that can lead to different conclusions. If one council has a moratorium and another does not, that would suggest that the advice is far from clear.

Whether or not there is a health risk—in all honesty, I do not believe that there is—if there is a perceived health risk, that blights people's lives, and it is important that we recognise that fact. There are about 40 local authority golf courses in South Ayrshire and, as Councillor Convery has said, refusing planning permission on a golf course means that masts have to be sited on land that is not council ground. The two specific examples to which Councillors Convery and Kerr referred are in the middle of residential areas, and whether or not people's lives really have been blighted because masts have not been allowed on a golf course, those people perceive their lives to have been blighted. If a council takes the view, "It's too dangerous for us to take responsibility for siting masts on our land, so we'll site them in the

middle of residential areas," there is an obvious conflict of interest. We genuinely need clarification from the minister about that, given that the current guidance apparently leads to senior council officers giving different opinions.

Helen Eadie: I agree with part of what John Scott says, but not with another part. I agree that the perception of ill health and the threat to health is a serious issue, and public health consultants say that politicians need to have regard to that aspect of community concern.

I do not see a conflict of interests in moratoriums on the siting of masts, because councils are turning down financial benefits for their area. If a council, or any farmer or other private individual, accepts the siting of a telecommunications mast, they are paid fairly significant annual sums for that. Local authorities are turning that money down—

John Scott: But why are they turning it down?

Helen Eadie: Because they have taken a decision that they do not want to put themselves in any position of risk. That is a choice, and this comes back to the point that Campbell Martin made. It is made abundantly clear in the papers before us, and we have notification here in black and white, that

"The Scottish Executive commissioned an evaluation of the new planning controls in 2004. This evaluation found that:

It was evident that the issue of moratoria for the erection of equipment on council-owned property was an issue for elected members. Again, it should be noted that land ownership does not fall within the remit of planning. Nonetheless, the use of moratoria, by some elected council members, was perceived as appropriate in terms of representing local community concerns."

The Scottish Parliament has always said that wherever possible, we will do our best not to suck up powers from local authorities, but to maximise subsidiarity and democracy at the most local level possible.

I agree with Phil Gallie that this is perhaps an example of the Transport and the Environment Committee's evaluation not being communicated to the 32 local authorities in Scotland. That might be a point that we could ask the Scottish Executive to pass on from the evaluation that it commissioned. I would be quite willing to support his suggestion that we ask the Executive to communicate the evaluation, which clearly supported the case that both Campbell Martin and I have made.

The Convener: I will try to draw the discussion to a conclusion now, because we have given the petition quite a good airing. Everyone in the room understands that this is ultimately a planning matter, that the decision must be made at local level and that we are not sitting in judgment on

any previous or future decisions. However, this is not the first time that we have had petitioners coming to seek clarification on specific points. In fact, without pre-empting our next debate, I think that that is exactly what happened in respect of a planning decision elsewhere, and in that case we took up the issue to seek clarification on certain points. We would not be stepping beyond the bounds of what we have done before if we were to do what Helen Eadie and Phil Gallie have suggested and to ask for some clarity on a specific point in the hope that that will allow those who will ultimately make the decision to do so having tested the Executive on its position. If we can agree on that, we could take the petition forward by seeking that clarity. When we get a response, the councillors will know what the Executive's position is in respect of those points when they make the ultimate decision.

Councillor Convery: Excellent.

The Convener: Do members agree that we should take up that point?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Councillor Convery: Thank you.

Current Petitions

Recreation Open Space (Provision and Planning Regulations) (PE771)

Planning Procedures (Playing Field Land) (PE813)

Planning System (Recreational Spaces) (PE821)

13:08

The Convener: The next item is current petitions. We took PE824 in conjunction with the other petition on Robert Burns—PE861—so the next petitions that we have to consider, which are linked, are PE771, PE821 and PE813, on playing fields and recreational spaces.

Petition PE771, by Olena Stewart, calls for the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to consider whether there is sufficient guidance for local authorities to safeguard the provision of playing fields and recreational open space and to establish whether additional legislation is required to cover conflicts of interest within local authorities on planning matters in relation to the loss of playing fields.

Petition PE821, by Sheena Stark, calls for the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to ensure that all planning applications for planning consent to change the usage of recreational spaces should be routinely sent to the appropriate minister for consideration.

Petition PE813, by Ronnie McNicol, on behalf of Laighdykes residents group, calls for the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to review existing planning procedures and guidance to ensure that they are sufficient to prevent local authorities from using playing field land for development purposes.

Members have seen the correspondence. Do they have any views on it?

Campbell Martin: I am extremely disappointed by the response from the Scottish Executive, because I do not think that it addresses the questions that were asked, particularly by the Laighdykes residents. Throughout the entire Executive response there are references to school playing fields. However, the Laighdykes petition is not about school playing fields but about public playing fields. That is the question that the Executive was asked to address. Of course, in the case of Laighdykes, it is North Ayrshire Council that intends to build a school on the public playing fields, so perhaps that is where some of the Executive's confusion has come from. In fact, what

would happen there are the amalgamation of two schools and the loss of playing fields at Kilwinning, which would be sold off. Another primary school in Ardrossan would lose part of its playing fields and the public playing fields would be built on, so we would be losing school playing fields and public playing fields.

This may be a duplication of effort, but I have written to the Deputy Minister for Communities to ask whether the Executive would consider in any forthcoming planning bill—and we know that one is coming—a presumption against development on playing fields where the National Playing Fields Association's minimum level has not been reached, as is the case in Saltcoats and Ardrossan. I hope that it is just confusion on the part of the Executive that explains why it continually refers to school playing fields, but I think that it has missed the point. The committee should go back to the Executive and ask it to address the point about the loss of public playing fields, particularly where the National Playing Fields Association's minimum level has not been reached.

I also have concerns about the position of sportscotland, in that the Executive refers to ministers calling in developments if sportscotland continues to object. However, as we have seen elsewhere in Scotland, sportscotland is sometimes persuaded by developers and local authorities that say that they will provide new sports pitches and facilities, when those are not the same as public-access playing fields—people are charged to use the new facilities, which are sometimes three or four miles down the road. I have concerns that, if sportscotland was persuaded at that point and withdrew its objection, a development could go through without ministers calling it in. That would be a huge retrograde step.

In its reply, the Executive states that if ministers were

“routinely making decisions on certain types of applications”,

that

“could be seen as undermining local democracy.”

That statement is a wee bit ironic, given that local democracy would seem to be undermined when local authorities build on pitches that are owned by the public.

I will listen to members' contributions, but I would like us to go back to the Executive and ask it to address the points that we asked it to address the first time. I am aware that the Executive was late in submitting its response. I hope that it will be more timeous if we ask for a further response.

Ms White: I know that Mike Watson will want to say something on the issue, as he had a members' business debate on it.

My comments concern the letter from the Executive and PE821. Campbell Martin is quite right about PE813. I have been concerned about the fact that, in Glasgow and other areas, playing fields have either been sold off and not replaced or, although it has been said that they are not being sold off, they have become so overgrown that nobody can use them and they end up being sold off for building. Like Campbell Martin, I am concerned about the Executive's comments on sportscotland.

Petition PE821 relates to Dowanhill lawn tennis club. In its reply, the Executive tells us that the issue is a planning matter for local councils. The Executive is saying that there must be compelling reasons for taking at a higher level a decision on an objection to selling off a piece of land. However, the fact that tennis clubs and bowling clubs that are well used are being sold off is a reason for taking the matter to the Executive.

We need further clarification. Who decides that it is reasonable to take a matter to the Executive? In its reply, the Executive says that a decision can go to a higher level—that is, the Executive—if a certain kind of interest is involved, but it does not say whether that applies regardless of whether it is the council or the private club that wants to sell off the land. We need clarification.

The Convener: That is a good question.

Mike Watson: As Sandra White mentioned, I had a members' business debate on the general subject last week. The debate was lively and Campbell Martin and others raised the issue of Laighdykes. It is interesting that, on notification of applications, the Executive's response states:

“Notification in such circumstances is required when the development is contrary to the local plan for the area or has attracted a substantial body of objection.”

My understanding is that the Laighdykes decision attracted a substantial body of objection. What I am not clear about is whether sportscotland has objected. Can Campbell Martin say whether it has, because, if it has, the issue would go to the minister anyway?

Campbell Martin: That would be the case as long as sportscotland maintained its objection.

Mike Watson: Is that not the current position?

13:15

John Scott: Perhaps I can help. The proposal for the old racecourse in Ayr attracted about 1,350 objections. An objection was received from sportscotland, but sportscotland apparently

withdrew its objection after being assured that the footprint of the development would be less than 15 per cent of the area concerned. Nonetheless, the local planning committee threw out the proposal because it obviously contravened so many of the local planning guidelines to which Mike Watson referred.

Mike Watson: In my members' business debate, I touched on sportscotland's role. I suggested that we could use the current review of planning guidelines for the planning bill to tighten up the system by providing for a presumption against the loss of recreational space. However, the issue can become complicated if, as might happen in Glasgow for instance, it is proposed that three blaes football pitches that are not used because they are in such a rundown state should be replaced by a modern floodlit all-weather surface that will be put to far greater use.

I take Campbell Martin's point about the users of such facilities often being required to pay a fee, but that does not necessarily exclude new developments, especially if the new facility is run by the local authority. In such situations, perhaps sportscotland should not object to a proposal that will result in greater recreational use. However, I disagree with Campbell Martin's suggestion that no objection would be made if the new facility was some distance away. New developments need to be accessible to the community in which the original facility was located. Otherwise, we get into the issue of what in Glasgow we call territorialism. Sometimes, young people from one area are reluctant to go even to an adjacent area only half a mile away, as there may be various reasons why it would not be regarded as safe to do that. Those sorts of considerations need to be built in as well.

We should ask sportscotland for its comments on the Executive's letter, especially on the aspect about applications that have

"attracted a substantial body of objection."

We should also ask it about the accessibility of new facilities, which should be at least comparable to, if not better than, access to the previous facilities.

John Scott: The Executive's letter states that it has commissioned research into the use of open spaces. That is germane to today's discussion and it should also inform the new planning bill.

Mike Watson: I endorse that point. We have a need not only for formal recreation spaces such as football and hockey pitches, but for open spaces such as parkland where people can go for physical activity. As a nation, we are not nearly as fit as we should be, so any opportunity for physical activity should be maintained and protected.

John Scott: An essential point is that no community wants to lose open space where that can be avoided. That is the fundamental point from which we all start. Thereafter, other needs—such as the need in Ayrshire for a new school building—must also be satisfied. It is certainly not a joking matter. We need to balance those difficulties.

Mike Watson: Convener, I am sorry to dominate the discussion, but I also meant to suggest earlier that our letter to sportscotland should ask for its views on the requirement whereby planning applications are referred to it only if they will result in the loss of recreational space of more than 0.4 hectares. That means that proposals for tennis courts and bowling greens may not be referred. Of course, one of our petitions was from Dowanhill tennis club about the loss of tennis courts in a city-centre setting. I would like to ask sportscotland whether that requirement should be reduced to bring proposals for bowling greens and tennis courts within its purview. In that case, sportscotland would be a statutory consultee in those situations as well.

John Scott: Are you talking about referring to sportscotland proposals that deal specifically with sports facilities?

Mike Watson: Yes.

Mr Ingram: I endorse what Mike Watson has said. I, too, participated in his debate last week. I agree that we need to get sportscotland's perspective on the issue. Its original letter to the committee left the clear impression that it felt that it was between a rock and a hard place. However, when I listened carefully to the minister's summing up of the debate last week, I did not get the impression that she had moved in any great way to accommodate sportscotland's concerns.

Those concerns were that, given the current procurement methods and the support for councils to procure new schools, there was a gap between what the councils could afford and how much they were being funded by the Executive. In those circumstances, it is natural for the local authority to look to its own estate for a cheap alternative source of land. Too often, that land comes via places such as the old racecourse in Ayr or the Laighdykes playing field, which are well-used facilities whose disappearance would be a loss to the local community.

We need a definitive response from sportscotland to what the minister has said. Clearly sportscotland wants the petition to be referred to a subject committee of the Parliament so that the matter can be investigated. I know that the Transport and the Environment Committee worked on the issue during the previous

parliamentary session, but the issue needs to be revisited.

The Convener: We still have a bit of work to do on the petition before we refer it. We tend not to send petitions on to subject committees until we have researched them as deeply as we can.

The three petitions are connected. We have to go back to all three petitioners to get their perspectives on the response and to find out how it relates to each particular issue. However, I take on board what members have said about the importance of contacting sportscotland. If we write to sportscotland and to the three petitioners to get their perspectives on the response, we will collate all that information and at that point decide how to progress the issues raised by the petitions.

Campbell Martin: You did not mention the Executive.

The Convener: We have to get responses from the petitioners and sportscotland to take back to the Executive. We need a response from the petitioner to the Executive's response. We can then go back to the Executive or refer the petition on to a subject committee to consider.

Campbell Martin: Okay.

The Convener: That concludes our deliberations for this morning. I thank everyone for their attendance. We look forward to this afternoon's awareness-raising agenda.

Meeting closed at 13:22.

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