

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Wednesday 21 December 2005

Session 2

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

19th 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)
*Mr Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP)
Campbell Martin (West of Scotland) (Ind)
*John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West)
(LD)
*Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

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

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED :

Chris Ballance (South of Scotland) (Green)
Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green)
Dr John Crawford
Christine Irving
Ellie Foster MacDonald (Trinity Primary School)
Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
Christopher Milne
Katie Moffat
Karen Rae (Trinity Primary School)
Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
Faith Waddell (Trinity Primary School)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jim Johnston

ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Hough

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 21 December 2005

[THE CONVENER opened the meeting at 10:02]

New Petitions

Packaging (PE905)

The Convener (Michael McMahon): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 19th meeting of the Public Petitions Committee in 2005.

The first of our new petitions is PE905, from Ellie Foster MacDonald and Faith Waddell, on behalf of Trinity Primary School. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to consider and debate the use of excessive packaging in supermarkets with a view to encouraging the use of recycled alternatives. Ellie and Faith are here to make a brief statement in support of the petition. They are accompanied by their teacher, Karen Rae. I also welcome to the public gallery other pupils from Trinity Primary School. Ellie and Faith have a few minutes to talk to us and then we will ask some questions about the petition.

Faith Waddell (Trinity Primary School): We believe that many products in supermarkets are so excessively packaged that it will add to global warming.

Ellie Foster MacDonald (Trinity Primary School): That will happen because factories that produce plastic and other materials create fumes and harmful gases that then enter the atmosphere. Even though we can recycle, many people choose not to, and even if they do, it is extremely difficult to recycle plastic of all kinds.

Faith Waddell: When all your rubbish gets taken away, either it gets put in a landfill site, which is a waste of space, or it gets burnt, which obviously produces smoke and more harmful gases. Also, wrapping food in plastic, especially clingfilm, can, over time, cause serious illnesses.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: That can happen because the plastic releases chemicals into the food.

Faith Waddell: If you are looking for alternatives, you could use recycled paper, cardboard or glass.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: The majority of excessively packaged items are aimed at children's lunch boxes and, in most schools, we cannot recycle.

Faith Waddell: We also think that Scotland should start using the green dot. Members might not be aware of that concept, which is widely used in Germany. It means that companies have to pay for the packaging that they produce to be recycled. That encourages them to manufacture less packaging.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: We have brought in some examples of excessive packaging. *[Interruption.]*

The Convener: It will be interesting to see how the *Official Report* deals with this. *[Interruption.]* I think that your point has been well made. *[Laughter.] [Interruption.]*

Faith Waddell: This is a pile of all the packaging—

Ellie Foster MacDonald: And this is a pile of all the products.

Faith Waddell: Now we will have a competition. Before we do, does anyone have any food allergies?

The Convener: We have agreed that the MSPs are going to be tested. We need to know whether any members have a food allergy.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: I would like Sandra White to open these.

Faith Waddell: And I would like Charlie Gordon to open this. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): I am rather partial to chocolates.

Faith Waddell: You can both keep them.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: The winner is the person who opens five Ferrero Rochers first. Ready, steady, go. *[Interruption.]*

Members: Hurray!

The Convener: Can we just open one? The winner is the person who opens the first one. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Gordon: It would be a shame to waste them.

Ellie Foster MacDonald and Faith Waddell: The winner is Charlie Gordon.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: If all round there was much less packaging—

Faith Waddell:—wouldn't life be so much easier?

Ellie Foster MacDonald: We need you—

Faith Waddell:—to take action.

Ellie Foster MacDonald and Faith Waddell: Thank you for listening.

The Convener: Thank you very much for bringing a good petition to the committee in an innovative way. If you do not mind, I will not ask Charlie Gordon to speak first, as he is still enjoying his chocolate. Do any other MSPs have questions for our petitioners?

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): Thank you for coming today with this interesting petition, which you have presented with enthusiasm. You spoke about the green dot scheme in Germany. Have you researched that? Can you give us some more information on how that works? If you cannot, do not worry.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: It was Mark Ballard who told us about it.

The Convener: Okay. We will ask Mark Ballard, as our witnesses seem to be passing the question on to him. Can you explain the process in Germany, to which our witnesses are referring?

Mark Ballard (Lothians) (Green): Under German waste law, supermarkets and the producers of packaging have a responsibility to pay for packaging waste to be dealt with. Most of them contract a company called Der Grüne Punkt, which runs a scheme. On a lot of pan-European product packaging, there is a little green point with two interlocking arrows. That symbol on packaging means that a small amount of money has been given to the company to collect that packaging waste. The companies that produce the packaging have to pay a small amount for the service.

In Germany, that has encouraged companies to reduce the amount of packaging that they use, because doing so reduces the amount of money that they have to pay either through their own dedicated collection scheme or through the national third-party scheme. The national third-party scheme is known as the green point and there are green point collection bins at supermarkets. The scheme has provided companies with a financial incentive to cut packaging at source, rather than to produce packaging and to place on local authorities the costs of cleaning it up after it has been produced.

Faith Waddell: The symbol is on the box that I am holding up. It is green with white arrows around it.

John Scott: Do you both recycle at home?

Faith Waddell: Yes.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: Yes.

The Convener: You are setting a good example.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): Thank you for coming along this morning. I was interested in your presentation. You covered a number of areas apart from supermarket packaging, including

recycling in schools. Have you done research into schools that recycle on school premises?

Faith Waddell: Our school recycles paper.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: And cardboard.

Karen Rae (Trinity Primary School): We have just started working towards becoming an eco-school.

Ms White: That is very interesting. There are a number of eco-schools in Glasgow and other areas. As well as having the supermarkets produce less packaging and dealing with the health risks associated with clingfilm, do we need to have an educational programme on packaging and recycling in schools?

Faith Waddell: That would be good.

Ms White: I presume that your school would be at the forefront of such a programme.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: Yes.

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): Good morning. I was impressed by your presentation, which was very professional. You should be congratulated on that. I agree that everything is wrapped up to the nth degree, which creates an awful lot of problems, both for the people who are trying to get into the packages and when it comes to disposing of the waste product. How do you suggest that supermarkets should present items on the shelves for sale without wrapping them as they do at present?

Faith Waddell: The red pepper that we brought is wrapped singly in a plastic bag. Why could it not be presented unwrapped? A plastic bag is not needed.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: We found that it was not possible to buy organic fruit loose. People could buy red peppers loose. They do not need to buy them in plastic bags, which they just throw away.

Faith Waddell: The cucumber that we brought is wrapped in two layers of plastic.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: There only needs to be one.

Faith Waddell: Or none.

John Farquhar Munro: I think that you are right. A lot could and must be done. However, the people who manufacture the product want to put it in a fancy box that is coloured and attractive. You do not see the product that you are buying, but the decorative box that is in front of you, which may attract you to buy the product. If the product was not in a box and was exposed, it might not look so attractive and people might not want to buy it.

Faith Waddell: If there was not the option of having a fancy box and all products were not wrapped excessively, people would have to buy them.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: People would have to buy things that are not in fancy boxes.

John Farquhar Munro: Do you agree that a single wrapper on each product would be more appropriate?

Faith Waddell: Yes—and there should not be so much plastic.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: Plastic is really difficult to recycle. More cardboard, recycled paper and glass should be used.

John Farquhar Munro: There is an on-going debate in the Parliament about reducing the number of plastic bags that are on offer in supermarkets and other shops. What are your views on that issue?

10:15

Ellie Foster MacDonald: People should have to pay for plastic bags, which should cost 15p or more.

Faith Waddell: People should use bags for life.

John Farquhar Munro: The bags should be made more reusable.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: Yes, they should be a bit stronger.

John Farquhar Munro: Thank you.

Mr Gordon: Congratulations on a very effective presentation and thanks for the chocolates. I actually prefer Belgian chocolates—you will know for next time.

What impact might alternative packaging or less packaging have on prices in the shops? Prices might influence how consumers would react to your proposition.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: I think cardboard costs less than plastic, so the shops could use more cardboard and recycled paper.

Faith Waddell: Consumers would pay less, but then they would buy more.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): I congratulate you and apologise for arriving late for such an entertaining part of the meeting. Does your petition relate to the size of packaging? When I was in America, I purchased a memory card for my camera. The memory card was about an inch big, but the thick plastic packaging was about one and a half times the size of an A4 file. Is your project really about making packaging more appropriate to the size of the product?

Ellie Foster MacDonald: Partly, yes. It is also about getting shops not to use nearly as much plastic, because only certain types of plastic can be recycled—

Faith Waddell:—such as milk bottles. The plastic packaging that we have brought in cannot be recycled.

Helen Eadie: Is your petition also about getting people to use glass milk bottles, which can be recycled, instead of plastic milk bottles?

Faith Waddell: Plastic milk bottles can be recycled as well, so no, not really.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Thank you and welcome to the committee. You will notice that Charlie Gordon has not moved very far from the box of chocolates; he is not going to share them with anybody. I have embarrassed him into giving me a chocolate.

Apart from lodging the petition, what else are you doing to further the argument? Are you doing things at home? Have you been to your local supermarket? What form is your project taking?

Faith Waddell: We have not really done much more yet.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: We have been waiting for today; we will take the project further after today. We went along to the supermarket and looked at everything.

Faith Waddell: We thought about what the really bad things were.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: And about what could be changed really easily.

Jackie Baillie: Some of the responsibility for packaging lies with the Westminster Government. The situation might change with the supermarkets themselves behaving differently. I just wondered whether you had done the things that I mentioned. I think that the answer is “not yet.” I have the chocolates now.

The Convener: Does Mark Ballard want to make any final points before we consider what action to take on the petition?

Mark Ballard: Yes. I want to say something about the Executive's current strategy on packaging.

The petition from Faith Waddell and Ellie Foster MacDonald is important, because it stresses the importance of dealing with waste at source. Much of our current approach is about dealing with waste after it has been produced. The costs for dealing with waste fall on local authorities, which have to clean it up.

A waste minimisation strategy, which is what Faith and Ellie are talking about, would put the

cost on to the companies, which would encourage them not to produce the waste in the first place, rather than loading the cost on to local authorities. Many local authorities are finding out that plastic is difficult and expensive to recycle. Once it has been produced, it is there in the waste stream. A waste minimisation strategy would encourage the producers and supermarkets not to produce the plastic in the first place and instead use things that are easier to recycle, such as paper and card. The cost would therefore not be loaded on to local authorities.

Ross Finnie, the Minister for Environment and Rural Development, has indicated that he plans to launch a consultation on a waste minimisation strategy, which will be comprehensive and wide ranging and will cover issues such as product design and manufacture, retailers and consumer behaviour. The committee might like to ask whether the issues that Faith and Ellie have raised could be included in that consultation and the thought processes surrounding it.

The Convener: Thank you for that. We have to decide what to do with the petition. I seek suggestions.

Ms White: I would like the petition to go to the Executive for its consideration as part of the consultation process. We should also send it to the Scottish Retail Consortium, whose work relates to supermarkets, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, whose work relates to waste, and the waste and resources action programme.

The Convener: Do members have any other suggestions for organisations that they think it might be useful to contact?

Helen Eadie: The organisations that Sandra White mentioned are okay.

The Convener: We will write to all those organisations. When we get their responses we will let the petitioners know what they tell us. The petitioners can then write back to us and let us know what they think of the responses. I thank them very much for coming along this morning and giving us a very good presentation and for lodging a very important petition.

Faith Waddell: Thank you.

Ellie Foster MacDonald: Thank you for having us.

10:21

Meeting suspended.

10:24

On resuming—

Information Literacy (PE902)

The Convener: Petition PE902 is from Dr John Crawford. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to ensure that the national school curriculum recognises the importance of information literacy as a key lifelong learning skill. Before being formally lodged, the petition was hosted on the e-petitions site between 26 October 2005 and 16 December 2005, during which time it gathered 710 signatures and 10 comments. The usual e-petitions briefing has been circulated to members.

Dr Crawford will make a brief statement in support of his petition. He is accompanied by Christine Irving and Christopher Milne, whom I also welcome to the committee. Dr Crawford, you have a few minutes for your opening statement. We will then discuss the issue that you have brought to our attention.

Dr John Crawford: Good morning and thank you for inviting us to speak to the committee. I am reminded of the old showbiz saying about never following an act that involved children or dogs. I am afraid that we have no sweets to hand out, but we can provide a card that was produced by the Chartered Institute of Library Information Professionals—CILIP—which is our professional body. One side of the card defines information literacy and the other quotes from the Prague declaration on an information literate society. In particular, I draw the committee's attention to the final lines of that quote, which state that information literacy

"is part of the basic human right of life long learning."

We have lodged our petition not out of anorakish enthusiasm but because the issue is of worldwide importance. As the convener pointed out, our petition attracted 710 signatures. Of those, 415 were from people in Scotland, 186 were from people in England and others were from people in other parts of the world, including Canada, the United States, Australia and—interestingly enough—Mexico. Those signatures include the names of some leading figures in the information literacy movement.

For the purposes of our presentation today, perhaps the best peg on which to hang information literacy is the Executive's document "a curriculum for excellence", which provides a framework for learning to enable young people to develop as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors who are confident in the handling of information. The four points in that framework can be linked to the CILIP information literacy group's definition of information literacy that is given on the card.

The first bullet point on the card mentions the “need for information”. That refers to the need to be aware that problems can be solved by the use of information. The second point is about “the resources available”, by which we mean information that is available not just in electronic form but in books and other types of printed media that are available in all types of libraries—not just public libraries—throughout Scotland. The third and fourth bullet points are about the need to know how to find information and how to evaluate the results. For example, several websites claim that the Holocaust never happened and that it is all just a myth, so people need evaluation skills to distinguish what is true from what is not true. As the fifth bullet point mentions, people need to be able to work with results and exploit them for their own purposes. The sixth bullet point, which is about ethics and responsibility of use, covers two big issues: copyright, which means respecting the rights of the creator of any piece of writing; and plagiarism—this is a big issue in secondary and tertiary education today—which means passing off other people’s work as one’s own. Finally, people also need to know both how to communicate or share their findings—whether that be with their work colleagues, their fellow students or even the people with whom they plan to go on holiday—and how to manage their findings so that they can make use of the information.

That definition of information literacy holds good for all activities that involve information, including activities relating to citizenship, study, work and leisure. For example, I am sure that, like me, many people plan their holiday by looking at websites about the places that they want to visit and by consulting the relevant book in the Rough Guide series.

It should be emphasised that information literacy skills are not the same as information technology skills. IT skills enable people to type a Word document, to create a PowerPoint presentation, to send and receive e-mails, to work with spreadsheets and so on. However, information literacy skills—to put it in two or three words—empower people to realise their full potential. That can be broken down into several components.

10:30

First, the Scottish Executive’s policy on lifelong learning is relevant in this context, as information literacy is an essential concomitant of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning cannot happen without information literacy because people need the battery of information-finding and evaluation skills so that they can use the information for their own purposes. To be a lifelong learner—as I have discovered during my long career—one needs to be able to find the information first of all.

Secondly, information literacy is a central ingredient for a thriving democracy—judging by what we saw this morning, democracy seems to be thriving here—as it allows people to evaluate what they see and hear and to form their own opinions. As the Prague declaration puts it, information literacy

“is a prerequisite for participating effectively in the Information Society, and is part of the basic human right of life long learning.”

Information literacy is, therefore, a civil right.

Thirdly, information literacy is essential for stimulating and sustaining economic growth. Information literacy is applicable in the working day and is essential for economic development in the knowledge economy and for researching new products. Information literacy allows people to find information in the work situation that can inform management and day-to-day decision making. As part of my research, I sent a questionnaire to some of our students and alumni—I believe that the convener is an alumnus of ours—to ask them what they thought information literacy was for. Most respondents answered that, for them, information literacy was to facilitate improvement in the work situation so that they work better.

At the moment, there is a need for greater integration and better direction of existing practices. Chris Milne has done some excellent work on initiatives in the higher education sector. We have also been involved in a research project with North Ayrshire Council’s Audrey Sutton, who is doing excellent work in the secondary education sector. However, existing initiatives are patchy and are not integrated. Examples of good practice exist, but within the Scottish Executive there is no focus of responsibility for information literacy, as various agencies currently have a hand in the issue. We are looking for the Executive to have the overall focus of responsibility.

We are probably talking not about big resource implications but about the co-ordination of existing activities with a clear understanding of what information literacy is. Undoubtedly, in both the secondary and tertiary education sectors, information literacy activities are already taking place but they are not recognised as such. Essentially, the aim of our petition is to

“identify a clear focus of responsibility for information literacy within the Scottish Executive”.

We want to make progress on that basis.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Do members want to ask any questions or make any points about what they have heard?

Helen Eadie: I thank Dr Crawford for his thought-provoking petition. Will he say a little more about the projects that are examples of best

practice? To what extent do those happen throughout Scotland?

Dr Crawford: I will ask Chris Milne to talk about the higher education initiatives. Christine Irving, who is my research assistant on the project, can then say something about the initiatives in secondary education.

Christopher Milne: I work at the University of Abertay Dundee and I have been an academic librarian for a number of years.

One of our main problems is that, although an exceptionally good infrastructure exists throughout Scotland to provide people with access to information, people do not value information and they often go to dubious sources of information for a whole range of activities. As a librarian, I used to see countless students panicking around Easter time before they handed in their dissertations. The main reason for such panic was that the students did not have the skill set that would have allowed them to gather and evaluate information from which they could learn so that they could then produce a good-quality dissertation.

One problem is Google overload. People are losing the belief that information is a valuable commodity and they are slowly losing the ability to develop information literacy skills. Information literacy has always existed, as people have always had to read for degrees. However, the information profession, via the United Nations Prague declaration, has had to rebadge information literacy because such skills are dying out rapidly.

It is to our shame that, as far back as 1989, the Bush Administration set up a presidential committee to investigate information literacy. The Americans believed that, without the ability to innovate, they would lack the economic capacity to produce new services and to bring new products to market in future because they were seeing their manufacturing base being replaced by countries in the far east.

To answer the question, the reason why we try to develop information literacy at the University of Abertay Dundee is that we have seen students lose out on the opportunity to develop their skills, not because of any lack of infrastructure or resource, but because they do not appreciate the relevance of information literacy. When students are timetabled to attend a session on the library, many of them do not understand why they should attend because they do not know the importance of information literacy skills. One barrier to the development of those skills that we have identified is that, as information literacy is not identified as a skill set in its own right, people do not value it properly. That barrier could be overcome simply by recognising information literacy within the

curriculum. That would be a powerful catalyst to improving the lives of many future generations.

Christine Irving: I will talk about what is happening in schools based on my experience of working on a cross-sector project that involved the Scottish Further Education Unit, learndirect Scotland, the Scottish Library and Information Council, Scottish Enterprise Glasgow and representatives of community libraries, university libraries and Learning and Teaching Scotland. Basically, the project was to produce learning material on information-handling skills for everybody in the post-16 sector. We developed learning materials for the specific skills and competencies that are involved in information literacy, which is needed, as John Crawford said earlier, when finding employment, choosing a college or travelling abroad. The learning materials are now available and are, if I may say so, really good. The materials are being well used in certain colleges, schools, public libraries and community libraries.

The problem in schools is that school librarians, who do some excellent work, are not recognised and are a lone voice. Librarians might be given access to pupils in first or second year before they start studying for qualifications, but libraries are not embedded in schools as part of the curriculum. Often, by the time that pupils move into third, fourth, fifth or sixth year, they have picked up bad habits along the way. When I organised some focus groups with sixth-year pupils recently, one pupil told me that Google—which Chris Milne mentioned earlier—was his friend. That pupil thought that Google validated websites for their reliability, whereas it is a commercial operator that simply gathers together what is out there and requires the individual to evaluate the materials that it presents. We all now need critical thinking and evaluation skills, but school pupils are not being encouraged to develop those skills because it is assumed that they have already acquired them. Problem solving is recognised as a core skill and information handling involves problem solving, but pupils are not being given the opportunity to develop such skills and experience.

As a by-product of the project to produce information-handling skills material, a qualification and corresponding assessments were produced for the Scottish Qualifications Authority. The qualification is now available at intermediate 2 level, but it has not had much take-up because the curriculum is so chock-full. However, we hope that take-up will improve, especially when the qualification is linked with problem solving, given that schools are having difficulty finding problem-solving material. The Scottish Library and Information Council is doing some excellent work, which is funded by the Scottish Executive, to get 2,000 learners to acquire the qualification.

However, there seem to be barriers all over the place preventing people from learning those skills and from participating in the course.

Jackie Baillie: I am genuinely curious about this. I thought that what you described about information literacy was already implicit in our national curriculum. I think that because of what I have heard from parents of young children—this applies not just to the secondary and tertiary sectors. The children have come home from primary school with projects connected with library sessions, which seems to link in a practical way with what you have been talking about. My first question is therefore whether we need to focus explicitly on that work. Would it not be better if we were to reinforce some of the information literacy work and the very good practice that is implicit in schools right now?

I suspect that my second question is linked to the first. In the paperwork that you have provided, your focus seems to be on the secondary and tertiary sectors. Is it not the case that we need to start at the primary level?

Dr Crawford: You may well be right that we need to start at the primary level. That is another issue for us to address, which we have not really looked at in our research work as yet. I touched on this in my opening statement: there is a great deal of excellent activity at present, but it is not co-ordinated. As you mentioned, some of the work that is being done on information literacy is not recognised as such. The idea is there in the background, however, and it is implicit in quite a lot of published documents. The words are there in our lifelong learning strategy and in the curriculum for excellence strategy.

Earlier this year, the United Kingdom Government produced a document on skills. That covered all sorts of skills, but information literacy skills were conspicuously absent. A digital inclusion document is currently out for discussion, to which Christine Irving and I will be responding. It deals with skills, but nowhere does it discuss information literacy skills. Christine Irving and I have been researching the subject for more than a year now. An awful lot of the issues come back to the definition of information literacy and to getting people to understand what it is. As you say, there is an implicit understanding, but there is no explicit understanding or definition, nor is there co-ordination.

You have said that work in this area should be extended to the primary sector. You may well be right about that, but it must also be extended to the post-school and post-higher-education sectors and brought into the work agenda.

Christopher Milne: There seems to be a vacuum here. When first-year students enter

university, their ability to use information tends to be limited. If we ask about their experience of using libraries, it turns out to be negligible. A lot of work goes on when students first enter university to get them used to using good-quality sources of information, so that they can read about their subject and develop their ideas. Over the years, we have seen that more and more effort needs to be made to teach those skills.

We do not think that we need to find a new place in the curriculum for information literacy—it should be integral. We need to find a way to make the subject more influential, to increase its relevance and to establish whether people are developing information literacy skills. By the time a student reaches his or her third or fourth year, they should be polishing up those skills, ready to go into the workplace to contribute to the economy, to their own social development and so on. They should not need to learn those skills from scratch at that stage, just prior to doing an honours dissertation. However, that is increasingly becoming the case, not just in Scotland, but throughout the UK and internationally.

10:45

Christine Irving: Jackie Baillie highlighted primary schools. John Crawford mentioned the work of Audrey Sutton at North Ayrshire Council, who launched an information toolkit for five to 14-year-olds. The teachers were very keen about it. In fact, she told me that they were queuing up to get their classes involved. That was even before they had had a cup of coffee—which is a very good sign. That is just in one local authority area, however. Other authorities are not doing anything, and the librarian is excluded from teaching activities.

In an ideal world, we would start off in primary schools. The curriculum review covers the whole curriculum from the age of three to 18 years. It would be ideal if information literacy was included in that, which would mean starting it at a very young age. As Chris Milne said, by the time pupils come out of school and are ready to go into the workplace or tertiary education, they should have developed those skills, and should by then be honing them.

Mr Gordon: I do not think that it is just schoolboys who have a touching faith in Google. I could name a number of senior journalists who have the same misplaced faith. I will put my cards on the table: as an autodidact and bibliophile, I mourn the reduced status of libraries. The world is changing, however.

I have a number of related points to make, which we could perhaps rack up. I will start with a devil's-advocate point. Is this petition not mainly

supported by librarians who feel undervalued? In that sense, is this not a sectional concern? I could give some examples from other people in educational institutions who feel undervalued. I have recently been corresponding with maths teachers. They feel that the status of mathematics has been downgraded in the modern educational environment, and that something ought to be done about that. Perhaps the reality is that, whereas you previously had a guaranteed raft of consumers for your service, more of a selling job now has to be done.

You use the term "information literacy". I am interested in how, in the 21st century, we are inventing new terms for things that have probably been around for a long time. I recall that, a generation ago, at the induction stage of Open University courses, there would always be a module called "How to study". You explained that information literacy is a core skill. That is a useful definition. You then went on to make a stronger, and possibly quite different, claim. You said that people are taught how to ferret out information and how to evaluate it. How to evaluate information is more like how to think, which is a much tougher proposition.

One of you started off by saying that people get too much information off the internet and perhaps do not understand that it will be largely from secondary sources. They might not understand that there should be a health warning, if I can call it that, on most of the information that comes off the internet. If we systematise that core skill called information literacy, we will not necessarily guarantee that people will evaluate information more effectively. They will just have more sources of information. That might help, but it will not necessarily teach people how to think, will it?

Dr Crawford: I am pleased to hear that you are a bibliophile and book user. As a library historian, I can say that information literacy and lifelong learning have been around in Scotland for 250 years. Then, it was called mutual improvement; today, we call it lifelong learning.

Many of the people who signed our petition were librarians, but there were also people from the education world. Some of them were from the public library world. You have made a good point about this. Essentially, you are talking about advocacy. Some of my colleagues might not agree with me on this, but we must now move out of the library and information world into the bigger world. That is one of the reasons why we are here today—if we did not think in that way, we would not be here now.

In answer to some of your other points, the key is having a definition and understanding of information literacy and integrating it in the curriculum. In the course of our research—

Christine Irving will back this up—we identified various activities that are similar to information literacy and with which a link needs to be established. As you said, learning how to think critically is a key component of information literacy and it features in various forms in curriculum development.

Christine Irving: We have to give people the opportunity to learn these skills and competencies. After that, it is up to them to decide what to do with them and at what level they use them. There is a lot of information, not just on the internet. When we read a newspaper or watch the television we still have to think about what somebody has said and their motives for saying it. It is the same with MPs. When I listen to an MP I consider where they are coming from and what their purpose is, then I make a judgment, which is backed up by my experience, and move on from there.

Christopher Milne: This is definitely not a plea to raise the profile of the librarianship profession. I am no longer employed as a librarian; I have moved on to records management and organising corporate information for my employer. I will use a metaphor to explain the key to this issue. One of the most important things in cookery is the ingredients; our ability to gather ingredients of a relative quality that are fit for purpose is paramount. Other things then apply, such as how to combine the ingredients to produce the finished article, such as a cake.

From my perspective in the higher education sector, we are seeing students who are unable to gather information for the purpose of their studies. That is a significant problem. As a sector, we are slowly losing the ability to turn out graduates of the quality that industry requires.

People used to read for a degree—I assume that members of the committee did—and reading was how they developed their skills. In many instances, students now click for a degree. Given the pressure on their time, they go to the lowest common denominator source, so they are not developing or applying the skills necessary to read through their subject and develop their own ideas.

As a profession we are providing people with access to information. It is about integrating that meaningfully so that the quality information plays an active part in students' learning with academics or other people with whom they have to interact. The problem is that people do not see the value of information as a currency. That will cause a great divide between information-rich and information-poor. Ultimately, it will affect our ability as a nation to compete in the knowledge economy. Without information we cannot generate knowledge.

Dr Crawford: I return to the point that Charlie Gordon made about non-use, which is, in effect,

what you were talking about. Users of information are not a homogenous mass; they are segmented into groups. On the work agenda, people in work are saying that they understand what information literacy is and that they do not have to be dragged by the scruff of the neck to take advantage of it.

Ms White: I want to ask a couple of simple questions. You mentioned the information toolkit and Audrey Sutton. Who is going to take that through the curriculum? Will information technology apply to all subjects in the curriculum? I agree with Jackie Baillie that such learning should begin at primary school, but that might not be possible at the moment. Would all subjects in the curriculum from primary school onward be covered? Would librarians be involved? Rather than being involved in just the lending library, would they be involved in encouraging pupils to access information and do research? I just want to know whether what you are suggesting would apply to the whole curriculum.

Christine Irving: The toolkit will be used in North Ayrshire. Librarians will work in collaboration with the teachers, which is as it should be. Other education authorities might look to what is happening in North Ayrshire and decide whether they want to take it on. Current provision is patchy. We are talking to the curriculum review team and to those in charge of the Scottish credit and qualifications framework. We want to build a framework to develop an overarching view of how people can develop their skills throughout their lives. Hopefully, that will lead to national overarching standards and criteria. If we can secure information literacy as a core skill under the national curriculum, that will mean that it will feature across the board, rather than provision being patchy, as it is now.

Christopher Milne: Under the review of all university undergraduate programmes, the University of Abertay Dundee could be said to have ripped up the rulebook with respect to how to develop library skills. We have integrated them much more into the curriculum. For example, a librarian might see 30 business students in week 3 of the semester to teach them how to use business information. The problem might be that the students will not see the relevance of that, because of the nature of the learning that they need to do using the information—for the purposes of assessment, they will not have to hand their work in until 10 weeks later.

We have now chunked up the skills involved and integrated them deeply into the curriculum. We have got some good involvement from the academics. It is a bit like the Martini effect—it is at the right place at the right time. Slowly, the quality of student work is improving. The students are reading through their subjects more. The

incidence of plagiarism is beginning to go down. Students are beginning to think more, because they are able to use information more effectively. They are getting guidance from the academics. It is not that we are teaching students how to think; we are empowering them by giving them the raw ingredients to develop their understanding of the subject, and hopefully to take it further.

The Convener: Do members now wish to consider what we do with the petition? We have given the issues a good airing. I invite suggestions from members.

Ms White: We should contact the Executive to find out what it thinks of the proposals. We do not have a statutory national curriculum, but we should look at it anyway. We should also involve the Scottish Qualifications Authority, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, and Learning and Teaching Scotland. I am not sure whether we should contact any other organisations.

The Convener: Do members think that those organisations cover all the bases?

Ms White: Do you think that we should ask the librarians?

Dr Crawford: I should mention that we are already in contact with all the agencies that you have named. We have the full support of our professional body, both in the devolved nation of Scotland and on a UK-wide basis.

Helen Eadie: We might wish to approach the relevant trade unions in the teaching profession. Clearly, the proposals might have an impact on terms and conditions. It would be useful to have their view.

The Convener: We will write to those organisations and collate their responses. We will get back to the petitioners and seek their comments when we receive those responses, and we will then see how we might take the petition further.

John Scott: In light of the discussion, should we be contacting some of the universities? Much of what the petitioners have been talking about relates to students' difficulties in accessing information for their degree work. Is there an overarching university body that it might be appropriate to ask?

The Convener: We will identify the appropriate organisation. As I said, we will be in touch with the petitioners once we have received responses. Thanks very much for bringing us your petition this morning.

Dr Crawford: On behalf of Christine Irving, Christopher Milne and myself, I thank you for inviting us here and for giving us the opportunity to speak to you.

Breast Cancer (Screening) (PE904)

11:00

The Convener: Our next petition is PE904, by Katie Moffat, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to consider introducing an early breast cancer screening programme in Scotland to start from age 30 upwards. I welcome to the committee Katie Moffat, who is here to make a statement in support of her petition. You have a few minutes for your opening remarks, after which we will discuss the issues that you raise.

Katie Moffat: Thank you, convener. I have submitted this petition to the Scottish Parliament on behalf of the many younger women between the ages of 30 and 50 who are developing breast cancer that is not being caught early enough, which can result in invasive surgery and sometimes death.

Breast cancer was recently thrust back into the limelight when the media reported that two prominent young women—pop singers Kylie Minogue and Anastasia—were both battling it. When I heard the news, I discussed it at length with friends and colleagues, and soon found that nearly everyone I had chatted with knew of someone who was battling, or had lost out to, breast cancer. The majority were in the 30 to 45 age bracket.

Breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in women: nearly 30 per cent of all cancers in women occur in the breast. Each year, around 8,000 women are diagnosed before their menopause, and around 2,200 of them are in their 20s or 30s. The figures do not even include the 40s.

According to cancer statistics, the mortality rate of women over the age of 50 is declining but the incidence of breast cancer in younger women aged 30 to 50 is increasing. I would therefore like the Scottish Parliament to ask the Scottish Executive to implement an early breast cancer screening programme, replacing the current breast cancer screening programme, which starts when women are 50. If the new programme started when women were 30, it could run alongside cervical smear testing, which occurs every three years. Why not run both checks together?

The first thing that the Scottish Executive should do is to consider the cost-effectiveness of reducing the age of screening. The initial years of such a programme may be expensive, but how many young women's lives would be saved? How many women—whose cancer would otherwise be caught only in the latter stages when it was too late—would not leave behind children and families? How many women would not have to go

through invasive surgery such as a mastectomy? And how many women would have a choice, rather than being told, "Sorry, it's too late. You only have months to live"?

The majority of women who have had a mastectomy or lumpectomy end up having radiotherapy or, in extreme cases, chemotherapy. Eventually, all will end up on tamoxifen, which kills any future cancerous cells before they develop. All in all, those treatments amount to a huge cost that will go on for years. Early detection would save the national health service money in the long run.

An age trial is currently being carried out by the NHS in England, looking into reducing the age of screening for breast cancer from 50 to 40. The study still has a few years left to run—it has been running for 15 years. I wonder how many women between the ages of 40 and 49 have died in the time it has taken to do the study. I hope that, when the study is published, it will become clearer just how much an early screening programme is required.

My mother had breast cancer. Contrary to popular opinion, breast cancer does not always come in the form of a lump; sometimes it is silent and deadly and there are no signs. My mother was over 50 and, just by chance, had a scan because the mobile scanner unit was in town. When the cancer was discovered, she was in the latter stages and was given approximately six weeks to live. Luckily, after a mastectomy, she lived to tell the story but, psychologically, it damaged her. How many women, who end up having invasive surgery, are psychologically damaged as a part of their body is cut off?

Early detection will reduce the death rate, reduce the effects of such loss on the families involved, and reduce the effect on the NHS and the knock-on effects on the economy in general. More often than not, early detection results in successful treatment. Scotland should strive to address the issues of preventive medicine—especially where early detection is proven to save lives and to improve the quality of life—and should strive to set a standard for the rest of the United Kingdom.

I have received approximately 100 e-mails in support of this petition. They are still coming in every day, from people I know and from people I do not know. All those people have stories to tell—some with hope and some with sadness. I will leave a copy of them all for members to read.

From the e-mails, there is one particular story that I would like to relate before I finish. I received it from a friend of mine. She says:

"I currently have three friends who have had or are fighting breast cancer aged 32, 35 and 42.

The 42-year-old is now terminally ill and is leaving 3 young children and a very loving husband behind as it was caught too late. A five minute screening would have prevented this.

The 32-year-old has had to have a double mastectomy, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. She is awaiting reconstructive surgery.

The 35-year-old had a lumpectomy, glands removed, chemotherapy and radiotherapy, and a 5 year course of Tamoxifen. These friends were lucky—the lump was found and dealt with quickly.”

As teenagers, we all spoke with our friends and wondered what we would be doing by the time we reached 40. None of us replied, “Dying with breast cancer.”

Thank you for your time.

The Convener: Thank you very much for lodging what is obviously a difficult petition for you to discuss. Do members have questions?

John Scott: You gave some figures, which I did not hear exactly, about those who are affected between 20 and 30 years old, 30 and 40 years old and 40 and 50 years old. Perhaps you could give us the figures again.

Katie Moffat: Yes. I got the figures from the Breakthrough Breast Cancer website. Around 8,000 women are diagnosed before the menopause. A lot of women aged over 50 are diagnosed at the time of or after the menopause. About 8,000 younger women in their 20s, 30s and 40s, who normally would not be going through the menopause at that time, are diagnosed. About 2,200 women in their 20s and 30s are diagnosed per year. That does not include the 40s age bracket. The figure is probably higher.

John Scott: Do you have the figures for women aged 30 to 40 and 40 to 50?

Katie Moffat: No. I just have what I could get. Some of the statistics are from last year or the year before. Obviously, the statistics for 2005 will not be published until the end of 2005. The figures are changing.

John Scott: Is the figure that you gave a Scottish figure?

Katie Moffat: I think it is a UK figure.

John Scott: What was the name of the website? I am sorry, but I did not hear it.

Katie Moffat: I have quite a few statistics from different websites, which I have printed off. One was the Breakthrough Breast Cancer website and I also got figures from the NHS breast screen programme website.

John Scott: You make a good case. Thank you for bringing the petition here today.

Helen Eadie: Good morning, Katie. The petition is important. I lost a dear friend, who was aged under 50, to breast cancer, so I support your petition.

One of the issues on which I want you to comment is the efficacy of the screening programme. There are doubting Thomases who do not believe that the programme is having the impact that they would like it to have, which I think is one of the reasons why the Government has not launched a wider screening programme. Would you like to say more about the information that you have gathered that relates to the efficacy of screening programmes?

Katie Moffat: Women can have cervical smear tests every three years. Cervical cancer is a slow-progressing cancer; it is not an aggressive cancer so it could take a couple of years to develop. Breast cancer develops at an alarming, aggressive rate. The type of cancer that my mum had was unusual and fast progressing. All cancers are different and develop at different speeds. The majority of breast cancers can kill within six to eight months—within a year anyway.

It surprises me that cervical cancer, which is slower to develop, gets quite a lot of attention, with three-yearly screening, whereas breast cancer does not. It gets attention in relation to women aged over 50, which is fine, but a lot of women to whom I have spoken were not invited for screening until they were 53. Things are not working at that end of the scale either.

Things seem to be different in every health district; they all seem to run things differently. Women should be invited for screening at the age of 50 and that should be it, but that is not happening.

I received more than 100 e-mails from all different age groups, all of which reported different things. A lot of women who are going for screening at age 50, 51, or 52—depending on when they are invited—are finding out then that they have cancer. It does not always come in the form of a lump. Sometimes it is silent and deadly; women just do not know that they have it. Although women are told how to check themselves, many women still do not know how to do so and, perhaps because they lead hectic lives, do not even think about breast cancer. I know that I do not think about it.

Given the incidence of breast cancer among the people from all over Scotland who have spoken to me—I have had e-mails even from people who work in the Western general, which specialises in breast cancer—the incidence of breast cancer among younger women seems to be increasing. The statistics also show an increase. The mortality rate at the other end of the scale is dropping—

which is fair enough—but I do not know what the mortality rate is among younger women who have breast cancer. However, the incidence of breast cancer in younger women is increasing and, over the next five years, may increase even more. The age study that I mentioned—it should be due for publication next year or the year after—will probably reflect that increase, as the study has been on-going for 15 years since it was commissioned in 1991.

Helen Eadie: Is that study being done by the University of Surrey?

Katie Moffat: I think so, yes. The study is being done for the NHS down south. It has been running for quite a while, but how many women in the younger age groups have died during that time? Perhaps breast cancer is becoming more prevalent because of environmental changes. Also, women's bodies have changed quite a bit over the past 15 years. When I was a kid, I hardly ever heard of anyone suffering from breast cancer but the disease seems to have become more and more common. That is a problem that needs to be looked at.

The Convener: I bring some personal experience of the issue, but I have a question for Katie Moffat. My father-in-law died of breast cancer—only 200 men a year fall victim to that type of cancer—but he was told by the specialist that his daughters would have a greater propensity towards breast cancer. He was very much aware of that, so he encouraged my wife and her sister to learn how to check for the signs of breast cancer.

When my wife started to see things changing, she asked her general practitioner whether the signs indicated anything. However, the GP told her that she was too young to have breast cancer so she need not worry because it could not happen. My wife was a bit more persistent than that, so she continually went back to the GP to point out the changes that were taking place that she was concerned about. To put her mind at rest, the GP sent my wife to a consultant, who carried out a scan that proved to be inconclusive. However, the consultant was not happy with the scan, so he carried out a biopsy. Only the biopsy proved that my wife had cancer.

My wife was 33 and she had all the outward signs of breast cancer, but the problem is that the existence of the cancer was proved only by the biopsy, not by a scan. I have heard specialists say repeatedly that the problem is that the breast tissue of a 30-year-old does not allow the scan to show conclusively whether there is breast cancer. That is the reason that the medical profession resists widespread screening for such age groups.

However, my concern is that the GP ruled out the possibility that my wife might have cancer

because she was so young. Is not the problem that people do not get the support that they need from their GP? No matter how much support people get from the people who carry out the scan, a scan may not show whether cancer is present if the woman is aged 30, 31 or 32.

Katie Moffat: Quite a few websites suggest that, because of the density of the breast tissue, screening can be done only on those who are aged 50 or upwards. However, for younger age groups, ultrasound scanning would probably show up things. Now that the genes that cause breast cancer have been isolated, it is possible to have a blood test, from which the blood sample is taken back to the lab for a couple of months where any changes in the cells can be watched. That means that people can be more proactive. I get such a blood test every year.

Sorry, I have lost what the question was.

11:15

The Convener: My question was about the ability of GPs to identify breast cancer in younger women.

Katie Moffat: I suppose that it depends on the training that GPs receive, but some GPs seem very rushed. For example, when I try to get an appointment for my daughter, I need to book the appointment about a month in advance. Perhaps because GPs are really busy, they do not have time to push the issue. In my mum's case, her GP totally missed the fact that she had breast cancer. Although she did not have a lump she had a different sign that appeared, but the GP simply dispensed some tablets and told her "Away you go." Perhaps GPs need more rigorous training on what to look for. Even the leaflets that tell a woman how to check herself do not seem to be widely available. It seems to be a hit or a miss because they are available in some areas but not in others.

The Convener: That is what my question was getting at. Even when a doctor suspects that cancer might be present, the test cannot always prove it. Therefore, the most important thing is that women have information so that they know what to look for. Secondly, GPs need to recognise that women of the age that we are discussing can get breast cancer, so the possibility should not be dismissed. I learned something from the experience that I encountered. Once my wife had seen the consultant, the problem started to be dealt with, but the information and what happened at the GP level were a bit more problematic.

Katie Moffat: We definitely need more information and publicity on what people should look for. For example, perhaps a little leaflet could be given out at every doctor's surgery. I have

never seen anything like that being offered to younger women at my doctor's surgery. That might already happen in some health board areas, but it does not happen in many. At the moment, people receive information only if they are attending the hospital for a check-up either personally or with someone else. People should not have to ask for the information. Every woman in the country should automatically get a leaflet that tells them how to check for breast cancer. A lot of women simply do not know how to do that.

John Scott: Should different types of mass screening techniques be developed for the under-50s? I would not begin to know what those techniques might be, but we could discuss that issue in writing with people.

Katie Moffat: Yes. In this day and age of technology, it must surely be possible to do something. Mammograms are suitable only for people who are over 50, but ultrasound seems to be becoming quite big. I know that it is now possible for pregnant women to get a three-dimensional-effect colour picture of their baby before it is even born. If it is possible to do that, surely it should be possible to come up with what we are looking for. It need not be a big X-ray machine thing.

John Scott: That technology is relatively cheap, too.

Katie Moffat: There should be something out there that can do that. Perhaps other countries already have something.

The Convener: I thank Katie Moffat for bringing her petition to the committee. How do members want to take the petition forward?

Helen Eadie: Perhaps we should write to the Scottish Executive's breast and cervical screening national advisory group, the United Kingdom screening committee, the Institute for Cancer Research, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, Cancer Research UK and the Minister for Health and Community Care. We should also write to the cross-party group on cancer—of which I am a member—as I know that the cross-party group is interested in the issue.

Ms White: I agree with Helen Eadie. It might also be worth our while asking about the study that is being done by the University of Surrey. I assume that the study has been done on a UK basis—given that it has been on-going for 15 years—rather than on just a London basis.

In our correspondence, we should also mention the fact—which I think John Scott highlighted—that many women do not want to undergo a mammogram because it is uncomfortable. Surely there must be some other kind of scan.

The Convener: Shall we ask whether there are alternatives to the mammogram?

Ms White: Yes. That is a big thing for many women who will not undergo a mammogram.

John Scott: We can ask about what is most appropriate for different age groups of women.

The Convener: We will write to all the various organisations. We will get back to you, Ms Moffat, and let you know what they tell us. We will then discuss the matter further. Thank you very much for bringing us your petition this morning.

Eco-villages (Planning Policy) (PE903)

The Convener: The first petition this morning for which there is no oral evidence is PE903, by Eurig Scandrett. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to develop and introduce a Scottish planning policy document on eco-villages. Before being formally lodged, the petition was hosted on the Parliament's e-petitions website; between 24 October 2005 and 5 December 2005, it gathered a total of 619 signatures and nine discussion comments. An e-petitions briefing has been circulated.

Chris Ballance has joined us, and I believe that he wishes to contribute to the discussion. We are happy to hear from you before we discuss the petition.

Chris Ballance (South of Scotland) (Green): This petition is very different, but very important. It concerns the provision of affordable housing and sustainable communities. Types of settlement involving new build, with small communities of between around 50 and 2,000, are currently being considered throughout Scotland. The aim of an eco-village is for groups of local people to come together to organise their own housing in such a way that it is sustainable economically, ecologically and socially, providing housing with a very low environmental impact but a very high social impact. Over the past few years, several groups in Scotland have been trying to create eco-villages. They regularly come up against the problem of a lack of planning policy. The concept of the eco-village has never been considered under Scottish planning policy. Planners are very reluctant to give permission for it.

I got involved in the issue because of a group calling itself the Tweed Valley eco-village group. Since setting itself up seven years ago, the group has been working to create an eco-village in the Borders. It has received some significant sums of development cash from various people, which have allowed the group to create its plans. However, even when it was offered an appropriate and substantial area of land by the Forestry Commission, it still ran up against the problem of obtaining local planning permission. The Borders local structural development plan has just come

out, but it does not contain any reference to eco-villages. That will be a real hindrance to their development.

Given the importance that has been placed on creating new communities throughout Scotland to resolve the problems around the provision of affordable housing, the requirement for a planning policy to guide planners on eco-villages is now, I think, of paramount importance. That is why the petition has been lodged. I thank the committee for its attention to the petition.

The Convener: I invite members' comments on the petition, although we do not want to get into a question-and-answer session, as we sometimes tend to do. Members may, however, clarify any points that Chris Ballance raised.

Ms White: There is one point that Chris Ballance made that I wish to clarify. The people who wanted to start up the eco-village in the Borders were given land. Is that the way in which people go about things? A piece of land will be identified and bought, and an application will then be made to the planning authority—the local council—to build the houses. Is that the way in which things would work?

Chris Ballance: Generally, although things have worked in different ways at different times. Different groups have had different amounts of finance behind them. The Tweed Valley group felt that it was lucky to come to an agreement with the Forestry Commission to get the piece of land in question. Even given that support, however, the group has not been able to get the necessary planning permission. That lack of permission is the real sticking point in such developments.

Ms White: It sounds like a great idea, and I think I will put my name down for one of those houses if any are built on the outskirts of Glasgow or somewhere like that. This is not just about the example from the Borders; we are talking about the situation that applies all over Scotland. The Executive does not recognise eco-villages, but I wonder why planning permission is not granted; perhaps it is because of the requirements for linking up with the sewerage system and so on.

John Scott: Have you ever visited an eco-village, Chris? What are the differences between a normal, traditional, sustainable Scottish village, which has perhaps been in existence for 300 or 400 years, and an eco-village?

Chris Ballance: I have never visited an eco-village. The difference is that an eco-village would expect to be very close to 100 per cent self-sufficiency in not taking its water from the national mains, and also with respect to sewerage. As far as energy supply is concerned, it would not be expected for the village to be connected to the national grid. There would be no demands on

general electricity or gas use. The village would contain a mix of people and skills, and the aim would be for the community itself to provide most of the skills required.

One place that has developed over the years and which I think calls itself an eco-village is the community of Findhorn, in the north-east. It has not yet reached complete self-sufficiency, but it aims to get there. The principal aim of an eco-village is to reduce its ecological footprint as much as possible and to source almost all its energy and water requirements—and a fair quantity of its food requirements, using allotments and small-scale market gardening—from within the community, and thereby to be as self-sufficient as it possibly can be.

Helen Eadie: I can see from the papers before us that the aim is not to seek a change to the legislation but to get policy planning guidelines. That strikes me as being a potential way forward. Perhaps we ought to seek more information at this stage on what the Scottish Executive thinks about eco-villages. Judging from the papers and from what I know in general about eco-villages, I can see a lot of attractions to them, but I have questions about certain issues. There are a lot of brownfield sites in many towns and communities in my area, which we are trying to improve environmentally. I am thinking in particular about the massive job that was done in my constituency, when former coalmining bings were converted into the superb park at Lochore meadows in Fife, which is just wonderful. I favour that kind of development, too. I would not rule out eco-villages, but there are issues around how all the different factors knit together.

It would be useful to get information from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland and the Findhorn eco-village. If I can make time next year, I will go and visit Findhorn eco-village, because it strikes me that it would be worth while to learn more about it. We should certainly keep an open mind on eco-villages, although there are question marks around them. There are issues, for example, to do with how they would tie in with environmentally sensitive areas.

The Convener: Are members happy that we proceed in that way and seek responses?

Chris Ballance: A growing number of architects are particularly interested in sustainable design. Perhaps the committee could also write to the Scottish Ecological Design Association to ask for its views.

The Convener: I am quite happy to do that. We will get back to the petitioners when we have received the responses. We can then take the issue further subject to the results of our inquiries.

Schools Projects (Open Space) (PE906)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE906 by Murray Dickie, on behalf of Torbrex community council, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to institute a moratorium on all public-private partnership school projects that are still at the planning stage or which are proposed, until such time as a proper audit of open-space loss has taken place and strict new guidelines have been issued to all Scottish councils on future and present PPP schools projects, especially in relation to open spaces and environmental sustainability. The petitioners are concerned that many communities in Scotland are facing the loss of substantial proportions of their local green space for PPP projects.

I seek members' views. We have discussed a few petitions on the same subject.

11:30

Ms White: The best place for the petition would be the Communities Committee. As the convener said, we have discussed a few petitions on the subject—national planning policy guideline 11 comes up all the time. I think that the Communities Committee is considering that, so that committee would be a good place to send the petition.

The Convener: PE906 falls into the same category as a number of other petitions.

John Farquhar Munro: There are a number of matters that ought to be acknowledged when it comes to the proliferation of building projects on green spaces, particularly on playing fields. A couple of controversial issues have arisen in my constituency. More consideration of and clarification on what is permitted are needed.

The Convener: We will ask the Communities Committee to consider that point specifically. Is that okay?

Members indicated agreement.

Local Plans (Housing) (PE907)

The Convener: The next petition is PE907 by Fionn Stevenson, on behalf of the Tayport local plan action group. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to review the requirements on local authorities to demonstrate that they have fully, financially and transparently accounted for the need for inadequate existing local services to be upgraded prior to the development of new housing in their proposed local plans, according to the relevant regulations and other statutory instruments that relate to the production of local plans under the Town and Country Planning (Structure and Local Plans) (Scotland) Regulations 1983 (SI 1590) and the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act

1997. The petitioners represent campaign groups from across north-east Fife, including Tayport, Wormit, Dairsie, Newburgh, Springfield and Newport. The groups have formed an umbrella alliance in an attempt to address what they consider to be the failings of the local development plan.

Helen Eadie: We might wish also to send PE907 to the Communities Committee. Earlier this week—in relation to a totally different matter—I met one of the major housing developers in Scotland, who said that things have changed dramatically over the past 10 years when it comes to community planning. Now, developments are less likely to have inadequate facilities, such as they have had historically, and there is greater recognition of how best to build schools, health facilities and all the other amenities that are required. The situation is still not perfect, which is why I support the petition's being passed to the Communities Committee. There have been moves forward, however, and the forthcoming planning legislation will help to strengthen provision.

John Scott: I agree with much of what Helen Eadie said. It is difficult for local authorities to upgrade all the facilities before houses are built. Private developers may or may not decide to go ahead with their building plans. They might build five houses a year. If local authorities have to carry out that upgrading, it places quite a burden on them. I am sure that the Communities Committee, in its wisdom, will debate all those matters.

The Convener: Do members agree to send PE907 to the Communities Committee, so that it may consider it in the course of its scrutiny of the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill?

Members indicated agreement.

Current Petitions

Fatal Accidents and Sudden Deaths Inquiry (Scotland) Act 1976 (PE841)

11:33

The Convener: Item 2 on the agenda is current petitions, starting with PE841 from the Curran family, who call on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to amend the Fatal Accidents and Sudden Deaths Inquiry (Scotland) Act 1976 to provide for mandatory inquiries in cases of road deaths that are caused by careless driving.

At its meeting on 8 September 2005, the committee considered responses from the Minister for Justice, the Lord Advocate and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. We agreed to invite the views of the petitioner on the responses and to write again to the Minister for Justice and the Lord Advocate. Responses have been received and circulated to the committee. We have been joined by Elaine Smith MSP and John Swinburne MSP. I invite Elaine Smith to comment.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in support of PE841, which is from the Curran family, who are constituents of mine. Members of the committee will remember that I wrote to them about the case in September. I am aware that the Currans have responded to the replies from the Minister for Justice and the Lord Advocate.

My constituents have been dignified and eloquent in putting their case to the committee, so I do not want to repeat all the points that they have made. Suffice it to say that the current system—in which victims' families can be left in a horrendous limbo in which they feel that justice has failed them, that they have been given few answers to questions about why their loved one died and that there has been no official recognition of the death—is completely inadequate. It is not good enough to say, "We're sorry, but that's just the way the justice system works." There must be ways to improve the situation in Scotland: making a fatal accident inquiry mandatory when death has been caused by careless driving might be a way forward.

I acknowledge that the Lord Advocate has said that action is being taken to ensure that communication between procurators fiscal and victims' families is improved—in that regard, it is clear that the revision of the guidelines and training on death investigations is a good thing. However, as my colleagues will be aware from their casework, procurators fiscal and their staff

deal with an enormous workload, which means that it is reasonable to question how much time they and victim information and advice officers would be willing or able to commit to addressing the concerns of affected families, especially when a case has already been resolved through criminal proceedings or when, in the eyes of the law, there is no victim acknowledged. That is a vital point.

I question how much detail is made available to victim information and advice officers on police investigations. For example, the Curran family still do not know why adequate evidence was not found to prove that the driver whose car hit Gillian's car was speeding, in spite of the fact that considerable damage was caused to Gillian's car. In such cases, families need hard facts so that they can be satisfied that the investigation has been sufficiently thorough. Unless they are given such detailed information, it is unlikely that families will be satisfied with vague reassurances from procurators fiscal or victim information and advice. Only a fatal accident inquiry would provide the necessary reassurance.

The Lord Advocate states that families' views are sought on whether there should be a fatal accident inquiry, but I invite the committee to consider asking him to elaborate on how proactively that is done and, indeed, on why such action is taken at all, given that families' views are not considered to be decisive in determining whether such an inquiry should take place. A mandatory fatal accident inquiry system in which the procurator fiscal took into account the views of families who did not want such an inquiry to be held would be more satisfactory. It might also be an improvement to enhance families' access to fatal accident inquiries. The Currans are involved in the lengthy and expensive process of applying for a discretionary inquiry. If permission is granted to hold such an inquiry—we hope that it will be—it will cost them thousands of pounds.

The point that my constituents are keen to make is that they are not being dogmatic in their petition. They want Parliament to seek ways of improving the system sufficiently to ensure that no other family experiences the trauma and aggravated distress that they have experienced.

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP): I am here as an observer and to support the Curran family. I thank Elaine Smith for being succinct in making all the points that I would have made.

For 25 years I travelled the road on which the accident happened. I have spoken to the family and my heart goes out to its members because they cannot get closure. A fatal accident inquiry might bring the matter to an end for them, so I hope that the committee will consider the petition favourably.

The Convener: Members have heard what has been said this morning. I am keen to hear what they think of the responses that we have received.

Helen Eadie: The family wants provision to be made

“for a mandatory inquiry in the case of a road death caused by careless drivers.”

That does not tie in with the responses from the Minister for Justice and the Lord Advocate. Given that the matter is complex and raises many other issues, there is a case for it to be referred to one of the justice committees for more detailed consideration. It is good to note that it appears that amendments to the Road Safety Bill that is being considered at Westminster will seek

“to introduce a new offence of causing death by careless driving in Scotland, England and Wales, with a penalty of up to five years imprisonment.”

That is indeed progress, but I do not think that it provides what the Curran family is after in its petition, which is why I would support our passing the matter on to one of the justice committees.

John Scott: I agree. The answers that we have received from the Minister for Justice and the Lord Advocate clearly define the role of FAIs. They do not regard FAIs as being the right vehicle for recognising the circumstances of such cases. The petition should go to one of the justice committees for that reason. I agree wholly that families need that recognition, if they wish it, but perhaps a vehicle other than FAIs has to be found because, as I have just said, such inquiries’ terms have been clearly defined by both the Minister for Justice and the Lord Advocate. We cannot avoid those definitions and the reasons behind them. It should now be up to another committee to consider the petition, I hope sympathetically.

The Convener: Although I understand the view that the Lord Advocate and the Justice Department have taken towards FAIs, I cannot understand their rationale behind dismissing the Curran family’s request for one. They say that FAIs do not always satisfy the people who are looking for an answer. At the same time, the Lord Advocate has admitted that there has never been an FAI in a case such as this. I do not know how he can say that the outcomes do not always satisfy the victims’ families if that has never been tested: there has never been an FAI in such circumstances, so there has been no opportunity to make that judgment. I understand the rationale behind calling for an FAI, but I cannot understand the Lord Advocate’s reasoning in dismissing that call.

We need to consider what the petition is asking for. The family are asking for recognition of the fact that there was a victim following the accident. If an FAI is not the way to achieve such

recognition, the Justice Department must come up with some way to ensure that there is recognition when someone dies in a car accident. It cannot be acceptable to anyone that a court case can take place, a person be found guilty and the court determine that a death took place in that accident, but that it cannot be found anywhere in the records that a fatality took place. That is the bottom line. I have not yet seen an answer from the Lord Advocate or the Minister for Justice that explains how the outcome that the Curran family is seeking can be achieved.

We need to ask one of the justice committees whether it can find a way forward. I do not think that we can close PE841 without knowing that all the possibilities have been examined. The proposed changes to the road traffic legislation will not achieve that and the Scottish legal system needs to find a way to ensure that, when a fatality takes place in an accident, regardless of the circumstances, there is some recognition that someone died in that accident. That is fundamental to the petition. If we send the petition to one of the justice committees, we should do so with the recommendation that it should try to find a way forward in that respect. Are members happy with that?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank our visitors for coming this morning.

Justice System (Child Sex Offenders) (PE862)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE862, by Margaret Ann Cummings. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to conduct a full review of the current system for dealing with and monitoring convicted child sex offenders. At its meeting on 8 September 2005, the committee agreed to write to the Scottish Executive and to pass the petition to the Justice 2 Committee for information. A response has now been received from the Minister for Justice, which I would like the committee to discuss.

We have been joined by Paul Martin, who has an interest in the petition.

11.45

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): I would like to touch on a number of issues arising from the response from the Minister for Justice. I feel that it is important to amplify, as I have done before, the concerns of Margaret Ann Cummings, who will, I hope, have a further opportunity to respond.

Among the outstanding issues is disclosure in respect of registered sex offenders. The Executive

has gone some way towards targeted disclosure, but Margaret Ann Cummings feels that there is still a debate to be had around whether disclosure should extend to providing the number of sex offenders who live within a particular postcode area, for example. The local debate has not been about providing names and addresses of registered sex offenders; it has always been about recognition of the disparities that exist and about the allocation of sex offenders to different localities in Scotland—perhaps on a divisional basis using police authorities or whatever.

The Minister for Justice has gone some way towards dealing with a number of other issues, including automatic early release, which is no longer in place for registered sex offenders. That is to be welcomed, and we have moved towards a more positive future through Professor Irving's recommendations.

I ask the committee to consider two possible ways forward. First, it could give Margaret Ann Cummings the opportunity to respond to the ministers' response to the committee. I would certainly welcome that—I know that Margaret Ann Cummings would, too. Secondly, the committee could investigate the effectiveness of the legislation for managing sex offenders. The Executive has already had passed, or is proposing, significant legislation in this area, so one of the justice committees could consider holding an inquiry into how effective the legislation will be and whether any other legislation could be introduced.

It must be recognised that neither justice committee has considered in detail an inquiry into the issue. It would give Margaret Ann Cummings and many communities comfort if Parliament could discuss the matter in detail, undertake a specific inquiry into how effective legislation will be in the future and target the question of how information is disclosed. More detailed discussion on the subject is needed.

I know that there are many examples from throughout the world—which I have mentioned to the committee before—of how disclosure can be dealt with. It would be helpful for a justice committee inquiry to be carried out to examine best practice around the world in order to ensure that we continue to develop the management of sex offenders. The issue faces us every day. It has been reported on, and the problem will not go away unless Parliament considers an inquiry on it.

The Convener: As is standard practice in such situations, we should write to Margaret Ann Cumming. We have received a response and we would like to know her views on it. We will take on board Paul Martin's first request. I recommend that the committee write to the petitioner, asking for her comments. I am not unhappy about referring the

petition to one of the justice committees, although we should not do that before we receive a response, in case there is something in it that requires us to examine the petition further. We could agree in principle that a justice committee will have to investigate the matter at some point, and we can hold our decision back until we have received a response from Margaret Ann Cummings. Paul Martin's points were well made and the course of action that he proposes is appropriate.

Ms White: I agree entirely that we have to get the petitioner's views. The report from Professor Irving is excellent, and it is a huge piece of work. Somebody has to monitor the legislation and assess how it is rolled out. Only recently, we have discovered that agencies are not working together. Tragedies could have been avoided. It is important that we have that report, and that the minister ensures that we are updated on it. A committee must examine the situation and monitor how the legislation is implemented throughout the country.

John Scott: Professor Irving has indeed carried out a significant piece of work. There are 36 recommendations in it; if they are implemented, they will go a long way towards delivering all the things that Paul Martin is seeking on behalf of the Curran family and other people.

I do not know how all this sits with respect to the European convention on human rights. Professor Irving himself wonders whether many, or at least some, of his suggestions are ECHR compatible. There is obviously a balance to be struck between the freedoms of individuals and the rights of families. We will have to see how it goes. Perhaps you can tell me, convener: is the report about to be implemented?

The Convener: One option would be for our committee to monitor the situation, but that would mean that we would need to keep the petition open and continually come back to it. Ours is not the best committee to follow through on an issue in that way, but the option of keeping possession of the petition is open to us. Paul Martin has suggested that we send the petition to one of the justice committees, which could perform that scrutiny role. We will do that only when we have received Margaret Ann Cumming's response, in case her response requires us to go back to the Executive with a question before we send the petition to a justice committee. The first step is to get the petitioner's views. We can then pass the issue to a justice committee, which can monitor the implementation of the recommendations, as John Scott suggested.

John Scott: That is fine.

Wind Farm Developments (Property Values) (PE816)

The Convener: Petition PE816, which is from Mrs Judith Hodgson, calls on the Scottish Parliament to consider and debate financial compensation for individuals whose property values and businesses are affected by wind farm developments.

At our meeting on 20 April 2005, we agreed to write to the Scottish Executive, the Department of Trade and Industry, Views of Scotland and the British Wind Energy Association. The responses that have been received have been circulated to members. Do members have any suggestions on how to deal with the petition?

Helen Eadie: Might we ask for the petitioner's views on the responses that we have received?

The Convener: We can consider the petition again when we receive the petitioner's response. Are members happy with that?

Members indicated agreement.

Scottish Legal Aid Board (PE751)

The Convener: Petition PE751, which is from Ronald Mason, calls on the Scottish Parliament to initiate an inquiry into the procedures and practices of the Scottish Legal Aid Board and to amend the rules that govern eligibility for legal aid so that they include an automatic right for disabled people.

At our meeting on 25 May 2005, we considered responses from the Scottish Legal Aid Board and the Disability Rights Commission and we agreed to seek an update from both organisations. Responses have now been received. Do members have any recommendations? Are members happy with the responses?

John Scott: The petition has served its purpose. The Disability Rights Commission's response points out that there should be no automatic right to civil legal aid for disabled people because the same statutory test should be applied to everyone. That is a reasonable point. Given that the Scottish Legal Aid Board's response refers to certain recommendations that are about to be implemented, the petition has served its purpose and should be closed.

The Convener: Are members happy with that?

Members indicated agreement.

Housing Stock Transfer (PE829)

The Convener: Petition PE829, which is from Mrs Anne Ayres on behalf of Carntyne Winget Residents Association, calls on the Scottish Parliament to consider and debate the impact of

the housing stock transfer on Scottish communities.

At our meeting on 27 April 2005, we agreed to seek the views of Glasgow Housing Association, Communities Scotland, the Scottish Tenants Organisation, the Property Managers Association Scotland, Shelter Scotland and Keystone Tenant Managed Homes. Responses have been received.

Helen Eadie: We might want to ask the petitioners for their views on the responses. We can then revisit the petition at another meeting.

Ms White: I concur with Helen Eadie. I have circulated to members some leaflets and various bits of paper that Anne Ayres gave me.

I want to ask whether the clerk knows why there has been such a delay between our receiving the responses in June and our consideration of them today in December. I do not accuse anyone of anything, but I want to know why there has been such a long delay. Since the petitioner gave evidence—obviously, this is why we need to ask the petitioner for her response—so many things have changed. Meetings have taken place involving Michael Martin MP, Paul Martin MSP, Margaret Curran MSP and others, but we have not been given any information on those.

The Convener: There is no specific reason other than the pressure of other responses to petitions. Today is the first opportunity that we have had to put the petition on the agenda since we took evidence on it. We will need to seek the petitioner's responses to the responses that we are considering today, so we will not get today's petitions back on the agenda for a few months. Although some petitioners may respond immediately, others take longer. The clerks try to get the petitions on to the agenda as quickly as possible, but there is no specific reason for the delay. The petition has not been held back.

Ms White: I did not suggest that it had been held back. I contacted the clerk a couple of weeks ago to ask when PE829 would be on the agenda because the delay had been so long. I have raised the issue because I believe that it is important that the petitioner should have an opportunity to provide a further response; things have changed so much over the past couple of months.

The Convener: We will look forward to the petitioner's response. If things have changed, we will look afresh at the new circumstances. We need to seek the petitioner's views on the responses that we have received so far.

Ambulatory Oxygen and Pulmonary Rehabilitation (PE648)

The Convener: Petition PE648 calls on the Scottish Parliament to take the necessary steps to

ensure that the national health service in Scotland provides truly portable oxygen and pulmonary rehabilitation classes throughout the country.

At our meeting on 22 June 2005, we considered a response from the petitioner and agreed to seek the views of the Scottish Executive on that response. The response from the Minister for Health and Community Care has been circulated to members. Do members have any observations on how we should deal with the petition?

Helen Eadie: I spoke to Andy Powrie-Smith at a social event that I attended recently. My impression is that he is well pleased with the progress that has been made. The response that we have received suggests that the outcome is a success story for the petitioners, so we can simply close the petition.

John Farquhar Munro: Based on the responses that we have received, I think that sufficient time has now been given to the petition.

John Scott: I still have concerns about the conservation devices. The minister's response states that the provision of such devices to people who need them is "under active consideration". I hope that that means that they will be made available in due course. I have concerns about the speed at which the conservers are being made available, given that they are obviously a vital part of the solution. I suppose that I am content that the petition be closed, but we can expect to hear from the petitioners again if conservation devices are not made available in the near future.

The Convener: That might need to be under a different petition.

Public Libraries (PE831)

The Convener: Petition PE831, which is from Catriona Leslie on behalf of Portree community council, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to review its policy on public libraries to ensure appropriate provision in rural areas.

At our meeting on 27 April 2005, we agreed to seek the views of the Scottish Executive, the Scottish Library and Information Council, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and Highland Council. Responses have been received. Are members happy to ask for the views of the petitioners?

John Farquhar Munro: The petition arises from a little local difficulty about the new location for a library. I believe that the issue is best settled locally without interference or suggestions from the committee.

The Convener: We would not interfere, but we would be happy to see the petitioners' comments

on the responses that we have received. We never sit in judgment on any decision that is made by a local authority. We might form opinions on the matter, but we would never take a decision on it.

Helen Eadie: I agree with the convener's recommendation about contacting the petitioner.

School Building (Funding) (PE832)

The Convener: The last of our current petitions today is PE832, which is again from Catriona Leslie on behalf of Portree community council. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to debate the use of public-private partnership funding to build new schools and to urge the Scottish Executive to provide adequate public sector funding to local authorities, which are better placed to meet the needs of communities in building new schools.

At our meeting on 27 April 2005, we agreed to seek the views of the Scottish Executive. A response has now been received. Will we ask the petitioners for their comments on the response?

Members indicated agreement.

eEurope Awards for eGovernment Good Practice 2005

11:59

The Convener: The final agenda item is on the eEurope awards for eGovernment good practice 2005. Members will wish to note that our e-petitioner system was selected as one of 52 finalists for the awards. The Parliament was invited to exhibit the project at the ministerial conference, which took place in Manchester from 24 to 25 November 2005. Following the final phase of judging at the conference, our e-petitioner system was selected as one of only four nominees to make the final shortlist in the service-use category, which initially attracted 102 submissions. Along with other nominees, our e-petitioner system received from the judges a good-practice label, which is now displayed on the e-petitioner home page on Parliament's website.

Do members have any comments?

Helen Eadie: I congratulate all concerned. To have reached that point against others from across Europe is a real feather in our cap. When earlier this week I visited the site to look at the award a bit more carefully, I noticed that we are sharing best practice with other colleagues across Europe. Again, that is very welcome. There needs to be on-going self-evaluation because that is good practice. It is great that we have got the award, so I say "Well done" to all concerned.

The Convener: I should add that we recently had a meeting with MEPs who are members of the European Parliament's Committee on Petitions, which is very interested in our e-petitions system. We are continuing our dialogue with that committee and we hope that we will be able to teach our European brothers and sisters how to do e-petitions.

John Scott: We could set up a franchise.

The Convener: That might be an idea.

I thank members for their attendance this morning.

Meeting closed at 12:01.

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