

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Wednesday 18 January 2006

Session 2

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2006, 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 :

Valerie Gillies
Patsy King (Craigmillar Community Council)
Anne McCall (Scottish Environment LINK)
Dr Alan McGillivray (Association for Scottish Literary
Studies)
Paul Nolan (Craigmillar Community Council)
Dr Donald Smith (Literature Forum for Scotland)
Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross)
(LD)
David Walker (Craigmillar Community Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jim Johnston

ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Hough

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 18 January 2006

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

New Petitions

The Convener (Michael McMahon): Welcome to the Public Petitions Committee. We have received apologies from Campbell Martin and yesterday I heard that Rosie Kane was feeling unwell and that she might not make it this morning. If she does not make it, we will assume that that was her apology.

Scottish Culture (Study of History, Literature and Language) (PE910)

The Convener: The first new petition is PE910 by Dr Donald Smith, on behalf of the literature forum for Scotland, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive urgently to review the study of Scottish history, literature and languages at primary, secondary and tertiary levels in the interests of ensuring that all citizens of Scotland have the opportunity to understand those key aspects of their society and culture.

Before being formally lodged, PE910 was hosted on the e-petitions site, where between 30 November 2005 and 11 January 2006 it gathered 1,338 signatures and 12 discussion comments. The usual e-petitions briefing has been circulated, along with a number of letters in support of the petition.

Dr Smith, who is the chair of the literature forum for Scotland, will make a brief statement in support of the petition. He is accompanied by Dr Alan McGillivray and Valerie Gillies.

Dr Donald Smith (Literature Forum for Scotland): Following my brief statement, Valerie Gillies will read a poem that she has written specially to accompany the petition. Dr McGillivray will contribute to the question-and-answer session.

We have not lodged our petition to have a girn—the writers, literature organisations and teachers whom we represent believe that it suggests a positive agenda and presents a timely opportunity to open up a rich resource for Scotland.

It is a basic education principle that learning begins with one's environment and then moves out. When we are able to grapple with our immediate circumstances and experience, we can reach out for wider understanding. Critical

awareness of our society is the basis of balanced judgment and is the best cure for prejudice. It makes for confident developing learners who are able to contribute to society. We believe that everyone in Scotland needs to understand something of our history, literature and languages—with all their strengths and weaknesses—in the interests of Scotland's social, political and economic health.

Our question over recent years has been about whether there is a plan, an overview or a strategy that covers all sectors of education, harnesses the strength of our cultural organisations, builds on our international connections and our inherent cultural diversity, resources teachers and stimulates research. We have tried without success to find such a plan; maybe the committee can do better than we have, or perhaps the plan does not exist.

Whatever the result of the committee's inquiry and consideration, all the relevant public sector bodies are accountable to the Scottish Parliament, so we, as petitioners, ask you to exercise your democratic responsibilities. We ask it not for ourselves, as writers and teachers, but because we believe that the people of Scotland have a right to know, and that no cultural policy for Scotland can ever be truly inclusive without education for all.

There is a quotation on the Parliament's website that seems to have stirred a lot of reaction—I have had a lot of e-mails about it. It says that many people feel that they missed out in the past by not learning about Scotland, or that they were made to feel that Scottishness is inferior, narrow or parochial. We feel that it is time to let all our citizens engage with the real Scotland—past and present—through the first-hand sources such as literature, history and languages. Then, we can judge for ourselves what are the strengths and weaknesses, which will enable truly democratic participation in shaping Scotland's future and its contribution to the global community.

I ask Valerie Gillies to read a short poem to give a flavour of the inspiration, energy and life that our culture gives to our society.

Valerie Gillies: I am here as Edinburgh's makar, and I have composed a poem—"The Wellhead"—to mark the occasion.

Right by the gate where you go in and out
There's a well of tradition, your *tobar an dualchais*,
A carrying stream towards a kist o riches,
The street-well close by Queensberry House.
Water-pipes channelled through the living rock
Supply the city, spring-fed from the hills,
A conch through which your ancestors sing and talk.
Those water-caddies of the Old Town come to fill
Their wooden churns bobbing on an iron hoop,
Pay fines for flyting and scolding, jump the queue,
Bring clear water to the houses in a stoup
And the sough of an auld sang for a lonely youth.

You never miss the water till the well runs dry:
Our young people at a loss, not knowing why.

The Convener: Thank you for that poem. It is certainly interesting and thought provoking. I am sure that members will want to ask questions about the petition.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): Thank you for coming along today and for the poem. You mentioned that not just literature writers but teachers, who are obviously involved in the school curriculum, are involved in the petition. I note from the guidelines that are before me that there is an option for teachers to omit teaching of Scottish history at higher level, and I also note that the Scottish Funding Council weighs in its funding allocations a responsibility on the part of Scottish universities to provide for teaching and research in Scottish literature and history. Is the problem that, although there are the guidelines, it is not mandatory to teach history and literature, not just in primary schools but in universities?

Dr Alan McGillivray (Association for Scottish Literary Studies): As the chairman of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, I have to say that history is not my field. However, it appears that the problems that affect literature and language studies also affect history.

The Executive and, before that, the pre-devolution Administrations have for years made many encouraging statements about the need to include Scottish culture, literature, languages and history in the curriculum; indeed, such sentiments have appeared in guidelines. However, as we are well aware, guidelines have no statutory basis and can be ignored. I am sure that the intention behind such guidelines is admirable, but the tone in which they have been presented and the lack of support for training teachers and to resource subjects mean that there is a licence either to ignore them or not to take them on board. All too often, with the demands that the busy curriculum makes on teachers, those subjects are the first to go. If a subject is neither statutory nor studied for examination, it is not taught.

Mr Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): Given my interest in Scottish history and literature, I am sympathetic with what you are trying to achieve. However, I also like to play devil's advocate and to test propositions.

In response to Dr McGillivray, I point out that the curriculum in Scotland is not prescribed by statute. If Parliament was to prescribe the subjects in which you have an interest, would that open the door for others to seek to prescribe by statute myriad other subjects? Surely that would fetter unacceptably educationists in the front line.

Dr Smith: We are not arguing that prescription is necessarily the correct way to deliver a strategy. Instead, we are asking Parliament to review the

whole area, which would include not only the school curriculum but community education, opportunities in higher and further education and so on. After examining the matter for a number of years, we believe that an overall strategy is what is lacking. The way in which the guidelines have been drafted and applied in the school curriculum might account for the present system's weakness, which means that people do not have the opportunity to learn the subjects. That said, we are not trying to prejudge the answers to the questions: we are not saying, "This is how it should be done"; instead, we are saying, "This issue is absolutely central, but is it being addressed in a coherent way for the people of Scotland?"

Mr Gordon: That answer is interesting, because it shows that you are not blaming legislators—never mind the constitutional arrangements—for the gaps that you have identified. However, it might be said that you are pointing elbows at the bureaucrats who draw up the guidelines.

Does the patchy take-up of subjects by front-line educationists suggest that the Scottish cringe is at work? Even though well-intentioned guidelines exist, could there be any deep-seated cultural or psychological reasons why the subjects have not been taken up more?

Dr Smith: There might be. Certainly, the submission of our petition and, indeed, the general discussion might suggest that that is an underlying issue. However, we could focus on the matter in a more concrete and specific way by examining whether one problem might be that there are not enough teachers with the necessary information, confidence and training to allow them to respond to growing interest in and demand for the subjects. Things might become difficult if we start trying to read the psychic runes when, in fact, educationists could be supported in some very practical ways.

To return to whether we are pointing the finger at anyone, I think that there is a positive mood around the subject, but there also seems to be a severe lack of joining up of the dots between the education people and the culture people and between the various sectors of education. Parliament could have a role in encouraging more joined-up thinking.

10:15

Dr McGillivray: Charlie Gordon used the phrase "prescribed by statute", which sounds harsh and rigorous. However, if we consider all the other education systems in the world, we see that, in some way or another, they all manage to place their national culture securely in their school curriculum. Scotland is an anomaly or an aberration in that sense. Why has that not

happened here? Has it got something to do with the cultural cringe at the level not necessarily of pupils or teachers but of officials and administrators? Is there a feeling at that level that, in some way, Scottish culture is inferior? There is a job of education to be done at all levels to make people aware that Scottish culture is rich and outgoing, that it has much to offer the community at all levels and that it is by no means parochial or inward looking.

Mr Gordon: You seem to be suggesting that we are served by a British civil service.

The Scottish Executive funds the Scottish Arts Council to promote Scottish literature, Robert Burns in particular, in Scottish schools. Do you have a view on the effectiveness of that?

Dr Smith: That is an interesting way to frame the question. The responsibilities of the Scottish Arts Council in that regard are quite fuzzy. As you correctly say, in relation to literature it is the lead agency for engaging with education. How does that happen? What are the mechanisms by which the Scottish Arts Council relates to the education sector? Those are interesting and valuable questions that a committee of the Parliament would be empowered to ask if it was to take up this issue.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Like Charlie Gordon, I am having some difficulty at the moment because I think that a slightly inconsistent view is coming across. I am interested in what Dr Smith has said about the wider aspects of the issue and about joining up culture and education. I do not think that the subject that is dealt with in this petition is narrowly about education, because education in our curriculum is a reflection of what goes on in our wider society. I am much more interested in capturing that issue.

I am conscious that the Cultural Commission reported in June 2005. In its report, there was a helpful section about education and culture. I am equally conscious that, perhaps fortuitously, the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport will tomorrow give Parliament her response to the report. I hope that that will include reference to the sort of joins that the petitioners are talking about.

Should we focus on the issue at that level or, as I suspect, at the level of implementation? There is a real keenness about Scottish culture. As you say, there is an increasing demand from teachers and others for materials and so on. Do you think that the solution might be to do with ensuring that we have the nuts and bolts right so that what we already have can be implemented?

Dr Smith: No. The problem is at strategic level in respect of implementation and resourcing. Furthermore, it is perhaps about the capacity of the system to respond to the change of mood and

the increase in enthusiasm and interest that Jackie Baillie describes.

The literature organisations that are involved in the literature forum for Scotland participated intensively in the Cultural Commission's reporting process, but we do not feel that its report presents a clear strategy for how education and culture are to work together, which is profoundly disappointing; one would assume that that would be at the top of the strategic agenda for advancing culture. It could be argued that that is more important than the question of how Scottish Opera is funded. We bring this petition on the back of the Cultural Commission's report because we believe that some of the core strategic issues are not being addressed at strategic level. Like the committee, we await the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport's announcement with great interest, but she is responsible for culture, not education.

Jackie Baillie: Ah, but we believe in joined-up government. My understanding is that the minister who is responsible for culture and the minister who is responsible for education talk occasionally. However, that aside, I am interested in your comments on the Cultural Commission's report. Have you given to civil servants or the minister your views that are contrary to the report?

Dr Smith: Yes, but—as I said—in the three or four years building up to the Cultural Commission's report, during which we have worked on the issue and made submissions, there has been no direct indication that the core issue that we have raised is being addressed strategically. Parliament is in a good position to encourage coherent forward thinking on the matter.

Dr McGillivray: I have a parallel point about the consultations on the curriculum in Scottish schools. The Association for Scottish Literary Studies and other organisations have been trying to co-operate with the Education Department in the deliberations. We feel that all aspects of content of the curriculum are in a sense being kept at a distance, while the focus is on structure. That is fine—we thoroughly approve of that—but there must be a point at which curriculum content is examined along with curriculum structure, which is when the nuts and bolts of implementation will come to the foreground. That will raise questions about teacher training and provision of courses at universities and colleges, which are vital and which underpin the strategic issues.

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): The petition is so wide ranging that I am getting rather confused. When first I read it, I concluded that it was to address the lack of teaching of Scottish history in Scottish schools. However, it now appears that you have a

wider aspiration that includes the arts, literature, music and culture. As I understand the present curriculum in Scottish schools, effort is made to promote and teach Scottish arts, language and culture, although there may not be enough emphasis on Scottish history. If we were to decide that the curriculum should put more emphasis on teaching Scottish history—on top of the efforts that are being made in relation to the arts, literature and language—how far back would we go? What is your aspiration? From what point would we instruct education departments to start teaching Scottish history? Would we go back one, five or 10 centuries? That would be a big responsibility and would be asking a lot of the education system in Scotland.

Dr Smith: We should, as every culture does, determine priorities by establishing what is valuable and important from the perspective of the present. We have a vigorous sense that there is an emerging distinctive Scottish society that has its own values and political institutions, not least of which is Parliament. We need to ask what aspects of our literature, culture, history and languages relate vigorously and creatively to our society's needs and aspirations, but that question clearly has not been addressed or answered coherently. We can pick many little bits of the picture and say that something is happening here and not there, but we need overall coherence.

We suggest that that coherence would be defined by Scots' need, their opportunity or, we might say, their right to understand the historical development of their society through its thinkers, historical background and creative writers. We are specific about considering the literary and historical side—the verbal side—of the matter, because it seems to be a distinctive and important place to begin in Scottish culture, because it has been at the core of our past and present thinking about ourselves and communication between our society and the wider world.

If there is such a thing as a specifically Scottish society, there must be such a thing as specifically Scottish culture that we can reflect on and study. We are asking whether that is being done in the most effective and accessible way for people in Scotland.

John Farquhar Munro: I sympathise with your petition and I hope that it gets support in Parliament, but where do we begin and what do we include? In my school days—I have heard the subject debated on the radio over the past week—history was taught, but we were taught to memorise a string of dates that meant nothing. As long as a pupil was able to respond to the teacher's question on the date of the battle of Bannockburn, Flodden or Culloden, they got full marks, but there was no explanation of why

Culloden, Flodden or Bannockburn happened, how they happened or what was involved. The concept of the teaching of history must change dramatically.

Dr Smith: Our educationists are on top of such matters. We can take a concrete example, as it is nice to home in on the concrete. The first of May 2007 marks the 300th anniversary of the Act of Union 1707 between England and Scotland—the coming into force of the treaty of union. Extraordinarily, on that day will also be held the Scottish election. We might say that it is just a date, but that date is clearly interesting and significant, not in any party-political sense but for its historical importance in the shaping of our contemporary culture and society. Its contemporary significance as a historical event is also extremely relevant to the exploration of, and debate about, what Scotland is about and where it is going.

That is one example of a historical event that has an awful lot of significance for us as Scots now. Are the education packs being prepared for that discussion?

Dr McGillivray: I accept John Farquhar Munro's point about the teaching of history in the past and the present. However, there is room for all ways of teaching history and the important thing about teaching it is to infuse the school career of pupils at all stages with an awareness of their society, community and environment. That can be done by teaching the facts and by examining particular periods in depth. Those are matters for the historians. The important thing is to ensure that, at all levels of the school curriculum and in courses beyond school in further and adult education, there is an opportunity to engage with different aspects of culture in different ways. We are talking about an open approach to culture, rather than an exclusive one.

We must not forget that the important dimension is the future. The purpose of education—learning about the past and fitting into the present—is to prepare people for the future. We need informed and thoughtful citizens, and one way to provide us with them in Scotland is to have young people and adult learners who are aware of the past and the present of their community.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): Good morning. Thank you for the poem and the eloquent discussion on the subject of the petition. I regret the passing of the adequate teaching of history in schools, but it is no different from the teaching of physics and chemistry, which is also in decline. You cite a lack of

"knowledge of Scottish literature, language and history"

among teachers. In your view, are enough suitably qualified teachers being trained? Perhaps not. Can you expand on that point?

10:30

Dr Smith: Dr McGillivray touched on the key issue, which is to ensure that primary and secondary teachers and those in relevant further education disciplines have an opportunity during their initial training to engage with Scottish history and literature. If we were training teachers to teach in Kenya, we would feel that it was important that they knew something about Kenya's cultural, historical and political background—how Kenya came to be as it is now. Equally, it would be valuable for teachers in Scotland to have an element of background knowledge about this country's history and literature that would give them the confidence to address those aspects of the curriculum and the guidelines.

Interestingly, one of the exercises that were carried out in the development of the petition—members will be aware that the petition has stirred up a huge amount of interesting discussion furth of the Parliament—involved interviewing pupils at Kirkintilloch high school, who showed a clear desire to know more about Scottish writers and history. It is a matter of ensuring that teachers are given the necessary confidence and back-up during initial teacher training and continuing professional development to encourage and support them in meeting the demand and interest to which Jackie Baillie referred.

John Scott: The enthusiasm of children and young people for education in this regard must have changed. I must confess that when I was at school, which was some years ago, I was taught history as opposed to learning it willingly. I admit that that is my own fault, but I wish now that I had paid more attention. I just wonder whether there has been a change among children so that they are now more likely to seek to be more adequately taught.

Dr Smith: I think that there has been a cultural change in Scotland and that there is a greater interest in knowing about our own society and its past and present characteristics, but not in a narrow, inward-looking way—it is about Scotland's international place and contribution. There is a change of mood among people and we want to respond creatively to that.

Ms White: I believe that if we do not know about our past, we cannot move on to our future. The issue is not just about teaching history but about cultural aspects. I want to know what you are looking for in the round. I referred earlier to the Scottish Funding Council. There is little evidence that it funds anything to do with Scottish history in or outwith schools. You talked about enabling teachers to become more knowledgeable. Would you like an investigation to be carried out into what the Scottish Arts Council and the Scottish Funding Council do to provide education in Scottish history

for teachers? In letters accompanying the petition, people say that they give talks in schools but that that is patchy throughout Scotland. Could the matter be looked at in the round, using joined-up thinking, so that there can be historical and cultural input into schools? It is an important issue.

Charlie Gordon suggested that a Scottish cringe may be at work. There certainly is such a cringe out there, particularly among educationists. I have heard them say that it is parochial to teach Scottish history in schools, which is untrue. We have to get over that attitude. If you want some kind of investigation done, perhaps it could involve joined-up thinking about teaching Scottish history and culture in and outwith schools.

Dr Smith: Absolutely. That is how we envisage the role of the Parliament in this matter. We see its role as being to ask the various official bodies and perhaps others who are influential in this area to give evidence on what their present provision is and how they see it relating to other aspects of the education system. That process could be hugely beneficial in enabling a coherent overall strategy to emerge that can respond to the cultural change and shift.

I repeat that, as Dr McGillivray stressed, we do not believe that a malign conspiracy exists; there is a lot of positive feeling. However, we feel strongly that the system is not coherent or integrated and does not maximise the opportunity. There is no evidence that it does that, although we all surely want our public education service to do that at all levels.

Dr McGillivray: I will add to that with specifics. A survey of the whole field would undoubtedly need to be part of the initial work. If that survey were undertaken, people would be amazed to find how much already existed. An audit of the educational resources in literature or history would show that a vast amount of stuff never reaches schools or teachers.

We need a resource centre or body to promote, and make teachers aware of, all that is available. Of course, that must be added to. Associations such as mine do a lot of work to create resources for schools and I am sure that the same is going on in history. Only through that will teachers become aware that the subject is wide and rich and that they can benefit from it. From that, confidence will come.

I promote the idea that we could do with a statutory advisory committee on culture in schools that would develop the subject and keep it under scrutiny, perhaps for only a limited time. We need something such as that to bring together the varied thinking of officials and educationists in different places.

The Convener: I will follow up a response by Dr Smith to John Scott. I cast my mind back to a petition that we received some time ago about the need for architecture to take into account people's disabilities. In discussing that petition, we agreed that being too prescriptive would take the edge off architects' ability to develop themselves and their art. Does that apply to the debate that your petition prompts? If we became too prescriptive, we could remove teachers' ability to develop themselves and their art in teaching. When discussing the other petition, we agreed that, to allow the individual to flourish, development at the training stage was important. If we trained teachers in a way that enthused them about Scottish literature, culture and art, we would not have to prescribe what is taught in schools. What is your response?

Dr Smith: That is an interesting line of exploration and argument and I do not necessarily disagree with it. However, it is important to say that we do not claim to have the answers to the questions. We are saying that those questions need to be asked, because it is not just among teachers but among pupils and citizens that there is a demand, a need and a right to ask whether the result is right for them.

Different views will legitimately be expressed. I sense different positions even in the discussion about the role of prescription. It would be very good to ask rigorously what the right and best way is to deliver the desired result for the people of Scotland.

Dr McGillivray: There are different types of prescription. Details, texts or topics can be prescribed, but nobody would want such rigorous prescription that every pupil and every school did the same thing. However, we could prescribe at a much higher level. It could be prescribed—or at least stipulated—that all schools will engage with different aspects of Scottish culture at all levels of the curriculum. Planning the detail of that would be a local, not a central, matter.

It is legitimate to make an overall stipulation about the place of Scottish culture in schools. In all the years that I have worked on the topic, I have never heard any argument against Scottish culture having a place in education. Some people feel that it should not have a place, but they never openly present their arguments. We would like to hear those arguments. If there is a case against Scottish culture in schools, it behoves those who feel that way to say why.

The Convener: I have enjoyed our discussion. It will be interesting to find out what the committee thinks we should do. Do members have any suggestions?

Ms White: We must ask the Scottish Executive its view, bearing in mind the Cultural

Commission's report, and we must ask the Education Committee. If we write to the Scottish Executive, would Peter Peacock reply, or should we address our letter to the Minister for Education and Young People?

Jackie Baillie: That is Peter Peacock.

Ms White: Yes, I know that it is Peter Peacock, but we sometimes write to the Scottish Executive in general. I know who the ministers are.

The Convener: I would write to a specific minister, whether that is the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport or the Minister for Education and Young People.

Ms White: That is fine. Peter Peacock can answer. We should also ask the Scottish Funding Council its views because, according to what we have been told, there is little evidence that its moneys fund the teaching of culture and history. We should also invite comments from Learning and Teaching Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland, the universities, HM Inspectorate of Education and—I will show my ignorance of Gaelic and ask John Farquhar Munro to pronounce its name—Bòrd na—

John Farquhar Munro: Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

Ms White: Perhaps it could also reply.

The Convener: Going back to the question about which minister to write to, we should cover the bases and write to both. That would give us a clearer perspective on their joined-up thinking. Do members have any other ideas about whom to contact?

Members indicated disagreement.

The Convener: We will write to a broad range of organisations and collate that information and get back to the petitioners. We will continue the discussion as the petition makes progress. Thank you very much for bringing it to us.

Dr Smith: Thank you very much.

Urban Regeneration (PE911)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE911, which is by Paul Nolan on behalf of Craigmillar community council. He calls on the Scottish Parliament to consider and debate the implications of the Scottish Executive's support for market-led regeneration projects and the operation of privatised urban regeneration companies. He is calling on the Parliament to consider in particular the mechanisms through which local communities can influence such companies and hold them to account. Paul Nolan, the chair of Craigmillar community council, will make a brief statement. He is accompanied by David Walker and Patsy King. I welcome you all. We will discuss your petition after you have introduced it.

Paul Nolan (Craigmillar Community Council):

Craigmillar lies less than 2 miles from this building, just on the other side of Arthur's seat. Despite being the poorest area of Edinburgh, it is rich in culture, tradition, heritage and social activities. Many of those were founded on the principles that people in Craigmillar held when it was a mining area. Coal mining and associated organisations kept the people together.

Craigmillar is a close community, but by no stretch of the imagination is it a closed community. We have international links with many other towns and cities throughout Europe and in South Africa. Last summer, we hosted the camp for the G8 and Make Poverty History protesters. Five thousand people from all over the world came to Craigmillar for a week and we were praised from every corner of the globe for the way in which the Craigmillar people welcomed, responded to and assisted those people.

10:45

Sadly, I have to tell the committee today that, as we speak, our community assets and our public assets are being plundered in the name of market-led regeneration. The people who are plundering our heritage, assets and community are a company called PARC—Promoting and Regenerating Craigmillar—which is a joint venture between the City of Edinburgh Council and its wholly owned property development company, the EDI Group Ltd—a very joined-up arrangement indeed. At first, we were told that that company, which receives £18 million of public money through Communities Scotland, would bring benefits to our community and would change our community for the good. In practice, it is proposing to clear most of the local people—more than 1,000 families—out of Craigmillar, and to replace their homes with private four-storey blocks of flats, to be sold at prices that our people will never be able to afford.

The issue that we want to bring before the committee is the way in which decisions are made by PARC, the regeneration company, which gets that grant from Communities Scotland and is also getting substantial land assets and public assets for free from the City of Edinburgh Council. PARC operates as a private company with an executive of three; those three men take all the basic decisions, which are rubber-stamped by the board. If any community representative challenges or questions a decision, we are threatened with cloaks of commercial confidentiality. If information is passed on to the community about what those people want to do in our community, we are threatened with all sorts of threats under company law. That organisation acts more like a masonic lodge than a publicly funded regeneration agency.

We want to see improvements to our area. Nobody wants that more than we do, because we live there. We want better housing, better play facilities for our children and better facilities for our elderly people. That is not what we are being offered by the market-led regeneration company. We think that, in the 21st century, it is not an awful lot to ask that the authorities collectively should provide decent housing and proper facilities for the poorest citizens in the city.

We would like the Public Petitions Committee to consider our petition, particularly on the issue of the decision-making processes of a market-led regeneration company that is being publicly funded. Its processes should be more open and transparent to the community that it serves and the people who make those decisions should be more accountable to the people in the community about which they are making those decisions. That is the substance of our petition and we ask the committee to consider that.

The Convener: We cannot look at the specifics of that organisation. We have no remit to do that. Our concern this morning is the wider implications of the issues that you bring before the committee. Can you give us any evidence that the decision-making process in Craigmillar is any different from that in a regeneration project in any other part of Scotland? Have you had any contact with regeneration projects in other parts of Edinburgh? I do not know whether there are any such projects.

Paul Nolan: Until quite recently, regeneration in Craigmillar was spearheaded by the Craigmillar Partnership. Its meetings are open to the public, and the agendas and minutes are published and are available in the local library and on websites. That is the practice in other partnerships in the west and north of the city. It is common practice for the decisions that boards make in partnership with local people and local agencies on a regeneration process to be made in public. There are occasions, of course, when some decisions have to be made in private but, by and large, most decisions are made in public. The public can come along or send a deputation to the board or petition it—a bit similar to what happens here. The public can try to influence the decision makers.

That is not the case with the regeneration company in Craigmillar; it is quite the opposite. The regeneration company there is a secretive, private organisation, so the committee will understand why we have had many complaints about what it is doing. Today, however, I want particularly to discuss how it goes about making its decisions; that is of greatest concern to us. We could easily give examples of what used to happen in Craigmillar and what happens in south, west and north Edinburgh in areas that are similar to Craigmillar. The decisions in those areas are

made by partnership boards working with the local community in openness and transparency.

David Walker (Craigmillar Community Council): There are similarities with other parts of Scotland. I believe that Govan community council recently lodged a petition with the committee that raised similar issues about decisions being taken on regeneration in the community that are largely opposed by people living in the area. Therefore, what is happening in Craigmillar has similarities with what is happening in other parts of Scotland. However, we are not here today to question PARC—although there are big questions to be asked of PARC and of the city council's role in this whole thing. We are here to ask the Public Petitions Committee and the Scottish Parliament to consider the legislation that governs the urban regeneration companies. Those companies do not appear to be in any way accountable to the communities in which they operate.

There is, I believe, provision under the Scotland Act 1998, but it is very loose and woolly and does not go as far as saying how the urban regeneration companies should be accountable to the communities in which they operate. We would like stricter criteria to be put in place to make sure that when companies such as PARC come into Craigmillar, they have to engage with the community, listen to it and take on board some of the ideas that local people put forward. We simply cannot have organisations such as PARC coming into an area, producing a business plan and riding roughshod over long-standing communities.

The Convener: You are correct: a community group in the Govan area lodged a petition about the Govan Initiative. The committee investigated that petition and found that the claims that were made against the Govan Initiative were not substantiated, and the petition closed.

Jackie Baillie: I would like to inject a note of clarity. We are talking about an urban regeneration company that is one of three pathfinder projects in Scotland. The Govan Initiative probably relates exactly to the Craigmillar Partnership and others. Not everything was rosy in the past and not everything is bad with the present. If we can accept that, we might make some progress. I will try not to touch too much on Craigmillar, but my comments may be helpful in elucidating some of the remarks that were made.

First, I am keen to know how, using Craigmillar as an example, you think the views of tenants and residents are represented in the regeneration process.

Paul Nolan: There are two bodies that represent the views of the community. The statutory body is the community council, which is very lively. It has representatives on the

Craigmillar Partnership, which was set up as a social inclusion partnership. We are now a community planning partnership that has representatives from all the government agencies that one would expect to find in a regeneration partnership, including health, the local authority that leads it, schools and the police. It is agreed that the partnership is the body that has responsibility for providing strategic leadership on regeneration in Craigmillar, whereas the community council has statutory responsibility for collecting the views of the community and feeding them through to the partnership board.

I am a member of the partnership board and we have experienced nothing but frustration over the past few years. Time and again, we have gone to the regeneration company with our concerns, but they have been ignored.

Jackie Baillie: Would it be fair to say that there might be other groups out there that feel that they, too, represent people? I am thinking about the community regeneration forum.

Paul Nolan: The community regeneration forum is made up largely of tenants organisations in the area and it liaises with the housing department of the City of Edinburgh Council. The forum is responsible for issues to do with local tenants associations and it does a good job. It collates the views of the tenants organisations in the area—of which there are about eight to 10—and feeds them into the council's housing department. However, although it does a fine job in that regard, it does not represent the whole community. The community council has the broader statutory remit of representing the community and the strategic regeneration body is the Craigmillar Partnership.

Jackie Baillie: It is clear that the Craigmillar community forum represents a section of opinion in Craigmillar. You may not be aware that it has written to the committee to say that there are organisations in Craigmillar that might not agree with the community council's point of view. Would it be fair to say that it is relevant to acknowledge that there are groups of people in Craigmillar who perhaps have a different view from that of the community council?

Paul Nolan: Craigmillar is a diverse community and it would be astonishing in any community if different views were not held. The Craigmillar community is made up of eight different neighbourhoods and different views are certainly expressed. The community forum is on record as objecting to many of the regeneration company's proposals.

The test of Craigmillar's voice is the consultation exercise that was conducted last year for three months. It involved the council, the regeneration company and the partnership in co-operation with

the community council and was not simply a case of sending round a leaflet or a questionnaire. It involved a series of four public meetings, as well as interviews with specific groups of people. In total, more than 300 people in Craigmillar who represented the broad range of the community's demographics were consulted. Sometimes the process took more than an hour to complete. The results of that survey show that there was overwhelming support for the community council's view of the regeneration company. Of course there are differences of opinion in any community.

Patsy King (Craigmillar Community Council):

That consultation document was completely ignored by PARC. The key principles of the urban design framework have not changed, despite the extensive consultation that took place.

Jackie Baillie: Did all the major community organisations in Craigmillar sign up to the consultation process that has just been described?

11:00

David Walker: Following the consultation, a position statement was put in place. The consultation document ran to about 55 pages. A summary of eight to 10 pages was produced that set out what the community wanted to happen in the regeneration process. We asked people to come to an event at Craigmillar Castle to sign what we called the declaration and to support the six or seven key principles relating to housing, community facilities, roads and so on. In total, about 700 people signed up to the declaration. There is widespread support for the consultation exercise and what came from it.

I want to take the committee back a bit. The Scottish Executive conducted a consultation process before it set about putting in place market-led urban regeneration companies. It looked at the English model. The consultation highlighted two or three issues that made the Scottish Executive fearful. One was that urban regeneration companies appeared to go off on their own and to do what they wanted. There was a clear indication in the report that they should not do that and that they should work closely with social inclusion partnerships, or whatever the equivalent was in England at the time. We have always supported that way forward.

We see the Craigmillar Partnership as the body that should represent Craigmillar. The community council has a role to play in that partnership arrangement, as does the urban regeneration forum, which wrote to the committee before the meeting. Even the Craigmillar Partnership is being ignored by the urban regeneration company. The partnership has written to and has attended meetings of the planning committee on a number

of occasions. It has presented a view on and objected to the plans, but on each occasion it has been completely ignored. Concern about the procedures is not limited to the community council, which is giving evidence to the committee today. The former Craigmillar social inclusion partnership, which is now called a community planning partnership, is also concerned.

Jackie Baillie: The Craigmillar Partnership is not a signatory to the petition, but you are telling me that it, too, is represented here today and has signed up to the terms of the petition.

David Walker: No. I am saying that it signed the declaration that I mentioned earlier and that it is the main representative agency in Craigmillar.

Jackie Baillie: I understand that. I just wanted to avoid any confusion.

David Walker: As Paul Nolan says and as members know, in any area there is a diverse range of views. However, there needs to be one agency that represents the community. In Craigmillar, that agency is the Craigmillar Partnership.

Jackie Baillie: I will try to wrap up the other issues that I want to raise in one question. It relates to the structure of urban regeneration companies, which Mr Nolan described quite well. They are not private companies, as the petition alleges. Is it not the case that PARC—as you effectively conceded—is wholly owned by the City of Edinburgh Council and one of its arm's-length bodies? There is community representation on PARC, and I understand that the community council is represented on it as an observer. I am sure that, given his previous experience, Mr Nolan will agree that councillor involvement is a key link with the democratic process. For that reason, I do not understand why you cannot hold PARC to account.

Paul Nolan: You have obviously taken quite an interest in the matter. I remember when you first came to Craigmillar some years ago. The situation was fine then; we wish that we had you back.

Jackie Baillie: I would still do the same thing.

Paul Nolan: EDI, a company that is wholly owned by the City of Edinburgh Council, is at pains to tell everyone that it is a commercial company. It operates under commercial circumstances and company law. There is no regular report back to the city council and there is no committee to which EDI or PARC send their minutes. There are no instructions to EDI to tell it what to do, because that would be against company law. Company directors must do what is best for the company.

Two community representatives are present as observers on PARC, the joint venture company.

They cannot vote on any matter. As I mentioned earlier, one of those community representatives is here with us today. They consistently raise questions about the proposals but are consistently ignored. They have been warned that they are operating as directors of a private company and cannot, under any circumstances, tell local people what the decisions are. It is not a matter of there being no mechanism to report back to the community; those directors are warned about commercial confidentiality and threatened that they had better not go back and tell the community what has been decided. Not only are there no great lines of communication to the council, there are no such lines to the community. In fact, quite the opposite is true: the community is deliberately kept in the dark about those decisions.

John Scott: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. You have made some strong statements against the City of Edinburgh Council. Although I am not necessarily a fan of the council, I am surprised at the strength of those statements. I am also surprised at your antipathy towards this urban regeneration project, because it could give all such projects a bad name. You say that what you describe is not only your position, but the position of the Craigmillar community forum, the tenants' associations and the Craigmillar Partnership. You say that you represent all their views.

You state that 1,000 families are to be displaced. From the paperwork that I have, I do not have any knowledge of what the council intends to do with those people. You imply that they will be made homeless, but is that really the case? I find that hard to believe, but I am interested to know.

Paul Nolan: We find it astonishing. I will cite a case that came up at one of our meetings recently, which involves a woman—a single parent—who lives in Craigmillar. The regeneration company requires her house and land to build private flats on. Over the past few years, the woman has worked as a nurse at Edinburgh royal infirmary and is on course to qualify with a higher national certificate. She has two sons—one is doing his higher grades at Castlebrae Community high school and the other will shortly do his standard grades—and she looks after her elderly father who lives nearby in the Niddrie area. She has been told by the City of Edinburgh Council that she has to be decanted, probably to Granton, on the other side of the city, for at least seven years before she has any hope of being placed on a housing association waiting list for Craigmillar.

That is one of many individual cases that have been brought to us over the past few years. We think that that is a disgraceful way to treat people. How on earth can that woman keep together her

children's education, her job and her caring for her elderly relative if her family is shunted to the other side of Edinburgh for seven years? By no stretch of the imagination is that an isolated case. In case after case that the community council deals with through our project works, we encounter such tragic horror stories of what is going to happen to local people because of the principles of the market-led regeneration company. My colleagues can give you other examples of the terrible things that are being done in the name of regeneration.

David Walker: I back Paul Nolan up on that. The first phase of the housing development in Craigmillar will see the Niddrie Mains area cleared completely, with all the houses demolished. There are 257 houses in that area, but very few houses in Craigmillar that their inhabitants can go to. In total, 3,200 new houses will be built in Craigmillar, but only 15 per cent of them will be for rent—for social housing, as people call it these days. That is just the first phase of the development.

We studied the EdIndex system—the housing waiting list in Edinburgh—and looked at the availability of houses in our area. Only three houses were available the last time we looked—not just in Craigmillar, but in east Edinburgh. Some 257 houses will be knocked down and people will be decanted to other parts of the city. The quoted 1,000 families is perhaps an underestimate.

John Scott: Jackie Baillie has kindly passed me a piece of paper, although I do not know its provenance—perhaps she can let me know; it is not a piece of paper to which I have had access—that says that PARC guarantees that all residents who want to stay in Craigmillar and who currently rent a house there will have a new one built to allow them to continue to do so.

I am concerned about the bigger picture, and that what you describe is happening in the three pilot regeneration schemes. Have you evidence of a situation elsewhere in Scotland that is similar to the one you describe in Craigmillar? I presume that you have done your research. Is it a general problem? Does it affect the other two schemes?

Paul Nolan: I believe that there are problems in other parts of the country, such as in the west of Scotland, where there are conflicts between the community and the regeneration company. Quite the opposite is the case in Stirling, where the council has taken a lead in the regeneration company and fully involved the community—it is a case of night and day by comparison. It might be worth comparing the success in the Stirling community with the distress about which we are telling the committee this morning.

PARC is a private company. Just before Christmas, it decided to spend £350,000 to appoint public relations consultants. It produced a

Christmas card for every Craigmillar resident telling us how great PARC would be. To see its PowerPoint presentations and pretty picture, you would think that we were going to walk into a new Shangri-la in Craigmillar. However, when you get the PARC representatives round the table and say, "Right, what does that mean for this family? What does this policy mean?" their empty promises are not worth the paper they are written on. Their plans are vaguely made in public and in print, but they are not committed to them.

I issue a challenge to PARC: if it is so confident that it can deliver what is guaranteed on John Scott's piece of paper, I invite it to enter into a legal agreement with every family that wants a rented house, to ensure that they will be back in Craigmillar within a certain time. When we raised that point, PARC ran a mile.

A PARC PR promotional leaflet is as far from the truth as you will get. That it spent £350,000 to employ a PR company to sell such nonsense to us says to me what a desperate state it is in.

John Scott: Thank you. There is no backing off in your view, and you have made allegations that we will have to take up with PARC, the City of Edinburgh Council and others. I am aware that we are hearing one side of the situation—your view—but I would be utterly dismayed to think that there was no other side to it.

Patsy King: As regards the consultation process and the document that we produced, the facts and figures that we used all came from PARC's business plan. The building programme is to be over 12 years. PARC conceded that it should be a seven-year programme, but that will not happen because it will not build the rented houses in time. It will still build those houses over the 12-year period, but people will be out of their community for that length of time, and not enough houses will be built for them to return to.

Mr Gordon: If PARC were to implement a strategy with which your community council agreed, would you be all that bothered about its operating procedures?

11:15

Paul Nolan: Yes, we would. We are not asking for the moon. We have dreams, but we are not dreamers. We are asking for our seven-point action plan—our seven-point charter—which some people thought was moderate. We ask for a 50:50 balance between housing for sale and housing for rent, and we want 20 or 25 per cent of the houses for sale to be affordable to local people. There is a world of difference between what is affordable in Edinburgh and what is affordable in Craigmillar. We also want a better balance of houses to flats. At the moment, the balance is two thirds flats and

one third low-rise houses, but we want the opposite. We want PARC not to build an office block on our public park. We want commitments on community facilities that are vaguely promised in lovely PowerPoint presentations but about which, when we get down to the details and ask, "Where will that youth centre be built and who will pay for it? Where will the sheltered housing for the elderly or the supported housing for the disabled be?" we get a load of waffle that would embarrass a PR company.

Our demands are not excessive—they are reasonable. We would like PARC to meet those demands, but we would also like it to engage the local community in its decision-making processes. Why should its meetings be held up on the High Street? Why should they not be held in Craigmillar, and be open to the public with a public question-and-answer session? If it needs to go into private session, like a local government or Scottish Parliament committee, that is easily done. The secretive nature of the way that it does business and the fact that it will not even listen to the community concerns us. It is important that PARC engages with the community as well as listens and does what we would like to happen in our community. I assure you that the community's demands are far from unreasonable.

Patsy King: Any body that receives public money should be accountable. At the moment, legislation does not exist to make PARC accountable.

Mr Gordon: I want to be clear whether you are against the principle of arm's-length companies, even when they are wholly owned by local authorities. I do not know a great deal about how Edinburgh works as a city, but I know about EDI, which is the City of Edinburgh Council's property company—I believe that Edinburgh runs its leisure services in a similar way. There are compelling reasons why that *modus operandi* might be chosen.

I go back to my Glasgow municipal responsibilities. Glasgow City Council runs the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre as a company, but it owns 97 per cent of the shares. The Glasgow Royal Concert Hall is also run by an arm's-length company. There would be huge financial burdens on and risks to the council tax payers of Glasgow if they were not run in that way and we made them part of the mainstream local authority. You are not saying that you are against arm's-length companies in principle?

Paul Nolan: No.

Mr Gordon: Although you have described PARC as being privatised, I have to say that if it is wholly owned by the City of Edinburgh Council

that does not meet my definition of what is meant by privatised.

Paul Nolan: PARC is a property development company, which makes clear in its literature, its promotions and its presentations to us that although it is owned by the council, it acts as a private property development company.

Mr Gordon: It operates according to commercial disciplines, but surely a company is not privatised when it has only public-sector shareholders.

Paul Nolan: Perhaps privatisation is the wrong word, but it seems to us that Craigmillar is being privatised and that PARC is a private company. I experienced such a situation for five years when I was a member of the board of Lothian Region Transport.

Mr Gordon: You will know about the disciplines according to which companies must operate. As a company director you must operate according to company law.

Paul Nolan: Yes. The legislation that governs bus companies is a wee bit different from legislation for other companies, but the principles of how they operate are the same. There are issues about dividends and levels of service. My experience of the bus company is that it was more responsive to local communities' needs than PARC is to Craigmillar. PARC is specifically supposed to engage, involve and listen to the community. That is surely not too much to ask of an organisation that will receive the best part of £40 million-worth of public money and assets, and it is surely achievable within the disciplines of company law. It seems to be achievable in Stirling, but not in Edinburgh.

Mr Gordon: You disagree with PARC's strategy, but you say that Craigmillar community council has an observer on its board.

Paul Nolan: The observer has consistently disagreed with PARC's strategy, and he has produced papers on it. However, he has been warned on pain of death that he cannot tell the community council what the board's decisions are.

Mr Gordon: According to the community council's additional information, 14 per cent of the new housing will be social rented housing for rehousing local people. Is it true that, although there will be decanting—to be fair, avoiding that can be difficult, depending on the size of the area—everybody who is local will ultimately be rehoused locally?

Paul Nolan: No.

Mr Gordon: Your briefing states:

"The 14% of homes being built for public rent will be used to re-house tenants displaced by development; they are not additional public housing".

I thought that you would say that there should be more social rented housing to get more people into Craigmillar, but you are saying that not everybody will be rehoused locally, even if they must be decanted first.

Paul Nolan: We have considered the figures and our judgment is that the 14 per cent of homes to be built for public rent are not adequate to house the existing rented housing population in Craigmillar, let alone to meet the unmeasured need that there will normally be as a result of overcrowding in families and children growing up and looking for houses. In fact, things will be made worse for people who are living in overcrowded conditions because they will have no chance of getting a house in the next decade.

Mr Gordon: I gather that you think that 50 per cent of the new homes should be social rented houses. How did you arrive at the figure of 50 per cent if no one has measured overcrowding or latent demand?

Paul Nolan: That figure has been an aspiration for the community through the partnership for perhaps the past 10 years. Ten years ago, when we suggested that there should be a move to a 50:50 split between private housing and public authority rented housing from the 90 per cent public authority rented housing that there was in the area, we were described in some circles as being too radical in wanting to sell off public housing. However, we have made a judgment. I do not have figures that will add up to 50 per cent, but housing authorities and planning authorities have accepted that a 50:50 split in communities that are moving from having public authority housing stock to having more diverse stock—there are housing associations and housing co-operatives in Craigmillar—is, by and large, about right. That has been the judgment of the Craigmillar Partnership and its predecessors for around 10 years and is the judgment of the housing department and the planning department.

Mr Gordon: I want to return to the fundamentals. Do you mainly want the committee to help you to change PARC's current strategy or do you want it to help you to get PARC to listen to you?

Paul Nolan: We would love the committee to get PARC to change its strategy, but we know that that is not the committee's function. Therefore, to start with, we would love to find a way to make PARC listen to us properly and take account of our views. That would be a small but important step. This process will last 15 or 20 years and the development will affect our community for the next 50 or 100 years.

In five or 10 years' time, we do not want to read a report by the Scottish Parliament saying that

market-led regeneration companies were a load of rubbish and that one of their failures was that they never listened to local people. We should find a way of improving the legislation so that anyone who receives a certain amount of public money has to put in place processes and procedures for taking local opinion seriously and properly into account.

David Walker: Although it will be important to change what has happened in Craigmillar, the issues do not affect only Craigmillar. If pilot projects are regarded as successful, they may be rolled out in other parts of Scotland too. We would like legislation to ensure that companies operate within the guidelines of the Scottish Parliament. Those guidelines should state that companies have to listen to communities.

Charlie Gordon asked whether we were against PARC from the outset. No, we were not.

Paul Nolan: We supported it.

David Walker: At a meeting in 2001, we sat down with the City of Edinburgh Council to discuss the whole issue and to discuss who would be the best company to work with. We supported the idea of using EDI—which is now part of PARC—as the joint venture company. We saw the benefits and realised that profits would come back into the community. That was fine, but what we need is a company that actually listens to the community and does not just produce a business plan and then tell the community how it will work. That is what has happened to us and it is certainly not good enough.

The Craigmillar Partnership set out a protocol with PARC about three and a half years ago. The protocol stated that the partnership would be responsible for the social regeneration of Craigmillar and that PARC would be responsible for the physical regeneration of Craigmillar. The final decisions on where a school or road would go, or on what type of housing would be built, would be for the Craigmillar Partnership. However, PARC has never adhered to the protocol; it has ignored the Craigmillar Partnership.

When we say that we want PARC to listen to us, we do not mean that we want it to listen to the community council. We have a view and, as Jackie Baillie rightly points out, other people have views as well. However, Craigmillar Partnership has been recognised in the protocol and by the community as the representative organisation for Craigmillar, but PARC has ignored it.

The Convener: I want to move on because we have taken a bit of time over this, but I will first invite quick comments from Helen Eadie and then Sandra White.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): You used the phrase “market-led”, which I find quite

pejorative. In fact, PARC is a not-for-profit company; there is quite a distinction between market-led and not-for-profit. If a company is a not-for-profit company, any resources will go back into the local community. I think that David Walker acknowledged that point; it is an important principle that we should all agree on from the outset. PARC is different from a private company that operates in such a way that money goes back into the company people's profits.

David Walker: PARC is a market-led company.

Helen Eadie: The phrase “market-led” suggests a private company in which individuals profit rather than the local community.

David Walker: It is the Scottish Executive's term.

Helen Eadie: The local community will derive benefit and that is one of the key issues.

Do you acknowledge that there will be opportunities for shared equity schemes in all the regeneration efforts across Scotland? Shared equity schemes will enable people on low incomes to purchase their own homes through the Chancellor's initiative. That answers the point that you made earlier about people not being able to afford houses. In fact, the affordability of the houses arises from the shared equity schemes. Such schemes are a good way forward and an example of something that might not have been available previously but that can now be offered by companies such as PARC.

11:30

Paul Nolan: In Craigmillar, we started talking about and promoting the concept of shared equity 10 years ago.

Two thirds of the people in Craigmillar, including three quarters of the children in the area, live on just £10,000 a year, largely in benefits. People who are in work earn, on average, £14,000 a year. Those are Scottish Executive figures. At the moment, the cheapest one-bedroom house that is proposed by PARC will cost about £90,000. That figure will increase. A two-bedroom house will cost £120,000. I do not think that PARC is planning any three-bedroom houses, which is important; if the organisation does not provide houses that are suitable for children, that will have an effect on local schools.

Some of our people are successful and are able to buy their houses. We are delighted about that and we want to see them getting on. Shared equity will help a small minority of people, although, at the end of the day, one still has to pay up the money, even if it is part rent and part sale. Unquestionably, that will help some families, but by no stretch of the imagination will it help the

overwhelming majority of people in need in Craigmillar.

As far as the term “market-led regeneration company” is concerned, that is how PARC describes itself. It is not our description of the company. When PARC first came to Craigmillar to give us its promotion, it said that it was in the business of market-led regeneration. It is not a term that we use, but one that the company uses.

Helen Eadie: It is just unfortunate that you portray PARC as an ogre that has come along. The papers that we have seen show that regeneration schemes bring tremendous benefits to local communities throughout Scotland. There is a regeneration area—Lochgelly in Fife—in my constituency, so I know the issues. We have some of the highest poverty ratings in Scotland. Would you be prescriptive about the guidelines that you would like the Scottish Executive to lay down for regeneration organisations in Scotland?

Paul Nolan: I am not an expert on the drafting of amendments to legislation, but the general concept is that, because the company gets a huge amount of public money—£18 million—and £22 million of public land and other assets in the area, there has to be an agreement that it will be required to involve and consult the local community through the principal organisations and the social inclusion partnership. At the moment, the legislation refers to social inclusion partnerships and states that the regeneration companies should work closely with them, but they are in breach of that. There is a case for us to come to the committee today and say that the companies are in breach of the terms under which they got the money. Those are the broad areas that we would like the Executive to consider.

We know that the Communities Committee will discuss some of the principles during the next few months. If regeneration companies get public money and assets, the decision-making processes must involve the community. Decisions must be made in an open and transparent way and the people who make the decisions must be accountable in one way or another. That is essentially what we would like, but the next stage is a job for a parliamentary draftsman.

Ms White: Thank you for the honesty of your answers. I do not know Craigmillar and I certainly do not have any knowledge of the inner workings of PARC—if I did, I would declare an interest in it. However, I have seen similar things happening throughout Scotland, perhaps not particularly through regeneration companies, but in other areas. In Glasgow, that particularly involves the Glasgow Housing Association. I do not know whether you will agree, but I think that we had the Highland clearances and we now have the city clearances.

As you mentioned, only a certain percentage of houses will be built for families in the area. Helen Eadie said that communities benefit from such schemes, but if there is no community left, it cannot benefit from them. In light of that, I have a simple question. If this regeneration goes ahead under PARC, how many people who have been born and bred in Craigmillar will be left in the area? You have already said that you want houses rather than flats to be built. If more flats and fewer houses are built, there will be less room for families.

Finally, your focus is not wholly on Craigmillar; it also takes in other areas throughout Scotland. Patsy King mentioned legislation, and in the information accompanying the petition you say that, unlike Scottish URCs, the English URCs work within a legislative framework. Are you proposing that, in Scotland, there should be a legislative framework that works alongside the English system to provide checks and balances? You said that 700 people turned up at your open day and that 275 people were involved in a successful consultation that PARC carried out. I have to say that that does not sound like very many out of a community of 7,000.

Paul Nolan: Our judgment is that very few families will be left in Craigmillar. In fact, David Walker will bring tears to your eyes with his story of what will happen to two generations—a man in his 60s who looks after his father, who is almost 90.

As I said earlier, it will probably take a minimum of seven years for people scattered all over the city to return to the area. After all, things change. People might not want to return, or indeed might not be able to. Despite PARC's fine words and fancy brochures, one of its great lies is its guarantee that, in seven years' time, those people will return to rented homes. That is not the case. They will simply go on to a housing association waiting list.

I realise that the committee cannot examine the functions of any individual company. As David Walker said, in the beginning we supported PARC's establishment; however, over the past couple of years, we have been horrified to find that its promises have come to nothing. In fact, the situation is even worse than that. One or two of its representatives have privately admitted that they want to use Craigmillar to solve Edinburgh's housing problem. Just two or three miles from the city centre and with reasonable shopping facilities, Craigmillar is in an outstanding location on the edge of the countryside. People from the city will be queueing up to buy these relatively cheap houses, but it will happen at the expense of the local community and we will hear more and more horror stories of people being displaced from and

decanted out of the area with no prospect of returning for years.

I do not know whether it is possible for the committee to consider any English examples; however, preliminary research by the Scottish Executive does not show those companies in a good light. It might well be worth finding out why this approach has been so successful in Raploch in Stirling, but so disastrous in Craigmillar in Edinburgh.

David Walker: Under the guise of regenerating the area, PARC has received £18 million from the Scottish Executive and about £22 million in land transfers from the City of Edinburgh Council. However, at a number of meetings, Sheila Gilmore, the convener of the council's housing committee, has openly admitted that this is not a regeneration programme for Craigmillar, but a rehousing programme for Edinburgh. Can she make such a statement on one hand and, on the other, sit on PARC's board and accept £18 million of Scottish Executive funding and the transfer of huge amounts of land from the city council? It does not add up. She is—if you like—sitting on both sides of the fence.

Patsy King: The project will change the face of Craigmillar. We are angry because it is not about the people who live there now—they will be decanted all over the city. Regeneration is supposed to help the poorest people but, in our experience, those people are being cleared out of their areas with no hope of returning. That is why we are so angry.

The Convener: I ask members for their comments on what to do with the petition.

Jackie Baillie: The Craigmillar project is one of three pathfinder projects. Clydebank is another one and Raploch in Stirling has been mentioned, although I am not sure whether that is the third. The Executive will review the experience, but such projects have been successful elsewhere. The key issue that has arisen today is about how local people are engaged in the regeneration process by the urban regeneration companies. I would like us to write to the Executive, Communities Scotland and the Scottish Urban Regeneration Forum, which I suspect takes a broader interest in the issues, to seek their views. In fairness, we should also write to the City of Edinburgh Council, as specific points have been made about its processes.

Helen Eadie: We should also write to the Scottish community planning organisation and PARC, which might be able to answer several of the general points that have been raised about accountability and operation. We could learn from how PARC has worked. From the papers that I have in front of me, it seems that there is an

absolute right-to-return policy—it is worth putting that on the record. Another point to put on the record is the estimated £50 million benefit for the Craigmillar area, which will be a fourfold return.

The Convener: Are members happy with those suggestions?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will gather the responses and communicate them to the petitioners.

Paul Nolan: I thank the committee for its time and interest in the matter. We may have outstayed our welcome.

The Convener: I assure you that, if you had done, I would have closed you down.

Planning System (PE916)

The Convener: The next petition is PE916, by Scottish Environment LINK and the Association of Scottish Community Councils, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to secure real rights for all in the planning system by ensuring that the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill establishes an effective right for people to have their views taken into account in planning decisions and the setting of conditions through the introduction of a limited third-party right of appeal in the planning system, rather than just of more opportunities to express opinions. The petition also calls on the Parliament to ensure that all strategic planning decisions that are taken by the national Government, including those on the national planning framework, are open to challenge and public inquiry.

Anne McCall will make a brief statement in support of the petition. She is accompanied by Douglas Murray and Stephen Hawkins. You have a few minutes, after which we will discuss the issue.

11:45

Anne McCall (Scottish Environment LINK): Thanks. Good morning—just. I am here as the chair of the Scottish Environment LINK planning task force. As the convener mentioned, I am accompanied by Douglas Murray from the Association of Scottish Community Councils and Stephen Hawkins from the Portobello campaign against the superstore. We have attached a case study to the evidence that we submitted, which I hope that you have seen.

Between 1999 and 2004, the Public Petitions Committee received 67 different petitions on planning matters, which were signed by almost 24,000 people. Our petition has attracted more than 5,000 signatures. That is representative of a significant level of concern about the current planning system. Many of those petitions will be

considered by the Communities Committee as it examines the evidence that it receives during stage 1 of the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill, and we hope that this committee will see fit to refer our petition to the Communities Committee.

The petition was not undertaken lightly. We have had a close and frequently constructive working relationship with the Scottish Executive on planning matters but, as a result of repeated decisions not to address seriously our concerns, we felt that we had to appeal directly to the Scottish Parliament. As you will see from our evidence, the petition focuses on two issues: the scrutiny of the national planning framework and the decision to reject a third-party right of appeal.

The enhanced status and purpose of the national planning framework are welcome, as is the proposal to ensure parliamentary scrutiny. However, if that document is to establish the need for national developments, we are surprised that there is no statutory obligation for public consultation—a requirement that local authorities and developers are clearly expected to meet for developments and plans lower down the planning hierarchy. Given the importance of the document, we are alarmed that Parliament will be given only 40 days in which to scrutinise it—less time than a local authority currently gets to determine a household extension.

The decision by Scottish ministers to reject a limited third-party right of appeal was disappointing for many communities and individuals across Scotland. In response to the Executive's consultation on the issue, we organised a number of events throughout Scotland, which were well attended and at which people were passionate on the issue. Many of their views were reiterated during the event that was held by the Communities Committee in October. The overwhelming response to all the Executive's consultation on the issue has been a positive endorsement of the principle of a limited third-party right of appeal. We do not see the third-party right of appeal as a bolt-on, nor do we see it as a cure for all the ills of the planning system; it would address a basic issue of equity and trust.

The bill includes a range of proposals, including pre-application discussions, hearings and greater involvement in development plan preparation. Those are cautiously welcomed; however, essentially, they amount to a wider implementation of existing practices. We believe that there are workable and constructive solutions to people's concerns, which we hope that the Parliament will consider during its consideration of the bill.

The Convener: Thank you. You mentioned the number of petitions that we have received. It has become clear to us that they fall into different categories. Some people are genuinely concerned

and want us to have the best planning law; others fall into the category of nimbys. A pattern has also been developing of what are now called bananas—build absolutely nothing anywhere near anyone. You talked about a workable third-party right of appeal. Can you develop that and explain what you mean by a limited third-party right of appeal?

Anne McCall: The concept of a limited third-party right of appeal arose out of a piece of work that was commissioned by a range of environmental non-governmental organisations, which is known as the Green Balance report. The four key areas in which a third-party right of appeal might be introduced are where an environmental impact assessment is needed; where an application is contrary to planning officers' views; where a local authority has an interest; and where an application is contrary to the development plan. Those four areas were the subject of discussion and were highlighted in the partnership agreement. We think that the introduction of a third-party right of appeal in those four areas would be workable. It would be focused and would concentrate on the areas and the types of development that raised the greatest level of concern among people.

The Convener: Do members have questions for the petitioners?

Mr Gordon: I am chewing that over, convener, because you asked the question that I wanted to ask and have elicited a response that might raise other questions. The word "limited" is used a lot, but I think that that is the first time that I have heard it defined.

The Convener: Yes; I think that the answer was very helpful.

Jackie Baillie: Indeed it was, and I have considerable sympathy for this issue, as people will know. I am struck that one of our potential problems is that people ascribe all sorts of different things to the phrase "third-party right of appeal". What Anne McCall has described more precisely is almost the same as the current grounds for referral to Scottish ministers. We are told stories about how costly a third-party right of appeal would be and how many resources would have to be diverted from elsewhere. How realistic is that, given that what you have just described is a very limited third-party right of appeal?

Anne McCall: Ministers gave four grounds for rejecting the introduction of a third-party right of appeal and cost was not one. That is probably because ministers looked at the package of measures that they were proposing and at the situation in Ireland and realised that we are talking about introducing a final safety net for those situations where all the other checks and balances of the planning system do not work. A particularly

effective example is the development plan process. The purpose of the bill is to put the development plan at the heart of the planning system. I have heard very little criticism of that and we support it.

If the local community has agreed to the development plan and it has been the subject of extensive consultation, and applications are approved that are contrary to that development plan, there is no safety net for local communities who have put their heart and soul into engaging with the creation of the development plan. Portobello is a good example. The proposal that has been made there was not in the development plan.

If we cannot guarantee that level of security for those people who want to engage with the planning system, they will not do it more than once.

Jackie Baillie: Would it be fair to say that the bill that is currently before Parliament will do a huge amount to place the community at the heart of the process and allow it to engage with development plans at a strategic level? You are arguing for a gap at the end of the process that almost gives you the same rights as a developer would have.

Anne McCall: Absolutely. I could not have put it better.

Helen Eadie: You mentioned Ireland, but I understand that New Zealand also has third-party right of appeal. Could you elaborate on how that operates? It must be acceptable to that Government, given that it introduced the right.

Anne McCall: There are quite a few other international examples. New Zealand is one; Australia, Denmark and Sweden are others. They all operate slightly differently. Some depend heavily on development plans and some on what we will be calling development management. We can take lessons from all those examples. None of them is crippled by the third-party right of appeal; they all have more successful annual average GDPs than we do. We could take their good practice and develop it for Scotland.

A huge number of papers have been written on the subject, but I would not like to bore the committee with a lot of planning jargon. There are examples of good practice on which we could call, but we do not have to follow slavishly what is being done elsewhere. We could adapt them to suit the package of measures that has been developed for the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill.

Jackie Baillie: I suggest that we refer the petition to the Communities Committee because it is considering the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill.

Could I hear the definition of banana again, because I just loved that one?

The Convener: Build absolutely nothing anywhere near anyone.

Mr Gordon: There is also note—not over there either.

Jackie Baillie: Thank you, although I do not think that that applies to this petition.

The Convener: No. As members have no further questions or points to raise, I thank the petitioners for coming this morning. We will refer the petition to the Communities Committee. You have given us a good definition of what you seek. It certainly clarified the issue for me, because I have been concerned about how people defined a third-party right of appeal. If we can get away from the scare tactics and get to talking about how local communities can engage in the process, it would be quite useful. Thank you for lodging the petition.

NHS 24 (Independent Review) (PE917)

The Convener: Our next new petition is PE917, by Kevin Herd, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to consider and debate the final report of the independent review of NHS 24. Before being lodged, the petition was hosted on the e-petitions site, where it gathered 208 signatures in the period from 4 October to 31 December 2005. The usual e-petitions briefing has been circulated.

Following criticisms of NHS 24 in the winter months of 2004 to 2005, the Minister for Health and Community Care established an independent review team to examine the issues. The team published its final report in October 2005 and the Scottish Executive accepted all the recommendations in the report. Do members have suggestions on how we deal with the petition?

Jackie Baillie: The petition relates to an awful thing that has happened and we can only express our sympathies to the family. It would be interesting to know whether the Executive intends to debate the report on NHS 24. I am also quite keen to send a copy of the petition for information to the Executive and to NHS 24, although I am sure that the MSP who is involved has raised the matter with those bodies.

The Convener: Do members agree to that proposal?

Members indicated agreement.

Planning System (Amenity Woodland) (PE918)

The Convener: Petition PE918, by Bill Lobban on behalf of Dalfaber action group, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to review the protection that is afforded to amenity woodland in the current planning system with a view to ensuring that the views of local people who

enjoy visiting such woodland are given sufficient weight in the planning process.

Before being lodged, the petition was hosted on the e-petitions site, where it gathered 36 signatures from 30 November 2005 to 11 January 2006. Do members have views on the petition? I suggest that we do what we did with the other petition on planning and refer PE918 to the Communities Committee for consideration while it deals with the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Petitions (Interparliamentary Process) (PE919)

The Convener: Petition PE919, by Mark Whittet, calls on the Scottish Parliament to consider the creation of a mechanism for an interparliamentary petitions process between the Scottish Parliament and the United Kingdom Parliament. The petitioner is concerned that no mechanism is in place to progress petitions that are lodged with the Public Petitions Committee but which relate to reserved matters.

Before being lodged, the petition was hosted on the e-petitions site, where it gathered 12 signatures from 16 November 2005 to 9 January 2006. Do members have views on the petition?

Jackie Baillie: I am not sure whether I am wholly signed up to the notion of a Whittet motion, although the idea is imaginative. Several existing mechanisms allow us to communicate views to Westminster. I am cautious about the proposal, because the Scottish Parliament was not established with the sole aim of lobbying Westminster and a number of MPs represent Scottish constituencies. With all those MPs, surely there is no need for a Whittet motion.

The Convener: Another point is that if a petition is relevant to Westminster, it should go directly to Westminster.

Mr Gordon: Yesterday, in another committee, we talked about petitions to Westminster. I am told that the fate that befalls them is to be stored in a bag behind the Speaker's chair and cleared out periodically by officials. That is all that happens.

The Convener: That is right. At Westminster, an MP must present a petition—an ordinary member of the public cannot lodge a petition as Mr Whittet lodged his petition.

Mr Whittet has obviously observed the Public Petitions Committee. Occasionally, a crossover has arisen and we have had to write to Westminster for information that would allow us to consider a petition. However, if a petition does not relate to the Scottish Parliament, we do not

consider it—it is inadmissible. We discuss issues with Westminster only when there is a crossover, and we have done so as necessary.

Helen Eadie: We talk about interparliamentary matters, and as someone who bangs on about European issues, I remind members that there is a European Parliament. I was interested to read in a paper that the Scottish Parliament was mentioned in a European context in the *International Herald Tribune*. It was good that the Parliament was mentioned at the level of the European Parliament, which has a Committee on Petitions. I remind Mr Whittet that petitions have a European dimension.

The Convener: I do not think that there is anything that we can do with the petition. Will we close it and thank Mr Whittet for submitting it and for using the system that is available to him?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Current Petitions

Criminal Memoirs (Publication for Profit) (PE504)

12:00

The Convener: The first of our current petitions is PE504, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to take the necessary steps to stop convicted murderers or members of their families profiting from the crimes and selling accounts of them for publication.

At its meeting on 22 June 2005, the committee agreed to write to the Home Office. A response has now been received and circulated. Do members have any views on that response?

John Scott: I am somewhat dismayed by the Home Office's response and its unwillingness to do anything. Its letter is not particularly helpful. I presume that Mr and Mrs Watson have contacted their member of Parliament about this matter. I wonder whether he or she could put more pressure on the Home Office. We should contact the Executive to ask for its views on the Home Office response and whether it would like to address the matter, as the Home Office has apparently suggested.

The Convener: Are members happy with that suggestion?

Mr Gordon: There is nothing that I like about the Home Office letter. I do not like even the salutation, which reads, "Dear Michael McMahon."

The Convener: Nothing at all, Charlie? Did the letter have no redeeming features? I know what you mean. We will take up the matter with the Scottish Executive and ask its view.

Mental Health Services (Deaf and Deafblind People) (PE808)

The Convener: Petition PE808, which is by Lilian Lawson on behalf of the Scottish Council on Deafness, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to establish a specialist inpatient mental health unit for deafblind people and to provide resources such as training for mainstream psychiatric services in the community, so that they are more accessible to deaf and deafblind people.

At its meeting on 28 June 2005, the committee agreed to write to the Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care. A response has now been received and circulated to the committee. The committee has also received correspondence from the British Society for Mental Health and Deafness. What are members' views? Mary McDevitt and Shaurna Dickson from Deaf Action's

communication support unit have joined us; they will provide British Sign Language interpretations.

Helen Eadie: Should we invite the views of the petitioners on the responses?

The Convener: That would be a good starting point.

Ms White: It would be a good starting point, given that the petitioners have been waiting for responses for a while. RNID Scotland's response says:

"the proposal aims to ensure that deaf and hard of hearing people have access to specialist mental health care in their own country and seeks to establish a Scotland-wide Crisis Intervention Service...based in the Greater Glasgow area."

Can we get an update on that? It would be interesting to know who RNID Scotland contacted, because I do not think that it contacted the petitioners. I would like to see where this is going.

John Scott: I agree with the suggestion that we seek the petitioners' views. I acknowledge the minister's response and his recognition that there is a problem. The shortage of psychiatrists throughout Scotland is a huge problem that is faced by all our NHS boards. I would be interested to hear the petitioners' views in due course.

The Convener: Sandra White referred to the petitioners waiting for a response. We discussed the petition on 20 June and got some initial responses. We also had a letter from the Executive that touched on the point that John Scott made. If the committee asks the petitioners to comment on all the correspondence that it has received and discussed up till now, we could view all the responses in the light of the petitioners' opinions on their contents at a future meeting. We will keep the petition open and continue dialogue with the petitioners until we hear their views on the matter. Are members happy with that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Sub-post Office Closures (PE764)

The Convener: Petition PE764 is by Margaret Tait, on behalf of the Stoneybank Tenants and Residents Association, Musselburgh. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to request the Post Office to consider sympathetically the needs and requirements of disabled and elderly persons who, in urban areas in Scotland, would be expected to walk substantial distances, sometimes more than two miles, as a result of possible closure of certain sub-post offices.

At its meeting on 22 June 2005, the committee agreed to write to the Scottish Executive and the Post Office. Responses have since been received and circulated. Do members have comments on those responses?

John Scott: Sadly, neither the Post Office nor the Executive is prepared to help. We have exhausted all the avenues that are open to us to investigate the matter, so we will probably just have to close the petition.

Mr Gordon: John Scott is probably right. Sub-post office closures are regrettable, but they are not primarily the responsibility of the Scottish Executive. I have a great deal of sympathy with the petition, because I had a similar experience as a councillor only a year ago. Qualitative factors such as the number of frail elderly people and people with disabilities who relied on the urban sub-post office that was being closed in my ward were not taken into consideration. When I went to Postwatch, it simply pointed out, rather crassly, that there are fewer sub-post offices in rural areas. However, because urban areas are more densely populated, a higher proportion of post office users may suffer from mobility difficulties.

However, that is a qualitative factor that does not feature in the criteria for closure, either on the part of the Post Office or, sadly, on the part of Postwatch, which is supposed to keep the Post Office under scrutiny.

Helen Eadie: I agree with that analysis of Postwatch, which is the relevant consumer body. None of us has had particularly good experiences of Postwatch. I know that this is not related directly to the petition, but ought we to spend the public money on Postwatch that we do? I have spoken to many parliamentarians, not one of whom has had a good word to say about Postwatch. Perhaps petitioners might want to lodge a petition about Postwatch.

The Convener: I have recent experience of the closure of Hamilton main post office. To be honest, I found Postwatch to be as much a cheerleader for the decision to close as it was a conduit through which the public could be consulted on the decision. I find the usefulness of Postwatch questionable. I concurred with MP colleagues who criticised Postwatch strongly at the time of the closure.

Helen Eadie: A lot of money could be saved.

The Convener: If Postwatch does not serve a purpose on behalf of communities, I wonder why it receives public funds to do its job. However, we have to say that no further progress can be made on the petition.

John Farquhar Munro: The closure of post offices is a problem all over the country, not just in urban areas but in rural areas; we hear about it every week. Last week, we debated six post office closures in the Borders. Postwatch and the governing agencies of Post Office Ltd are not prepared to listen. I read in the committee papers about the extensive consultation with the public

over some months, which resulted in 145 closures. What is the point of such consultation? Closures are happening everywhere. We have tried and tried to save post offices in rural and urban Scotland, yet we are not winning the argument.

The Convener: I agree with you entirely, John. Do we agree to close the petition because we can make no further progress?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Helen Eadie: With regret, yes.

Drinking Water (Chloramine Treatment) (PE842)

The Convener: Petition PE842, which is by Mrs F C Bowman, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to review the use of chloramine disinfectant in the treatment of drinking water.

At its meeting on 11 May 2005, the committee agreed to write to the Scottish Executive; Scottish Water; the drinking water quality regulator for Scotland; the Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health; Friends of the Earth; and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. Responses have been received and circulated to members. The committee has also received further correspondence from the petitioner and from John Thurso MP, which has also been circulated.

We are joined this morning by Jamie Stone. Do you wish to make a contribution to the debate before we consider the petition further?

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Very briefly, yes. I extend my thanks to committee members for allowing me to join you—it is appreciated. I understand that Mrs Bowman has not been well recently, which is why she and her husband are not with us today.

For some time now, it has been brought to my attention that there is a strong feeling among residents in the area—in north Sutherland—that the quality of the drinking water is not all that it should be. Complaints have been made about its strong taste and people have said that it might not be doing the animals any good. Others have made representations to Scottish Water and to ministers. Within the present set-up of the law and rules, it appears that the water is acceptable. However, one is left with a group of constituents who find the water unacceptable.

I am at something of a loss as to where the matter should go now and I will be interested to hear members' views and suggestions. However, I conclude my remarks by saying that this has been and continues to be a local problem.

The Convener: We probably want to contact the petitioners to get their views on the responses.

You said that your constituents could not be here because of ill health—will that prevent them from responding?

Mr Stone: Contacting them for their views would be very civil and I do not think that ill health will stand in the way of their making a response. That would be a positive move and very much in keeping with the ideals of this Parliament—to which we all subscribe—of being open and interactive with people who have concerns.

The Convener: Do we agree to write first to the petitioners to get their views on the responses that have been received?

John Scott: From the responses that we have received, everyone seems to agree that the water is fine, with the exception of Friends of the Earth, which raises specific points and makes dangerous suggestions about the water. It would be reasonable to ask the minister for his views on the Friends of the Earth response.

The Convener: Are members happy to do that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Singing Tuition (PE860)

The Convener: Petition PE860, which is by Marilyn de Blieck, on behalf of Ayrshire Voices, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to develop a coherent national policy in relation to the teaching of singing and, in particular, to ensure adequate provision of vocal tuition for young people throughout Scotland.

At its meeting on 6 June 2005, the committee agreed to write to the Scottish Arts Council; the youth music initiative reference group; the Voice of Chief Officers for Cultural, Community and Leisure Services—VOCAL; the Heads of Instrumental and Teaching Services—HITS; Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education; the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; the Scottish Executive; East Ayrshire Council; North Ayrshire Council; and South Ayrshire Council.

Having felled a forest, we have had some responses to our letters. Do members wish to make any points?

Jackie Baillie: The responses have been hugely positive. The petition has served to focus awareness and attention on the matter. I think that we should invite the petitioner's views on whether anything else should be done.

John Scott: I agree with Jackie Baillie—that is not unusual—and welcome the generally positive responses. I also take the opportunity to welcome Marilyn de Blieck to the public gallery.

The benefits of singing are now recognised and the heightened profile that the petition has given

Marilyn de Blieck might help her to go back to previous funders and say, "Here is further evidence of the good job that we do." However, I am sure that she will be more than capable of giving us her views on that in due course.

12:15

Mr Gordon: The petition's proposal would help the rest of the country, but Glaswegians—as the convener knows—are genetically programmed to sing.

Jackie Baillie: Give us a song.

The Convener: Do members agree that we should write to the petitioner to ask for her comments and consider the petition further once we have received them?

Jackie Baillie: At that stage, perhaps Charlie Gordon could be prevailed on to give us a song.

The Convener: Or otherwise, as the case may be. We will write to the petitioner to get her response to the replies that we have received from the various organisations to which we wrote.

NHS (Provision of Wheelchairs and Specialist Seating Services) (PE798)

The Convener: Petition PE798, which is by Margaret Scott, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to resolve the critical problems in the provision of wheelchairs and specialist seating services in the national health service by providing an immediate increase in funding and by holding a review, in consultation with users, to address minimum standards, the scope of equipment that is provided and the delivery of services.

At its meeting on 22 June 2005, the committee agreed to invite the Disability Rights Commission and the petitioner to comment on the responses that it had received. Those comments have now been received and circulated to members. What are members' views?

Ms White: The responses are positive and they represent another victory for the committee. Rather than close our consideration of the petition, perhaps we should ask the Executive to inform us of the outcome of the independent review of the NHS wheelchair service.

Jackie Baillie: I agree that it is worth keeping open our consideration of the petition. We should await the outcome of the review that is in progress.

Helen Eadie: We were all pleased to get invitations to the various consultations that took place throughout Scotland. I welcome that programme of consultative meetings on an important issue.

The Convener: We will ask the Executive for an update.

A77 (Southern Section Upgrade) (PE859)

The Convener: Petition PE859, from Sheena Borthwick, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to upgrade the southern section of the A77 between Ayr and Stranraer and to include the provision of passing places every 6 miles and the development of a bypass at Maybole.

At its meeting on 6 June 2005, the committee agreed to seek the views of the Executive, the A77 safety group, the Royal Automobile Club, the Automobile Association, the Road Haulage Association and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. Responses have been received, on which I invite members to comment.

John Scott: As no other members are rushing forward to comment on the petition, which relates to my area, I will do so. I welcome the positive responses. I know the road; indeed, I have travelled on it since birth. The need for the Maybole bypass has been well defined for some time and I welcome the acknowledgement that a Scottish transport appraisal guidance assessment will be done on the proposal to build it.

Sadly, the stretch of the A77 south of Ayr is so bad that although a large amount of money has been spent on it—and we know that more is promised—it is still an incredibly dangerous road. The advent of SPECS—the speed enforcement camera system—has definitely reduced the number of accidents, but the trouble is that people are going faster than ever at the end of that stretch. The number of accidents that still occur testifies to the problems that are experienced. In addition, there has been an increase in the amount of traffic on the road, especially timber traffic. More needs to be done and I am happy to suggest that we consider inviting the Executive to provide an update on developments on the proposal for a Maybole bypass. We could also seek the petitioner's views on the responses that we have received.

The Convener: Are members happy to concur?

Members *indicated agreement.*

National Bird (PE783)

The Convener: Our final petition for consideration this morning is PE783, which is by James Reynolds on behalf of *The Scotsman* newspaper. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to support the establishment of the golden eagle as Scotland's national bird.

At its meeting on 28 June 2005, the committee agreed to approach the relevant minister to

express concern about the lack of response from the Executive. A response has now been received. Do members have views on it?

Ms White: We should write to the petitioner to ask for his views on the Executive's response, which I do not think much of. It says that the United Kingdom does not have an official national bird, but the petition is about the creation of an official national bird for Scotland. Although the minister's response does not contain a great deal, I would like us to find out what the petitioner thinks of it.

The Convener: I am more than happy for us to do that. We will wait for a response; we might have to read it on the front page of *The Scotsman*, if the petitioner deems that appropriate.

I remind colleagues that our next meeting will take place in Dunfermline on 30 January. As that is a Monday, we will not have a meeting on the Wednesday of that week.

Meeting closed at 12:21.

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice at the Document Supply Centre.

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Tuesday 31 January 2006

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