

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Wednesday 27 September 2006

Session 2

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

15th 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 :

Colin Anderson

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP)

Chantelle Irvine (Woodlands Primary School)

Amy Laird (Woodlands Primary School)

Cathy Macleod (Woodlands Primary School)

Professor Stephen Salter (University of Edinburgh)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

David McGill

ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Hough

LOCATION

Committee Room 5

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 27 September 2006

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:00*]

Item in Private

The Convener (Michael McMahon): Good morning everyone and welcome to the 15th meeting in 2006 of the Public Petitions Committee. Unusually for the committee, there are four items on the agenda. I have received apologies from Jackie Baillie, John Scott and Rosie Kane. Sandra White should be here, although she initially intimated her apologies.

Item 1 is to consider whether to take item 4, on external research into the petitions system, in private. We do not normally discuss much in private, but this is research that has been commissioned by the committee but not yet formally launched. It would be a bit remiss of us to discuss something publicly that has not been published. Does the committee agree to discuss the issue in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

New Petitions

Nuclear Power (PE989)

10:01

The Convener: The first new petition is PE989, from Colin Anderson, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to debate the issue of nuclear power and whether new nuclear power stations are necessary in Scotland, given our enormous renewable energy resources; whether funding for nuclear power would be better invested in energy saving and renewables; whether nuclear power is sustainable in regard to its fuel supply and waste disposal; and whether plans exist to consult the Scottish public on the siting of nuclear power stations and waste depositories. Before it was formally lodged, the petition was hosted on the e-petitions system, where it gathered 818 signatures and 18 discussion comments. Colin Anderson will make a brief statement to the committee in support of his petition. He is supported by Professor Stephen Slater from the University of Edinburgh. I welcome you both to the meeting.

Colin Anderson: Thank you for the opportunity to make a statement on the petition. I am delighted to ask Stephen Salter along to support me in the question and answer session. Stephen was my supervisor when I was a wave energy researcher back in the 1980s, here in Edinburgh. He has been a champion of renewable energy for a long time.

I will briefly go through my reasons for submitting the petition. Prior to the United Kingdom energy review, it seemed to be widely advertised that new nuclear power stations would be back on the agenda for the UK. I was disappointed by that, because I am not a supporter of new nuclear power in the UK. It seemed to me that we had a good policy for renewables and that new nuclear power would be a backwards step. However, I am more concerned that the decision on nuclear power in Scotland may lie at Westminster. That does not seem appropriate, given the existence of the Parliament and the huge strides that have been made on renewable energy in Scotland. The decision should at least be debated here in a full and open way that allows the public to be consulted.

We should concentrate firmly on renewable energy and energy efficiency for future electricity supplies, starting now; preferably, we should have started a long time ago. In the past, central Government electricity policy has hampered our development of renewable energy and indeed of energy efficiency. I have a single-page handout that the committee might want to look at. There

are some photographs to illustrate a couple of my points.

The photo on the top left shows a wind farm that was built in California in 1985. It was the biggest wind farm in the world at the time, with about 80 turbines and a rating of 28MW. The turbines were designed and built in Scotland by an engineering company in Glasgow—James Howden & Co Ltd. I worked there in the mid-1980s.

I am delighted to say that, 20 years on, that wind farm is still running. However, Howden never built a wind farm in Britain, despite having the capability to do so before even the Danish companies. Howden pioneered building wind farms, but this country is now unable to build them. The reason is that, between 1985 and the mid-1990s, the focus on energy policy in this country, under the privatisation programme, was for energy to be competitive and cheap. We had cheap electricity at the end of the 1990s, mainly from gas, while other countries had strong, renewable energy companies, which now dominate the world market. However, almost a decade further on, we no longer have cheap electricity, nor have we the capability to build wind farms ourselves. I am lobbying for a much more long-term policy over which we can take more control in this country. We can do renewable energy here and we are very good at it.

Why do I not support nuclear power? I am not at all convinced that it is genuinely economic or sustainable. The second picture, which is on the bottom left of the sheet that members have, has a graph that shows the spot price of uranium oxide fuel. The graph was taken from an American company's website recently. The point that I am trying to make is that, if we rely on nuclear power in the future, we will rely on an imported fuel over whose source we have no control. We do not mine uranium in this country and will always have to buy it. As oil and gas run out, the worldwide competition for nuclear fuel will increase and I would expect that to lead to an increase in its price. The point is that Britain might not be high in the pecking order to receive the fuel. Energy policy in this country should focus on a secure energy source and, for me, that means renewable energy, because we can guarantee that forever.

Renewable energy allows for decentralised electricity production, which brings wide economic benefits and many employment opportunities. We already see that happening in Scotland with solar power, and wind, wave and tidal energy. All those energy sources are being developed and I think that, in general, they will give a wider economic benefit than large, centralised power stations ever could. It is better for the wider economy to concentrate on renewable, diverse energy supplies.

On the top right of the sheet, the third picture shows solar panels on a house, which produce not electricity but hot water. The technology is easy to install and it is mature and commercially available. It was pioneered here in Edinburgh. People can call up and get it done in their house within a few weeks. If the money that is spent on nuclear power stations was spent on such a solution, about half a million panels could be put on Scottish roofs, which would knock about 10 per cent off everyone's heating bill. That is the kind of thing that can be done and it is low risk, which characterises renewable energy in general. It allows us to see further into the future than either a fossil or a nuclear fuel source does.

The final photograph shows the opening of a community wind energy scheme. It is a wind project, but it could have been biomass or another type of renewable scheme—I just used wind energy as an example. The scheme is locally owned by a community on the west coast of Scotland. They sell the power it generates and they plough that money back into their local economy. They own the scheme, so they get 100 per cent of the energy revenue from it. The money is going into housing refurbishment projects, building new housing and putting solar panels on roofs—it is closing the loop. They generate revenue from their own renewable energy station and spend it on improving their economy and infrastructure. If they were just buying supposedly cheap electricity from a nuclear power station, none of that would be happening. Renewable energy offers a terrific way to spread the benefits of electricity production and give people a leg-up in their local economies. Again, that comes down to decentralised electricity production.

There is a raft of reasons why we ought to concentrate on renewables as a national policy. The Scottish policy on energy should be set here in Edinburgh whether or not nuclear energy is seen as devolved or reserved—that is perhaps an open issue. With the Parliament, we have an opportunity to do something far-sighted. We have to take that opportunity.

That, in a nutshell, is the purpose of the petition. I would like to see that full and open debate hotting up between now and the next parliamentary election.

The Convener: I apologise to Mr Salter. When I read out your name, I got it wrong and pronounced it as Slater.

Professor Stephen Salter (University of Edinburgh): You were not the first, and you will not be the last.

The Convener: I will start the discussion by asking a question. Do you have a time in mind for

when you think that Scotland would be self-sufficient in renewables?

Colin Anderson: A time to aim for is when the present nuclear power stations are decommissioned. That will be a kind of cliff, and when Torness and Hunterston are out of action we will have to be able to make up the shortfall. I would not like to predict when we can be 100 per cent self-sufficient, but we need to replace the nuclear capacity with renewable capacity.

The Convener: But there is a possibility of a gap between the decommissioning of existing nuclear power stations and self-sufficiency in renewables.

Colin Anderson: My point is that there need not be.

The Convener: But there could be.

Colin Anderson: Not if we make the right decisions.

Mr Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): As I am sure that you understand, energy is principally a reserved matter and the final decision on energy strategy after the recent consultation will be taken at UK level, although there is a Scottish dimension to it. It is conceivable that even if the UK Government opted for a continuing role for nuclear power as part of a UK energy strategy, it could result in no new nuclear capacity being built in Scotland. For market operation reasons, it is conceivable that a new generation of power stations could be built south of the border, but not in Scotland. Could you comment on that proposition?

Colin Anderson: I would like to see the UK adopt my position, not just Scotland. However, I feel that with the Parliament, Scotland has an opportunity to set a lead. Ultimately, I do not want the UK to rely on nuclear energy in the far future, and we can make a start here. I would like it to be hardened up as policy in this country.

Mr Gordon: So the scenario that I have described would not satisfy you. Are saying that you are using this process to influence the UK energy debate?

Colin Anderson: Yes. In a way, Scotland already influences the development of marine and tidal energy because of the work that has been done here. Scotland has terrific resources in all the renewables, and because of that a lot of the development has happened here. However, we have been hamstrung in the past by national policies that have favoured price over long-term security. We have a great opportunity now to do something about that.

There is nothing novel in what I am saying. Roughly 20 per cent of the Danish electricity

supply is now from wind energy, and they started at the same time as we did. The reason why they have done better is that they set a policy to do that, while we set a policy to have lower-priced electricity. In the short term that worked, but in the long term it has not. Their policy has worked in the long term, and we now buy Danish wind turbines in large numbers.

Mr Gordon: Returning to my original scenario, if the UK Government decides on a nuclear component to its energy strategy but none of the new generation of stations ends up located in Scotland, I presume that when the two stations that currently operate in Scotland come to the end of their working lives, the potential energy gap will have to be filled. There will then be an operational need for the growth of renewables to fill the gap, although, as you will know, life extension work is going on with some of the fossil-fuel stations.

10:15

Colin Anderson: Yes. When it comes to the end of its natural life I would like Scotland's nuclear capacity to be replaced by a smooth changeover to renewables, and I believe that we can do that.

Mr Gordon: I am simply trying to point out to you a scenario where that opportunity might still be available even if the UK Government decides to have a nuclear component and the new generation of stations is located south of the border.

Colin Anderson: My concern is whether this Parliament believes that it can make that opportunity into policy. Is the matter reserved or devolved? Who will decide?

Mr Gordon: It is clearly principally a reserved matter. I am trying to point out to you that, notwithstanding those constitutional arrangements, there might be a need for the expansion of renewables in Scotland. Even if the UK policy decision does not go the way you want it to, that does not automatically mean that any new stations will be built in Scotland.

Colin Anderson: No, but from my time in the renewables industry I know that the lack of a clear priority for renewables has always allowed a get-out and that lets us fall back on what we traditionally feel more secure with, such as the thermal and nuclear power stations. Countries that have set their sights on a renewables policy as a priority have succeeded in the market, and have developed export industries as a result. We have missed out on that. As long it is just a scenario that we might not need nuclear power in Scotland rather than a policy not to have it, we could miss out again. I would not like us to lose out where we could take a lead—in marine and tidal energy, for

example—because we do not have a strong policy to give it priority.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): Are you aware that Jack McConnell has set very clear renewables obligations for industry and for Scotland as a whole?

Colin Anderson: Yes. We have a binding target under UK legislation and we have an aspirational target under Scottish legislation. I am really only interested in binding targets.

Helen Eadie: You have talked about what happens in Denmark. Are you aware that Finland did not build new nuclear power stations, but expanded existing power stations by adding new reactors? Is your position totally non-nuclear or do you think that there might be a case for expanding existing nuclear capacity in the power stations that we have here in Scotland?

Colin Anderson: I am not at all convinced by the economics or the sustainability of new nuclear power stations. I will ask Stephen Salter to say a bit about the cost implications, but it is 60 years since we started developing nuclear power and we are still debating whether it is economic. I reckon that we ought to know that after 60 years. I cannot think of any other technology that is still uncertain about that after such a long gestation period.

Professor Salter: The Finnish nuclear power station has some rather funny economics. Incredibly generous loan guarantees have been set up by the French Government and the manufacturers and such loans will not necessarily be available to everyone.

Recently, I did a calculation sharing out the decommissioning and waste disposal costs for nuclear energy. The Treasury's latest figure is £90 billion. I divided that figure by all the electricity that has ever been generated in the United Kingdom through nuclear power. It comes out at 4 pence per kilowatt hour just to get rid of the waste, not including operating the stations or buying the uranium. So the economics of it are extremely shaky.

The only reason that we started a nuclear programme in the first place was to get plutonium to put into bombs because the mean Americans would not give us anything for our nuclear deterrent. We have inherited the outcome of that decision. If it was straight economics with the full cost of waste disposal, it would look incredibly expensive.

Helen Eadie: There are those who say that the volume of nuclear waste that we are looking at from the nuclear power stations would fill a taxi. That is the hard-core nuclear waste. A proposal is coming forward from some corners of the UK for the deep storage of that amount of waste each

year. Can you comment on the safety of that proposal, which has been made by various people throughout the UK?

Professor Salter: If the waste was the size of a taxi it would be supercritical and it would not stay that volume or that shape for long. If that is correct, the figure of £90 billion would not make sense. The £90 billion figure comes from the Treasury, so there is a discrepancy between the enormous amount of money and the tiny volume.

Helen Eadie: Can you comment on the radioactive waste that is produced in other sectors of society, such as hospitals, manufacturing and elsewhere? We tend to focus primarily on nuclear energy, but we produce a lot of nuclear waste from other sources. How do you view that?

Professor Salter: We would have to look at the weights. I am sure that the amounts of nuclear waste that are produced in a hospital are tiny compared to what we get from the power industry. Quite a lot of waste also comes from the weapons side. However, the great bulk of the waste comes from power generation. There is 80 to 100 tonnes of fuel in each reactor, which must be changed over every 300 days or so.

Helen Eadie: Issues are raised about the security of supply from renewables. The major concern that is debated in the Scottish Parliament and elsewhere is what we saw in the United States when the lights went out. That is a big concern for industry, individuals in hospitals and elsewhere. We cannot afford to have the lights going out, especially where there is life-saving equipment. How do we address that problem?

Professor Salter: Reliance on nuclear power is not the solution. You get no warning of a nasty vibration in the CO₂ compressor or something overheating. When that happens, you have to shut the reactor down at once. With tidal energy it is possible to predict a long way ahead when there will be spring tides and neap tides. You get about four days' warning for wave energy and a day at least for wind. I would argue that because the capacity factor of nuclear stations is only about 75 per cent, you cannot plan all the outages and when they come they can last for several months, nuclear is not the power source that will guarantee that the lights do not go out.

A broad mix of diverse sources is required and we must be able to use surplus electricity to produce a synthetic gas or synthetic liquid fuel that can be used as a buffer stock. Every kilowatt hour of renewables that we use leaves a cubic metre of gas still in the ground, which we can then use to fill the future gaps in the supply from renewables. It is wrong is to burn the gas now to make electricity. Let us leave that for the next generation.

Helen Eadie: Are you saying that that capacity could be found without any doubt? Are you 100 per cent certain that the period of warning that you say we would have and the capacity that you mention as a result of the gas being stored could provide the security of supply that the people of Scotland want?

Professor Salter: You can be certain of that if you have closed the loop by using surplus electricity to make a storable liquid fuel. We know how that could be done: an excess of generation capacity, for example from the Pentland firth, could be used to convert municipal waste into either methanol or dimethanol ether. If we did that, there would be tanks full of a fuel that we could burn to fill the gaps.

Helen Eadie: Are you saying that you know how that can be done or that it is being done?

Professor Salter: It started back in the 1920s in Germany. There is a thing called the Fischer-Tropsch process. When the South Africans were threatened with a blockade they set up the Sasol process. The process has been running for a long time—almost 100 years. It is not new chemistry. At the moment, it is more expensive than getting methane from the ground but, if gas prices go up and up, it will become viable again. We know how to do it, however. The chemistry is absolutely well known.

Colin Anderson: Whatever power station you rely on for your electricity, you need a back-up. A few years ago, Torness, which provides a third or a quarter of Scotland's electricity, was off the grid for a few months because of some sort of fault in the system. It went off the grid at fairly short notice. Unless there is something else waiting to deal with the demand when such an event occurs there is no security of supply. That "something else" usually means burning fuel such as gas or coal. Simply having nuclear power does not, in itself, give you security and having a few large power stations gives you less security than having many small ones.

Helen Eadie: I am grateful to you for answering my questions.

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): When I hear all the talk about renewable energy, I am encouraged by the fact that Scotland has made an enormous contribution to alternative sources of energy, specifically hydroelectricity. That work has spanned almost a complete century. How much of the Scottish demand for electricity is met by hydroelectricity?

Colin Anderson: I think that it is about 10 to 12 per cent of the total Scottish demand.

Professor Salter: There are 1,200MW of capacity in the hydro sector and the load factor varies between 25 and 45 per cent of the capacity factor, depending on how rainy the year has been. It would be wonderful if that figure were bigger. It would be nice if we had a lot more.

John Farquhar Munro: A figure of between 10 per cent and 12 per cent of the Scottish demand is quite significant.

You talked about what is happening on Gigha with the wind generators. That is happening in various other places. There is a lot of interest in rural Scotland about the benefits of renewable energy, particularly from wind, wave and tidal sources. It has been demonstrated that such projects benefit the local communities, which is to be welcomed. However, we have a huge problem coming up and I wondered whether you had the answer to it. Many of the communities are keen to develop their renewable energy schemes but are being frustrated because there is no grid line to accept any power that they produce. Places in the Western Isles, where many schemes are currently going through planning processes, cannot export the electricity that they might produce.

Colin Anderson: I think that there is a mismatch between the top-level policy and how it is being implemented. What you say about the grid connection in the Western Isles is right. However, there are, as yet, no wind energy generation facilities in the Western Isles. That is because people have booked their grid capacity but cannot get planning consent. That is crazy. The Western Isles could install facilities that would generate something like 25MW of electricity, which would supply the area's own needs and allow for the occasional export of electricity back across the Minch. That could be done without having to lay new undersea cables. However, that cannot happen at the moment because the capacity has been booked up by schemes that cannot get built.

A criticism that I have of the present renewables policy—which is well intentioned and can be a powerful tool—is that the little details have not been attended to. It is possible to have a lot of schemes proposed but not getting built. That seems crazy to me. Perhaps one of the reasons why politicians elsewhere are starting to consider building more nuclear power stations is that they think that we cannot develop renewable energy properly. However, the problem lies with the detail of the policy. We need to be able to allocate grid capacity on a rational basis.

10:30

John Farquhar Munro: Yes, but until the situation is resolved, there will not be much advancement in the renewables sector. I am sure

that people would be willing to develop tidal and wave power to a larger extent, together with wind, if they were assured about the market. There is a market for that power, but how do people get it to market? That is a big problem. It has not been decided whether the transmission line will be a subsea line or an overhead line. All those issues are still to be debated.

Without a nuclear back-up, how do we guarantee sufficient supply of power to meet modern-day demands?

Colin Anderson: We have to consider other renewable sources too, such as biomass. A biomass station is being built near Lockerbie. I think that it will produce about 45MW using forestry waste. Stephen Salter might know more about that. It will be a thermal power station so the fuel can be stored—if there is no need to run it, it will not be run. We could have lots of stations like that in Scotland. A priority could be set to put them in places where there is grid access, such as close to the cities. Such stations are completely renewable because they use forestry waste, which is sustainable. Why are we not doing more of that? Other countries are doing it. We have to ask ourselves why we do not do these things.

Campbell Martin (West of Scotland) (Ind): I agree that we do not need any new nuclear power stations. I say that as someone who might well be the MSP who lives closest to a nuclear power station—I stay within 10 miles of Hunterston B. We conducted a survey recently in the constituency that contains Hunterston B, in which we asked people whether they are for or against siting a new nuclear power station there. The result was that 44 per cent were against it and 40 per cent were for it, which is pretty close. The rest said that they did not know. Hunterston B is the largest private sector employer in the area, but the people are against siting a new nuclear power station there. Perhaps politicians should be listening a wee bit more to what the people think.

You said that you accept that energy is a constitutional matter that is currently reserved to Westminster, and that the Westminster Parliament will take the decisions on United Kingdom energy. It is also a political issue, though. You said that you want a big debate on the matter in the run-up to the elections. A number of political parties and independents oppose nuclear power and, ultimately, the people will decide whether they support nuclear power by voting for parties that either support or oppose it.

My question is about the amount of energy that we produce in Scotland. Do we use all the energy that we produce or do we export some of it? If we export some, how much do we export?

Colin Anderson: I will let Stephen Salter answer that because he knows more about the overall picture.

Professor Salter: Recently, one of the Scottish political parties commissioned an energy review, which contains a breakdown of the energy that we produce and use here, the energy that we export, and the energy that we could have in the future. Modesty prevents me from naming the author of the report, but I have a copy here. It is probably best if the committee gets its own copy of the review.

I do not know whether you can see my copy from where you are sitting, but I am pointing to the graphs that show the energy that we use now, the energy that we export and the energy that we could have if we were to develop all our renewables. The graphs show that we could have a lot more than we use at the moment. One of the astonishing things that I found out is that although we can send 2,000MW of electricity south, the network allows only 600MW to come north. Some people might think that there is deep symbolism in that. Others say that they are surprised that as much as 600MW can come north. At the moment, Scotland produces far more energy than it needs.

Campbell Martin: The Scottish Executive's policy is that no new nuclear power stations will be developed while the problem of waste is unresolved. Is burying nuclear waste and monitoring it a solution to the problem?

Professor Salter: I am sure that technical solutions exist for sorting out nuclear waste problems, but they are very expensive. That expense should influence decisions on solutions if they are to be properly accounted for. The issue is not the technology, but the politics. A difficult political issue that is more in members' area than in mine arises when the question "Where will we dig the hole?" is asked. The engineering is certainly possible, but it is expensive.

The Convener: There is something that I hope that you can help me with before we consider what to do with the petition. It has been said—perhaps facetiously—that Scotland is blessed with a lot of wind, but that it also suffers from the cold and that the wind is least likely to blow when Scotland is at its coldest. Consequently, under your scenario, in which electricity will be provided in the future by wind power, electricity is likely to be least available when we most need it. Is that a genuine argument? Have you considered that matter?

Colin Anderson: There will certainly be days on which a pressure system will sit over the whole country and there will not be enough wind to obtain reasonable electricity output. Something else must be done on such days—fuel could be burned in biomass fuel power stations, such as

those at Lockerbie and Westfield, for example. I would never claim that wind energy is 100 per cent the answer, but a mixture of renewable energy that can be stored and energy from intermittent sources, such as wind and wave energy, could match demand.

The Convener: That is when back-up would be required. I am not an expert on the matter. I am thinking back to my O-grade chemistry course. The substances that would be required to be burned for back-up—I think that you mentioned methanol and ethanol—are carbon-based chemicals. As a result, there would be most carbon-based emissions when we most needed renewables.

Colin Anderson: Those fuels are renewable—they are not fossil fuels. They would not be taken from the ground and burned once and for all.

The Convener: I understand that, but they are carbon-based substances.

Colin Anderson: Yes, but they are carbon neutral. If a person grows a tree, burns it and then grows another tree, the same carbon goes round and round—the amount of carbon in the atmosphere will not be increased. That is what Stephen Salter means by renewable fuels.

The Convener: Will you clarify things in totality? Are we moving towards renewables to get away from burning carbons?

Colin Anderson: We want to get away from burning fossil carbons and adding to the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Professor Salter: There is an important point to make. If the carbon in municipal waste is put into landfill, it will turn into methane, which is a much worse greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. We want municipal waste, which will eventually go into the atmosphere anyway, to be mixed with hydrogen from renewables in an electrolysis process in order to produce a liquid fuel or gas that can be stored and burned if weather conditions are unusual. The last really bad weather conditions were in 1982, when there was a very cold winter. An anticyclone was almost stationary over the North sea for around three weeks. In fact, the sea froze at Aberlady; I had never seen sea ice there. Such conditions occur. However, if we rely on nuclear energy, a CO₂ circulator could be out of action for much longer than an anticyclone is above us. We should not worry about the carbon. If carbon is taken from forestry mass or municipal waste, which will be a major problem, it would have got out in a worse form if nothing had been done.

The Convener: In all our discussions on nuclear power and renewables, this is the first time someone has told us that we must rely on burning

carbon to replace renewables when they are not available. I thank you for providing that information.

Colin Anderson: I will add a very short appendix. Millions of years ago, the atmosphere was much more carbon rich than it is now. We could not have lived in the days of the dinosaurs. That carbon was captured underground as fossil deposits of coal and oil. At the moment, we are unlocking it and turning the atmosphere back to what it was like in those days. We must stop that process, which means not using fossil fuels. If we burn only what we have grown, we will not add to the carbon in the atmosphere; we will simply recycle it, as we should recycle lots of things.

The Convener: That is helpful. Thank you.

Helen Eadie: You have talked about a company in my constituency—the chicken waste plant. I am working with another plant in my constituency that is talking about burning municipal waste, sewage sludge—which is a big problem for the Executive—and coal slurry, which would produce an equal amount of energy to the amount that is produced by a nuclear power station. The Green Party in Parliament says continually that it would not be environmentally friendly to do that. I would appreciate Professor Salter's view on that.

Professor Salter: Are you talking about the Westfield plant?

Helen Eadie: Yes.

Professor Salter: I visited that plant and was very impressed with what it is doing. After my visit, I wrote to the Executive because I wanted to ensure that those people got all the support that they needed. I think that the Green Party is wrong about it—the plant is using material that will be much worse for us if we do not do what the plant is doing. It uses a process that releases no liquids or gases into the environment, but produces usable fuel of any kind that is wanted—it could be methanol, methane or material that is a substitute for diesel. There is also a vitreous slag that comes out, which can be used as an aggregate in concrete.

The interesting thing about the laboratory there is that it was set up by Sir Denis Rooke, who was the head of British Gas back in the 1970s when we were just starting to extract natural gas from the North sea. He did something that showed flagrant disregard for commercial concerns: he set up a lab to find replacements for natural gas; the Westfield site is the residue of that. The gas board has forgotten all about because the site has been taken over, sold and messed about with, but the people there are clinging on to something that could be absolutely decisive for the whole future of liquid-fuel synthesis in the UK and especially in

Scotland. You are lucky to have such a useful asset in your constituency.

Helen Eadie: I am grateful for those comments. I invited a select committee of the House of Commons to come and visit the plant. I have also invited various MSPs and ministers to go and see it. Like you, I have written letters to try to help that company. I am really pleased that you have endorsed it, too.

Professor Salter: I believe that a chimney there is about to be demolished. I hope that it is not a crucial part of the site.

Helen Eadie: Perhaps I will urgently investigate that. Do you want recommendations from committee members, convener?

The Convener: Yes please.

Helen Eadie: We have had an interesting discussion this morning. I am very pleased to have met Professor Salter and Colin Anderson. Perhaps we can get an update from the Executive on the position regarding the development of nuclear power stations in the light of the recent UK energy review and the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management's review of long-term management of waste. When we get an update, we can inform the petitioners and return to the issue.

Campbell Martin: I endorse what Helen Eadie has said. We could also ask the Executive specifically whether it considers that burying and monitoring nuclear waste solves the problem.

The Convener: Yes—that is a specific question that we are entitled to ask. Are members agreed that we will proceed in that way on the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: When we get responses from the Executive, we will give you sight of them and will welcome your comments on them when we discuss them further. We thank you for bringing your petition to us this morning.

Home Loss Payment (PE988)

10:45

The Convener: Our next new petition is PE988, from Ian Macpherson on behalf of Harvieston Villas residents. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to increase the home loss payment. Before being formally lodged, the petition was hosted on the e-petitions system where it attracted 21 signatures. Do members have any suggestions as to how we should deal with the petition? Should we just write to the Scottish Executive to ask for an update? We could then consider the petition further at a future date. Are members happy with that?

John Farquhar Munro: There seems to be some disparity between us and our counterparts in England and Wales on the issue.

The Convener: We can ask for specific information on that. Are members happy to do that?

Members indicated agreement.

Local Plans (Environmental Designations) (PE975)

The Convener: Our next new petition is PE975, from Malcolm Ouldcott, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to legislate to ensure that local authorities consider all environmental designations—in particular, areas of great landscape value—when they produce new local plans. Do members have any comments?

Helen Eadie: I suggest that we write to the Executive, to Scottish Natural Heritage and to Historic Scotland to seek their views on the petition.

The Convener: Okay. Are members happy with that suggestion?

Members indicated agreement.

Smoking Ban (PE987)

The Convener: Our next new petition is PE987, from Peter Nield, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to amend the Smoking, Health and Social Care (Scotland) Act 2005 to extend the prohibition of smoking to designated areas in the vicinity of no-smoking premises, such as doorways and pavement cafes. Before being formally lodged, the petition was hosted on the e-petitions system where it attracted 57 signatures and 27 discussion comments. Do members have any views on it?

John Farquhar Munro: We should leave things as they are. There is sufficient legislation already, and I do not think that the argument that is presented in the petition can be justified or even sustained.

Campbell Martin: I can see where the petitioner is coming from. We are finding that there is a problem with people going outside pubs to smoke cigarettes. To some extent, the pub is in effect moving outside—there can be quite a few guys standing outside. Because of the language that they use and so on, it can be intimidating for people who are passing. There seems to be a problem, but I do not think that what the petitioner is asking for would solve it. We need to let the legislation bed in to see whether the problems persist. We can return to the issue.

The Convener: Obviously, the issue has generated a bit of discussion. It may be worth our

while to let the Health Committee see the petition—we will do nothing else with it for the moment. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: I suggest that we take a couple of minutes out to enable our next petitioners to settle into their seats and to allow movement in the public gallery. I suspend the meeting for a couple of minutes.

10:47

Meeting suspended.

10:50

On resuming—

Broken Glass (PE986)

The Convener: I reopen the meeting. If members agree, we will amend the running order of petitions. Christine Grahame wishes to attend today's meeting to discuss petition PE990 but she is currently moving amendments in another committee meeting. She will be here as soon as she can.

To give Christine Grahame a chance to be present for our discussion of PE990, we will move on to petition PE986, on behalf of Woodlands primary school, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to take greater action to protect the public, domestic and non-domestic birds and animals from the dangers of broken glass; to promote the use of plastic bottles as an alternative to glass; and to introduce a refundable deposit scheme that is aimed at reducing the amounts of broken glass in public places.

Cathie Craigie, who is the local member of the Scottish Parliament, has said that she would have liked to attend in support of the petition, but has commitments in another committee that is considering a bill at stage 2.

Before being formally lodged, the petition was hosted on the e-petitions system, where it attracted 170 signatures. Cathy Macleod will make a brief statement to the committee in support of the petition. She is supported by Chantelle Irving and Amy Laird. I welcome you all to the committee. You have a few minutes to tell us a bit about your petition. We will then discuss the issue that you have brought to us.

Cathy Macleod (Woodlands Primary School):

First, I would like to introduce Amy, who is now in secondary 1 at Greenfaulds high school, and Chantelle, who is now in primary 7 at Woodlands primary school. Both children have played

important roles in bringing the petition this far. I thank the committee for inviting us here today.

My P6/7 class last school session became interested in the issues relating to broken glass as a result of a school topic about MSPs and schools, which encourages pupils to think about issues that affect them. Chantelle's dog had recently had its paw split open by glass in the street. All the children in our class had stories about problems of broken glass and—worryingly—about glass bottles being used as weapons and as a way of intimidating them.

A survey was taken throughout the school to see how widespread the problem is—a table with the results of the survey has been provided to the committee. As members can see, the number of young children who are affected by the problem of broken glass is very high—around 70 per cent.

Coincidentally, at around the same time, Angela Graham raised a petition calling on the makers of Buckfast to switch to plastic bottles because broken glass was ruining her outdoor pursuits. Her petition made headline news in the local Cumbernauld newspaper.

After we had presented our findings to four MSPs in May, we were encouraged to submit a petition. On 7 June, we became the first primary school in Scotland to have an e-petition. The e-petition attracted more than 170 signatures—I should add that the names are not taken from the school register or we would have had significantly more.

The pupils contacted local vets, doctors, Monklands hospital, Keep Scotland Beautiful, Strathclyde police, the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals, the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, community police and local councillors. They also publicised the campaign in the local newspaper. All the replies they received were positive about the need for action and supported the part that the children are trying to play in raising awareness about the need for alternative disposal solutions for glass bottles and broken glass.

The statistics—details have been given to the committee—show that glass injuries are problematic, time wasting and expensive not just for the health service but for the police. Injuries that are caused by broken bottles are preventable.

We realise that we are dealing with only one part of a complex problem that is also related to ecological and recycling issues. Our petition asks Parliament to urge the Executive to introduce a refundable deposit scheme. Some of our pupils take back Barr's bottles to the shop or ice cream van so that they can collect the 20p deposit. We wonder whether that scheme could be extended; for example, could a person take an empty wine

bottle to a large food store and get 20p off their next bottle of wine? There are lots of recycling bins at such stores anyway. That is done with bags and all sorts of things. We are all very environmentally aware nowadays, so perhaps we could extend that sort of thing.

Could schools be provided with more big recycling bins, which could serve their local areas? Our councillor, Councillor Goldie, is very supportive of that idea. Full bins could get schools points towards eco-incentives. Our school is going for an eco-flag this year. Perhaps we could make a link there.

An article in the *Edinburgh Evening News* from 20 July this year, entitled "Have we the bottle to make a change?" noted that

"Container deposit schemes ... have proven hugely successful ... in the United States, Sweden, Denmark, Canada, Germany"

and other countries.

On switching from glass bottles to plastic bottles where that is feasible, the implication has been made that plastic bottles will produce landfill, but if all bottles were recycled, that would relieve that problem. Plastic bottles are being recycled through a partnership between the British Soft Drinks Association and Friends of the Earth. The improvements that have been made in plastic technology mean that there is now more plastic packaging where glass bottles have been used traditionally. That includes the fizzy drinks market.

We believe that a combination of measures is necessary to protect people and animals from the dangers of broken glass. As an article from America illustrates—I believe that members have a copy of it—the

"[bottle bill] legislation led to a 60% reduction in glass related"

cuts to children outside the home. We hope that our Parliament urges our Executive to look into the issues, and that it considers the views and evidence that have been gathered by our young people on ways to protect them and future generations from the effects of broken glass where they live and play. In the words of Woodlands primary school, we want

"Safe grass, not broken glass!"

The Convener: Thank you for bringing that interesting petition to us.

Mr Gordon: I have some sympathy with your petition. I have often reflected that if glass was invented today, it might be banned. However, the truth is that we probably could not live without it—we might think that especially when we look at the beautiful windows in this room. On the measures that you recommend to us, have you considered

the fact that design standards for products that are made of glass, including bottles, are reserved to the Westminster Parliament? Have you taken a view about putting pressure on MPs to consider reviewing design standards and possibly reducing the amount of products that are made of glass?

Cathy Macleod: The petition started off as a school topic at the end of last year. We have taken the matter to you and we have raised it locally. Further work can be carried out on the subject, and the issue could be taken to Westminster later, but we need backing from more people. Everybody needs to pull together so that we have a greater chance of being able to push measures through.

Mr Gordon: I see your point. Given the support that you have gathered from councillors and MSPs thus far, I think that you might have been pleasantly surprised had you approached MPs.

Cathy Macleod: That is something that we can take up.

Helen Eadie: I extend a warm welcome to Cathy, Amy and Chantelle. It is really good to see your school being so actively involved in something that is of importance for all of us. It occurred to me that schemes are often established where money goes to charity for the return of batteries or ink cartridges for computer printers. Have you discussed that sort of idea with glass manufacturers? They could incentivise people. It is often left to Governments to organise such schemes, but industry could play a major role and resolve such issues at a stroke.

11:00

Cathy Macleod: When we started to gather evidence, Cathie Craigie—one of the four MSPs to whom we made a presentation—contacted Barr's on our behalf. Because of the work that is going on in Barr's on a big extension scheme, we were geared towards the environmental policy on its website, of which members have a copy. We have not got back to Barr's, but it has a recycling scheme and different types of packaging and it is changing its drinks containers. That is a way forward. With more time, we will be able to approach more people for any extra information that we need.

Because we are in school, our time is limited. The P7s who were involved have now left primary school. We would like to take the work further, but everybody else must work together to channel us in the right directions.

Helen Eadie: If we approached Jack McConnell on your behalf and asked him to give an industry award for best practice in recycling glass, would you be pleased about that?

Amy Laird (Woodlands Primary School): Yes.

Chantelle Irvine (Woodlands Primary School): Yes.

Helen Eadie: Perhaps we could do that.

Cathy Macleod: The girls say yes.

The Convener: I have a question for Chantelle. You were interested in the issue because your dog's paw was cut. Did that happen in the area that you live in or when you were walking in the countryside?

Chantelle Irvine: It happened in the area that I live in.

The Convener: Have you ever noticed local authority staff cleaning your area?

Chantelle Irvine: No.

The Convener: Could the problem be that the area is not cleaned often enough?

Chantelle Irvine: Yes.

The Convener: I know a little about Cumbernauld and I know that there is a lot of countryside round about it. Do you walk your dog in the countryside? Have you noticed broken bottles in and around the country walks in your area?

Chantelle Irvine: Yes. Down from my bit is a big piece of grass that my dogs play on. Once, my dogs cut their paws there, because glass was on the grass.

The Convener: I call Campbell Martin.

Campbell Martin: Thank you, convener—you just stole my question.

The Convener: I am sorry—I was just trying to get an idea of the area that we are talking about.

Campbell Martin: My question for Amy and Chantelle is about the problem in Cumbernauld that prompted Woodlands primary to lodge the petition. What areas around the school or elsewhere in Cumbernauld have a problem? You do not need to name streets, but is the problem of broken glass quite bad in some areas or types of area? Who is responsible for breaking the glass?

Amy Laird: Glass is usually everywhere, but we do not know who breaks it—anybody could do it.

Campbell Martin: Is it broken by groups of youths or adults hanging about?

Amy Laird: It could be adults or other people in groups.

Campbell Martin: Is the glass on pathways, wooded land or streets?

Chantelle Irvine: It is on streets and pathways. A lot of groups of young people such as teenagers

hang around our bit with bottles and stuff in their hands and walk up the path, but we do not know who is responsible.

Campbell Martin: They could drop bottles, which are then broken.

Chantelle Irvine: Yes.

Cathy Macleod: Chantelle said that she had not seen the area being cleaned, but we know that it is cleaned. I have a letter from one of the local health centres, which mentions injuries that the doctors have seen. It says:

"We also have an unfortunate person who fell onto the jagged base of a bottle and severed a tendon, this person has been left with a permanent disability."

The letter goes on to say:

"Although the Local Council has responsibility for keeping footpaths clear, the amount of footpaths in Cumbernauld and cutbacks in local authority spending mean they are not swept as often as is required to remove the hazard of broken glass. Education of those responsible would seem to be the main way forward. It might seem like a bit of fun at the time smashing a bottle, but the after effects can be quite the opposite."

The author of the letter then asks how one of the culprits would feel if their dog got hurt by broken glass.

We asked the children why they thought that people behaved in such a way. Some of the children in our class admitted that they had seen older people smashing glass when they were younger. At that age, they would not have realised the consequences. The problem is complex and there is no easy fix. We hope that we can urge everyone to do something about the problem.

The Convener: Cathie Craigie has just come in and I know that she has a point to make on the petition.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Lab): As members of the Communities Committee, Christine Grahame and I are both involved in stage 2 consideration of the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill. I do not know what has been said so far, but I am sure that the pupils and their teacher will have spoken effectively in support of their petition.

As I remember, the gathering of information in support of the petition involved the whole school. Many of the parents are involved in the working life of the school. The petition expresses a view that is supported by the entire community, the lives of whose members are being affected by the broken glass bottles that lie around the area. They are worried that they and their pets could be injured by the glass, which they regard as a blight on their community, and they feel that the Government has a responsibility to take account of their wishes. Although the petitioners speak for

their school community, they believe that they also speak for, and have the support of, a much wider community in Scotland. I hope that the committee will give the petition a fair wind and allow it to be investigated further.

Helen Eadie: I praise Chantelle Irvine, Amy Laird and Cathy Macleod for raising such an important issue with the committee. I recommend that we seek the views of North Lanarkshire Council, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Keep Scotland Beautiful, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and the Scottish Executive. Once we have obtained the views of those organisations, we can let the petitioners comment on them.

The Convener: As there are no more suggestions, I thank the petitioners for submitting such an interesting and important petition. I hope that we will get some answers to the questions that you have asked about how we can make your community safer for you and your pets. We will send you the responses that we get from all the people to whom we write and you can let us know what you think of them. We will discuss your petition further at a future date. Thank you very much for coming.

Leisure Facilities (PE990)

The Convener: We now go back to the fifth new petition on the agenda. Petition PE990, which was submitted by Derek Rosie and Colin McCall on behalf of Penicuik Community Education Association, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to review the provision of community leisure facilities throughout Scotland, in the light of the proposed closure of Ladywood and Queensway community leisure centres and the Jackson Street community learning centre in Penicuik. Before it was formally lodged, the petition was hosted on the e-petitions system, where it gathered 158 signatures. In addition, 2,224 signatures have been received in hard copy.

Christine Grahame will introduce the petition.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): Cathie Craigie and I are hurtling between the Communities Committee and the Public Petitions Committee today.

At the outset, let me say that I understand the limitations on the Parliament in dealing with local authority issues—the committee can take that as read. I appreciate that individual decisions by local authorities are matters for those authorities, regardless of how members might feel about how they affect their areas. However, the provision of community facilities in an area is a broader issue.

The petition calls for a review of the provision of community facilities throughout Scotland, and although it gives specific examples, similar closures are proposed elsewhere. The closures mentioned in the petition and the proposed closures elsewhere will have an impact on individuals in the community. The facilities that are currently available to diverse groups in the Penicuik area will not be available in the proposed substitute facility, which someone described to me as a TARDIS: it is a small swimming pool with a leisure centre attached, and it will not replace the range of facilities that is being taken away.

Without going too far into specifics, I will give you an example. The Jackson Street centre deals with a range of activities including picture framing, carpet bowls and a drop-in coffee morning. The Ladywood centre is slap bang in the middle of a large housing area. It is very much a community centre—it is a misnomer to call it a leisure centre. It has a range of activities, including children's parties that are booked up Saturday after Saturday, elderly stroke clubs, dancing, a gym—the whole lot. The Queensway centre is more like what we might call the usual kind of leisure centre that I rarely visit, where one has to do physical activities such as gymnastics, dancing and so on. Together, the centres provide a great range of facilities.

The difficult question for the Parliament is what we can do when, despite our social inclusion policies and our aim to keep people fit and active physically and mentally, what is happening on the ground flies in the face of such policies. Members might say that people vote for local councillors so they can get them to do what they want at the next election, but the facilities under threat will have gone by then. Not only will such facilities have gone throughout Scotland, but their preservation will not have been in the manifestos of any of the local authority candidates.

The petitioners are quite rightly asking the committee to look at the situation throughout Scotland and say, "Right, we want healthier people. We don't want them to get fat. We want them to be engaged. We don't want elderly people to be isolated at home." One person who had just been bereaved told me that dropping into the Jackson Street centre coffee mornings or lunch-time sessions kept her sane because she had somewhere to go nearby.

What is the remedy and what can the Parliament do with its overview? The first stage is simple. There has been a recent audit of sports facilities in Scotland that showed us how many sports facilities are falling below an acceptable level and how many playing fields have been lost. The petitioners are asking for a similar exercise to be carried out on community facilities provision to find

out what is happening on the ground and to let that then inform ministers' policy. Councillors who say that they are closing facilities because councils do not have enough funding could advise people to put their case to the Scottish Government and ask for funding so that they can deliver at ground level the policies that the Parliament wants.

If I may pre-empt the committee's decision, I suspect that we will be told that this is a matter for local authorities. If the committee says that, it will offer no remedy to the petitioners or to other people throughout Scotland. Although the committee might not be able to do something immediately, I believe sincerely that there is a role for Parliament in looking at the situation. In the same way that we look at the closure of hospitals and how to reconfigure our health service, let us look at what is happening to community and leisure centres throughout Scotland to inform both policy and local authority funding.

The Convener: Thank you.

Well, I might as well say it: this is a matter for local authorities to deal with. However, if there were nothing in the petition for the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive to consider, it would not be admissible. The petition asks the Scottish Executive to review the provision of community leisure facilities in Scotland, which is why it is on our agenda this morning. Based on the information that Christine Grahame gave us, the petitioners have made a reasonable request. Do members wish to comment?

Campbell Martin: Christine Grahame made a good point when she said that although a replacement facility was being provided, it would not be as good as the existing facilities. Some time ago, I worked for a local authority that analysed the jobs in the area. It seemed that an awful lot of jobs were coming into the area, but we were losing full-time manufacturing jobs and gaining part-time, low-paid service centre jobs. I wonder whether the same thing might be happening in the sport and leisure sector now. Perhaps we should ask the Executive to look into that. We might be getting new facilities, but are they better than what was there before?

11:15

Helen Eadie: I absolutely agree that dealing with the leisure facilities in question is a matter for Midlothian Council. It is also worth while reminding ourselves of the members' business debate that took place in Parliament, during which George Lyon, the Deputy Minister for Finance, Public Service Reform and Parliamentary Business, said that, since 1999, funding for local government has increased by 55 per cent, and that Midlothian

Council has had a hefty share of that £3 billion. Notwithstanding that, it is right to ask the Scottish Executive to review the matter, but I would like to throw another thought into the melting pot, to do with the fact that we now have a new Co-operative Development Agency.

I ought to declare an interest at this point, because I am a Labour and Co-operative member of the Parliament, not just a Labour member. I am talking not about trusts but about true co-operatives. A number of co-operative endeavours have been established across the UK to provide the kind of facilities that we have been discussing, and those initiatives are distinctly different from trusts. Co-operative facilities are not trusts. When the Scottish Executive conducts its review, I would like it to examine exactly what has been done in England to ensure that such facilities can continue, but within a co-operative model, so that they are really owned by local people in the community rather than being owned by a council or the Government. That allows for real community participation and ownership—all the values that the Labour Party believes in—and I urge Christine Grahame to play her part in ensuring that a co-operative model, not a trust model, goes forward as one of the options.

The Convener: Are members happy for us to take up Christine Grahame's suggestion that we write to the Executive asking whether it intends to conduct such a review? I think that that is a worthwhile question to ask. Shall we do that?

Members indicated agreement.

Christine Grahame: Thank you, convener.

Current Petitions

Victims of Crime (Financial Reparation) (PE914)

11:17

The Convener: The first current petition is PE914, from Peter Fallon, calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to amend criminal justice legislation to require criminals to make financial reparation to the victims of their crime. At its meeting on 22 February, the committee agreed to write to the Lord Advocate and to the Scottish Executive. Responses have now been received and circulated. Do members have any comments?

Helen Eadie: Given that the matter is now being examined by the Justice 1 Committee, perhaps it would be appropriate to accept that committee's view that it would be happy to consider the petition as part of its further consideration of the Criminal Proceedings etc (Reform) (Scotland) Bill. Perhaps the Justice 1 Committee will consider amending the bill as suggested in the petition.

The Convener: Are members happy to refer the petition to the Justice 1 Committee?

Members indicated agreement.

Criminal Law (Procedures) (PE935)

The Convener: Our next petition, PE935, is from Ian Longworth and calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to amend criminal procedures to ensure that, when a procurator fiscal does not consider it to be in the public interest to pursue criminal proceedings, a full written explanation is provided to the alleged victim of the crime. At its meeting on 8 March, the committee agreed to write to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, the victim information and advice service, Victim Support Scotland and the Scottish Executive. Responses have now been received and circulated. Do members have any views on how to proceed with the petition?

There are no comments from members. Petition PE935 struck me as so similar to PE914 that I thought for a moment that I was rereading the same papers. I think that we can also send PE935 to the Justice 1 Committee, as it falls into the same category. Are members happy to do that?

Members indicated agreement.

Hospital Patients (Spiritual Care) (PE923)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE923 is from Ben Conway and calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to

promote pastoral and spiritual care in hospitals, to ensure that physical, psychological, social and spiritual needs are properly addressed. At its meeting on 30 January, the committee agreed to write to the Scottish Inter Faith Council, Professor John Swinton of the University of Aberdeen, the Rev Chris Levinson of NHS Scotland, the Scotland Patients Association and the Scottish Executive.

Helen Eadie: Ben Conway is a constituent of mine. He has campaigned long and hard on this issue and it is very nice to see him in the public gallery today. Shortly, the committee will perhaps decide that it wants to write to seek the views of the petitioner on the responses that we have received. That might seem strange, given that he is here today, but we have to follow our procedures. The convener might wish to explain why we have to do it that way rather than simply asking him.

I am pleased with the response from the health care chaplaincy development officer in the national health service in Scotland. He agrees entirely with Ben Conway's point and he has highlighted the solution, which is that the Data Protection Act 1998 has to be amended so that hospital chaplains become part of the health care team. I have written to my Westminster colleague Gordon Brown asking whether that can be done; it may be that the committee could write as well. It is Ben Conway's view, and mine, that in this case the act has been a sledgehammer to crack the nut of malpractice. In seeking to avert such malpractice, we have run into unintended consequences.

I was also pleased with Professor Swinton's response, which gives his backing. He details research that has shown how vital it is to attend to the spiritual needs of people who are ill.

The Scottish Inter Faith Council has declined to comment, but it says that the issue has been brought to the attention of its members.

However, I am disappointed that it was not possible for the Minister for Health and Community Care to do more than say that it all comes down to the Data Protection Act 1998. I would welcome it if the Scottish Executive could make representations to Her Majesty's Government to secure the amendment to the act that we so badly need. If hospital chaplains were regarded as part of the health care team, they would be given access to details about the faith of the patients in hospitals.

After we have heard the petitioner's views, I hope that we will get round to making recommendations. By that time, I hope that we will have had a response from my colleague Gordon Brown. I know that he is very supportive of all the people in Kelty who have raised this issue.

It is a tribute to Ben Conway that he has been so determined and has stuck doggedly to his

campaign for about three years now. I congratulate him on all his hard work.

The Convener: We should write to Ben Conway officially to get his views. All the points that Helen Eadie has raised can be considered when we receive his response.

National Bird (PE783)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE783, which is from James Reynolds on behalf of *The Scotsman*. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to support the establishment of the golden eagle as the national bird of Scotland. At its meeting on 18 January, the committee agreed to invite the views of the petitioner on the responses that we received. His response has been circulated to members.

When the Public Petitions Committee was in Germany last week at the Bundestag, it struck me how much importance Germany places on having a national bird. It had never occurred to me how important such symbolism could be. Wherever we went, the importance of that type of thing was clear to us. It sounds bizarre and is not something that I had paid particular attention to, but it strikes me that other people take the issue of having a national bird much more seriously than we do.

Helen Eadie: When the petition first came to the Parliament, I was not persuaded but, having read various newspapers and, like you, heard other people's views, I am coming round to the view that we ought to consider having a national bird. We should refer the petition to the Enterprise and Culture Committee as a serious issue for consideration.

The Convener: Are members happy to do that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Forth Road Bridge (PE943 and PE942)

The Convener: Our next petitions are PE943 and PE942. Petition PE942, from Bill Cantley, on behalf of the ForthRight Alliance, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to desist from spending taxpayers' money on preparing for the construction of a second Forth road bridge before having at its disposal all the facts regarding the condition of the existing Forth road bridge, on the grounds that any such expenditure would be both environmentally irresponsible and fiscally imprudent. Petition PE943, from Mark Hood, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to consider the need for a new Forth road bridge. The committee agreed previously to link consideration of petitions PE942 and PE943 and to write to the Forth Estuary Transport Authority, Fife Council, the City of Edinburgh Council,

Architects and Engineers for Social Responsibility, Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish Executive. Responses have been received and members have seen them.

Helen Eadie: We should write to the petitioners to ask for their view of the responses that we have received. However, in doing so, would it also be possible for us to invite the Cockburn Association to attend a presentation on the condition of the Forth bridge? Last week, when I attended a presentation at the Fife Chamber of Commerce and Enterprise, I spoke with the bridgemaister and saw what a grave condition the Forth bridge is in. If the Cockburn Association and others saw the state of the bridge, they might be persuaded at least to listen to the arguments. I have always been of the view that we should have a second crossing anyway, but we are now talking about a replacement bridge. The whole of the north of Scotland depends on the bridge—it is a lifeline and part of a trans-European route. It would be devastating and catastrophic for Scotland if we did not do something about the bridge.

The Convener: We will write to the petitioners and get their views on the responses, before we discuss the issues further.

Helen Eadie: Could we suggest that the Cockburn Association attend such a presentation? I could arrange that.

The Convener: You could take that up with the petitioner. I am not sure whether the committee could do that.

Helen Eadie: Right—that is fine.

The Convener: If you do so, the petitioner could comment on the presentation when they respond to us.

Forth Road Bridge (Tolls) (PE921)

Tolled Bridges (PE925)

The Convener: Next, we will consider two more connected petitions, PE921 and PE925, which concern tolled bridges. Petition PE921, from the Rev Ross Brown, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive not to increase the tolls on the Forth road bridge. Petition PE925, from George Campbell, on behalf of the National Alliance Against Tolls Scotland, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive not to extend the tolling regimes on the remaining tolled bridges—the Erskine, Forth and Tay bridges—but instead to take over the bridges and their approaches as part of the national road system and to remove the tolls forthwith.

At the committee's meeting on 19 April, we agreed to pass copies of the petitions to the Minister for Transport and the First Minister and to

await the outcome of the review of the impact and cost of retaining or removing tolls from the Tay and Forth bridges. Responses have been received and circulated to members.

Helen Eadie: We should write to the petitioners with the responses and get feedback from them.

The Convener: We will have to do that in the context of the decision that has been made to extend tolling on the Forth bridge to 2010 and the decisions that have been made on the Erskine and Tay bridges.

Helen Eadie: I add the caveat that I have a draft proposal for a member's bill on the abolition of the tolls on the Forth bridge. The rumour or the information on the street is that tolls will be removed from the Tay bridge. If so, it would be a total inequity to continue to have tolls on the Forth bridge, as it would then be the only tolled bridge in Scotland. We should get the petitioners' views on the responses.

11:30

The Convener: Okay. I am happy to do that, if members agree.

Members indicated agreement.

Solvent Abuse (PE580)

The Convener: The next petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to recognise the serious problems with solvent abuse in Scotland and to introduce preventive safety measures to help combat it. At its meeting on 30 January, the committee agreed to write to the Scottish Executive and a response has now been received and circulated to members. Do members have any suggestions on how to deal with the petition?

Helen Eadie: Shall we get the view of the petitioner again?

The Convener: Okay. We will write to the petitioner and await his response. We can then consider the petition again. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Coastal and River Erosion (National Strategy) (PE878)

The Convener: The next petition is from James A Mackie and calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to consider the need for a national strategy to address the impact of coastal and river erosion in Scotland. At its meeting on 22 February, the committee agreed to invite the views of the petitioner on the previous responses received. Those views have now been received. I ask members for suggestions about what, if anything, we can do with the petition in

light of the petitioner's response. I do not think that we can do anything with it. We have the views of the petitioner and the Executive. We can only agree that no further action should be taken.

Members indicated agreement.

Local Democracy (PE880)

The Convener: Our final petition this morning is from Iain D Skene, on behalf of Renfrewshire and Inverclyde association of Burns Clubs, calling on the Scottish Parliament to consider and debate the issue of local authority democratic accountability and in particular the accessibility of local elected representatives. At its meeting on 8 March, the committee agreed to invite the views of the petitioner on the responses received. Do members have any views on the petitioner's response? Is there any more that we can do with the petition?

Helen Eadie: I do not think there is.

The Convener: So we will just agree to close the petition.

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That concludes our consideration of petitions and we now move into private session.

11:32

Meeting continued in private until 12:14.

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