

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Wednesday 4 October 2006

Session 2

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

16th 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

Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con)

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Jim Milne (Dundee Anti-Poverty Forum)

Caroline Morrison

Mick Napier (Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign)

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

David McGill

ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Hough

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 4 October 2006

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:07*]

New Petitions

The Convener (Michael McMahon): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to 16th meeting in 2006 of the Public Petitions Committee. I have received apologies from Sandra White, Jackie Baillie and Charlie Gordon. Rosie Kane has advised us that, because of difficulties with trains from Glasgow this morning, she is trying to get here by another method and hopes to be here as soon as possible.

Before we start, I remind members that we will take receipt of our 1,000th petition after the meeting. It is a landmark event for the committee and Parliament, in which the media has shown strong interest. There will be a photo opportunity for members and petitioners during the formal handover and a number of previous petitioners will join us in the courtyard of Queensberry House to mark the occasion.

Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PE985)

The Convener: Our first new petition is PE985, by Mick Napier, on behalf of the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to congratulate the Palestinian people on their ability to conduct democratic elections while under Israeli occupation, to call for the ending of all sanctions against Palestine and to invite Palestinian parliamentary spokesmen to address the Scottish Parliament. Mick Napier will make a brief statement to the committee in support of the petition.

Mick Napier (Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to use the important democratic institution that is the Public Petitions Committee.

The first part of the petition is fairly clear. It asks Parliament to congratulate the Palestinians for having conducted democratic elections under very difficult circumstances. Having just returned from Palestine with a Scottish delegation, I am happy to answer questions about precisely how difficult those conditions are. All the observers of the elections admitted that they were as close to flawless as they could be under such difficult circumstances. I hope that the first part of the petition is not controversial.

Unfortunately, the second part of the petition might be controversial. I have looked for other examples in history of an occupied population, rather than the occupying military force, being the subject of sanctions, and I have been unable to come up with a parallel. I believe that a grievous injustice is being committed against the people of Palestine by those sanctions, in which the British Government is complicit. Having worked in the middle east for 10 years, I can say that the impact of the sanctions is not only grotesque in terms of human suffering but casts the people of Britain and Scotland in a bad light in the middle east. I hope that Parliament will call for an end to those sanctions.

Finally, we are asking for a Parliament-to-Parliament link. The young Parliament in Palestine has emerged from democratic elections. There are many reserved matters on which it would be inappropriate to submit a petition, but it would be appropriate to invite someone from the Palestinian Parliament to the newly reconstituted young Parliament here in Scotland. It would also send a message to people throughout the middle east that we stand for human rights and that we are against violation of the human rights of Palestinians. That would be very positive.

The place I used to live in the middle east is now very dangerous. It is impossible for me to visit the place where I used to have a flat because al-Qa'ida dominates the whole area. I am talking about Saudi Arabia. Al-Qa'ida recruits people on the basis of the on-going grievous crime against the people of Palestine. Those recruiting sergeants could be undermined if the Scottish Parliament took a stand for Palestinian human rights, congratulated the Palestinian people, called for an end to sanctions and invited a speaker from the Palestinian Parliament to address this one.

The Convener: As you rightly identified, many of the issues that you have asked to be dealt with are reserved to Westminster. This Parliament can make its voice heard on issues—we are not restricted in that way—but we cannot make the decisions that you would like us to make. You asked us whether we could congratulate the Palestinian people on their ability to hold the elections. There is no difficulty in any individual member offering such congratulations; the question is how we could get the whole Parliament to do it.

Campbell Martin (West of Scotland) (Ind): This is an important and difficult issue. You speak from personal experience. There is nothing controversial in your petition and what you ask for is reasonable. I should be honest and say that I come from a position of support for the Palestinian people. It is quite incredible that sanctions are

being imposed on them. What is happening to the Palestinian people because of the sanctions?

Mick Napier: In July, I led a delegation of people from Scotland to different cities in Palestine. We visited hospitals and spoke to doctors, who told us that drugs are running low and that they are unable to find clean surgical instruments with which to deal with members of the public who suffer trauma. We spoke to people in schools, nurseries and right across civil society. What we found was a tale of unendurable suffering—a tale that shocked and horrified many of the people who were visiting Palestine for the first time. I could go on at great length. We have published a considerable report—about 80 pages—on what we saw when we were there. No one could read that without feeling the impact of the sanctions and the suffering that the Palestinian people are going through.

A recent article in the *Guardian* was headlined, “Gaza is dying”. I told people for long that lack of food is not such a problem in Palestine, but that is no longer the case. There is now serious suffering of an unprecedented nature and it is all the result of human activity—blockade, the destruction of Palestinian produce and prevention of imports of necessary medicines and educational materials. It is within our power to stop that. Britain is associated with the sanctions and, in the eyes of Palestinians, Arabs and hundreds of millions of Muslims throughout the world, we are committing a terrible crime against the people of Palestine. I believe that to be the case.

Campbell Martin: The convener is right that it may be extremely difficult for us as a committee to force Parliament to make any commitment or statement but what would your message be to individual MSPs? What could they do?

Mick Napier: They could visit Palestine. They could invite a speaker from the Palestinian Parliament to come here and explain what is happening to their people—that Parliament is the fruit of democratic elections that no one faults. It is possible to invite someone from one Parliament to this Parliament—that is a fairly commonplace activity. Quite rightly, democratic institutions the world over should support each other; therefore, that part of the petition is within the powers of the Scottish Parliament.

On congratulating the Palestinian people, perhaps a motion could be lodged to which MSPs could sign up. That would shine a light across the middle east and would be seen by all concerned as an expression of support for human rights by members of the Scottish Parliament. The same could be done in relation to the call that sanctions be ended. I realise that such matters are reserved, but we cannot overestimate the impact that a call in a motion that had been signed by a majority of

MSPs would have on the beleaguered and incredibly brave people of Gaza and the west bank, who simply endure their situation.

That would send a resounding message, given that Britain has been seen as part of the problem ever since the time of Mr Balfour, who I believe had an association with Haddington. Britain gave away the land of Palestine to other people. The exit from such a terrible crisis is complex, but the genesis of the problem involved Britain violating the human rights of the people of Palestine—that is not a secret. Men and women of good will will have to work together to resolve matters and to take the people who live there out of their nightmare. I believe that Parliament as a whole could publicly adopt the position that I have outlined. If that is not possible, a majority of individual MSPs could publicly congratulate the people of Palestine, call for an end to the sanctions and invite a speaker from Palestine’s democratically elected Parliament to come here.

10:15

Campbell Martin: A friend of mine, the former MSP Lloyd Quinan, visited Palestine while he was an MSP. When he came back, he showed me photographs that he had taken. It shocked me to see bombed-out houses and children without food and medicines. I would certainly be happy to lodge a motion along the lines that you have described, if you would like me to.

Mick Napier: Thank you.

Campbell Martin: I would hope, too, that the Scottish Parliament could invite someone from the Palestinian Parliament to come and address us.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): John Home Robertson and Pauline McNeill might well be known to the petitioners—both have undertaken a fair amount of work on the Palestinian situation. I know that they have been involved in arranging for speakers from Palestine to come to the Scottish Parliament.

Given that Westminster is where the key decision-making responsibility lies, have you submitted a petition on the issue to your Westminster parliamentarian?

Mick Napier: Numerous petitions have been submitted to the Westminster Parliament. We operate in Scotland—the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign lobbies Scottish educational, trade union and parliamentary institutions. We leave petitions to the Westminster Parliament to people in London and the United Kingdom as a whole to deal with. I know that similar petitions have gone to the UK Parliament, although I am unable to give a detailed report on them.

You are right to say that a number of MSPs have been active in bringing over from Palestine speakers who represent the elected voice of Palestine. Following the election that produced a result that was not congenial to western Governments, which was followed by the imposition of sanctions on the people of Palestine, we want the Scottish Parliament to extend an official invitation to the fruits of that democratic election—in other words, to the current Palestinian Parliament. We think that such a link would make the world safer for all of us and would offer some hope to the beleaguered people of Palestine.

Helen Eadie: I feel strongly that if you want the concerns of Scotland to be represented, you should take the issue to Westminster parliamentarians because they can influence decisions on such matters. The Scottish Parliament may or may not be able to exercise influence by expressing the views of individual MSPs, but you will appreciate that because of the settlement on devolved and reserved matters, it is important that people who want to effect real change take their concerns to the place that is able to bring about such change.

We are talking about an immensely difficult subject. No one can fail to be moved by and concerned about the people who live in war-torn places, whether it is Palestine or any other part of the world. However, the Scottish Parliament does not have the powers to change the decisions that are made. If you want change, I implore you to take the matter to Westminster parliamentarians.

Mick Napier: Helen Eadie makes a valid point but, on the other hand, politics is often about symbols, which can be very powerful. It is within the power of the Scottish Parliament to adopt a symbolic position of support for human rights: it could congratulate the people of Palestine on their incredible achievement of expressing, under military occupation, their democratic voice, and it could say that it respects that choice and will act on that choice in terms of building Parliament-to-Parliament relations. That would be seen by people throughout the middle east and beyond as the Scottish Parliament taking a stand for human rights.

Such action would contrast with the position of the British Government, which is seen throughout the middle east not as supporting human rights, but as being complicit in the on-going violation over many decades of the human rights of the people of Palestine. I therefore ask for a moral commitment, albeit that the practical power is lacking, to support the democratic voice of the people of Palestine.

Helen Eadie: I agree that symbols are important, and there are certainly moral arguments as to why we should all take various actions.

Nevertheless, if you want to effect change where it matters—where decisions are made—you really must take the matter to Westminster. I do not think that it is good enough to say that we should leave it to England, Ireland or other parts of the UK. People in Scotland need to take the matter to where the decisions are made. I feel strongly about that.

Mick Napier: I agree.

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): Good morning. As you have heard from my colleague, the main responsibility seems to rest with our colleagues at Westminster. At the same time, there is—as I am sure the committee will agree—nothing to prevent our inviting someone from the Palestinian Parliament to address the Scottish Parliament. I see in our papers that members of the Palestinian Legislative Council visited the Parliament in 2003 to see how the new Government in Scotland works. I am sure that there is everything to be gained by continuing that link.

In your opening comments, you talked about the sanctions that are currently imposed in that part of the world. How widespread is the imposition of those sanctions? How many European nations subscribe to the implementation of the sanctions? Is it just a minority of countries?

Mick Napier: The United States has backed the sanctions, Israel enforces them, the European Union has joined the call for sanctions and has implemented them and the World Bank has imposed sanctions. Even Arab banks that want to transfer money that has been raised openly and legitimately to pay the salaries of Palestinian Government officials—including teachers, hospital workers and doctors—are afraid to do so because sanctions are threatened against those banks by the United States.

The embargo or blockade is extremely comprehensive and the results are, consequently, extremely grim. People do not even have paper, pencils or medical equipment. There was a moving programme on television last night that mentioned, in passing, that salaries have in some cases not been paid for five or six months. Medical workers and teachers are driving taxis or doing anything simply to earn a few pennies to keep food in their families' mouths. I cannot overstate how exceedingly harsh the sanctions are. It is worth remembering that the sanctions are being imposed on people who are under military occupation and who are often refugees who were driven out of their homes by ethnic cleansing in previous decades. They cannot understand why the sanctions are being imposed on them instead of on the military force that occupies their land in violation of United Nations resolutions that have been repeated annually for decades.

To answer your question, the sanctions are very harsh, comprehensive and extremely unjust.

John Farquhar Munro: I quite agree that it is unjust. I cannot understand why a caring world would want to impose draconian measures on individuals, groups and organisations who find life difficult enough already.

How do we set the ball rolling? Who flings the first pebble into the pond and says, "Enough is enough. We have to address this situation and remove at least some of, if not all, the sanctions"? You mentioned a lot of organisations and countries—the World Bank seems to have tremendous control. Who should take the first step?

Mick Napier: There is a tremendous dissonance between official policies and public opinion. People around the world—opinion polls have convinced me that this is true in Scotland and throughout Britain—are deeply apprehensive about what is happening to the Palestinians and about what happened in Lebanon a month or so ago. There is a dangerous lack of overlap between public opinion and official opinion.

Civic society is beginning to move. High-tech companies in Belgium and churches in America and Britain are beginning to call for sanctions against Israel to protect the people of Palestine and Lebanon. That is a symptom of the public opinion that I have been talking about.

You ask who should start. Well—that is why we are here. We would like the Scottish Parliament to take a public stand. If that is not possible, we would like a majority of MSPs to take a public stand together.

Remember what we are asking for: we are asking that the Palestinians be congratulated on holding democratic elections. We tell the world that democracy has fundamental value—the Palestinians have achieved democracy so we should congratulate them. We are asking the Scottish Parliament merely to call for the end of sanctions against the Palestinian people. We know that the power to end the sanctions resides not in Edinburgh but in Westminster, but it is within the Scottish Parliament's power to make a call for their end. Finally, we are asking the Scottish Parliament to invite somebody to come and speak to it.

Israel is building a wall—a wall that is higher than the roof of this auditorium. It encircles whole cities and towns. Qalqilya is a large town of 25,000, and the good people who live there rise in the morning inside a 25ft wall. The sun rises late and sets early. There is one Israeli checkpoint.

You would not believe the structures that are being built across Palestine. Ghetto is not the

word. The black ghettos and Jewish ghettos in Europe were undoubtedly ghettos but they did not usually have walls around them. What is being built across Palestine is so unspeakable that we do not have words for it—it is worse than a ghetto. It is a gigantic prison system inside which people can barely move two miles.

We speak to Palestinians and ask, "How would you like the problem to be solved? A single state for everybody together? Two states?" An old man said to me, "Don't talk about that. I want to be able to move five miles."

If I may, I would like to give the committee an example of the kind of thing that can happen. I spoke to an orthodox Catholic priest in Nablus—Father Yousef Saada. He is privileged to have been issued with a Vatican diplomatic passport, and he wanted to go from Nablus to pray in Jerusalem. That distance is the same as the distance from Glasgow to Edinburgh, which normally takes 45 minutes—although there are train problems today. Going from Nablus to Jerusalem normally takes about an hour and a half.

Father Yousef had not been to Jerusalem before. He is a Christian priest and he is 66 years old, but when he tried to go through the checkpoint, a more angry man I have never met. He had his passport trampled in the dust by a 17-year-old soldier. The soldier made him wait for four hours in the sun and told him to shut up. After that then he allowed him to go and pray in Jerusalem.

Most Palestinians cannot go and pray in Jerusalem. I am an atheist, but I feel for them. It is a basic human right, but such fundamental human rights are denied to Palestinians every hour of their waking lives. It would take a poet to express to you what that is like.

If you are not moved by the human rights arguments, I suggest that you should be moved by the need to make the world a safer place. A large part of Riyadh, where I used to live, is now controlled by al-Qa'ida, which is recruiting hand over fist. When it recruits, it points to Palestine—Iraq and Afghanistan, too, but first to Palestine—and it says, "This is what we can expect from the west. Let's give them some of what they are giving us."

I deplore terrorism of any kind and certainly believe that this is a matter that people who opposed the acts of terrorism in London or New York should think about. I applaud the First Minister of this Parliament for going to New York—which I believe is not part of Scotland—to express his solidarity with the victims of the terrorism of 9/11. It shows that there is a precedent in the Scottish Parliament for taking a position on

international issues. The horror and agony that the people of Palestine are experiencing with the British Government's complicity are such that I ask MSPs collectively and individually to stand up on the issue. If you do, you will send hope to people who really do not have much to hope for, and you will send a message to the people of Scotland that we, collectively and individually, should be taking a position on this matter.

10:30

Helen Eadie: I wonder whether I can make a recommendation, convener.

The Convener: Before you do, I want to make a couple of comments. Although our number is depleted, I doubt very much that the committee members who are not here will disagree with the points that have been made this morning. The committee does not often reach a unanimous decision on a petition; however, when it does, it clearly states its support for it. It might well be no more than a symbolic pronouncement, but we as a committee of the Parliament can say that we support the basis of the petition and agree that the Parliament should send the congratulatory message that you seek.

However, it is difficult to know how to turn that pronouncement into a more substantial message that can be sent out by the whole Parliament. Campbell Martin has said that he is prepared to lodge a motion of congratulation that we hope will be signed by as many MSPs as possible and unite everyone in the same way that your petition has united the committee this morning. I do not think that pulling together such a motion is beyond the ability of any individual member.

As for other means of conveying our concerns about the information that you have highlighted this morning, I suggest that we send the Parliament's cross-party group on Palestine the *Official Report* of this morning's meeting to show that, after hearing what you had to say, the committee unanimously agreed that the message of congratulation that you requested be sent out.

Moreover, when the committee has discussed reserved matters in the past, it has contacted Whitehall to make it aware of those discussions, and it would be useful—for information, if nothing else—if we could send the *Official Report* of this morning's deliberations to the Foreign Office to ensure that it is aware of the strength of feeling that has been expressed and the support that the petition has received from the committee.

Our third recommendation, on how Parliament can engage with parliamentarians, is probably the most practical course of action that we can take. I believe that Helen Eadie has a suggestion in that respect.

Helen Eadie: I agree with almost, but not quite, all your comments, convener. I will not oppose what you have recommended, but I suggest that we also ask the Presiding Officer and the Parliamentary Bureau to consider the petition and to tell us whether they have any plans to invite a speaker from Palestine to the Parliament.

The Convener: Do members have any other suggestions about how we can support or endorse the petition?

Campbell Martin: I agree with your suggestions, convener.

The Convener: We will write to the cross-party group and the Foreign Office and advise them of this morning's deliberations. We will also ask the Presiding Officer and the Parliamentary Bureau whether they intend to give a speaker from Palestine the opportunity that has been afforded to representatives of other Governments across the world to come and talk to Parliament in some capacity.

Thank you very much for bringing your petition to our attention this morning.

Mick Napier: Thank you very much.

School Clothing Grants (PE999)

The Convener: Our next new petition is PE999, by Jim Milne, on behalf of the Dundee Anti-Poverty Forum, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to review the school clothing grant system. Before the petition was lodged formally, it was hosted on the e-petitions system, where it gathered 28 signatures. Jim Milne will make a brief statement to the committee in support of his petition. He is supported by Caroline Morrison.

Jim Milne (Dundee Anti-Poverty Forum): Actually, Caroline Morrison will present the information.

The Convener: That is fine.

Caroline Morrison: I will give a brief overview of the current situation in local authorities in Scotland and make some recommendations for the committee to consider. Currently, 75 per cent of Scottish state schools require children and young people to wear a specific uniform. The ideals behind uniforms include engendering a sense of identity and belonging and creating a feeling of equality that masks differences between more affluent students and their less affluent counterparts. However, the purchasing of uniforms can exact a heavy financial toll from those who are least able to afford it.

Provision is made for such families through the school clothing grant, which is set and administered by local authorities under section 54

of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. However, the allocation of school clothing grants is a postcode lottery for Scotland's low-income families. Variations exist between local authorities in the monetary value of the grant awarded—it ranges from £30 up to £65—and in the eligibility criteria that are used. Differences also arise in the windows of opportunity that are available for claiming and in the method of claiming. One local authority has a sliding scale of payments and others have a cut-off point so that young people in secondary school who are eligible for the education maintenance allowance cannot access the school clothing grant.

Dundee City Council has recently changed its policy to make claiming the school clothing grant a simpler process. Other local authorities, including Orkney Islands Council, combine the application forms for the school clothing grant and free school meals, which makes the process simpler for those who claim. The Dundee Anti-Poverty Forum welcomes that progressive step, which we hope other local authorities will adopt as a model of good practice.

We ask the committee to consider the following recommendations. The money that the Scottish Executive allocates to local authorities for school clothing should be ring fenced, so that it must be spent on the grant, with any underspend at the end of the year being carried over to be spent by the local authority as deemed appropriate. The eligibility criteria for the grant should be standardised and set by the Scottish Executive Education Department. The criteria should be widened to incorporate families who are on low wages as well as families who are on benefits and the level of the grant should be increased to reflect the true cost of school uniforms.

The practice of schools instructing parents to shop at particular retailers should be discontinued and the recommended uniforms should be made more widely available. If uniforms can be purchased only from certain outlets, that constitutes what John Fingleton, the chief executive of the Office of Fair Trading, calls a tax on parents. The voucher system that applies in some areas, including Falkirk, should be removed. Real or perceived stigmatisation through the identification of parents can be a negative consequence of a voucher system. Finally, the take-up rates in local authorities should be investigated.

When I was a lone-parent student who qualified for income support during the summer vacation, I received the school clothing grant. It was like receiving manna from heaven—a welcome financial boost to an extremely limited income, every penny of which was counted and recounted. *Oliver Twist* dared to ask for more, but that option

was not available. Even though the amount allocated covered only a proportion of my children's clothing needs, one claim per academic year was our lot.

The Convener: You have put forward an eminently sensible and positive suggestion for how the matter can be addressed, but there is one issue that I would like to explore a bit with you. It was recently brought to my attention that certain schools encourage parents to go to one supplier. Like you, I thought that that might prevent people on low incomes from obtaining school uniforms from outlets other than the recognised supplier, but I was told that if an individual supplier is identified and all parents are directed to buy from that supplier, the bulk buying of uniforms can bring the cost of supply down and therefore reduce the price that parents have to pay. Is that your experience?

Caroline Morrison: The Office of Fair Trading report stated that when a specific uniform was requested and it was available only from specific retail outlets, parents would generally pay 23 per cent more than they would in other outlets, and up to 150 per cent more than supermarket prices.

Jim Milne: It is basically because of the specialist type of uniform that some schools ask parents to supply their kids with. There may be certain colours or certain braiding on the blazer. Such uniforms tend to cost more. If suppliers have a monopoly, although they might make some saving by buying in bulk, that kind of uniform will tend to be more expensive.

The Convener: I take it that they would also have the school emblem stitched on, which is what would make the uniform specific to that school.

Jim Milne: Quite possibly.

Helen Eadie: I too think that you have brought us a good petition. I was a councillor on Fife Council, so I know about the controversy that school uniform policy can generate among families. We made a change to the rules in Fife because at one stage families were going to the local retailer—I think it was British Home Stores—where a shop assistant would direct all parents with school vouchers to a certain till. Those parents were stigmatised because they had vouchers, so I sympathise with you on that point.

You have asked for grants to be standardised. I think that the convener has asked an important question about that. Do you think that, if the criteria are standardised, we should also ask for the uniforms to be standardised? If schools want to differentiate themselves with badges and so on, they could allow parents to buy them as optional add-ons, because that is where the extra cost comes in. I watched the BBC news item about the OFT report that you mentioned, and was aghast at

how the cost of uniforms impacted on low-paid families. If there are three or four children in a family, that compounds the problem even more. What is your view on standardising uniforms, so that all children have a basic uniform, but with the option of having add-ons such as braiding and badges?

Jim Milne: That is not something that we have considered in any detail, although we took the opportunity to read the Office of Fair Trading report and to mention that to the committee in our evidence. I do not know whether some schools would want their uniforms abolished. I tend to think that they would not, but that is another issue. Our petition is really about the criteria, the level of grant and the targeting. Even when there is good practice in a local authority and generous criteria to qualify for generous grants are available, targeting still seems to be a problem.

10:45

In the school year 2004-05, the school clothing grant for Dundee was £761,000. Approximately £240,000 of that money was spent—so about a third of the families who were eligible for the grant did not take it up for whatever reason. We do not know why. They might have thought that it was not worth while, or that it was too bureaucratic and difficult to understand or they might just not have known they were eligible—we do not have that kind of detail. If that is what happens in an area whose local authority encourages people to take up the school clothing grant, I am sure that it will be reflected elsewhere—although we do not have take-up figures in other local authorities. The targeting of benefit is extremely important.

When we raised the matter with the Minister for Education and Young People, we were told that the grant is only a contribution towards the uniform and that it is not intended to cover the full cost. The level of grant about which Caroline Morrison spoke goes nowhere near meeting the cost of a school uniform. When people are poor, they need a 100 per cent grant, because they do not have anything else.

Helen Eadie: I commend you on the petition, which is excellent. Did I pick you up right that Falkirk Council runs a voucher system?

Caroline Morrison: Yes. The two options in Falkirk are a clothing voucher scheme or the council issues a crossed cheque, so the recipient must have a bank account.

Helen Eadie: Is Falkirk the only local authority in Scotland that offers such options?

Caroline Morrison: As far as I am aware, Falkirk is the only one that still operates the voucher system.

Helen Eadie: What is your preferred option—cash or vouchers?

Jim Milne: Issuing cash provides parents with the responsibility to spend it efficiently. They could make maximum use of it by going somewhere where they can get more and cheaper clothing that would do the child over the school year. That is the way in which we would encourage any system to be implemented. Vouchers carry a stigma, they are antiquated and should not be used in a modern society.

Caroline Morrison: Additionally, the voucher system might restrict parents to purchasing school clothing in certain places.

Helen Eadie: To play devil's advocate, some people will say, "Yes, but would the money really go to pay for the children's uniforms or would it go with the dad down the pub?" Such accusations are made in council circles when cash is proposed rather than vouchers.

Jim Milne: It is amazing and unfortunate how rich and poor people always attack the poor. Our line is that people should be given the responsibility to spend their money and benefits in ways that are appropriate for them. We all like a bit of enjoyment in life.

Mothers tend to spend the school clothing grant and they are more responsible than men sometimes are. That is not an accusation that I throw into the discussion lightly; it is a fact of life.

John Farquhar Munro: Good morning. Just to clarify: you seek amendments to the way in which the grant is administered. Currently, the local authority is given grant-aided expenditure as a lump sum and decides what allocation it will make to the school clothing grant. Or does it meet the demand as it is presented?

Jim Milne: I am not sure of the exact formula for the bulk grant that local authorities receive, but it is meant to be enough to ensure that everyone who is eligible for the grant can receive it, but that is not what happens because, for some reason, people do not apply for the grant. In most local authorities there is a difference between what is available for a primary school child and what is available for a secondary school child—the level tends to increase, except in Edinburgh where it decreases slightly.

According to the latest information that we have, Inverclyde—one of the poorest areas in Scotland—has the lowest level of school clothing grant, at £30. That is an absolute disgrace. I do not know why that is the case, but that is the situation there.

There is good practice in some local authorities. Some are trying to target the money well, make the process as unbureaucratic as possible and be

as generous as they can within their budgetary constraints, but that is not always the case, and we do not know why. That is why we think local authorities need more guidance from the Executive on how to administer the grant and what level of grant should be paid.

There is cause for some differences in the criteria. For example, some local authorities that have been part of the dispersal programme have asylum seekers in their areas and can provide grant aid to people who have asylum-seeker certificates. The situation will differ from one local authority to another. I can understand why there are differences for such reasons but, in general, the criteria should be the same—poor people are poor people.

John Farquhar Munro: Yes. It seems that the debate has concentrated on the blazer. The committee's briefing paper says that the clothing grant is designed to help children participate in their education. If a child has a keen interest in physical education and sports, would an education authority consider grant aid for a pair of new trainers as opposed to a school blazer?

Jim Milne: I do not know. It would be the parents' choice when they were purchasing whatever they thought was necessary for the child at that time. Because most of the grant is available at the start of the summer/autumn term and they cannot apply for other support later in the year, it tends to be summer clothing that is purchased, not duffel coats, heavier coats, heavy shoes and that type of thing. In the winter months, when the weather gets a bit more inclement, they will have to find money elsewhere for those things or the kids will go without.

John Farquhar Munro: But you agree that it should be a clothing grant rather than a grant to buy a school blazer.

Jim Milne: Very much so.

John Farquhar Munro: It should not be prescriptive.

Jim Milne: No. It should not be £40 for a blazer and £20 for whatever. Parents can be inventive in looking about and getting as much for the money as possible. There has been negative inflation on a lot of school clothing in the supermarkets, for example. Parents can now perhaps eke the money out further to get more than they could in previous circumstances. Nevertheless, the grant is so low that it does not nearly cover the cost of the full uniform and all the sports clothing as well.

John Farquhar Munro: Did you say that you would prefer not to have the voucher system?

Jim Milne: Yes.

John Farquhar Munro: As Helen Eadie said, there is a degree of security in the use of the voucher system, as the voucher can be used only for the purpose for which it was awarded. If cash is awarded, it can be spent in any way the parents like.

Jim Milne: The petition asks the review to take account of the level of take-up. If the voucher system is used in Falkirk, it would be interesting to see whether there is a higher level of take-up there than in other areas. You might find that the level of take-up is not much higher.

Campbell Martin: It is an indictment of politicians and society that we are talking about this in 2006. As you know, we are talking not just about clothes, but about brands and the stigma that children feel for being poor. Unfortunately, children are not slow to identify somebody who is a bit different, which can create problems for a child at school. Thirty or even 40 years ago, when I was at school, children who wore hand-me-downs or clothes that were not quite up to the best standard were identified and got slagged off, maybe even bullied. It is terrible that we still have that problem in 2006.

I have a daughter at secondary school and I know how much it cost me to equip her for school. How does the minimum a child needs in terms of uniform or clothes to go to school compare with the maximum grant? I know that that is a difficult question, but I just want to get an idea of how little the grant is.

Caroline Morrison: We priced items at a supermarket and found that the minimum cost for both boys and girls was approximately £50. The maximum grant is £65.

Campbell Martin: You are talking about the very bare minimum.

Caroline Morrison: Yes, that was a very basic uniform of a jumper, a shirt and a pair of shoes. It did not include winter clothing or anything like that.

Campbell Martin: I notice that One Parent Families Scotland carried out a survey that found that, since 2000, two local authorities have reduced the grant. Do we know where they are?

Jim Milne: I do not know. What seems to happen is that if the grant is not allocated to families, it disappears into the main education budget. I do not know whether that is why some local authorities are quite happy that take-up is low.

The Convener: I invite members' suggestions on how to take the petition forward.

Helen Eadie: Given the points that have been raised this morning, perhaps we could invite reaction from the Child Poverty Action Group, One

Parent Families Scotland, the Poverty Alliance, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland and the Scottish Executive. We could get their views on the petition to bring back to the committee.

Jim Milne: Most of the Scottish charities you mentioned are aware of the petition and have voiced support for us. We have discussed it in the voluntary sector charitable network.

The Convener: We are sure that that sort of thing normally happens, but it is useful for us to get the information from the organisations, so that we can discuss the matter later with as much supporting information as possible. Writing to the organisations that Helen Eadie suggested would probably give us the information that we are looking for. That is not to say that you have not given us good information yourself, but it is useful for us to get it from the organisations themselves.

Jim Milne: Save the Children would be another good organisation to approach, because it is aware of the petition, too.

The Convener: That is a good suggestion, which we will take on board. Once we receive those responses, we will provide you with details of them and seek your response to them before we discuss the petition again in due course.

Microchip Implants (PE983)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE983, by Raymond Bell, which calls for the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to ban the use of microchip implants on young people in Scotland. It would appear that the petitioner has personal experience of an adverse reaction to a microchip implant. We received a very interesting submission from the petitioner. In the light of his experience, we have to consider the petition seriously. We could be found guilty of treating it flippantly if we do not take on board the information that he has given us.

Helen Eadie: I notice that Mr Bell is going to be viewing the meeting on the internet. He said in his letter:

"I shall be viewing the live broadcast on the internet, here in Finland."

We say hello to Mr Bell in Finland.

I had never given the issue a lot of thought. I was vaguely aware of what might or might not be going on, but what has happened suggests that there are worrying aspects. The most concerning thing is the fact that people can just have chips inserted without research having been conducted. The Food and Drug Administration in the United States of America says that it uses microchips with patients. However, despite having conducted a

literature search, the Scottish Parliament information centre has not been able to find any in-depth research on health-associated risks connected with such technology.

If I started to use something like this, I would want a wee bit of reassurance that somebody somewhere had done some good qualitative research on it. I would like to hear the views of Scottish professionals and Health Protection Scotland.

11:00

Campbell Martin: You are right: we should take this seriously. There is a reference to a nightclub in Barcelona where people are agreeing to have a chip inserted that will allow them into the VIP section of the nightclub. It is absolutely incredible that people are agreeing to be chipped for something so trivial. If I was running a nightclub, I would think that anyone who agreed to that would be too stupid to be in my club. It is a serious point, and we should treat it as such.

John Farquhar Munro: I agree. This is a step too far and I do not see any justification for it. There are attachments that can be strapped to an individual's leg or arm to monitor their activities 24 hours a day. It is suggested that this system will be of universal use. I fear for the outcome if we agree to it. Someone might have an implant for medical reasons. That is to be welcomed, because it enhances the life potential of the individual, but this is strictly for surveillance and I cannot support such a suggestion. I am sure that the committee has similar views.

The Convener: I would like to know whether it is possible for this type of equipment to be used in Scotland and whether anyone would be legally entitled to do here what is being suggested. The issue raises a lot of questions on which we should ask the Scottish Executive to comment. It should let us know whether this technology is possible, what it could be used for and whether there are any programmes into which it would fit. I know that we have had all sorts of accusation about how MI5 can operate recently, but—

Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP): That is more to do with a chip on the shoulder than any other kind of chip.

The Convener: It is worth pursuing the issue seriously, just to clarify whether it is actually possible for the technology to be used here and, if so, in what circumstances.

Helen Eadie: I think it can be used on animals. There was a BBC news programme about how dogs are being chipped because there have been some really sad cases of celebrities losing their dogs. I just wonder whether it is safe to have such

chemicals released into your bloodstream. This is a good petition on which we could seek clarity.

Rosie Kane: As far as I am aware, chips are used on animals for identification purposes. I do not know how safe they are; I am reading in the papers about chemical leakages and so on. I understand that the implant has to be inserted and administered by a veterinary surgeon, as opposed to a nightclub bouncer. As often happens, there is more regulation for pets than there is for humans. It is a great concern.

The Convener: I think we should write and ask Health Protection Scotland and the Scottish Executive to give us their comments on the petition and see what responses we get back.

Helen Eadie: It is nice to know that someone is watching us all the way over in Finland over the internet, convener.

Plants (Complaints) (PE984)

The Convener: Our next petition is by Dr Colin Watson on behalf of Scothedge, who calls on the Scottish Parliament to introduce legislation to provide local authorities with the power to deal with complaints about vigorous growing trees, hedges, vines and other plants. The petitioner considers that legislation is required to protect residents who are facing loss of amenity, devaluation of and damage to their residential property through the improper and unfair deployment and mismanagement of trees, hedges, shrubs, vines and other vigorous growing plants on neighbouring land.

Members will recall petition PE497, which called for the Scottish Executive to implement legislation at the earliest opportunity to alleviate the nuisance caused by hedges. That petition was closed in May 2005 on the basis of Scott Barrie's work in that area.

Do members have any suggestions about how to deal with the petition?

Helen Eadie: I do not know about other members, but a constant flow of people come to my advice surgeries in my constituency to talk about the issue. I would be pleased if we made progress on the issue, because there is no doubt in my mind that something needs to be done about it. In the interim, so that we know where we are, we should write to Scott Barrie, who has a proposal for a member's bill in the Parliament on the issue. I believe that he is preparing a consultation document. We should also seek information and advice from the Department for Communities and Local Government on how part 8 of the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003, which aimed to tackle the problem, is being implemented in England. We have seen photographs of what

some people have to tolerate. It is intolerable that we allow that situation.

Rosie Kane: Does Scott Barrie's proposal include all the hedges, shrubs, vines and other plants that are mentioned in the petition?

Helen Eadie: I do not know. I do not know what stage his consultation is at, but we should give him feedback on the petition.

John Farquhar Munro: There is widespread support for Scott Barrie's proposal.

The Convener: Yes, but he has not managed to introduce a bill yet. However, if memory serves me correctly, Dave Petrie has lodged amendments to the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill to allow local authorities to deal with the issue.

Helen Eadie: I think that John Home Robertson and Dave Petrie have lodged amendments on that.

The Convener: On-going consideration of the issue is taking place in the Parliament, either through Scott Barrie's proposed member's bill or proposals to amend the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill. We must establish what progress, if any, is being made on the issue so that we can get back to the petitioner with that information and seek their views. Do members agree to do that?

Members indicated agreement.

Forth Estuary Ship-to-ship Oil Transfers (PE982)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE982, by B Linden Jarvis, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to consider and debate the implications of proposed transfers of oil between ships at anchor in the Forth estuary, with a specific focus on the likely impact of such operations on wildlife, tourism and local authority funding of clean-up and on how the Executive may use its powers within the 12-mile tidal limits to protect the local ecology, scenery and environment and areas of special scientific interest and habitats in the estuary. Members will recall considering PE956, by Mary Douglas, which called on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to ensure that the habitats regulations were applied in relation to ship-to-ship oil transfers in Scotland.

Mark Ruskell wants to comment on the petition before we consider it.

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The issue has been around for some time. It is about five months since the committee considered PE956. During that time, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency has approved the oil-spill contingency plan, which in effect means that ship-to-ship oil transfers could go ahead in the Firth of Forth at any point, should Forth Ports choose to

sanction them. Mary Douglas and Linden Jarvis, who has submitted petition PE982, are considerably frustrated that the committee has not received all the evidence that it needs to make progress on the issue. There is a feeling that progress is needed urgently.

PE982 and PE956 cover similar ground. PE982 considers some of the strategic issues, such as where oil transfers should take place and whether they should take place in Orkney. Mr Jarvis argues that the set-up in Orkney is better for dealing with such transfers. The petitions would sit well together as part of a limited inquiry by the Environment and Rural Development Committee, which is considering marine issues in the run-up to dissolution.

If the petitions are not referred to the Environment and Rural Development Committee for detailed consideration, there will be no scrutiny of the issue before the election and in all reality there will probably be no such scrutiny until at least this time next year, by which time ship-to-ship oil transfers might well be going ahead in the Firth of Forth and the petitions will in effect be redundant.

The Executive has set up a working group, which is considering marine issues and how legislation might be changed in session 3 of the Parliament. That is useful, and November might be a good time for the Environment and Rural Development Committee to consider the group's conclusions and ship-to-ship oil transfers, which is a live issue. Such work might well feed into plans for session 3.

Helen Eadie: I agree entirely with what Mark Ruskell said about the seriousness of the issue. There is no doubt that concern has been expressed by people from around the Forth estuary and beyond and that there is extraordinary support for the views expressed in the petition. Mr Linden Jarvis has given sound reasons for why he feels so strongly that the activity should be directed to Scapa Flow and I support that view. That is what ought to happen.

In light of the fact that we are also considering PE956, from Mary Douglas of Kinghorn, we should take up the suggestion in our briefing paper that we consider both petitions together and pursue the responses to PE956. We can then piece the information together and decide what more—if anything—we can do to address what is a desperately serious issue.

The Convener: We need to chase up the responses to PE956 that we sought. We expected to have been able to collate responses before now, but that has not been possible. PE982 provides a timely reminder that we must make progress on the earlier petition. When we receive

and circulate the responses, we should include Mr Linden Jarvis, so that we can seek as much feedback as possible and address the issue as quickly as possible.

Mr Ruskell: Can we forward the petitions to the Environment and Rural Development Committee now or in the months ahead?

The Convener: We cannot do that until we have received the responses. When we have passed a matter on to another committee, it is out of our hands. As we have not yet received the responses, we have nothing to pass on to the Environment and Rural Development Committee. Ultimately I think that we will want to take the matter forward, but we cannot pre-empt the responses of the people whose views we sought or the petitioners' views of those responses. We would be jumping the gun if we forwarded the petition before we concluded our deliberations.

Rosie Kane: Did you say that we should seek speedy responses from the people who we contacted?

The Convener: Yes. Are members happy for us to do that, to get things moving?

Members indicated agreement.

Statutory Religious Observance in Schools (PE993)

The Convener: PE993 was lodged by David Walker and calls on the Scottish Parliament to amend the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 to remove the statutory requirement on education authorities to provide religious observance in Scottish schools. The petitioner considers that all children should be taught together, irrespective of whether they have religious beliefs. How do members think that we should approach the petition?

John Farquhar Munro: The petition is rather broad, because it calls for the removal of the statutory requirement on education authorities to provide religious observance in Scottish schools. "Observance" is different from religious education and I think that there is also a statutory requirement on education authorities to teach religious education.

11:15

The Convener: I think that the petitioner wants that requirement to be removed—that is the point of the petition. We all expressed our personal opinions in relation to the first petition this morning, so we would not be setting any dangerous precedents by stating our personal opinions with regard to this petition. With that in mind, I have to say that I fundamentally disagree with the position that Mr Walker takes in this

petition. I was educated in a faith school and I saw the value of having my children educated in a faith school. I find it bizarre that people who preach tolerance will not tolerate religious education. However, that is not to say that I would not want to seek the views of various organisations in relation to this petition. I have no problem with that. That would be the fair way to treat this petition, rather than dismissing it because of my personal position.

John Farquhar Munro: I agree with you, convener. However, as I said, we have to be clear about the difference between observance and religious instruction.

Helen Eadie: I absolutely agree with you, convener. I would not want to be obstructive to the petitioner and I think that we should get the views on the petition from the Humanist Society of Scotland, the Scottish Inter Faith Council, Learning and Teaching Scotland, the Association of Directors of Education, the Scottish Parent Teacher Council and the Scottish Executive. However, my own position is clear. I have a very strong faith. Although I was not taught in a faith school, I feel that faith and spiritual development is important for us all in life.

Rosie Kane: Is it worth contacting the Educational Institute of Scotland as well?

The Convener: Why not? I am more than happy to get as wide a view on the petition as possible. I wonder whether we should contact the churches. We probably know where most of them are coming from on this issue, of course, and the Scottish Inter Faith Council would probably be able to give us the churches' position.

Helen Eadie: I think that we should ask the churches for their views, as the issue affects all faiths. There is the Jewish religion, the Church of Scotland, the Catholic Church and so on—let us ask them all.

The Convener: Are members happy that we do that and contact the organisations that have been mentioned?

Members indicated agreement.

Current Petitions

Limited Companies (Court Representation) (PE863)

11:17

The Convener: The first current petition is PE863, by Bill Alexander, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to amend the Solicitors (Scotland) Act 1980 to allow limited companies to be given either the right to apply for legal aid or the right to represent themselves in court.

At its meeting on 18 February, the committee agreed to write to the Confederation of British Industry Scotland and to invite the views of the petitioner on responses that had been received. A response has been received from the petitioner and circulated, as well as an update on the legal position.

Do members have any suggestions about how we can take the petition forward?

Helen Eadie: Shall we refer it to the Justice 2 Committee, as it is actively considering this issue as part of its consideration of the Legal Aid (Scotland) Bill? I think that our colleagues on that committee would be happy to consider this petition.

The Convener: Do we agree to do that?

Members indicated agreement.

Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002 (PE930)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE930, by Lucy Johnson McDowall, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to amend the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002 to bring all aspects of local authority administration under the remit of the public services ombudsman, without exception or exemption, and for the ethics and professionalism of local authority officials to be included in the remits of the ombudsman or the Standards Commission for Scotland.

At its meeting on 22 February, the committee agreed to write to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, Audit Scotland, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Unison, the GMB and the Scottish Executive. I think that we should ask the petitioner for her views on the responses that have been received from those bodies. Do members agree?

Members indicated agreement.

Supporting People Funding (PE932)

The Convener: Our next petition is from Stella Macdonald, on behalf of the Citizen's Rights Action Group, and calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to review the supporting people funding arrangements to ensure that vulnerable adults are in receipt of the responsive services that are required to keep them healthy.

At its meeting on 22 February, the committee agreed to write to Community Care Providers Scotland, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, Shelter Scotland, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care and the Scottish Executive. Responses have now been received and circulated.

Helen Eadie: I suggest that we seek the petitioners' views on the responses and give their feedback further consideration. I am sure that Stella Macdonald and Margaret Duncan, who are in the public gallery this morning, will be wondering why we are going to write to them instead of simply telling them face to face. However, it is simply the way we do things.

The Convener: Do members agree with Helen Eadie's suggestion?

Members indicated agreement.

Local Authorities' Traffic Orders (Procedure) (Scotland) Regulations 1999 (PE934)

The Convener: The next petition is petition PE934, by Dr J W Hinton, on behalf of the metered parking organisation, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to review the Local Authorities' Traffic Orders (Procedure) (Scotland) Regulations 1999 to ensure that local authority consultation on traffic orders is full, meaningful and democratic.

At its meeting on 8 March, the committee agreed to write to COSLA, Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Executive. Responses have been received and circulated. In addition, members have received correspondence from the petitioners that provides an update on the situation in Glasgow.

Rosie Kane: I believe that, yet again, we have received no word from COSLA.

At the end of the first page of its response, the Scottish Executive says that it would be interested in any new evidence or findings that emerge. The petitioners should find that encouraging, as I understand that they have quite a lot of new

evidence and some interesting findings. I suggest that we seek their views on the responses.

The Convener: I should say that we received a rather minimal and not very detailed response from COSLA.

Rosie Kane: I suppose that we should be grateful for small mercies.

The Convener: It did not ignore us, but it did not give us a lot of information to work with. We should seek the petitioners' views on the responses anyway. Are members agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Secondary Schools (Lockers) (PE825)

The Convener: The next petition is petition PE825, by Alana Watson, on behalf of Rosshall academy students council and higher modern studies section, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to ensure that every Scottish secondary school provides lockers for pupils. Those pupils have to carry heavy bags through the school day, which can lead to back problems.

At its meeting on 8 March, the Public Petitions Committee agreed to invite the Scottish Executive's views on the petitioners' response. The response has now been received and circulated. Members will note the Executive's position that decisions on aspects of school buildings and facilities are

"best left to local decision making processes"

and that it sees

"no benefit to be gained from the provision of guidance or direction from the Executive on the provision of school lockers."

I disagree. I understand that the Executive might not wish to prescribe the facilities in any given school but, given that so much guidance on schools is required, and given that, under various contracts, school buildings have to be designed in accordance with the local authority's wishes and in consultation with parents, teachers and others, I cannot believe that we do not need some guidance on basic school facilities. I wonder whether the Education Committee should consider the need for such guidance to provide young people with some assurance that local authorities are dealing with the issue. For goodness' sake, we are trying to prevent them from getting back problems.

Helen Eadie: Like you, convener, I am outraged by the Executive's deplorable response. It cannot simply tell the students of Rosshall academy that this issue is not important; indeed, it has been acknowledged that the weight of pupils' school bags is causing serious problems. I agree that we

should refer the petition to the Education Committee. Someone somewhere should really dig their heels in on this matter, because if young people cannot take appropriate care of their spines when they are growing up they are just storing up back problems for the future.

Part of the problem is the present system in schools, which involves young people roving around to get to their different classes. If that system is necessary, a way must be found of allowing pupils to store some of their books.

Rosie Kane: I agree with everything that has been said. It is a false economy to ignore the issue now. The pupils of Rosshall academy have handed the Executive a brilliant opportunity. If we were to agree with the Executive's response, as well as putting those pupils' growing spines at risk, we might put their interest in democracy at a peep. I agree with the suggestion to pass on the petition to the Education Committee so that it can consider the issue further.

The Convener: I definitely think that some guidance is required to ensure that local authorities insist that such provision is made available.

Rosie Kane: It is a health and safety issue.

The Convener: Exactly. The health and safety of pupils is at stake. It beggars belief that such an issue can be left to the people who draw up contracts. Given that we have so much regulation in other areas, it is nonsensical not to have any here.

John Farquhar Munro: The Minister for Education and Young People has responded by saying that it is for local authorities to decide what is best.

The Convener: That might be the case, but in other areas local authorities are given guidelines under which they must operate. I cannot believe that the Executive wants to leave it up to local authorities to decide on a case-by-case basis whether a school should have lockers. There will obviously be variations, depending on which company an authority deals with to build the school and which other facilities are provided. We demand other things of local authorities, so I do not see why we cannot demand that they provide lockers for our young people.

Campbell Martin: Local authorities will not make such provision off their own bats, but if the Executive provides guidance that recognises that damage can be done to young people's spines as a result of carrying around heavy bags, they will take cognisance of the issue and respond to it in their future plans. They will not do anything unless guidance is issued.

The Convener: That is my view.

Rosie Kane: It is necessary for there to be a uniform approach. It would not be right for kids in some areas to have dodgy backs, because parents would start to send their kids to schools where they would not get dodgy backs. We need uniform provision throughout Scotland.

The Convener: I wonder how a local authority would respond to a placing request that was submitted on the basis that the preferred school had lockers for the kids but the alternative did not. We might be saving local authorities from themselves.

We will send the petition to the Education Committee so that it can give the issue serious consideration.

Members indicated agreement.

Oil Depots (Public Health) (PE936)

The Convener: Petition PE936, which was submitted by Simon Brogan, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to review the public health implications of siting oil depots in residential areas in the light of the Buncefield oil depot explosion in December last year.

At its meeting on 8 March, the committee agreed to write to the UK Petroleum Industry Association, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Health Protection Scotland, the Health and Safety Executive, COSLA, the United Kingdom Offshore Operators Association and the Scottish Executive. Responses have been received and circulated. Members will note that Lord Newton's investigation into the Buncefield explosion and fire of December 2005 is continuing. Are there any comments?

Helen Eadie: Perhaps it would be best to wait for the report on the Buncefield major incident investigation. Once that has been completed, we can invite more comments from the people concerned. Thereafter, we can seek the views of the petitioner on all the responses.

The Convener: Are members happy for us to await the production of that report?

Members indicated agreement.

Public Health Services (Consultation) (PE938)

The Convener: Our final petition this morning is petition PE938, by Dr Patrick McNally, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to ensure that clear, transparent and meaningful public consultation takes place when changes are proposed to public health services.

At its meeting on 8 March, the committee agreed to write to the Scottish health council, the Scottish

Consumer Council, Citizens Advice Scotland and the Scottish Executive. Responses have been received. What do members suggest?

Helen Eadie: Shall we seek the petitioner's views?

The Convener: Yes, it would be useful to get his perspective on the responses. Do members agree?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Meeting closed at 11:29.

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