

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 23 October 2007

Session 3

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

6th Meeting 2007, Session 3

CONVENER

*Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West)
(LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Bashir Ahmad (Glasgow) (SNP)
*Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Angela Constance (Livingston) (SNP)
*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
*Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)
*Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP)
*Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD)
Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
John Scott (Ayr) (Con)
*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED :

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP)
Andrew Billson-Page
Alison Hardie (Young Scot)
Rajiv Joshi (Young Scot)
Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP)
Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Fergus Cochrane

ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Hough

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Tuesday 23 October 2007

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:02*]

New Petitions

The Convener (Mr Frank McAveety): Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee's sixth meeting in session 3. In particular, I welcome to the meeting representatives of the Petitions Committee of the National Assembly for Wales, who are here to observe our proceedings. We have already discussed with them issues relating to petitions in the Scottish Parliament. I hope that they enjoy today's session as much as we will and that they learn from our engagement in our petitions process.

I remind everyone that all mobile phones and other electronic devices should be switched off. There are standing apologies from Angela Constance; I again welcome John Wilson, who is substituting for her. We have received a late indication that Bashir Ahmad may be delayed; indeed, he may be unable to attend the meeting, but we await further information on that. As far as I am aware, those are all the apologies that we have received.

Before we consider today's petitions, I want to make something clear to members of the public and those who view the committee's proceedings. We receive a substantial volume of petitions, and only a small number of petitioners can be called to give evidence directly to the committee. The reality is that, because of timescales and the way in which the committee structure is organised, we can take oral evidence on only two petitions—or a maximum of three, if we are lucky. That means that we cannot take oral evidence on the vast majority of petitions. However, I reassure all petitioners and members of the public that the committee considers all petitions thoroughly and seriously and that, even if petitioners do not have an opportunity to give oral evidence, committee members value the petitions that are submitted and take seriously their role in assessing their value and worth and deciding what to do with them.

We are not about diminishing the contribution that people in Scotland can make by petitioning the Parliament, but we need to manage a very popular petitions structure to maximise those voices as much as possible. Even if a petitioner is

not heard directly, there are still many ways in which the issues that their petition raises can be amplified, examined and thoroughly considered over the period in which it is kept open.

Endometriosis (Research Funding) (PE1057)

The Convener: I welcome our first oral submission this afternoon. Petition PE1057, by Andrew Billson-Page on behalf of the Save our NHS Group, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to consider increasing funding for research into endometriosis—I think that I got that right—and to consider ways of facilitating more effective diagnosis of the condition in light of the recommendations of the Kerr report on the future of the national health service in Scotland. I welcome Andrew to this afternoon's meeting. You have approximately three minutes to make your submission, after which I hope that we can have a shared discussion on the issues that your petition raises.

Andrew Billson-Page: Thank you.

An overview of endometriosis is perhaps unnecessary, given the Scottish Parliament's previous discussions on the issue. The Parliament's research note on endometriosis—dated 25 June 2001—gives the following description:

"The condition is defined as one in which tissue almost perfectly resembling the uterine mucous membrane (the endometrium) and containing typical endometrial granular and stromal elements occurs aberrantly in various locations in the pelvic cavity."

That neat medical definition adequately summarises the biomechanics of endometriosis.

However, such definitions can never convey the level of suffering that is endured by those unfortunate women who have first-hand experience of the symptoms of the condition. Apparently, endometriosis is the second most common gynaecological problem in Scotland. The symptoms vary, but they almost always include severe and debilitating pain and they can include infertility and fatigue. The condition is also known to cause gastro-intestinal and bladder-related problems. In addition, although the symptoms are largely physical, they can have effects on mental health.

There is currently no known cure for endometriosis, although a range of treatments is on offer. Unfortunately, those are mainly geared towards controlling and relieving symptoms. Treatments include pain-killing medication, hormonal treatments that prevent ovulation and surgery—which, at its most drastic, can include hysterectomy. In many respects, those treatments

are less than ideal and they are certainly inadequate. However, until there is a better understanding of the causes of endometriosis, treatments will inevitably have limited effectiveness. Therefore, research is urgently required if progress is to be made. The immediate priority must be more effective treatment and earlier diagnosis.

The fact that current thinking on the potential causes of the condition is confused, contradictory and speculative underlines my case for increasing responsible medical research into the problem. One theory is that endometriosis is caused by retrograde menstruation—an explanation that is favoured by the National Endometriosis Society—but, for example, a clinical group from the national university hospital in Iceland suggests that it is due to a genetic or hereditary predisposition. It has also been claimed that endometriosis is a by-product of the impact of the toxins and chemicals that are included in our diets and in products that are in use in our everyday lives. Another theory is that the condition is caused by remnants of tissue that remain from the earliest stages of pre-birth development. All those theories are plausible, but we need to explore them further. The scientific and medical institutions are failing women—including Scottish women—by speculating on, rather than facilitating, solutions.

Some progress has been made. The United Kingdom has an all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis. In 2004, the National Endometriosis Society received £25,000 from the UK Government. Groups such as the National Endometriosis Society have done a great deal to increase endometriosis awareness, as has a recent grant from the European Union. However, as the National Endometriosis Society affirms, funding for research is the central issue. Although facilitating research is one of the society's stated aims, the society itself concludes that it is currently not in a position to do that. Instead, its activities are limited to awareness campaigning. For me, that is not enough.

On 9 June 2003, in a House of Commons written answer, Jacqui Smith conceded that Government funding had fallen from £1.8 million in 1998 to £1.2 million in 2002. I cannot extrapolate the Scottish statistics from those figures, but they demonstrate that a sympathetic stance from our elected representatives in the Parliament is incompatible with a backdrop of Government funding cuts.

In her motion for a debate on endometriosis in the Scottish Parliament in 2001, Annabel Goldie, the leader of the Conservative group, urged the Parliament to acknowledge

"the need for greater awareness of this disease amongst the general public and the medical profession",

and to encourage

"greater co-operation between relevant organisations and individuals to facilitate the early diagnosis and treatment of the disorder."

Annabel Goldie's comments were welcome and are still pertinent six years later, because we have not moved forward. It is unfortunate that she stopped short of making recommendations on funding, but she stressed the importance of co-operation. In my call for funding, I say that co-operation is needed, because research has been piecemeal and inadequate.

Malcolm Chisholm said in a written answer on funding:

"The Chief Scientist Office ... has responsibility for encouraging and supporting research into health and health care needs in Scotland. The CSO has previously contributed £201,000 to research projects on causation and treatment options for endometriosis but is not currently funding any research into endometriosis. The CSO responds to research applications ... and this role is well advertised throughout the health care and academic community."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 13 August 2003; S2W-1558.]

I appreciate that funding arrangements for scientific study are complex and often not understood by the public—or the MSP who asked Mr Chisholm the question. However, it would be facile to suggest that we are talking about an exclusively scientific research project; we are talking about finding a permanent solution to a pertinent health question. It is a matter of social justice.

In 2001 Annabel Goldie had a vision of a Scotland in which early diagnosis and treatment of endometriosis was a reality. For that to happen, we need more than well-intentioned discussion; we need significant research funding, which will increase understanding among the medical and scientific communities and lead to more effective treatment. Such an approach is likely to have significant economic benefits as the need for drastic surgical intervention is reduced. For those reasons, I ask members to give my petition due consideration. I am sorry if I have overrun my time.

The Convener: You have done so slightly, but do not worry about it.

You raised a number of issues in your petition and your statement. Members have debated what the Government, its health directorates and the various health agencies have been doing to address the issue, which is central to your submission. We will focus on that. I invite questions or observations from members.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I ask Andrew Billson-Page to clarify a comment that he made towards the end of his statement. Did he say that currently no research is going on in Scotland?

Andrew Billson-Page: That is what Malcolm Chisholm said in 2003. He referred to a one-off donation of £201,000, which the Scottish Executive had made in 2001. There was no regular contribution.

Robin Harper: Forgive me, but I am not clear about how things are done. Does the CSO commission research or does it respond to and fund research proposals from universities and other scientific establishments that do medical research?

Andrew Billson-Page: My understanding, which is limited, is that a research proposal would have to come from the academic institutions. That is the difficulty. Endometriosis is a health issue, not a scientific issue—particularly for the 800,000 women in Scotland who will potentially suffer from the condition during their lifetime.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Have you asked scientific institutions whether they are willing to do the research that you talk about and to bid for funding for it? Do you know where they are at? I am not saying that you should know, but I ask because of your interest.

14:15

Andrew Billson-Page: I am a medical student, so I have a medical understanding. When I put the petition together, I spoke at length with Dr Jean Turner when she was an MSP. Her then agent, Dr Robbie Robertson, is a retired general practitioner who has a keen interest in endometriosis. Through him, I tried to find statistics and some analysis of how funding was apportioned and what it was spent on in Scotland. Doing that was difficult. He gave me a contact at the University of Glasgow, of whom I asked many questions, but although that person is an academic in the field, they could not give me absolutely assured answers. We are in the early days, so I may exert pressure on academic institutions to request further funding.

Rhoda Grant: Are you aware of research that is being done in other countries?

Andrew Billson-Page: Research is being conducted in Iceland, but it seems controversial. Organisations in other countries refute some of the evidence that is claimed to have been unearthed there. I treat that research with suspicion at the moment.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I am not sure of the up-to-date position. I was first involved in the issue of endometriosis when I became an MSP in 2003. I was in contact with people in Aberdeen, where some research into endometriosis had been done or was continuing. Are you aware of whether that is still going on in Aberdeen?

Andrew Billson-Page: Some research is still going on. My main point is that central Government has cut funding by a third. That is a concern, because the amount of research that can be done is limited by what central Government provides. Although £1.2 million might sound like a great deal, it is not a huge amount. Given that the Scottish Parliament's remit covers Scotland's health interests, I do not imagine that the UK Government will prioritise Scottish interests.

Nanette Milne: On a slightly different tack, I was under the impression three or four years ago that an application might be made to the Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network for guidelines on endometriosis. I have not heard whether any progress has been made on that. Are you aware of any application?

Andrew Billson-Page: I am aware of nothing of note since 2002, apart from the rather speculative claim from Iceland that endometriosis is exclusively genetic.

Tricia Marwick (Central Fife) (SNP): Do any self-help organisations in the United Kingdom deal with endometriosis?

Andrew Billson-Page: Obviously, there are many self-help groups for women generally, but two major organisations deal with endometriosis: the Endometriosis UK foundation and the National Endometriosis Society. The society aims to do much more work on research, whereas Endometriosis UK is more of a support group.

Tricia Marwick: Does either of those organisations fund research? I know that the Multiple Sclerosis Society has funded much research into MS. Is research being done through those organisations that you have not referred to?

Andrew Billson-Page: The National Endometriosis Society has a stated aim of researching endometriosis. Unfortunately, it concedes that because of the economic restrictions that it finds itself subject to, it cannot do research at the moment. That is a difficulty. The society is a national charitable organisation that depends on public money. It had a gift of £25,000 from the Government in 2004 to facilitate research, but it cannot achieve its stated aim because the money from the Government is limited. As far as I am aware, the society has had no further funding from the Government.

Robin Harper: I take your point about Iceland. Iceland's population is quite small—it is roughly that of Aberdeen—so the sample is rather too small to draw conclusions from.

You have made a powerful argument, and I am sure that that impression is shared by the rest of the committee. I would be reluctant to let the

matter go. We should keep the issue alive and push it on further.

Tricia Marwick: I was present in the chamber when Annabel Goldie led the members' business debate on the subject in 2001—a lot of women MSPs were there. Part of the purpose of her raising the subject was to highlight what is a real problem for many women in Scotland. It is regrettable that, since then, the light that Annabel Goldie allowed to be shone on the condition has not resulted in the research that all members hoped for. I agree with Robin Harper and others that we must not lose sight of the condition.

I doubt whether the UK Parliament has debated endometriosis—that might have something to do with its having a lower proportion of women members. I repeat: we should not lose sight of the matter, given the work that has been done by Annabel Goldie and others over the years. We should ask the Government and other organisations what they are going to do about it.

The Convener: Andrew, you mentioned that you are a medical student. Is the condition part of the area that you are specialising in, or is it just an issue that you feel strongly about?

Andrew Billson-Page: I have been strongly affected by it. I would like to have children, but my wife is not able to. That is not an endometriosis issue but, from there, I came into contact with women of child-bearing age with endometriosis and became aware of what a problem it is for them. That is where my interest stems from. It is largely personal, and the issue is emotive.

The Convener: That is fine—I am not criticising that. If such a number of women are affected, why have we not been able to get key players to give the condition more priority? In the world that we live in, there will never be enough money for all the things that we want to do, no matter how much we ask. If the issue is important enough, how do we raise the debate to ensure that the CSO, health boards, academic and medical specialists and others engage properly to find solutions to something that seems not to have been explained well enough so far? What are the barriers right now, which might prompt the Public Petitions Committee to ask more questions?

Andrew Billson-Page: When the public think about health, they mainly think about hospitals, as I am sure you, as MSPs, will appreciate. The public tend also to focus on life-threatening illnesses. They want money to go into cardiac or cot death research. To be honest, endometriosis is not considered particularly sexy. It does not kill people. Most women suffer in silence, and it is not something that people want to know about.

Annabel Goldie started something very useful in 2001 when she lodged her motion. It was the first

time that the condition had been debated in any Parliament in the UK, and there was widespread empathy with what she was trying to do. The National Endometriosis Society has done a great deal to raise awareness of the problem. The new grant that we received from the European Union in May this year will help to raise the profile of the condition throughout Europe, at least in some respects. Most of the money has gone to academic institutions and self-help groups. That in itself is not enough, however.

It is a good start that people now know about a problem that has been hidden for so long. It is a bit like mental health problems—years ago, we knew that they existed, but we did not want to address them. There is a similar problem with endometriosis. If the public become more aware of the condition, they will start to demand answers, solutions and money.

The Convener: With that discussion and those suggestions, I have now heard from members on the matter. We would like to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing on the issue. Given what Andrew Billson-Page said, I think that we should contact the CSO and NHS Quality Improvement Scotland. I also heard somebody mention SIGN.

There is a range of agencies to which we could write directly with copies of the petition and the *Official Report* of our discussion. We could say, "Here are the two or three areas that we explored on which we wish to get responses from you." Are there any other suggestions about who we could contact?

Rhoda Grant: The National Endometriosis Society was mentioned as a voluntary organisation interested in the scientific research. It would be good to write to it for information, as well as to Endometriosis UK, which has support groups.

When we write to the Scottish Government and SIGN, we should mention that there appear to be no guidelines for dealing with some illnesses and diseases. That came up at our previous meeting, when we heard from folk who were dealing with thrombosis and learned that there is no recognised way that applies throughout Scotland of dealing with people who have symptoms of that condition. In fact, I think that there were two such cases at the previous meeting, and here we go again—there is no guidance on how to investigate such conditions to reach a proper diagnosis. It seems that good practice is not being passed around health board areas. That seems to have been the flavour of several recent petitions, and we should pick up on it.

The Convener: Do members have any other suggestions?

Nanette Milne: I raised the SIGN guidelines issue because I knew that there were no guidelines for dealing with endometriosis. There is a process to follow, which I thought was undertaken three years ago, but clearly that did not happen. I would like to get in touch with SIGN. I also wonder whether it is worth making contact with universities, such as the University of Aberdeen, where we know research is on-going, to find out what is happening and how much money is going towards endometriosis research. I also wonder whether the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists might have any advice to offer.

The Convener: More will happen at the next stage, but those are good and sensible suggestions from members—I hope that the clerk noted all of them. We will write to those organisations and await their responses before the next stage, when the petition will return to the committee, about which Andrew Billson-Page will be forewarned. We hope to progress some of the issues for you, Andrew.

Andrew Billson-Page: Thank you very much.

The Convener: Thanks for your time today.

Democratic Process (Young People) (PE1065)

The Convener: Our next petition is by Rajiv Joshi, on behalf of Young Scot, calling on the Scottish Parliament to use the Microsoft government leaders forum Europe to promote the use of new and emerging technologies to enhance the engagement of young people in the democratic process and to encourage Parliaments throughout Europe to do the same. I welcome Rajiv Joshi and Alison Hardie to the meeting this afternoon. You have three minutes to present your petition and a question-and-answer session will follow. Good luck.

Rajiv Joshi (Young Scot): You might not realise that Earth has its own planetary ring. From space, the thousands of satellites that orbit this planet have transformed the way in which people communicate. Information and communications technology has changed the world. Use of the internet has grown by 245 per cent in the past six years alone. In Scotland, 70 per cent of young people regularly use the internet for day-to-day communication.

I will explain to the committee a little of the background to the petition, how it came about and why we think it is important for the Scottish Parliament to invest more in information technology to help young people become more engaged in Scotland's democracy.

14:30

In January 2007, young people from throughout Scotland and the rest of Europe participated in a youth seminar as part of the Microsoft government leaders forum. The delegates explored how European democracies engage with citizens, with a particular focus on young people and technology. Young people also had the opportunity at the end of the conference to ask questions of Bill Gates and Gordon Brown.

The internet has transformed how young people participate. They do so through online social networks and through short message service technology. The young people who met at the conference believed that technology could transform how they were consulted, inspire greater participation in elections, increase the space that they have for public deliberation and provide them with better access to decision making and influence. I will outline those four matters.

Using social networking technology could increase young people's participation and engagement in a host of discussions, thus increasing the reach and quality of consultation. SMS or global locator technology could provide a two-way connection between young people and policy and decision makers. Street consultations should be used to talk to young people where they are—personal digital assistants could be used to record their views. Using the principles of open source software, an online portal or virtual world could be created in which young people could be consulted and could discuss issues.

Young people feel that they cannot access bank accounts, because they do not have identification or cannot afford it. This year, Young Scot piloted a project about that with Lloyds TSB. Online surveys were used to establish the views of young people, who then used advocacy to lobby the banks. Now, young people can open bank accounts in Scotland with a Young Scot card, which costs them nothing. Technology transformed the way in which they participated in the project—they used online methods to come together. Consultation is important.

In the Scottish Youth Parliament elections in 2007, more than 6,000 young people in North Lanarkshire used online voting to elect their local MSYPs. That is testament to how technology can inspire participation in a way that traditional forms of engagement cannot.

It is important to increase the space for public deliberation. Young people feel that national initiatives to enable them to deliberate issues could facilitate their being consulted and could compel decision makers to engage with them more. The potential of MP3s and so on should be utilised. Young people can download videos and

podcasts to learn about issues and can then provide feedback and input on what matters to them. Engagement should be both informal and formal and efforts should be made to create more accessible forms of participation for young people, not only nationally but in local decision-making processes.

Technology could be used to help share participation across different countries in Europe. We should examine the different ways in which young people engage with issues and help them to realise what issues are important to them in different parts of the country.

Young Scot currently has 300,000 young people using its Young Scot card—92 per cent of 12 to 18-year-olds in Scotland. There are millions of hits on our website and we have an online portal on which we plan to develop a youth opportunities database as well as information services in schools. All those tools are in place, but we need to invest in an infrastructure that creates a more integrated approach to the way in which young people participate, not only in their education but in local decision making and democracy—in elections, deliberations and consultation. We believe that technology can make a difference to young people, can spark their participation in local democracy and can lead to a better Scotland.

The Convener: Would Alison Hardie like to add anything?

Alison Hardie (Young Scot): Not at the moment. I am happy to take any questions.

The Convener: The younger members of the committee should go first.

Tricia Marwick: That will be me.

The Convener: Yes, on you go. It says a lot for the committee if Tricia Marwick is the youngest.

Tricia Marwick: Absolutely.

The petition was lodged on about 30 or 31 January, when the Microsoft government leaders forum was held in the Parliament. That highlights some of the issues that the convener referred to earlier in relation to the backlog of petitions, the amount of time that it takes us to deal with them and the fact that it is impossible for us to hear everybody.

Rajiv Joshi's presentation was excellent, but is Parliament the right forum to do all that has been suggested? You spoke about how successful Young Scot is and said that 92 per cent of young people are signed up to the Young Scot card. Would more support for Young Scot's work engaging with young people be better than involving some of the old yins in Parliament?

Rajiv Joshi: The point is interesting. It is important that young people understand Scotland

and its Parliament. For us, it is important to develop the infrastructure to enable participation. Parliament has a role in helping to remove barriers that prevent that infrastructure from being developed and in thinking about investing resources in that infrastructure so that the technology that Scotland's citizens have for participation and that young people have for participation locally as citizens stays at the cutting edge. Engaging with the Parliament to try to put the right resources in place is important.

Young Scot, the Scottish Youth Parliament, of which I have been the chair, and other organisations in the youth work sector, which I know well, provide young people with important face-to-face and peer-to-peer interaction. That needs to happen locally. Infrastructure needs to be put in place and resources need to be expended to ensure that that happens, which is where Parliament can play a role.

The Convener: One question that we talked about in our discussion with members of the National Assembly for Wales was the use of texting as a communicative model. The ageing process takes me over regularly, so will you explain how that would work?

Alison Hardie: Young Scot is about to do a consultation with NCH Scotland that will use SMS technology to ask young people, and particularly hard-to-reach and excluded groups of young people, what the Parliament's priorities should be in the new session. Groups of young people throughout Scotland will be asked to vote on their priorities for the Parliament, using mobile phones. It will be interesting to see what comes back from that.

We have done other consultation work, particularly with the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland, to ask young people what their priorities are—having things to do was their top priority. That was all done by text message; it is a successful way of engaging with young people.

The Convener: When you discuss that option with young people, what do they say about how they feel? Is that more likely to encourage them to participate than conventional methods?

Alison Hardie: Yes—that method has helped. The number of young people who have participated by using SMS technology has been encouraging. Young people see that as a positive way of participating in democracy. Our experience has been positive and young people are keen to use that technology.

The Convener: Will you offer courses in text speak for those of us who are a wee bit behind the times?

Alison Hardie: Yes, if you need that. We have a text speak dictionary.

The Convener: "C U soon," whatever that means.

Robin Harper: I am just coming into the information technology age. My wife asked me why I never texted her and I said, "Because I can't make it work," so she has patiently introduced me to the intricacies of predictive texting—I did not realise that that was why I never got the letter that I wanted.

The Convener: I can exclusively reveal that Robin Harper is our pre-radio member.

Tricia Marwick: You mean pre-wireless.

Robin Harper: I described difficulties that people of my age face, but young people are well versed in such technology and can take full advantage of it. Could the Parliament's education service make use of the facility? MSPs visit schools a lot and thousands of young people are shown round the Parliament. That activity could be carried on through many of the instruments that you explained to us.

Anything that can be done to involve young people more in the democratic process is good. Using such technology is the obvious way to involve them, so I am persuaded by your argument.

Rhoda Grant: Is the Microsoft government leaders forum the best forum for the Parliament to use to make progress? Are there any alternative approaches? Might it be an idea for the Parliament to work with organisations such as Young Scot to find another solution? Perhaps I do not know enough about the forum, but it seems a bit distant. Should we start something closer to the grass roots, together with organisations such as yours?

The person who deals with my website tells me that I have Facebook and podcasts and so on, but I do not know how to work them. We should use those things to engage as much as possible—and a bit of training would not go amiss.

Rajiv Joshi: I am sure that Young Scot would be happy to provide support or training in that kind of technology. The aspiration when the Microsoft government leaders forum came to the Scottish Parliament was that Scotland could lead Europe in developing forms of participation to inspire participative democracy, using technology that engages young people and helps Scotland develop a democracy far ahead of anything else in Europe. It would be amazing to achieve that.

That aspiration does not necessarily require to be met through the Microsoft government leaders forum. However, through working with other people in Europe, recognising other practices in

different parts of Europe and working to lead that practice, Scotland could do something quite amazing. Young Scot is part of a network called the European Youth Card Association, and it has been in the lead for quite a while. Every nation in Europe, pretty much, has a youth card similar to the Young Scot card. Perhaps we could lead practice in Europe using that network. However, we would need a bit of support from Parliament, both to develop that in Scotland, where we could work more intimately with organisations here, and to roll that out and take the lead across Europe.

Rhoda Grant: So it is not as if the same thing is happening somewhere else, and we can go and find good practice there. You are saying that we should actually devise the system and lead the rest of Europe.

Rajiv Joshi: Yes.

The Convener: If you were to project ahead by five or 10 years, how would you envisage engagement with elected members? I am asking about a reciprocal relationship—we need to consider how we engage with our electors. We are all on different learning curves, and we have different resistance levels. Clearly, the situation is evolving—the news on the radio this morning was about certain products and space being bought by major global companies so that they can communicate directly with the 18 to 30 spending age group. They have an economic interest in doing so and wish to secure such catalysts for their own development. How do we ensure that those companies do not dominate exclusively, and that there is a progressive voice on accessibility and the sharing of information, rather than controlling it? That is the big concern that I have.

Rajiv Joshi: That is a big challenge for us in Young Scot. We always want to protect young people. We have a database of young people throughout Scotland, but that is to be used to help their interaction. Private companies obviously look for ways to communicate with young people. I will give an example of where things can work well and develop. Before I came here today to present the petition, I was able to go on to the Scottish Parliament website and learn about each member here, so that I could understand your backgrounds and where you come from. You all have videos available online. That does a lot more for me in connecting with each of you than simply being able to read a biography.

The Convener: Do we look better in real life?

Rajiv Joshi: You have some interesting stories. It is important that young people can access information online about their MSPs.

Even being able to text can be important. If I am walking down my street and the streetlight is out, I am unlikely to call my councillor and tell them that

I cannot walk down my alleyway any more because the streetlight is out, that I am going to have to walk the long way round and that I am quite scared. I might, however, think of texting my councillor to tell them that my streetlight is out, giving them the postcode and asking them to fix it.

Services are not as responsive as that, but they could be. Scotland could lead the way. More innovative approaches could be taken to realise the real role that technology can play not only in improving the way in which services can respond to young people's needs, but in engaging young people in discussions. That is really important, whether it is done by way of direct contact with MSPs through text services or through other forms of communication.

14:45

Alison Hardie: New technology also has a role to play in engaging young people who are excluded for whatever reason—the young people who are not in education, employment or training. I am thinking of things such as podcasting, which are important if government is to offer a universal service.

Rajiv Joshi: That is particularly the case in rural communities. Many of the young people on Orkney and Shetland with whom we work say, "Technology is great. We can e-mail our MSP." They cannot travel from one of the smaller islands to the mainland to visit their MSP. It is important to try to get the technology to them.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I am interested in your engagement with difficult-to-reach young people. You keep referring to podcasting, texting, and the need for access to computers. Is there really such a proliferation of materials and technology that young people can use? You said that 6,000 young people in North Lanarkshire participated in the Scottish Youth Parliament elections, but I understand that much of that took place within North Lanarkshire Council school structures.

If we are trying to communicate with those difficult-to-reach younger adults, how do we do that if they do not have the technology? I am interested in the findings of the NCH surveys. If a young person does not have a mobile phone, computer, iPod, or an MP3 player, how can they engage with us?

Alison Hardie: Certainly, when Young Scot consults young people, we try to ensure that we strike a balance between offline and online activity. We do a lot of advocacy and street work to try to ensure that we include as many young people as possible. We also have an e-roadshow team, who go out and about with wireless laptops and iRiver technology. They can record podcasts,

which we make available to young people. However, we are limited in our time and resources, which means that we cannot include everyone in the way that we would like to.

The Convener: Okay; PE1065 raises many intriguing issues. The entire range of government—whether at national or local level—is reviewing its communication strategies to assess the two-way process that is required and ways in which to enhance the use of technology.

The reality is that—with little or no exception—most teenagers in this country now have a mobile phone and probably make better use of it than anyone in the room. They use their mobiles imaginatively to connect to a wider network of opportunity—commercial, individual, and social. The question is who drives all that. PE1065 mentions the Microsoft government leaders forum. Rhoda Grant touched on how to make that more organic. I am not being critical of the process by which you submitted the petition; I am simply trying to understand where best to develop things, which is from communities upwards. It would be useful to consider who we might explore such issues with. There must be standing parts of Government and public sector agencies that we could approach.

Tricia Marwick: An interesting conclusion of the Gould report is that the voters were the last people to be considered. The election seemed to have been organised by the political parties for the political parties—I am paraphrasing. That brings me back to the question I asked Rajiv Joshi about who should take responsibility for doing what he suggests. Should Parliaments and Governments take a top-down approach, or is the issue everyone's responsibility? Should Young Scot have more input than the Parliament or the Government?

We should speak to the Scottish Government and we should ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body about its plans. Perhaps Young Scot could produce a paper that contains ideas about what can reasonably be achieved and blue-sky thinking about what it would like to happen. When we have received responses and had a bit more input from Young Scot we might consider the issue again and make recommendations to various bodies.

The Convener: That is an interesting suggestion. We will see whether it goes down well with other committee members.

Rhoda Grant: This suggestion is off the top of my head. When petitions are taken further, we tend to refer them to other committees. However, given that the Public Petitions Committee acts as a gatekeeper for the Parliament and is concerned about how people access the Parliament, perhaps

we could undertake an inquiry on the issues that PE1065 raises. We could take the petition on and run with it. The Public Petitions Committee has a duty to do that for the Parliament and the Government. We can take soundings from other organisations, but there is a strong possibility that we could work with Young Scot and other organisations to develop the ideas in the petition. Given the subjects that the Public Petitions Committee deals with, we are always stepping on other members' toes and having to refer petitions to other committees. However, the issues in PE1065 are in our remit.

The Convener: That is a useful suggestion. I do not know what other members think. The challenge that faces a petitions committee—whether we are talking about the Public Petitions Committee of the Scottish Parliament or the Petitions Committee of the National Assembly for Wales, members of which are present—is that we cannot say, “This is how things are always done”. The world around us is changing rapidly, particularly when we consider people's engagement with decision making, even locally—or their disengagement, which is clear from electoral returns, never mind anything else.

The only caveat that I make is that the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body might regard the issue as its responsibility. However, it is not a bad idea for the Public Petitions Committee to acknowledge that the petition raises an important aspect of engagement. Members of this committee in 15 years' time will not be talking about petitions that people sign in the street; petitions will have virtual signatures, and e-technology and other new technologies will have been developed to enable members to engage with citizens. We are caught between the old, gramophone world, which we fondly reminisce about, and a new world, which young boys like Rajiv Joshi are positive about, although it scares the living daylights out of me.

John Wilson: I agree with the suggestion that has been made, but we should seek views more widely. The convener talked about how other public bodies use new technologies and Rajiv Joshi talked about how people can text their local authority to report that a streetlight has gone out. New technology can open up accountability in all democratic processes, not just in the Scottish Parliament but in local authorities. Many local authorities have a good working relationship with young people and do much outreach work. We must also consider how we engage people in wider society in the democratic process. It is not just about turning out to vote once every four years; it is about other processes.

This morning, the Justice Committee discussed how people engage with the police service. We must consider other public bodies. How do the

police engage with young people? If they use the media that they have always used, they do not get a message back from young people. If we are to conduct an inquiry we should make it as wide as possible and include public bodies and local authorities, which must also engage with wider society—and particularly with young people, if they do not want them to become disfranchised.

The Convener: The committee agrees in principle to further exploration of the issue. We can ask the clerks to produce a paper on the best way to make progress, perhaps in discussion with the petitioners. We could talk to Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, who has engaged with young people through surveys. John Wilson is right and we should take his suggestions into account.

Robin Harper: I take on board what John Wilson said, but I am more in tune with what Rhoda Grant said. As a first step we could involve young people's organisations and people who work with young people. For example, we could talk to the Lothian Association of Youth Clubs and the Parliament's education service. The Modern Studies Association, which is a teachers' organisation, might be interested in developing the work, because it likes to involve young people in research in the Parliament. I am sure that the systems that Rajiv Joshi talked about would provide an exciting opportunity for the young people who are studying what happens in the Parliament.

The Convener: I thank Rajiv Joshi. As we say in Glasgow, that's quite a result the day. Well done.

We will have a brief comfort break.

14:57

Meeting suspended.

15:06

On resuming—

The Convener: Members will note that two additional MSPs—of the older generation—have joined us. They have missed out on the important debate on information technology and so on. Anyway, there are a couple of petitions coming up shortly that Gil Paterson and Brian Adam wish to comment on.

Schools (Class Sizes) (PE1046)

The Convener: I declare an interest in the next petition, PE1046, in that I am a member of the Educational Institute of Scotland, which submitted it. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to support significant reductions in class sizes in Scottish

publicly funded schools during this parliamentary session. Members will note that the petition has attracted 78,790 signatures. I do not know whether text signatories were included in that total, but we might find out shortly.

Do committee members have any comments or observations on how to deal with the petition?

Tricia Marwick: The Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee is considering this issue as part of a wider debate. I suggest that we simply refer the petition to it.

The Convener: It might seem a bit cursory, but the policy committee is going to have a good examination of the issue. I imagine that it will be an interesting issue for the political parties to deal with over the next few years—it forms part of the cut and thrust of the political system. That is a reasonable suggestion. Are we happy to refer the petition to that committee?

Members indicated agreement.

Coastal and Marine National Park Process (PE1047)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1047, which is from Mark Carter, on behalf of the Hebridean Partnership. It calls on the Parliament to consider and debate the failure of the existing coastal and marine national park and marine environmental protection process, and the extent to which that failure is due to pressure from those individuals and industries that have a vested, affiliated or commercial interest in that sector. I invite members' suggestions on how to deal with the petition.

Rhoda Grant: We need to get an update from the Government on how it proposes to develop the management of coastal areas. It is almost the case that if we do not manage coastal areas properly, we will simply need to farm them. The debate on the marine national park created more heat than light, but we need to pursue the issue. Local management of fisheries is important in parts of the area that I represent, as it helps to sustain communities.

I suggest that we write to the Scottish Government and ask it for its proposals, in particular on the local management of resources. How is it proposed to give communities a say over the resources that are at their disposal, so that those resources can provide them with a continuing sustainable income?

Robin Harper: The National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 contains one line that allows for marine national parks to be set up and I think that it is regrettable that further progress has not been made on that. I feel strongly that local fisheries control is not necessarily incompatible with the

establishment of local marine parks. We should never think of them as being incompatible—in fact, they must go together. I am strongly in favour of the petition being more than simply noted.

The Convener: Rhoda Grant's suggestion was to write directly to the Scottish Government to ask for an update on its observations on the issues relating to the management of the coastal and marine environment. We can contain within that inquiry some of the points that committee members have made. Robin Harper has identified the need to try to find a greater compatibility and synchronicity between marine parks and local fisheries management, rather than seeing them as being in opposition to each other. I am happy to do that, as we want to continue to explore the issue. We will see what response we get from the Government. Are members happy with that suggestion?

Members indicated agreement.

National Planning Policy Guideline 19 (PE1048)

The Convener: Gil Paterson has asked to address the next petition, PE1048, which is from Kitty Bell. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to alter national planning policy guideline 19 to correct an anomaly in paragraph 21 and ensure that the precautionary approach that is mentioned there also applies to pre-school children and all children at play, thereby giving them the same protection from telecommunication masts as is available to their older brothers and sisters while they are at school.

Before I take suggestions on how to deal with the petition, I will give Gil Paterson a minute or two to make a presentation to the committee.

Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP): Thank you for allowing me to speak to the petition. Kitty Bell was faced with the possibility of a mast being installed about 80m from a designated play area for children where toddlers played. Fortunately for Mrs Bell and the children who play there, that is no longer an issue because the phone mast company decided not to go ahead with the project. Nevertheless, Mrs Bell thought that young children and toddlers in Scotland needed protection like their older siblings. Her attitude is commendably public spirited.

The argument is simple: it is clearly an anomaly that children in school play areas are protected from masts but children in other designated play areas are not. The petition seeks to protect children no matter where they play. Remember that the evidence suggests that the younger the child, the more at risk they are.

Committee members were no doubt asked at the start of the meeting to turn off their mobile phones. There is a great guilt complex when we politicians make decisions on mobile phone masts, because we all are heavy users of mobile phones. However, everyone uses electricity and no one would ever think that a cable that runs through a school should be unprotected. That would be ridiculous, yet toddlers are unprotected from phone masts. A simple bit of legislation to bring play areas for toddlers under the guideline would work well and be a good service for everybody.

The Convener: Thank you. Do members have comments?

15:15

Robin Harper: I have a simple question. Do we need primary legislation? Could the change be made under regulations?

Gil Paterson: Regulations would work perfectly well.

Nanette Milne: I have much sympathy with the proposal. If the guideline applies the precautionary principle in relation to older children, it is anomalous that it does not cover younger children, who appear to be relatively more at risk, if we assume that a risk exists—I know that there is a lot of debate in the scientific world about whether masts are damaging. We should take the petition forward, perhaps with the Health Protection Agency, the Government and whatever other bodies we can think of.

Tricia Marwick: We do not need primary legislation or regulations. The guideline comes directly from the Scottish Executive, so I see no reason why we cannot just ask the Executive whether it intends to close the gap and ensure that youngsters who are under five are given the same protection as those who are over five. That is a simple matter of writing to ask the Executive what its plans are.

Rhoda Grant: I agree that we should do that, but sometimes reviewing a planning policy guideline takes time. The petition is more to do with how the guideline is interpreted. The spirit of the guideline is that masts should not be located near where children congregate, although that is not spelled out. How people interpret the guideline should be changed. The Scottish Government could do that without a review of the whole guideline by clarifying to planning authorities that, in the spirit of the existing guideline, they should not consider granting planning permission for masts in places where young children are concentrated.

The Convener: We will write to the Scottish Government about the NPPG and about ensuring

parity—what is okay for older schoolchildren should be okay for under-fives and children at nursery.

Rhoda Grant: The issue is almost an oversight.

The Convener: We will see what happens. The response may throw up issues, but we will return to the matter.

I hope that that is satisfactory, sir.

Gil Paterson: I thank the convener and the committee.

The Convener: No problem—thanks again.

Unadopted Open Spaces (Maintenance) (PE1049)

The Convener: PE1049 is from Karen Shirron, who calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to take responsibility for the maintenance of unadopted open spaces, including footpaths, lanes, kerbs, car parks and roads, such as those in Heathryfold west, Aberdeen, where responsibility for the maintenance of such spaces was previously a matter for a Government agency, such as Scottish Homes. Brian Adam, who is the relevant constituency member, has expressed an interest in the petition and will address the committee.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The background to the petition is that, all over Scotland, Scottish Homes had a series of estates, some of whose soft and hard landscaping was never transferred to local authority responsibility. The petition concerns hard landscaping. Several developers are in that position under the planning system. The committee might wish to consider asking the appropriate parliamentary committee to examine whether we should allow developers—whether in the public sector or the private sector—to pass on maintenance responsibilities for soft and hard landscaping to tenants or owners.

The problem exists throughout Scotland, but the scale of it in Heathryfold west is different. Various figures have been bandied about for how much people who have bought their homes there might be expected to contribute to bringing roads, footpaths and so on up to an adoptable standard. They range from the high hundreds to £1,200-plus. In other estates, the cost is £25 or £100, which is a fairly modest amount of money. The scale of what is expected of folk in Heathryfold west is unreasonable. Government is certainly not shown in a good light when a Government agency fails to ensure that the hard landscaping is brought up to adoptable standards so that it can be transferred to the council.

My suggestion, for what it is worth, is that the committee should ask the Government what it

intends to do about the issue and ask the appropriate committees to consider the principles behind the matter. The local government committee will ultimately need to consider whatever proposals are made. In addition, I think that the Health and Sport Committee deals with communities. The matter falls within the responsibility of the Minister for Communities and Sport, who has clearly inherited the problem.

The Convener: Do members have any questions or observations on the petition?

Nanette Milne: Coming from the Aberdeen area, I agree with what Brian Adam has said as I know that the issue has caused a lot of heartache locally. We should follow through on Brian Adam's suggestion.

John Wilson: I agree that we should seek the views of the Scottish Government. As Brian Adam suggested, it would be worth while finding out from Communities Scotland what the problems were with the hard landscaping being adopted when the transfers took place. Clearly, it is unacceptable if Communities Scotland or Scottish Homes transferred stock but left the ownership of the soft and hard landscaping to residents or to the successor landlords.

We should also get the local authority viewpoint on the issue. Having experienced how issues can arise when ownership of roads is transferred from a private landlord or private operator to the local authority, I think that the views of local authorities need to be taken on board as well. Local authorities are often expected just to pick up the tab for roads, pavements and soft landscaping, but local authorities themselves are hard pressed. For some organisations, transferring ownership might seem an easy option. I know that problems can arise if private developers leave the roads in a poor condition when they come off site. The residents are then faced either with a bill or with being told that the local authority cannot take ownership of the area. The issue goes much wider. Given that the decision was taken to transfer the stock, we need to take on board the views of a range of organisations to find out what the problems are with this particular case.

Tricia Marwick: Could Mr Adam explain why the state of the roads was such that the local authority could not adopt them when Scottish Homes was wound up?

Brian Adam: The reason is that Scottish Homes had not maintained the roads to a proper standard. Indeed, Scottish Homes took the view that, as many of the properties had been sold to sitting tenants, the responsibility for the roads had also been transferred. The problem arises throughout Scotland, but it is particularly bad on the Heathryfold west estate, where the scale of the

charges is exceptionally high and residents face costs that are severalfold those that are faced elsewhere.

Like others, I found it hard to believe that Scottish Homes behaved in that way, but it did. As Nanette Milne will remember—we both served on City of Aberdeen District Council in the early 1990s—we persuaded Scottish Homes to ensure that the soft landscaping areas could be dealt with by Aberdeen City Council. It is just a great pity that the problem with hard landscaping was not drawn to our attention as well. We will probably find that most of the later transfers from Scottish Homes to housing associations raise similar problems, but they will tend to be on a much smaller scale because the costs that were passed on to the new housing association—or, in many cases, to home owners who bought their property under right to buy—are much more modest and are not four-figure sums.

Tricia Marwick: The reason I asked is that there are parallels with the wind-up of the new town corporations—I know the case of Glenrothes Development Corporation extremely well. We had no such problems when the housing stock in Glenrothes was transferred to Kirkcaldy District Council or when the roads were adopted by Fife Council. Scottish Homes was a Government agency but, in the development in Aberdeen, it did not repair or keep up the roads to a standard at which they could be adopted. I take John Wilson's point that we cannot continue to put burdens on local authorities, but somebody will have to be responsible. Given some of the points that Brian Adam and others have made, we should refer the petition to the Local Government and Communities Committee for that committee to have a good look at it and to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. That would at least allow us to find out from COSLA the extent of the problem throughout Scotland, rather than simply deal with one area in Aberdeen, important though it is. The problem might be much wider and may need to be addressed.

Robin Harper: My point follows directly from Tricia Marwick's point. It is clear how depressing it is for people who rent or buy flats in blocks that are surrounded by a virtual wasteland but which are otherwise pleasant. I recall an instance in which a developer built a brand new block but then walked away from the landscaping. The set-up of the development allowed the developer to do that. I hope that the problem is not enormous, but there might be a general problem that is worth investigating about landscaping involving all sorts of situations.

The Convener: Brian Adam may make a final comment.

Brian Adam: I take the points that Robin Harper and Tricia Marwick have made. Undoubtedly, the situation in Aberdeen is not unique—the principles that are involved arise in the public and private sectors. In the Aberdeen case, it is particularly disappointing that a public sector agency failed to maintain roads and footpaths in the first instance and to bring them up to a standard at which they could be transferred to the local authority. It is a good idea for the petition to go to the committee that deals with community matters, because there is a housing issue. However, given the principles that are involved, which are fairly wide, the petition ought to go to the local government committee and any other committee that deals with planning. If we want to prevent such situations from arising in the public or private sectors, we must put in place legislation so that developers from either sector cannot pass on maintenance costs to individuals, as things are much better done collectively, with everybody paying up front. We cannot expect local authorities to pick up costs that ought to have been picked up by developers.

The Convener: The clerk will correct me if I am wrong, but I think that the procedure is that if we refer a petition to a committee, we cannot instruct that committee on how to deal with it. We need to know the views of the successor body, Communities Scotland, and to find out whether the situation that is mentioned in the petition is anomalous. There may be different grades. There may be 25 or 30 cases that are relatively small and manageable but three or four absolutely bad cases, of which the one that the petitioner has highlighted may be one. The committee should write to Communities Scotland and contact the Scottish Government about the planning framework and the adoption process under planning law. We need to know whether the law is clear about what must be concluded before such land transfers to another public agency or private ownership, or is adopted by a local authority.

I know that local authorities would say that if they had to adopt all land the status of which was anomalous, they would need three or four times the amount of money with which they are currently provided for landscaping and maintenance. It might be worth asking Communities Scotland, the Scottish Government and COSLA whether they are trying to find solutions to these issues, such as the creation of a pot that people could tap into, which would allow the costs to be reduced substantially or, at least, managed a bit more effectively or creatively than they are at present.

As MSPs, we know that everyone blames everyone else for the situation that we are in, but no one ever sorts it out, with the result that local tenants and residents are left with the implications. Would what I have suggested be a more appropriate course of action than forwarding the

petition to another committee? When we have obtained responses, we could provide the information that we receive to the committee concerned. In the interim, I am sure that the petitioner and Brian Adam, as the local member, will explore the issues through contact with decision makers, when that is possible.

Brian Adam: We are doing that.

The Convener: I understand that. With such unity of purpose, we can make a genuine difference on the issue.

Brian Adam: Thank you very much.

Common Good Sites (Protection) (PE1050)

15:30

The Convener: The next petition is PE1050, which was lodged by Councillor Ann Watters on behalf of Kirkcaldy Civic Society—is that an oxymoron? It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to introduce legislation to provide better protection for common good sites, such as Ravenscraig park in Kirkcaldy, and to ensure that such assets are retained for their original purpose for future generations. It has gained 67 signatures on the e-petitions system. Do members have views on how we should deal with it? Does the member for Central Fife have any comments, given the proximity of Kirkcaldy to the area that she represents?

Tricia Marwick: Claire Baker and I were just discussing whether Annie Watters was still a councillor. In fact, she ceased to be a councillor before May.

The Convener: Rub it in.

Tricia Marwick: No—my point was that that shows how long it has taken the committee to deal with the petition.

Annie Watters makes some good points; she has been highlighting the issue for a number of years. The handling of common good funds is of concern to communities, which do not believe that local authorities have their best interests in mind. We must deal with the issue. We should ask COSLA and the Scottish Government about local government asset management, with particular reference to common good funds.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I support Tricia Marwick's suggestions and note that the constituency member, Marilyn Livingstone, has been supportive of the campaign. People in Kirkcaldy obviously feel strongly about common good sites.

Robin Harper: It is an important issue Scotland-wide because we do not have a proper register of common good land. The fact that some councils

do not have proper registers means that it is quite possible that, in the past, councils have acted illegally in their dealings with common good land. I strongly urge that we do not just write to COSLA but seek a legal view from the Local Authority (Scotland) Accounts Advisory Committee and recommend to the Government that it take an overview of the issue.

Rhoda Grant: Rather than asking the Government to take an overview, it might be worth asking it for its views as well because I do not think that it is just local authorities that hold property and land that, historically, public benefactors or groups of people have clubbed together to buy and which has subsequently been transferred to them to maintain. The issue goes a bit wider than just common good funds, so we should ask the Government for its views on the whole issue, rather than restricting our inquiry to common good funds.

The Convener: That is a slightly different proposal. Do members have views on it?

Tricia Marwick: Changes within the set-up of our local authorities—when new local authorities took over from old ones—led to problems. Things were lost in the mists of time. For example, a library in north Fife was to be closed, but the local authority was told that it could not dispose of the library because it was common good property. A community trust is now being set up to keep the library going, after decades during which trustees had not been appointed. The community is taking over the library as a trust.

If individual members of a community are not alert enough to speak to local authorities, things can be lost. Thorough research is needed in order to find out what common good land and property each local authority holds, so that everybody is aware of it. Sometimes, it is only through the digging done by individuals that we discover that the local authority was supposed to be holding something in trust. Over the years, local authorities have lost some common good property that should have been retained for the community. It is time that local authorities got to grips with that. The Scottish Government should take a view, because common good properties are very important.

John Wilson: It is not only common good properties but common good assets. Robin Harper asked earlier whether local authorities were acting illegally in the transfer of some land and assets. Court judgments have been made on the ownership of common good land. I am thinking in particular of the Hamilton palace grounds that the local authority transferred for retail development. The transfer was challenged and the case went to court, but the court decided in favour of the local authority. Local authorities have since taken it as a

rule of thumb that they have the right to dispose of common good assets or land.

As Tricia Marwick suggested, over the past 20 or 25 years we have seen the wholesale transfer of land. Land that was gifted to communities has been sold off by various agencies. It would be a good idea for the Government to consider having a proper register of land and assets that have been gifted to the community. That would allow us to consider other agencies that hold property in the name of the people—I am thinking in particular of the National Trust for Scotland, which was considering disposing of some of its properties and assets. We need a proper record of what is held. Rather than decisions on the future of those assets or land being taken by the local authority or certain agencies, they should be taken by the community.

The Convener: Committee members seem to be suggesting that we want an overview from the Scottish Government, and that we want the issue of the management and planning of assets to be raised with local authorities and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. I am happy with that.

Gifted Land (Public Recreational Use) (PE1077)

The Convener: PE1077, from Jennifer McKay, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce legislation to ensure that the original conditions pertaining to gifts of land to private and public bodies or owners be honoured where they provided access and benefits to the local community. This petition raises a similar issue to the one raised by the previous petition, but the details are different.

The petition has gathered 96 signatures on the e-petitions system. The property law reform element to the petition makes it slightly different from the previous petition. Perhaps we should write to the Government to ask it how it is enacting property law reform and whether reform puts at risk the conditions pertaining to gifts of land.

Members indicated agreement.

Broadcast Spectrum (Local Television) (PE1055)

The Convener: PE1055, from Graeme Campbell, on behalf of the media access project Scotland—MAPS—calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to seek clarification on the ownership of electromagnetic broadcast spectrum in advance of the proposed spectrum packaging and award process, and to seek assurances that capacity will be reserved on the digital multiplexes to enable local and new Scottish television channels originating in Scotland to be broadcast to Scottish

viewers who receive the public service broadcasting channels. The petition attracted 58 signatures on the e-petitions system. How should we deal with it? Is the issue in the Scottish Broadcasting Commission's remit, or could it be drawn to the commission's attention?

Fergus Cochrane (Clerk): It could be.

The Convener: Yes, but we do not know whether it is part of the commission's remit at the moment. The commission has a broad remit, although it may address specific issues, of course.

Fergus Cochrane: The issue seems to fall within the commission's remit.

The Convener: We could refer PE1055 to the commission and seek a response from it. Do members have any other suggestions?

Tricia Marwick: It would also be helpful for us to get the Scottish Government's view on the Office of Communications's consultation document, "Digital Dividend Review". The commission may consider PE1055 if we ask it to, but the Scottish Government should have a view on the consultation so we should ask what that view is.

Rhoda Grant: Could we pass PE1055 on to Ofcom for consideration as part of its consultation? Broadcasting is a reserved issue, so there is little that the committee can do with the petition. However, it might be worth our feeding it into the consultation. I am not sure whether the committee can do that.

The Convener: This is an issue that transmits across different levels. That was my gag for the day.

It would be reasonable to refer PE1055 to Ofcom and we should also raise the issue with the Scottish Broadcasting Commission. The Scottish Government will make submissions both to Ofcom and to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport about the impact of digital broadcasting. Whitehaven in Cumbria has already switched over to digital, so we are at the beginning of a revolution in access to information through television and so on. We will bring the petition to the attention of the three bodies that have been mentioned.

Bridge Replacement (PE1064)

The Convener: PE1064, from Bruce Whitehead, on behalf of Queensferry Residents Against Another Forth Crossing, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to reconsider its decision to replace the Forth road bridge and to await pending studies on the feasibility of repairing it; to consider Forth Estuary Transport Authority's proposals for road user charging; to invest instead in improved public

transport with new bridge tariffs to reward vehicle sharing; and to endorse the previous Prime Minister's declaration that

"we cannot simply build more and more roads, particularly when the evidence suggests that traffic quickly grows to fill any new capacity."

To date, the petition has attracted 206 signatures.

We have had a chat with the petitioner since PE1064 was lodged, and peace and love may have broken out on the issue. Petitioners may be unable to give oral evidence to Parliament, but we treat all petitions as being of equal worth, irrespective of whether the petitioner is sitting at the table or is unable to be called. We have to manage our time to ensure that we can deal with the number of petitions that are before us. Tricia Marwick and other members have pointed out that we are trying to deal with a substantial number of petitions. I make that point on the record, so that the petitioner may understand the process. The committee treats every petition with absolute seriousness and wants to explore the issues that it throws up, so that we can decide how best to deal with it.

I invite members to comment on the petition. Robin Harper has spoken about the issue previously, so I will leave him until the end.

Rhoda Grant: The Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee is looking into the issue and has visited the Forth bridge. It is important that we refer PE1064 to that committee and ask that it be dealt with as part of its in-depth inquiry. There is little point in our gathering information on the issue when the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee can include it in its findings.

The Convener: Robin, I presume that that is what you are going to comment on.

15:45

Robin Harper: Indeed. If you want six reasons for sending PE1064 to the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, I can give them to you. They are from the National Trust for Scotland's submission—the ink is hardly dry on it—to Transport Scotland's consultation. The reasons are as follows: the case for the additional crossing has yet to be made; climate change is the most important issue to consider; increasing road space for private cars conflicts with Government policy; major improvements to all forms of public transport are essential; we need greater clarity on the future of the existing road bridge—we simply do not know what is happening with that yet; and the corridor C tunnel options could have unacceptable environmental impacts. Those are six cogent reasons why the discussion should be continued and the petition considered

by the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee.

Tricia Marwick: It will not surprise the convener to hear that I disagree with PE1064 for a number of reasons. Nonetheless, the matter will be considered by the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee as part of its scrutiny of the proposal for a new crossing and it is entirely appropriate that the petition be sent to that committee so that it can form part of its consideration.

The Convener: That is the appropriate course of action, given the thoroughness with which the issue needs to be explored. The Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee has a big responsibility. The proposal is controversial, irrespective of its progress through different Governments, and the debate needs to be aired clearly at that committee. If what Rhoda Grant says about a visit to the bridge is accurate—as I presume it is—that indicates that the issue will be scrutinised seriously. We should recommend that the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee deal with PE1064. To reassure the petitioner, I expect the members of that committee to interrogate the issue rigorously, irrespective of their starting positions. Other members—perhaps even members of this committee—will articulate their views on the issue to the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee when appropriate and when they can.

I thank committee members for their agreement on that.

Current Petitions

Blessing Oneself (PE1005)

15:47

The Convener: The next agenda item is consideration of a series of current petitions. Those are petitions that are in the system, that the committee has previously considered and on which we are following up with further information. The committee has had late submissions on a number of the petitions, which I will identify.

The first current petition is PE1005, by Harry Conroy, on behalf of the *Scottish Catholic Observer*, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to ensure that the act of blessing oneself does not result in a police investigation or criminal proceedings in any circumstances—perhaps handshakes are now part of that issue for the individual who is the source of the debate.

Committee members have copies of the Scottish Executive's letter of 7 February 2007, and we now have a response from the Crown Office. The previous note on the petition suggested that we were awaiting that, but we now have a response from Elish Angiolini, which gives an accurate update on what has happened.

The issue was prevalent because, I understand, of a heated set of circumstances at a particular social engagement in the west of Scotland. Do committee members have any views on how to deal with PE1005, now that we have information from the Crown Office?

Robin Harper: I would be happy to close it.

The Convener: That is okay, given that we have had assurances from the Crown Office. The petitioner was concerned about the representation of a faith issue and whether it was considered inappropriate to bless oneself. We have now clarified that matter under Scots law, which is helpful. We will close the petition.

Local Planning (PE1009)

The Convener: The next current petition is PE1009, by William and Angela Flanagan, which calls on Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to assure justice in local planning matters by providing an advocacy service to represent third parties who are seeking redress and financial recompense through the regular court system when planning authorities have acted in error.

Committee members have copies of written submissions from the Scottish Legal Aid Board, dated 7 March 2007; the Scottish Executive, dated 12 March; Planning Aid for Scotland, dated 28

March, the Law Society of Scotland, dated 18 April; and the petitioner, dated 25 May. How do members suggest we deal with the petition?

Rhoda Grant: I was not a member of Parliament at the time, but I had been under the impression that the third-party right of appeal was well considered and discussed when the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill was before Parliament. That happened so recently that it would be wrong of us to reopen the issue. I therefore suggest that we close PE1009, although I am willing to listen to other points of view.

Tricia Marwick: I am not sure that PE1009 is primarily about the third-party right of appeal. It is about a third party being able to take the planning authority to judicial review because they believe that the authority has not carried out its duties properly. The petitioner is seeking financial assistance through legal aid or advocacy services to allow third parties to take such cases through the courts. The petition is not purely about the third-party right of appeal—it is about the decision-making process and whether cases can go to judicial review. We should ask the Scottish Government whether it intends to reform the planning process further. However, I am mindful of the fact that we received letters about the issue from various bodies. Perhaps we have gone as far as we can on the issue.

Robin Harper: This is not a declaration of interest, but I was keen on having a third-party right of appeal accepted by the previous Executive. That did not come to pass, but the point of the proposal was to get fairness for people who are involved in planning disputes. There are other ways forward, some of which should be incorporated in regulations and advice. However, advocacy and mediation, which have already been mentioned, are being left out. I would like to refer PE1009 to the Executive as an example of how much better the situation might be if proper mediation services and advocacy were available to people in such disputes.

The Convener: How clear are we on what we wish to do?

Rhoda Grant: I am not particularly convinced by the arguments that Tricia Marwick and Robin Harper have made. I stand by my comment that the planning process was scrutinised recently and I do not see how we can take PE1009 further. We need to let the changes that have been made bed in and thereafter to address any issues that arise. The Government would not be keen to reopen the matter so soon.

Nanette Milne: I am inclined to agree with Rhoda Grant. The planning legislation is new, and we should see how it works. Is it in order for us to close PE1009, but to suggest to the Scottish

Government that the issue be considered as part of post-legislative scrutiny of the operation of the new law?

The Convener: The clerk informs me that we can close PE1009 and bring it to the attention of the Government or anyone else to whom we wish to refer it, although they may ignore us. Are members happy with that course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will close the petition but draw the Government's attention to the issue of mediation.

Alcohol Exclusion Zones and Dispersal Orders (PE1010)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1010, by Ron Rose, who calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce or enhance devolved legislation to empower local authorities to enforce powers to apply alcohol exclusion zones and dispersal orders under a fast-track system, thus enabling police and local councils to implement measures more expediently to rescue communities such as Aberfeldy from "death by due process".

There is a series of submissions from various respondents, including the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland, Tayside Police, the Scottish Licensed Trade Association, Perth and Kinross Council and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

There has been a fairly substantial debate in Parliament about antisocial behaviour. The present Government has taken on developments that were already taking place to tackle alcohol misuse, and there have been recent statements by the Cabinet Secretary for Justice on the responsibility of local licensing boards and local providers of licensed premises and the role that they should be playing in minimising the impact of misbehaviour in their communities. In addition, under antisocial behaviour legislation more powers are being given to local authorities and the police to intervene, where appropriate. How do members wish to deal with PE1010?

Nanette Milne: According to a later paper, Perth and Kinross Council is already considering the introduction of a byelaw in Aberfeldy. I wonder whether we should, bearing in mind that everything that can be done is being done, close PE1010.

The Convener: That would be a sensible course of action. If we close PE1010, and there are no developments that would be of assistance, the petitioner is perfectly at liberty to submit another petition.

Scheduled and Listed Buildings (Management) (PE1013)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1013, by Niall Campbell, who calls on Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to review the arrangements for managing scheduled and listed buildings, such as Rowallan old castle, to ensure that when owners have made suitable and sensitive plans for restoring such buildings in a way that will allow public access, such developments are encouraged to proceed.

There are written submissions from the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, East Ayrshire Council, Historic Scotland, the Scottish Executive, the Royal Town Planning Institute and the petitioner, covering the period February to July 2007. Do members have a view on what we should do with PE1013?

Rhoda Grant: I should declare an interest, having worked in the past for somebody who was in a very similar situation. It is far enough in the past that it is not a registrable interest, but it colours my views on how we should deal with the petition. It is horrendous that a Government agency can put a dead hand over a community and stop any kind of development, and that it can, without consultation, when a property is for sale, say that it will not consider any planning proposal. That is what an agency has done in this case, and in the case in which I was involved.

We need to do more with PE1013—the situation is hugely frustrating. We could write to the Scottish Government, asking it to review how ancient monuments are listed, and indeed how they are then dealt with. An ancient monument can be properly preserved only if it has a use in the here and now. Such monuments fall into disrepair if they do not have a current use.

We could ask the Scottish Government for clarification about whether it is legal for a Government body to make a decision about a planning application before the Government has reviewed it. To me, that is against planning law.

16:00

The Convener: I should declare an interest: I served for a time as the minister responsible for some of the review process. I wanted to put that on record—although, if I am honest, I cannot say that I influenced Historic Scotland much.

What Rhoda Grant said is reasonable. A difficult decision has to be made between, on the one hand, preserving heritage and on the other hand, regeneration that could lead to employment and other opportunities. The issue can become more complicated when the debate is about access,

even when a proposed development will retain access or improve it. In the case that is raised in PE1013, it seems that solutions could have been reached but were not. That is frustrating. From looking through the papers relating to the application, it seems that a solution could have been reached that combined preservation, effective use, and regeneration of a part of Scotland that desperately requires employment. That could have happened with a bit of good sense on all sides—from the developers of the idea and the agencies.

Historic Scotland went through the review process, which I was involved in, and looked into the issue of scheduled monument consent. However, issues still arise to do with the timetable for consultation, how Historic Scotland has responded to the consultation and some of the issues in PE1013. I would like clarification from Historic Scotland on that. It might also be worth writing to the Government minister about the continuing process.

Rhoda Grant: We need a clear pronouncement on where the powers fall. Government ministers make decisions on planning applications that have been called in, but if a Government agency has already made a pronouncement on a particular planning application, a conflict arises. Historic Scotland does not deal with such conflicts properly.

The Convener: We will keep PE1013 open and seek further explanations. Monuments are a difficult and sensitive issue, so we will have to tread carefully.

Members indicated agreement.

Antibiotic Resistance Campaign (PE1019)

The Convener: PE1019 is by Imran Hayat. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive, or Government, to start a nationwide health promotion campaign to raise patient awareness of the proper use of antibiotics in order to combat antibiotic resistance. We have received responses from the various agencies that we contacted.

Nanette Milne: I have not worked in the health service for a long time, but I should perhaps declare a past interest in health promotion. Overprescription of antibiotics is a serious issue. However, I agree with the health professionals who have commented: I doubt whether the sort of campaign that the petitioner is asking for would have the desired effect.

We should probably close PE1019, but we should also let the Government know about our concerns. There will have to be an on-going education process as far as doctors and doctor-

patient relationships are concerned. I hope that the ministerial health care infection task force will monitor the issue closely.

The Convener: That is a sensible suggestion.

Members indicated agreement.

A90 Deceleration Lane (PE1020)

The Convener: The next petition, PE1020, is by Councillor Paul Melling on behalf of the constituents of Portlethen South—ward 60 of Aberdeenshire Council. I am not sure how old the petition is, but are we talking about the old ward boundaries? Yes, we are—we are talking about the good old days.

The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to consider and debate the safety issues in relation to the requirement to construct a deceleration lane for access to the Bruntland Road junction in Portlethen South from the A90.

I welcome Mike Rumbles, who I presume is the constituency member for the area and who has joined us for our consideration of the petition. I invite him to say a few words.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Thank you. I remind members that Councillor Paul Melling has actively campaigned on the issue for four years. The campaign has been entirely locally produced and is entirely on a road safety issue. Paul has the backing of the local community, Aberdeenshire Council's local area committee—of which, since the elections in May, he is now chair—and Aberdeenshire Council itself. As members will be aware, the problem is that a huge number of accidents have occurred on this extremely dangerous section of trunk road. Unfortunately, since he lodged the petition, there has been a fatality involving a motorcyclist, who died as a result of his injuries after an accident on the road.

Very simply put, a deceleration lane should have been included when the road was built. There is nothing to stop such a lane being built now, as there is an open field right beside the road. As I understand it, all the measurements have been taken and all the preparatory work has been done to build a deceleration lane, but nothing seems to have happened. Essentially, the petition is on a road safety issue—nothing more, nothing less—and it is extremely important to the people of Portlethen.

The Convener: Do members have any comments or observations on the petition?

Robin Harper: I know well the area that Mike Rumbles is talking about. There is a strong argument for having a 50mph limit on the road

until it reaches Stonehaven. I am all for taking the issue further.

The Convener: Obviously, Transport Scotland has the key responsibility. I do not know whether that road is included in its infrastructure investment programme, but the local members have probably been advocating that meetings should take place with Transport Scotland on that. Essentially, we want to know what Transport Scotland's strategic assessment is of the road's suitability and what improvements might be made. Even if we do not get an immediate decision one way or the other on a deceleration lane, we should find out what measures Transport Scotland is putting in place to address the immediate public safety concerns. That might be one way of dealing with the petition.

Nanette Milne: I certainly agree that we should get in touch with Transport Scotland. There are many junctions on the A90 that have caused problems and serious accidents over the years. Transport Scotland would probably accept that most junctions on the A90 need treatment of some kind, so it is a question of priorities. Clearly, the Portlethen junction is not up the priority list. We should bring the petition to Transport Scotland's attention so that it realises that the matter is of serious concern.

The Convener: We shall write to Transport Scotland to highlight the discussion that we have had today, to raise a specific question about what measures are being taken to improve the road's safety and to ask whether a deceleration lane is part of Transport Scotland's potential investment programme. Are members comfortable with that?

Members indicated agreement.

Mike Rumbles: Convener, when I attended the committee meeting at which the petition was originally considered, I understood that the committee decided to write to Transport Scotland on those issues. I had assumed that the committee would have received a response. Is that not the case?

The Convener: Out of courtesy to Mike Rumbles, as he will not have a copy of the letter, I will read out from the response. It states:

"an A90 junction strategy study was scheduled to be undertaken early in 2007."

"Aberdeenshire Council has been lobbying for some time to have all junctions on the A90 improved"—

that point was made by Nanette Milne.

"I am advised by Transport Scotland that the study is underway with the ... Junction included in the study. The study is due to be completed early in May 2007.

Regarding your question about involving developers in the financing of an upgrade to the junction, there would be little scope for this at present".

The response gives a commitment that the study would be completed by May, but we do not know—unless members have local intelligence—what happened with that study. We should find out about that.

Essentially, we will acknowledge the response but say that we do not have any details about the study's recommendations or conclusions—

Mike Rumbles: Or the timescale.

The Convener: Indeed—or the timescale. We will say that we do not know whether the conclusions will fit in with the capital resources that will obviously be available in the new Scotland for whatever we want.

Solicitors (PE1021)

The Convener: The next petition, PE1021, by Bill Alexander, calls on the Parliament to investigate the availability of solicitors who are prepared to act against other solicitors in cases of negligence or inadequate service, the role of the Law Society of Scotland in such cases and the impact, both physical and financial, of such cases on the complainer.

We have a written submission from the Scottish Executive of 28 March 2007. Do members have a view on how to deal with the petition?

Rhoda Grant: I suggest that we close consideration of it because I believe that the problems that the petitioner flags up have been dealt with by the Legal Profession and Legal Aid (Scotland) Act 2007.

The Convener: As there are no other views, the recommendation is that we close the petition because we feel that the 2007 act should be able to address some of the immediate issues raised in the petition. There is also a review process of all legislation by the Government, so we may come back to the petition if there are difficulties. With that recommendation, can we close the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

Television Coverage of Scottish Football (PE1026)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1026, by a gentleman called Stuart McMillan—where is he now? The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to exert all its powers on BBC Scotland to ensure that the corporation provides television coverage of every Scotland national football team match, and notes the sporting and cultural importance of the national team, which should ensure that this issue is highlighted every time that the Scottish Executive meets with BBC Scotland.

I understand that the gentleman is a true believer because the petition was submitted when Scotland was not performing well in international football. We must give him credit for his vision that things would be different.

We have written submissions from some of the players in this debate for our consideration. Do members have a view on how we should deal with the petition? The Scottish Broadcasting Commission may be asked to deal with the issue.

Tricia Marwick: It may be asked to do that. For the record, I was seriously cheesed off that the Scotland games were not carried live on the BBC. The response from BBC Scotland was that it could not afford to do that. However, the England versus Russia game was live on the BBC.

The Convener: Great game.

Tricia Marwick: It was, and presumably the BBC found the money to show that game. I cannot be the only one to be more than cheesed off that the only way to see the Scotland game was to pay money or go to the pub. I think that we should refer the issue to the Scottish Broadcasting Commission for its consideration, and close the petition.

The Convener: I have a further suggestion. I broadly agree with what you said. We are all keen to watch Scotland because we are doing better than we have done for a long time—I hope that that will continue. However, there is the issue of the role that the Scottish Football Association should play in this debate. It is important that BBC Scotland and the United Kingdom BBC take the responsibility for addressing the matter, but there is also a commercial issue.

I appreciate that the SFA must do a balancing act because it must generate income, but it can play a role in setting ground conditions for key matches. I suggest that we write to the SFA saying that there is a strong sense that not everyone has access to digital television and, equally, that many folk are reluctant to go to pubs to watch football games, not just for moral or religious reasons but because of personal circumstances—for example, they might be asked to pay for a drink for a change.

We should also draw the Scottish Broadcasting Commission's attention to the petition because it may be a tangential issue that the commission will be asked to comment on. Is it agreed that we close the petition on the basis of what has been suggested?

Members indicated agreement.

Bus Services (Funding) (PE1027)

16:15

The Convener: The final petition is PE1027, by Kristina Woolnough, on behalf of Blackhall Community Association, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive, in the interests of social inclusion, to increase public funding for bus services, particularly in communities where such services are already limited, and to ensure that, when bus routes and timetables are to be axed or changed, members of the community are properly consulted.

There is a series of responses from the Scottish Executive, Lothian Buses, the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK, Bus Users UK, the Scottish Association for Public Transport and the petitioner. Do committee members have any strong views on how to deal with the petition?

Robin Harper: I would be happy to close it, noting that the service that is mentioned in the petition has been restored. Perhaps we should also forward the correspondence to the Scottish Government and highlight the need to ensure that there are effective ways of consulting local communities on the provision of bus services. That could be achieved through local transport forums or other means at local authorities' disposal.

Rhoda Grant: I agree with that. In rural areas, there is a duty on local authorities to consider funding rural transport schemes; in urban areas, it is more difficult. If only the lucrative or economically viable options are taken into account, some of the most deprived areas will suffer from a lack of transport options, and those are possibly the areas that need them most. We should flag that up when we pass the papers on for consideration and information. We need to find ways of ensuring consideration of communities that cannot stand up for themselves in the same way as Blackhall Community Association has done. Perhaps that should become a pillar of the consideration of service delivery.

Robin Harper: Bus companies need to be reminded that they are expected to provide a service, not simply to run a profitable operation.

The Convener: As there are no other comments, we will close the petition. We should note that the service that was highlighted in the petition and was the driver for the debate has been re-established. When we write to the Government, we should ask about the development of bus quality partnerships and mention that it should involve a communication strategy on the nature of services and decisions on them.

The issue of who picks up which responsibilities for investing in the bus service is the subject of continuing dialogue between the Government and local authorities. We all know from experience how complex and difficult the matter is. It is not easy, and services to needy communities have been lost. We need to be eternally vigilant about that. Although I am sure that, in the near future, the Parliament will discuss and decide on a regulatory framework, I am also sure that members will continue to raise the issues and seek a long-term solution.

We will close the petition and write to the Government about how changes to bus services are communicated.

I thank committee members for attending the meeting. I ask them to stick around for two or three minutes after the meeting has closed to deal with some housekeeping issues, and I remind them that the next meeting of the committee will be on Tuesday 6 November 2007.

Meeting closed at 16:18.

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