

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 20 November 2007

Session 3

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

8th 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)
*Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP)
Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
*Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)
*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 :

Sandra Hogg (Scottish Council for Voluntary
Organisations)
Norman MacAskill (Scottish Council for Voluntary
Organisations)
Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP)
Chris Paterson

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Fergus Cochrane

ASSISTANT CLERK

Franck David

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Tuesday 20 November 2007

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:00*]

New Petitions

The Convener (Mr Frank McAveety): Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee's eighth meeting in the third session. I forewarn members of the committee and members of the public, in case they have not had their hair done today, that a photographer is in the room. He will take snapshots of the committee in session. If you are a wee bit averse to photography, as most politicians are, you may wish to leave the room.

Please ensure that your mobile phones and other electronic devices are switched off. I have a standing apology from Angela Constance, who is on maternity leave. I welcome John Wilson, who is her substitute. We have also received apologies on behalf of Rhoda Grant. There is an illness in her family.

Village and Community Halls (PE1070)

The Convener: The first new petition for us to consider is PE1070, by Sandra Hogg, on behalf of the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to recognise the importance of village and community halls in rural Scotland; to create a Scottish halls fund to refurbish or modernise community buildings in order to increase the level of community use of them and improve the range and quality of the services that are provided; to fund a village halls support service; to create a fair relief scheme for water charges for charities that will maintain the exemption beyond 2010; and to work with appropriate partners to cut regulatory burdens and support the interests of hall committees.

I think that Claire Baker wants to make a declaration about previous interests.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Before I was elected to the Parliament, I worked as a policy manager for the SCVO, and I know the two witnesses.

The Convener: I thank you for your courtesy and honesty.

We welcome to the meeting Sandra Hogg and Norman MacAskill. They know the procedure—they have around three minutes for a presentation

or to comment on the petition. I hope that what is said will elicit a question-and-answer session with members. I understand that Sandra Hogg will lead off.

Sandra Hogg (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations): Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of PE1070.

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations raised the petition in response to a growing concern in communities in rural Scotland that village and community halls were dropping down the agendas of policy makers, funders and the Government. The response that we received to the petition from communities throughout rural Scotland convinced us that village and community halls are a key issue that needs to be addressed. Today, we have delivered a further 5,000 paper signatures in addition to the 1,250 signatures on the e-petition.

People tend to talk about land management and agriculture when they discuss rural development. Of course, land management and agriculture are important, but rural communities need community space to survive. Village and community halls provide that space and play a pivotal role in the life of rural communities.

The SCVO has estimated that there are upwards of 3,000 village and community halls in Scotland. Those halls are incredibly valued in rural communities as a focus for activities and services and encouraging community well-being. Play groups, youth clubs and senior citizens' clubs meet in them, and they host birthday parties, weddings, sporting activities and dramas, for example. I could continue that list. In addition, village and community halls are increasingly filling gaps in service provision as post offices, shops, libraries, learning centres and health services are lost.

Research that the SCVO undertook in 2000 showed that more than half of halls have poor external structures—poor roofs, for example—and that more than a third have toilets and kitchens that are not fit for purpose. Many halls are cold and damp and need substantial investment to bring them up to 21st century standards.

In the past, there has been access to a range of possible funding sources for village halls, which reflected their public value and contribution to active communities, but far fewer funding opportunities are now available. For example, the Scottish Executive's rural partnership fund was a major source of funding for hall building projects through its local capital grants scheme. The fund was closed in 2005, subject to review. That left many halls high and dry, as they had already agreed support from their local authority in match funding.

Lottery funding is another example. Whereas the previous Community Fund enabled many halls to modernise, the growing community assets strand of the investing in communities programme will not fund community buildings as general purpose meeting places or for sporting provision. That compares badly with England, where the Big Lottery Fund is investing £50 million in community centres and village halls. Together with the reductions in local authority support and in European funding, that means that there are just not sufficient funds available for halls to modernise. We believe that a national village halls fund is required to bring halls up to standard.

Village halls are largely owned by communities and run by volunteer management committees. Running a hall is a complex operation. Hall committees must—to mention but a few issues—keep abreast of changes in legislation, apply for relevant licences, comply with regulators, understand building regulations and meet the demands of funding bodies. However, in comparison with England and Northern Ireland, support for hall committees in Scotland is poor. Although some good work is done by local authorities, councils for voluntary service and federations of halls, there is a need for a national support service that is available to all halls.

In summary, the SCVO believes that village and community halls in Scotland have had a poor deal over the past few years. We recognise and welcome the opportunity for funding halls in the Scottish rural development programme, but that will not be enough. We need a whole-hearted political commitment to long-term support for halls through a national village halls fund and a support service.

The Convener: Does Norman MacAskill have anything to add?

Norman MacAskill (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations): No. Sandra Hogg's presentation was very comprehensive.

The Convener: Having heard the presentation, do members have any questions?

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Is there any way of accounting for the difference between the Big Lottery Fund's attitude to funding halls in England and the attitude that is taken in Scotland? Has that been explained?

Sandra Hogg: I do not think so. I think that there are just different priorities in the different countries.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I know that, for village halls and other charitable organisations, the potential impact of the withdrawal of water rates relief in 2010 is an issue. What financial benefits does the present water

rates relief system provide? What is the impact of that on new-build halls?

Sandra Hogg: At the moment, halls need to meet about six different criteria to qualify for water charges relief. Some halls managed to meet those criteria, but new-build halls qualify for the relief only if they have remained in the same premises. New buildings do not qualify for the relief, so such halls automatically start paying charges. Those halls that were not registered in the required period do not get the relief either. Water charges relief does not apply across the board. The system is iniquitous.

Nanette Milne: As things stand, the relief will disappear for all halls after 2010. Is that right?

Sandra Hogg: At the moment, that is correct.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Who owns the village and community halls that we are talking about?

Sandra Hogg: In the vast majority of cases, the halls are owned by the communities themselves.

John Wilson: Do you want water rates exemption to be applied to all village community halls rather than just those that are in community ownership? For example, many halls that act as a vital hub to small communities are technically owned by the local authority. However, communities very much desire such halls to be run as community facilities rather than to be seen as part of the local authority's outreach work. Do you want the relief to be extended to all halls, including those that fall into that category?

Sandra Hogg: That question is difficult, because it asks where we draw the line. The SCVO's position is that all charities should be exempt from paying water charges. Charities are also exempt from paying local authority rates. However, not all halls are charities. Relief would encourage halls to become charities, which might be good for them from several points of view, including accounting to the public. However, deciding where to draw the line is difficult. To say that all charities should receive relief might be the easiest way to proceed.

The Convener: It strikes me that the challenge that you raise in the petition is about whether decision makers discuss with one another a strategic vision for community halls. Anyone who has been to a community hall will know of a similar nervousness about who dances first.

I accept that an on-going issue has been a lack of coherence nationally. Pressures that relate to grant mechanisms are thrown up in local authorities or the voluntary sector any time that we have a new budget. Irrespective of where we as political representatives stand on that budget, how funding is accessed raises issues. What

discussions have the SCVO and others had with key decision makers in national politics or in lottery funding bodies about a coherent national strategy for hall development?

Norman MacAskill: We have had individual discussions with many people who are involved in village hall funding and support. One proposal that we are running in parallel with the campaign is for a village hall summit that would bring together not primarily village hall users, but people who are involved in providing funding and support, for the purpose that you described—to ensure that they are all dancing the same dance—and to reduce the burden of difficulty on village hall committee members, who have to fill in dozens of funding applications with different reporting requirements.

A priority for us is setting the issue in the context of the new funding that will be available through the Scottish rural development programme, which Sandra Hogg mentioned, and refocusing the emphasis of trusts and other funders on providing coherent and joined-up funding for halls.

The Convener: In discussions, we are all unravelling the recently announced budget. From looking at the budget, do you have a sense of avenues in it that would assist the debate, or has it made that more difficult?

Norman MacAskill: To be honest, I have not been in a position to study the detail of the budget. We are glad that the Scottish rural development programme, which awaits signing-off in Brussels, includes a measure on community and leisure facilities. That is by no means ring fenced for village halls, but it represents a pot of money that will be available for village halls to make bids to through rural development contracts or LEADER. We are happy with that, but on the detail of the budget and joining up with other funders, we are watching this space.

Nanette Milne: You suggest a Scottish halls fund. Do you have a ballpark figure for how big that fund would have to be to satisfy basic demand?

Norman MacAskill: One problem is that we do not know the number and condition of village halls and how much funding will be needed to refurbish, repair and, where necessary, rebuild them. We are loth just to pluck a figure out of the air, but we have brainstormed it a bit. What is on the table for the next six years of the rural development programme is potentially £32 million. We did our sums and reckoned that if the figure were taken up to about £50 million for that period, that would probably approach sufficiency to address the needs. However, we do not want to say that with one figure, the problem will be sorted. The Government or somebody else should do serious

research to assess the condition and needs of village halls.

14:15

The Convener: I want to try to get the ballpark figures. You are saying that £4 million or £5 million per year would get the £32 million up to £50 million. Joined-up, coherent discussions are an issue. Discussions with the likes of the Big Lottery Fund in Scotland could result in matching funds. Have there been any discussions about extending the exemption scheme for water charges? Such discussions would be complex for anybody at ministerial level to deal with. Is the door totally closed on that matter, or is there still willingness to talk?

Norman MacAskill: Our colleagues in the SCVO have been pursuing that matter. The issue was included in our petition because it is a great concern to people in many village halls, but it is obvious that that concern stretches much wider—it is a concern for charities and the voluntary sector. We have not led on the matter, but the SCVO is certainly pursuing it.

John Wilson: I would like to expand the debate slightly. Community ownership of community facilities is an issue that is dear to my heart. In that context, I should have declared an interest earlier, as I have been working with a group in my constituency to take ownership of community facilities that the local authority currently operates.

If we are pushing for more voluntary sector community ownership of local facilities, the figure of £50 million that has been mentioned may be an underestimate, as many local authorities have the drive and ambition to offload to local communities facilities such as community halls that they currently own and operate. In essence, the petition deals with rural Scotland, but much wider issues are involved. For example, a number of community facilities in Glasgow are effectively run by the community while the council has tacit ownership of them. If there are more developments towards transferring the ownership of community facilities, more resources and more support to communities that wish to take on responsibility for and ownership of those facilities could be required. Is there an expanding programme of community ownership of facilities?

Sandra Hogg: It probably is expanding. In England, a fund that is delivered through the Big Lottery Fund was announced this year. The money that is involved is not the Big Lottery Fund's money—I think that it is Government money. I cannot remember the details, but the money supports local authorities giving communities their buildings and funding the refurbishment of those buildings. A specific fund

has therefore been opened to allow communities to take ownership of community buildings. A fund also exists that helps them to bring buildings up to standard, as many have been badly neglected over the past few years.

The Convener: The Big Lottery Fund in Scotland is discussing with different communities the transfer of community assets that are currently under local authority control to create an equity base for community halls. As you can imagine, the issue is fraught with complexities, but a commitment to do that certainly exists.

You raised the global issue, which is how to knit together all the different agencies to build up a much more credible initial sum to make a difference to village halls. That is the petition's dominant thesis. However, many of us who represent urban areas know that there are wee post-war local halls in their areas that are connected to what happened overseas. Such halls have received council revenue funding, but the voluntary community has run them.

Norman MacAskill: The need for a nationwide support service that would help to bring together diverse funding and support and consideration of many issues should be emphasised. We envisage that as a resource not only for hard-pressed village hall committee members spending a Friday night trying to fill in funding applications or get architectural advice, but for people who want to find the most appropriate ways of delivering funding and support. The support service could work in both directions. It would not cost a huge amount of money for the Government to fund, but the benefits would be enormous.

The Convener: We have heard the petitioners and had the question-and-answer session. Do members have any recommendations about how to proceed with the petition?

Claire Baker: One key issue is the continuation of water charge exemptions. It would be worth writing to the Scottish Government to ask for its views on that and on what it sees as the future of the exemptions for village halls post 2010. We should ask whether the Government envisages a continuation of the exemptions and what its plans are.

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): In view of the fact that none of us really has a handle on the budget proposals that the Parliament debated last week, I presume that we need to write to the Government to ask where it thinks the funds that we have been talking about might be in the current budget proposals.

John Wilson: We should write to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. Many village and community halls provide vital services in communities. We have discussed rural post

offices and alternative avenues for certain services. Village halls provide many facilities that are normally picked up by local authorities or health boards, so it would be useful to get a view from COSLA on the future of the village halls programme and its possible expansion.

Nanette Milne: The water charge issue is clearly a major concern for many charities. If we are writing to the Government to ask about the water charge exemptions, is it in our remit to extend the query to include churches and town halls, even though the petition is clearly about community and village halls? I do not know about other members, but a significant amount of the mail in my mailbag is from churches, which have a major concern about water charges.

We should try to get more information from the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment about the rural development plan. In response to a recent parliamentary question, Richard Lochhead referred to funding from the new rural development plan. We do not yet have details of that, but we should try to find out as soon as we can just what that covers and what the possibilities are for organisations such as community groups.

The Convener: On Nanette Milne's first point, the clerk advises me that, because her suggestion is not within the scope of the petition, it would be difficult for us to refer to those points in our letter. The member, like many of us, has had letters from churches that allow church halls to be used by groups other than church ones. We can continue to pursue that as individual members or perhaps as a committee when that is appropriate, but the structure of PE1070 does not allow the committee to do so at present.

Nanette Milne's point about the rural development fund is worth exploring. We should ask the Big Lottery Fund about what dialogue it could have with the SCVO or others to try to create coherence between its funding and potential Government funding, so that we get a more structured approach that at least matches in. Three points arise. First, to be blunt, basic research is negligible. Secondly, there is a mismatch in the funding of existing hall provision—it is funded through charitable trusts, local authority grants and various other fundraising activities. Thirdly, if we do not do something structured in the next five or 10 years, the quality of what many halls offer will be diminished or they may not be able to provide anything because of the lack of investment in infrastructure. We need to deal with that.

As well as being a rural development issue, this is a cross-Government issue, as many such issues are. For example, I imagine that the communities ministerial team would need to take a

view. Perhaps in our letter we can ask whether the Government is working across portfolios and ministerial responsibilities to find ways in which to address the issue. To be fair, I point out for members who represent more urban areas that it has been suggested that some halls fit into the category even if they are in small towns or in neighbourhoods in cities.

I ask the clerk to pull together those five or six suggestions. We will follow through the suggestions, and through the committee clerks and public information the petitioners will see the responses that we receive. We will bring all the responses back to the committee for final consideration of what we would like to do with the petition. We will decide at that point what we can do to help address the issues that are raised in the petition. I know that before the petitioners came to today's meeting they lobbied individual MSPs and other decision makers—they should continue to do that. Thanks for your time.

Norman MacAskill: Thank you.

Car Parking (Hospitals) (PE1086)

The Convener: I ask the next petitioner to come to the table. PE1086, by Chris Paterson, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to issue new guidance to health boards to remove excessive charges for car parking—particularly for staff who work shifts and for whom public transport alternatives are limited.

Paul Martin MSP, who has expressed interest in the petition, is present. I welcome him to the meeting.

Chris, you have seen the format. You can make a three-minute presentation, after which committee members will ask questions, as may any other member who has expressed an interest in the issue.

Chris Paterson: I come before the committee as an individual representing the 5,200 people who have signed the petition—I am not representing an organisation. My original statement on the petition was written prior to the introduction of hospital car parking charges and I surmised what the potential problems were. Now that we have lived with the charges for almost four months, I confirm that all those concerns are a reality.

Public transport is neither reliable nor frequent enough. Staff often have to wait for transport for up to an hour before or after a shift and are sometimes late for work. Patients and relatives who attend the hospitals experience the same problems. Some people are required to use three modes of transport—bus, train and subway—for a journey that would take 10 minutes by car. People

who have checked public transport travel arrangements on the internet have been advised to leave home at 11 o'clock at night and stay overnight somewhere in order to get in for a shift that starts at 8 o'clock the following morning. Some members of staff live only 10 minutes away by car, while others travel a considerable distance. Some staff have felt unable to sustain the situation and have already resigned.

The main criterion for the allocation of parking permits is the need for the member of staff to use their car during their working day. As a result, the majority of permits have been allocated to the highest earners, such as consultants and senior managers. Lower earners and shift workers are, in effect, being discriminated against. Most people have found that they have no option but to travel by car and either pay the charges or, depending on the location of the hospital, park close by in suburban streets. Understandably, that is not well received by local residents. There have been reports of irate confrontations and cars being vandalised, which raises concerns about the well-being and safety of individuals.

It appears that the only safety concession to have been implemented is for night-shift workers, who do not have to pay between 9 pm and 7.30 am. In fact, however, day-shift workers are most at risk. They may travel between 6 and 7 o'clock in the morning and 8 and 9 o'clock at night, when public transport is limited and there are generally fewer people about.

A member of staff who has taken to cycling was jumped on by five youths and knocked off their bike when they were going home one night. It was also recently reported in the press that a woman out walking her dog in the evening had been raped on a street close to one of the hospitals.

As predicted, relatives who visit for long periods when patients are very ill or dying are clock-watching to avoid a parking fine. Their stress is compounded by the need to have the correct money, as no change is given at the machines.

Since the introduction of the charges, the car parks have been fairly busy Monday to Friday from nine to five, but they have not been full. However, they are very quiet outwith those times, especially at weekends and on public holidays, when charges still apply from 7.30 am to 9 pm.

Four months down the line, the strength of feeling against the parking charges remains high. This is not a knee-jerk reaction to an inconvenient change. The reality is that this is an expensive, unworkable, unsafe and stressful situation for many thousands of people in Glasgow.

14:30

The Convener: Thank you very much, Chris. Do members have any questions?

Nigel Don: Forgive me—I come from very much further east—but I have one simple question. Are the car parks run by the health service or are they run under some private arrangement?

Chris Paterson: I am not entirely sure about all of them. I know that the situation at Glasgow royal infirmary is separate from the arrangements that have been introduced at other Glasgow hospitals. To the best of my knowledge, Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board has brought in an independent company and its attendants manage the car parks.

Claire Baker: Thank you for your evidence today, Chris. I am familiar with the issue, as my cousin is a nurse in Fife and I know the kinds of shift patterns that she is required to work. She recently passed her driving test, as it was impossible for her to use public transport because of the hours that she works.

Why do you think the charges have been introduced in Glasgow? In March this year, guidance was issued on how NHS boards should introduce charging. If you are familiar with that guidance, what do you think its weaknesses are?

Chris Paterson: To the best of my knowledge, one of the primary reasons for introducing the charges was that patients arriving at the hospital found it difficult to get parked. By and large, they could find a space, but it took them a bit of time because the car parks were busy. The only positive outcome from the charges is that patients have the luxury of being able to drive in and find a parking space easily.

However, aside from that, it seems to me that all the other problems have not been addressed. The green issue—the desire to protect our environment and to reduce road congestion—has not been addressed. People still need to travel by car because public transport facilities are not available for the majority of people.

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): Chris, can you clarify how you wish the petition to be taken forward? Are you concerned that the green issue has not been dealt with properly and that charges should not have been implemented before that issue had been effectively interrogated?

Chris Paterson: No, my main concern is that people should be able to get to their work reasonably and safely. They should not suddenly be required to pay out £140 a month for doing that.

Paul Martin: The point that I was making is that, to your mind, the health board should have ensured that public transport was provided before it decided to introduce the charges. In effect, your argument is that the cart has been placed before the horse. If the health board cared so much about the green transport issue, it should have ensured that public transport was in place beforehand.

Chris Paterson: Absolutely.

Paul Martin: Finally, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing has given a commitment to complete a review by the end of this month. Are you disappointed that health boards in some parts of Scotland intend to proceed with plans to implement car parking charges before that review is complete?

Chris Paterson: Absolutely. That has disappointed many people. To the best of my knowledge, the review will begin this Friday 23 November, but its recommendations will not be made public until April 2008. That means that it will be five months before we see any recommendations, never mind changes.

Nanette Milne: Just out of interest, do you know whether the health board has made any attempts to ensure that public transport serves the hospital?

Chris Paterson: The board has said that it is looking into the matter and is in negotiations, but nothing has happened.

John Wilson: I understand from what you said earlier that health boards have prioritised parking spaces for certain members of staff, but they tend to be senior consultants and other senior medical staff.

Chris Paterson: The spaces are for people who have to use their car up to four times a week, which is generally people who have to attend meetings at different hospitals during nine-to-five hours.

John Wilson: I am looking at this from an economic point of view. It seems that those who are paid most in the health service are those who are least affected by the charges. Those who are paid the least could have to pay £140 a month to use the car park. It all comes down to how one determines who an essential worker is. The health board seems to have decided that senior staff members are essential workers, but nursing staff and others are not.

Chris Paterson: Yes.

The Convener: People have different starting points on this issue. In your experience, have the health boards' approaches shifted depending on their audience? They have made arguments about green issues, parking and generating income. It seems that different arguments have been

deployed at different times. Each hospital in the area that you have identified faces different pressures in relation to parking—the situation is not the same for each hospital—yet a universal policy on hospital parking will be applied right across the board. Are you picking that up from staff who have signed the e-petition or have raised the matter with you?

Chris Paterson: I am not aware of each hospital having different problems. It is easier for staff at one particular hospital to park in surrounding suburban streets, but that is just creating another problem rather than solving the one that we are trying to solve. The points that I raised in my statement reflect a feeling across the board.

The Convener: John Wilson referred to staff who might have higher salaries than support staff, ancillary staff or junior ward staff. The impact on staff in your area of work of paying car parking charges might be equivalent to a pay cut. Have you any notional figure for that?

Chris Paterson: Absolutely. A pay rise for somebody like me would be about £50 a month once a year, yet they would suddenly have to find £140 a month to bring their car to work.

The Convener: If you have to perform certain duties at certain times, you could find yourself having less take-home pay than before the pay rise because of the parking charges.

Chris Paterson: I would have considerably less pay.

The Convener: Are you as an individual staff member aware of what is happening in discussions with the health board or the unions? Do you find the communication helpful? Is there a lack of communication?

Chris Paterson: We get a core, brief letter sent over the intranet telling us what is happening. There does not seem to be much room for discussion. I have written to the health board and I got a letter back addressing my points, but saying that the board has to address the green issue, congestion and parking for patients. I know that one of the unions handed in an 11,000 signature petition to the health board in July and got the same response—that those issues have to be addressed and the matter is not up for discussion.

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): If you were able to secure concessionary parking for staff at the hospital, how do you suggest that it could be policed? How would you control it?

Chris Paterson: That is a difficult issue. However, there are lots of difficult things in life. We can fly people to the moon, so there must be a solution. I am not entirely sure what it is, but there

must be a way of doing it. Each member of staff could be given a permit to prove that they were a staff member and not just somebody who wanted to park at the hospital so they could go and do their shopping in town. There could be a specific parking area for patients. There must be an average number of patients attending the hospital at any one time. An area could be allocated solely for them. They could get a pass with their appointment card.

John Farquhar Munro: So you do not think that it would be difficult to control the parking. What about people who are not medical staff—people who do not work at the hospital—using the car park?

Chris Paterson: It is clearly not right for people to park there just so that they can do their shopping. A member of the portering staff could check that everyone who comes in has a permit or proof of why they are there.

John Farquhar Munro: So if someone did not have a permit, or something similar, they would not get into the car park.

Chris Paterson: I suppose that that would create a difficulty for people who were coming to visit patients.

John Farquhar Munro: In your petition, you make a point about staff who are not car owners working unsociable hours and having to go to the Govan Road bus stop, where they are potentially vulnerable. If you achieved concessionary parking, that would not eliminate the difficulty relating to public transport.

Chris Paterson: Absolutely. There are green issues that need to be addressed for reasons other than the petition. Public transport must be improved for everyone, in all walks of life. That must happen before we make it too difficult for people to take their cars anywhere.

The Convener: In a previous life, I had the privilege during the summer of working as a gatehouse attendant in hospitals. We had a relatively straightforward boom system: if people wanted access, they had to demonstrate either that they had a visitor pass, because family members with long-term illness were in the hospital, or that they were a staff member. By and large, the system worked reasonably sensibly; its operation was part of the hospital portering staff's duties. Admittedly, that was a fairly long time ago and the volume of traffic is now markedly higher, but a modified version of the system, combined with the use of technology such as swipe cards, could be adopted. The reality is that people would still try to get around it to help their pals to get a parking space.

The aim of the petition is to ensure that staff, who are critical to the effectiveness of the health service, and people who have family members in hospital are not disadvantaged excessively. I do not mind paying £2 or £3 for an hour-long visit—I can afford it—but I would not like to pay that if I were a pensioner whose mobility was dependent on a car and who needed to visit their partner. Do you think that Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board should freeze the present position until it has explored all other options, to satisfy the concerns that exist? Should it negotiate a much better agreement, especially with staff members, through their union representatives, to ensure that staff are not disadvantaged? Would that be a reasonable step forward?

Chris Paterson: That would be a popular decision.

The Convener: Should the health board pursue the issue while the review that the minister announced is under way?

Chris Paterson: It would be much better if the health board froze the position for the moment, given the difficulties that exist, until the review is complete.

The Convener: I think that we should write to the health board to express concern about the fact that it is accelerating the discussion, given the review process that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing has initiated. A number of major issues need to be addressed, including the issue of access. Do members agree?

Nanette Milne: I agree absolutely. I was a member of the Health Committee in the previous session, when it took evidence on hospital car parking charges. There are wide variations between health boards. The system with which I am most familiar is totally different from that which has been described this afternoon. I welcome the review that has been announced by the Government; we should ask to be kept informed about it. Clearly, there are such wide variations that the situation needs to be considered more equitably across the country. The suggestion of contacting the health board is good, and I would go along with that.

14:45

Paul Martin: There is an issue in welcoming the review: is the health board willing to take notice of it? This Sunday, charges will begin in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area at the Southern general, Stobhill and one other hospital.

A petition about car parking charges at Stobhill by Mary Murray, a constituent of mine, is due to come before the committee. I wonder whether the committee could call on the Cabinet Secretary for

Health and Wellbeing and the health boards not to implement the plans until both petitions have been properly explored by the committee. I see no point in people such as Chris Paterson and my constituent submitting petitions unless the issues that they raise are allowed to be explored properly by the Parliament.

That is obviously a decision for the committee. I am not a committee member, but I think that it is important that the Parliament is taken seriously by the health board. I know that Chris Paterson's petition has been going on for some time now, and there have been a number of debates on it.

My understanding is that the cabinet secretary's review will be complete at the end of the month but that the recommendations will take some time to come forward. We should at least explore the issues and ask the health board to be aware of the fact that the petitions process should be complete before it goes ahead with the charges.

John Wilson: I know that the petition is quite narrow, but Chris Paterson has raised a number of important issues concerning the current public transport constraints. More important, she has raised the health and safety issues for staff who work in hospitals throughout Scotland and the problems and potential dangers that they may face getting to and from work or, as Chris said, waiting at a bus stop.

We could widen the issue out when we write to the health board to ask whether it has taken on board the wider implications of the introduction of car parking charges and the issue of staff transport. If the board is not going to provide parking facilities for staff, has it examined the wider implications of the introduction of the charges? As a Parliament, we need to take some responsibility for the wider implications of proposals from health boards.

Would the committee like to write to the health boards on those terms? We could ask whether they have looked at the wider implications of the policies and whether they are doing any work in conjunction with public transport providers and others to ensure adequate transport links to hospitals at the times that they are required by staff as well as visitors and patients.

Nigel Don: I wonder whether we could widen the discussion further. Two weeks after I was elected as a city councillor in Dundee—that was four years ago—we introduced a residents parking scheme. Anyone who knows Dundee will know that my ward, Ninewells, contained a large hospital and a lot of people who could not park outside their houses, because everybody else wanted to park there when parking charges were introduced at the hospital. That obvious knock-on effect needs to be explored.

The Convener: People perhaps knew that that would happen, but there could be unintended consequences in neighbouring residential areas of squeezing on a hospital site. That issue has thrown itself up at one or two hospitals because of their locations.

I do not think that it is beyond the ken of the committee to raise the matter with the health board, saying that we have received a petition and that we are exploring the issues in it. Obviously, it is an autonomous body, but there is no harm in drawing its attention to the fact that we expect it not to pursue the charges while a Parliament committee is dealing with the issue and the cabinet secretary is undertaking a review. I do not think that it would be unreasonable for the Public Petitions Committees to do that. Are members okay with that?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The second point is about the broader definitions, which Chris Paterson raised in her petition. For some folk in the Parliament, it is a matter of principle whether there should be charges in hospitals at all, which will come up in the open debate on that. However, we should raise the idea of exploring all other options, because it strikes me that the punitive option has been taken. It will impact on staff during the daytime, never mind the complexities that many staff have in getting any transport other than their own personal transport or a taxi to hospitals in the evening, given the shift patterns that are worked.

I note with interest that Chris works at an acute dependency unit, so her shift patterns and the pressures on her will be markedly different compared with many other staff. We could take that on board. We can also raise with the cabinet secretary the fact that we have received the petition and our hope that the review process can be expedited to deal with the issue.

Are there any specific issues that I have missed? There are issues in the petition that we can take from the *Official Report* of today's meeting, such as the impact on residential properties when charging is introduced. A number of us have already seen that around hospitals—the impact on local drives and so on has been pretty hellish.

If there are no other issues, are members happy with what we will do on the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I hope that that is a wee bit more progress for you, Chris. You have probably been sitting in tearooms, raging about the issue with your fellow staff members in the past six or so months. If there is a concern, the Parliament has to hear it. We cannot guarantee that we will

resolve the concern for you, but we can guarantee that we will push the boundaries with the health board to try to raise the issues more effectively.

We will await the responses on that, but I hope that we can get some progress for you.

Chris Paterson: We will welcome any help that we can get. Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you for your time.

We will stop for a few minutes for a comfort break, and we will come back to the written petitions after that.

14:52

Meeting suspended.

15:04

On resuming—

The Convener: According to the agenda, the next petition should be PE1071. However, as a member of Parliament who is not on the committee but who expressed an interest in speaking to the petition has not arrived at the committee yet—he is attending another committee meeting—we will defer consideration of it until a bit later, to give him a chance to get here.

John Wheatley College (PE1072)

The Convener: The next petition that we will deal with is PE1072, from Councillor Frank Docherty, on behalf of the East Centre and Calton local community planning partnership and the board of John Wheatley College. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to take steps to enable John Wheatley College to be able to comply fully with the charities test that was established under the terms of the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005.

I declare an interest, in that, for the eight years until the college moved to its new campus, I had a lease with the college. Further, my parliamentary area is substantially served by the college and includes part of the East Centre ward and the Calton ward. I should also note that the college has written to me on this issue and I have already written to the minister about it.

How do members wish to proceed in relation to the petition?

Claire Baker: I was concerned by the problem that the petition raises. In my role in the SCVO, I was quite close to the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Bill as it passed through the Parliament and I certainly do not think that the Scottish Executive intended it to exclude colleges from charitable status.

The petition raises the idea that there could be an exemption for colleges, and I understand that ministers might be sympathetic to that. I share the concerns of the college about that suggestion. I do not think that exemptions are the solution and I think that that would be the charitable sector's opinion as well.

The Government's intention has not been followed through. It might be necessary for the current Government to go back to the legislation and think of a solution to the problem. We should write to the Scottish Government to find out its views on the petition and ask how it thinks that the situation could be resolved.

John Wilson: The reason for introducing the new charity legislation was to reduce the conflict that seemed to be arising from the lack of clarity between bona fide charitable organisations and organisations that declared themselves to be charitable organisations for the purposes of exempting themselves from certain conditions.

We need to ask the Scottish Government about the issue that has arisen in relation to the education sector. It is not only colleges that are affected, as it is quite clear that a number of other establishments might be identified as being in breach of the new legislation. The Scottish Government has to examine what the impact of the roll-out of the new conditions will be and determine whether the interpretation of the rules regarding charitable status will severely affect our further education and, possibly, higher education establishments.

Robin Harper: That is an important point. The issue must be thoroughly investigated to ensure that this sort of unintended consequence does not happen the next time a similar circumstance arises.

Ian Graham, the principal of the college, suggested transferring the ministerial responsibilities to the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council. We should find out whether the funding council has been consulted on whether it would like to take on that responsibility.

The Convener: Paul Martin has a constituency interest in this matter as well. He has had a busy afternoon.

Paul Martin: As the convener said, John Wheatley College has recently relocated to the Haghill area of my constituency. The work that the college has done over the years has been a good example of how colleges should operate.

As Claire Baker said, to exclude colleges was not the intention of the bill that we passed. The solution is for the Government, and the civil servants who support it, to show some humility—I

appreciate that drafting the bill was a previous Government's responsibility—and to acknowledge that the provision is wrong. The bill was not meant to have such a consequence. We all have a responsibility for that, given that we were all responsible in different ways for interrogating the legislation.

Humility must be shown and we must accept that we got it wrong. The Government must produce remedies to deal with the problem. The college has located itself in one of the most deprived communities in Scotland and it wants to continue the good work that it has done over the years. We must act quickly to ensure that that good work is not interrupted. The issue is a diversion from important activities in further educational attainment on which the college wants to focus. The quicker we all accept that a mistake has been made, the quicker we will move on.

The Convener: It is helpful to note that "Principles and Priorities: The Government's Programme for Scotland", which was published in September, says that the Government will

"introduce any legislation which is necessary to support a decision that the charitable status of colleges should be retained."

A problem for the college is that the timescale for meeting its immediate needs is difficult to match with finding the time to introduce an appropriate bill or amend a relevant bill that is to be introduced. The Parliament's timescale offers opportunities for that, but the time for scrutinising a bill might be so long that the college's immediate issues were not addressed.

We need clarity from the Government about the issues that the unintended impact of the 2005 act has thrown up. I echo what Paul Martin said. John Wheatley College works at a level at which many other colleges do not need to; it is involved in pre-vocational training for access to work for individuals and communities whose life experiences and unpreparedness for college work mean that they are among the most challenging. The college does an incredible amount of work, much of which is supported by charitable trusts, which help the college with its budget. Anything that can be done on this issue would be worth while.

I take on board Robin Harper's point. It is fine to suggest that the Scottish funding council might inherit ministerial responsibilities, but is that appropriate and can it do that? What is the funding council's view? We need to explore that. I do not think that John Wheatley College will be the only further education establishment in this position, although it is the first. The Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator will continue to play its role throughout Scotland—its creation was necessary—and that might throw up many

anomalies that exist because, over the years, institutions were created by a variety of methods through regional authorities, local authorities or charitable organisations. It would help to explore the issue and to have views on how to deal with it.

I thank Mr Martin for his attendance and I hope that the next meeting that he attends is much less busy.

Kinship Carers (PE1085)

The Convener: PE1085 is from Caroline Garrett, on behalf of You Are Not Alone, and calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Executive or Government to provide total recognition for kinship carers.

Alasdair Morgan MSP, who has expressed an interest in the petition, is present. I will invite comments from committee members first, but I will be happy to call him after that.

Heavy lobbying on kinship carers has taken place in all parts of Scotland in recent years. I declare an interest: an active organisation that has raised issues to do with kinship carers is in my constituency. I am sure that the same is true of several other members.

How do we wish to approach the petition?

15:15

Nanette Milne: I was impressed by the letter from YANA, which details the research that it did in Dumfries and Galloway this year. It is interesting to note the high percentage of kinship carers who qualified for the grant that was provided and how many of them were senior citizens, or certainly over 52 years of age. YANA should be commended for doing that work.

We were promised a national fostering and kinship care strategy. I wonder what the strategy will recommend and whether kinship carers will be given the same provisions and legal recognition as foster carers. We should write to the Minister for Children and Early Years as soon as possible and ask for details of what the strategy will offer.

Robin Harper: I remember from my time in the children's hearings system—things will not have changed—that the children's panel can specify that a child should be moved into the care of a family member rather than into foster care or other forms of care. If the children's panel can make that decision, it is bizarre that kinship carers have no legal status. The petition merits further consideration.

The Convener: I know that the former First Minister explored the options. In the past two or three weeks, unless I am mistaken, the Labour leader asked a question of the First Minister, Alex

Salmond, who said something constructive on the matter. I am sure that I heard him say that the Government wants to move forward on kinship care. Maybe Alasdair Morgan can confirm that.

I think that a broad consensus is emerging that the matter has fallen through the gaps in the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 and nobody has got around to resolving it. Particularly because of the massive explosion of the drug problem, grandparents have been adopting the role of primary carers for their grandchildren. They do that out of love, but they are treated badly by the system because they do not get any income for it. They do not want to give up their legal guardian rights to get that, which is perfectly right. If I was the carer of a child who was a blood relation, I would not want to change the legal format of our relationship to try to get some money. We should make things flexible rather than asking people to do that.

Alasdair, given that the matter has been raised with you, do you wish to comment?

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): Yes. Thank you, convener. You are quite right in all that you say. The matter is not just about giving money to carers who look after children, although that is obviously an important mechanism. It is about ensuring that a certain proportion of our children are not disadvantaged compared with their peers in relation to the clothes that they wear, the educational experiences of which they can take advantage, and other normal things that the rest of their class can access because they have more funds. The quote that says all that we need to hear on the matter is from a 16-year-old:

"I used the money to visit my mum in England. It's the first time I've seen her in 3 years."

We could either say that the petition has arrived at the right time or at the wrong time. The convener is right—the First Minister gave a positive reply to Jack McConnell and, in a members' business debate in October, the Minister for Children and Early Years said that he thought that the strategy would be published in early December.

I do not want to be presumptuous and tell the committee what it should do, but I suggest that you write to the minister and set out the points in the paper from YANA, in the hope that the strategy has not gone to the printer yet and that you might be able to influence it. Secondly, I suggest that you keep the petition open and, when the strategy is published, consider to what extent it addresses the issues that are raised in the petition. If you do not feel that the strategy addresses those issues satisfactorily, you can decide what further steps to take.

The Convener: I will sum up. There is a positive consensus on trying to progress the issue. I think that there has been cross-party support in the chamber on the matter, but obviously a legislative framework and, more important, a resource allocation must now be found. I would certainly not quibble with what Alasdair Morgan has said, and I presume that committee members assent to it and are comfortable with it.

We will write to the minister about the issues that have been raised, say that the committee is still exploring the issues, and send a copy of the *Official Report* of the meeting. I hope that we will receive a positive response.

I thank Alasdair Morgan for attending the meeting. I appreciate his doing so.

Primary Schools (Visiting Specialist Teachers) (PE1071)

The Convener: We return to PE1071, which is from Ruchelle Cullen—I hope that I have pronounced that name correctly—on behalf of Lochinver primary school parents and teachers association. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that all primary school children, especially those in remote and rural areas, have adequate access to visiting specialist teachers of music, art and physical education.

Jamie Stone hoped to be here to discuss the petition, but he is still convening a Subordinate Legislation Committee meeting. Obviously, major issues of interest have compelled him to stay at that meeting. However, John Farquhar Munro may want to raise issues that Jamie Stone might have raised. Other members have also expressed an interest in raising issues relating to the petition.

Robin Harper: I am in danger of repeating what I have said in the Parliament on various occasions over the past eight years. It is sad but true that specialist teachers of music, art and physical education are often the first to suffer from cuts if a local authority needs to trim its budget. Those teachers are, in my opinion and in the opinion of many other people, essential to the education of our young people. Music, art and drama should be thought of as core subjects rather than additional subjects. It is simply wrong to deny children in their early years access to specialist teaching and the wonderful experiences that that teaching brings. Something needs to be done.

John Farquhar Munro: The petition calls for more visiting teachers, particularly in rural areas—that is its gist. Under the previous Administration in Edinburgh, all sorts of promises were made about additional visiting teachers. Quite significant numbers were discussed, but not much has

happened. The petitioners are trying to redress the balance.

It is all very well to say that music, art and physical education are taught in the bigger schools in which there are almost full complements of staff, but small rural areas in which pupil numbers are low, as they are in my constituency, do not have the same facilities, and there seems to be a diminution in the number of visiting teachers in those subjects. Pupils, parents and teachers rightly complain bitterly that they are deprived of such facilities. The petitioners are trying to arrest the situation and to bring back more visiting teachers so that pupils in remote and rural areas have the same opportunities and facilities that the larger schools in the country have. I am happy to support them. I do not know what other members think, but I think that their cause is good and justifiable and that it merits support.

Nigel Don: I echo the comments that others have made, particularly Robin Harper. I do not see how we can leave these specialist subjects out of education. At this point, I should perhaps point out that I was a music teacher in a previous incarnation. To me, it is a basic issue. I have one memory of my earliest school. Do not ask me how long ago that was, but I remember banging a drum—and I have been a noisy soul ever since, as most people who know me will verify. These subjects are crucial. They are not something to be cut. We just need to bang the drum.

The Convener: Mind you, banging a drum can cause a few stushies here and there in my constituency—but there we are.

The issue here is about the devolving of the decisions on provision to local authorities. There is encouragement for local priorities to emerge from the budget process. We will have our arguments and discussions about such matters in the chamber, but there is a concern that specialist work could get squeezed. We need clarity about the local authority's current position on the issue.

I know that the previous Executive had a commitment to additional specialist teachers and that it was working towards that. I am sure that that is still the case. However, if the money has been devolved, as it seems to have been under the new budget, there might be issues of follow-on and of tracking the money through to ensure that the desired return is achieved.

We should write directly to Highland Council, mentioning that the petition has come from its area. We should voice our concern about some of the implications. There are one or two other bodies with which we could raise the petition regarding the role of specialist groups. My attention was drawn to the youth music initiative, which I was involved in before. There is a new

commitment to give primary 6 pupils access to music tuition. That came from a partnership between the grant body—essentially, that was the Scottish Arts Council—and the 32 local authorities. They will take a position for their school music departments. We need to get views about whether there has been a detrimental impact on provision.

I take on board what members have said about experience. Sometimes it is the unique experiences that can make school more bearable—we could all provide good testimonies of that.

I imagine that COSLA might be the other organisation to write to.

John Wilson: I was going to suggest that. The petition comes from a rural context but, as other members have said, we need to widen out the issue to the whole of Scotland. It is not just in rural areas that specialist teaching staff are unavailable. It would be useful to get the views from COSLA's membership on what councils are doing to carry things forward, including in urban schools, in light of the previous Executive's commitment.

The Convener: Okay.

John Farquhar Munro: Are you suggesting that we contact the Educational Institute of Scotland?

John Wilson: I am suggesting COSLA, but it would be useful to contact the EIS, too.

The Convener: We should contact the local authority and the two major quango organisations, the Scottish Arts Council and sportscotland—whatever happens to either of them. Oops—sorry, that was a wee bit of politics, there.

John Farquhar Munro: Did you mention Highland Council?

The Convener: Yes—so that you can send your irate letter to them, John.

Electricity Transmission Lines (Underground Cabling) (PE1087)

The Convener: PE1087, by Nancy Gardner, calls on the Parliament to consider and debate using underground and, where appropriate, undersea cabling for any new electricity transmission lines, such as that which is proposed between Beaully and Denny. The petition, as well as having been lodged, was hosted on the e-petitions system, where it gathered 232 signatures. The petition is relatively clear. I invite views on how to deal with it. I know that consultation is continuing. In fact, the inquiry into the matter is now on-going.

John Farquhar Munro: There is a lot of interest in what is happening and a lot of criticism about what has been proposed. I suppose that we must

wait for the results of the public inquiry, which I think is drawing to a conclusion. The local population on the route of the Beaully to Denny line are certainly objecting strongly. All the local authorities, from Highland to Stirling, have also objected. There is a lot to happen yet.

15:30

John Wilson: I was going to suggest that we do not wait until the inquiry has reported its findings, as certain issues need to be addressed. This petition might well have raised another—how to transmit the electricity that is produced—on which it would be worth while for the committee to seek the views of the Scottish Government and the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets. After all, the petition might give them an alternative that might not have been considered in the inquiry and that they might think about before they go ahead and put up the pylons and cabling from Beaully to Denny.

Nigel Don: A week and a half ago, I attended a conference in Dundee with people involved in establishing sources of renewable energy and in exploring how to transmit across Scotland the electricity produced. All the issues raised in the petition are topmost in the experts' minds, so I do not think that it will tell them anything that they have not thought about already. Of course, that does not stop us writing to the Government or anyone else on what the current position might be.

The Convener: Are members happy with those recommendations?

Members indicated agreement.

Further Education Lecturers (Pay and Conditions) (PE1088)

The Convener: PE1088 is from Dr Robert Leslie, on behalf of the Educational Institute of Scotland North Glasgow College branch, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to conduct an inquiry into the salary levels and employment conditions of further education lecturing staff, who are at present seriously disadvantaged compared with university lecturers and schoolteachers. Do members have any views on this rather straightforward petition?

John Wilson: I find it interesting that on the very day that we have discussed John Wheatley College's charitable status we are considering this petition. My understanding is that many further education lecturers' terms and conditions have come about as a result of changes in the further education sector—including the move towards charitable status—that were made a number of years ago. It is a worthwhile issue for consideration and we should seek the views of the Scottish Government, the Scottish Further and

Higher Education Funding Council, the Association of Scottish Colleges and the University and College Union to find out what went wrong and what can be done to redress the problem. After all, many colleges face cash restrictions. As we pointed out in our discussion on the petition on car parking charges at hospitals, one of the first things to happen in this kind of situation is that workers' salaries get squeezed. The same might well have happened in the further education sector over the past decade.

The Convener: I should declare an interest as a member of the EIS. The petition's broader point is that we seek the views of the agencies that John Wilson mentioned on the issues involved. However, such issues should, of course, form part of the union's direct negotiations with the employer.

John Wilson: I am aware that particular difficulties have emerged in the negotiations between individual colleges and unions. Indeed, in some cases the union's rights in these pay negotiations have been derecognised. This petition goes much wider than has been suggested, convener, and the bodies that I have suggested we seek information from might well flesh out some of the issues that it raises.

The Convener: Do members agree to that course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

Cancer-causing Toxins (PE1089)

The Convener: PE1089 is from Morag Parnell on behalf of the Women's Environmental Network in Scotland, which calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to investigate links between exposure to hazardous toxins in the environment and the workplace and rising incidences of cancer and other chronic illnesses. Since the petition closed on the e-petitions system in late October, the petitioner has gathered 91 more signatures of support.

How do members wish to deal with the petition? It is suggested that we write to a number of organisations on the issue.

Nigel Don: Let me try to lead us through this. Obviously, the petition is wide ranging and general but it makes a fair point. Unfortunately, synthetic chemistry has given us all sorts of molecules that were not there originally and we are paying the price.

As we start from a base of no research, I suggest that we write to all the organisations that the clerks can think of that are connected with occupational health and with this general area. We can ask what research has been done or is on-going, whether there is a bank of information,

whether that information is being added to and whether there are experts on the subject. We are starting from a position of ignorance.

The Convener: One organisation that has been suggested is the occupational and environmental health research group at the University of Stirling. It might be worth exploring the issue with that group, with appropriate Government departments or ministers and with any other organisation that deals with health-at-work issues.

John Wilson: We should perhaps write to the Health and Safety Executive.

Nanette Milne: In view of the fact that just about everything that we buy and eat seems to have chemical additives of one kind or another, it might be worth asking the Food Standards Agency for its input and knowledge.

Robin Harper: At the moment, human beings in the western world do not seem to be threatened health-wise—apart from by obesity—and we now live longer than we did before. However, I am concerned at the sheer number of chemicals in the environment. We should ask whether any research has been done on the cumulative effects. We might not be able to identify those clearly at the moment, but such effects might occur through exposure to a cumulatively large amount of various chemicals. For example, I know that WWF has carried out some research on the chemicals that are collected in house dust. It is pretty frightening to see how many different chemicals exist in the average vacuum cleaner-load of house dust. I urge that some research be focused on that issue. Instead of considering just individual chemicals in minute quantities, we need to examine how the different chemicals relate to one another. Under the current regulations, certain levels of chemicals are allowed and a huge number of additives can be put into the processed food that we buy—the additives listed on a packet of dried fruit can be quite concerning—but those additives would not normally be present in food taken straight from the ground.

I certainly agree that we should consider the issue further by consulting the occupational and environmental health research group at the University of Stirling, the Cancer Prevention Coalition and Health Protection Scotland. All those groups should be consulted.

The Convener: If members have no other additional comments or recommendations, we will approach those organisations for further information. Do members accept that course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

Current Petitions

“The same as you? A review of services for people with learning disabilities” (PE743, PE822 and PE881)

15:38

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is consideration of current petitions. We have grouped three petitions—PE743, PE822 and PE881—as they all raise issues about the implementation of “The same as you? A review of services for people with learning disabilities”, in which commitments were made on services for people with learning disabilities.

PE743 by Madge Clark, on behalf of the Murray Owen Carers Group, urges the Scottish Government to review the implementation of “The same as you?” to ensure that adults with learning difficulties who still live at home and who are cared for by elderly parents are given the same level of support and community care opportunities as hospital-discharged patients.

PE822 by Beatrice Gallie calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that sufficient funding is made available to allow the implementation of “The same as you?” so that all people with learning disabilities have the choice to live at home like anyone else and are given the support that they need to live independently.

PE881 by Rachel Cole calls on the Parliament to urge the Executive to review the findings of “The same as you?” to ensure that those with profound and complex needs are provided for.

We have received a fair amount of correspondence on the issue and we have a number of possible options to consider. Do members have any views?

Nanette Milne: Given that we have a new Government in its first budget process, is it worth asking for an update on the action that it is taking to address the petitioners’ concerns and what funding might be available?

The Convener: I am reluctant to close the petitions because the service area and the needs of the clients that we are talking about are complex and always challenging, so we should be vigilant all the time. I know how difficult it has been to get somewhere. To achieve the commitments of “The same as you?” requires all the different agencies such as housing providers, local authority providers, or voluntary sector providers to have combined resources and staff to deal with problems.

Social work departments sometimes review their services for the older adult with disabilities and learning difficulties and this is about how we deal with those issues. We should get an update on where we are and whether there are issues around resources or policy that still need to be dealt with.

Members indicated agreement.

Speech and Language Therapy (Agenda for Change) (PE768)

The Convener: The next petition, by Susan Bannatyne and Nicola Orr, calls on the Parliament to consider and debate the implications of the proposed agenda for change legislation for speech and language therapy services and service users in the NHS. Again, members have the papers and written submissions.

Challenging as much of the agenda for change has been around pay bands and so on, I am of the view that most of the areas around the agenda for change are assimilated into the agreement, and I do not know that we can add anything further at the moment. If there are no other views, I am minded to close the petition.

John Farquhar Munro: There is the suggestion that we could draw the petition to the attention of the Scottish Government for consideration in the “Better Health, Better Care” discussion and the forthcoming health and well-being action plan.

Nanette Milne: I presume that that is not incompatible with closing the petition.

The Convener: To put it bluntly, I would have thought that speech and language therapy would be an on-going issue in the health and well-being sector at ministerial and civil servant level, given that it is a core issue for discussions with health boards and social work departments. Current information seems to indicate that there are no recruitment and retention problems, so I would be happy to recommend closure. If the petitioners are still unhappy, or there are future problems, they have the right to bring something forward again. I recommend closure at this stage. Does the committee approve?

Members indicated agreement.

Maternity Services (Rural Areas) (PE898)

The Convener: PE898, by Mrs Lynne Simpson, calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to review the provision of maternity services in rural communities to ensure that quality and access to services are retained locally. Papers have been submitted to us. Are there any views?

My information is that birth units have been established in Banff and Fraserburgh, and that a

unit in Aboyne will become operational shortly. There was a review, through “A Framework for maternity services in Scotland”, to ensure that health boards try to provide maternity services appropriate to local needs, and obviously there was a massive amount of public concern about three years ago—maybe it was longer ago than that.

Nanette Milne: I suppose that I should declare an interest of sorts in that I was involved with the Aboyne group when it was lobbying us intensively. To my knowledge, it is as we have been told; the birth units are either up and running or are about to be. I understand that the health boards will monitor the situation carefully. I am not sure, therefore, that the committee can do anything further at this time, but obviously we will note the units’ progress with interest.

The Convener: Are there any other views in the committee? There has been a shift from where we were when the petitioners would have been most concerned. Can we therefore recommend closure of the petition in light of the new and retained maternity service provision in the north?

Members indicated agreement.

Victim Notification Scheme (PE899)

15:45

The Convener: PE899, by Hazel Reid, calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to review the operation of the victim notification scheme to ensure that victims of serious violent and sexual crimes are given the right to receive information about the release from prison of an offender who has committed a crime against them, regardless of the length of sentence that was imposed.

Do members have recommendations on how we should deal with the petition?

Claire Baker: It is important that we obtain clarity on the future of the victim notification scheme. I suggest that we write to the Scottish Government to ask whether, when and how it will take forward an extension of the scheme. It would be helpful to obtain the Government’s ideas on how that should be implemented.

The Convener: Do members agree to approve that recommendation and to continue our consideration of the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

Urban Regeneration (PE911)

The Convener: PE911 was lodged by Paul Nolan on behalf of Craigmillar community council. It calls on the Parliament to consider and debate the implications of the Government’s support for

market-led urban regeneration projects and the operation of privatised urban regeneration companies; in particular, it asks us to consider the mechanisms through which communities can influence such companies and hold them to account. Members have the written submissions in front of them. How should we proceed?

John Wilson: Given that the petition has been around for almost two years, it is incumbent on us to write to the new Government to find out how it plans to make progress on housing regeneration and other aspects of community regeneration. In the light of the statements that have been made by the cabinet secretary and other ministers, we should find out whether the Government will have the same attitude as the previous Executive on such matters.

The Convener: I am keen that we do that, given that two of Scotland’s major regeneration projects sit in my area. It would be helpful to get clarity, although I would be surprised if there was not a fair amount of consistency of approach. We will write to the Government and await its response with interest.

Play Strategy (PE913)

The Convener: PE913 was submitted by Debbie Scott on behalf of To Play or Not to Play. It calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to adopt a play strategy that recognises the right of all children in Scotland to a safe, accessible and challenging play environment.

Robin Harper: We should keep open our consideration of the petition because it deals with an on-going issue. For a large number of reasons that I will not go into just now, I strongly believe that the petition should be kept open for discussion.

The Convener: I know that the Government has issued a consultation on national planning policy guideline 11, which is on play areas and open spaces. Those issues are relevant to the petition, so I think that we should keep it open and ask for the Government’s view on it.

Claire Baker: I noted that quite a few of the letters that we got back from organisations were a bit uncomfortable about the play strategy being closely tied into the early years strategy. We should write to the Scottish Government to ask whether that is indeed the approach that it plans to adopt and what the thinking behind it is. Perhaps we could also tease out from which part of the strategic spending review the funding for the play strategy will come. More detail on that would be helpful.

The Convener: The issue is relevant in the context of the debate about Glasgow’s successful

bid for the Commonwealth games, which is about not just the benefits that the city of Glasgow will obtain, but the wider subject of activity, exercise and engagement. If we do not have open spaces or supported play provision, it will be more difficult to engage in such activities. Housing is still an important issue in Scotland and the housing lobby remains powerful. Let us keep the petition on board, as it deals with an issue that we will want to return to.

Bingo Industry (PE1040)

The Convener: PE1040 was submitted by Mike Lowe—who was one of the petitioners we heard from early in the new session of Parliament—on behalf of members of Premier bingo clubs in Kirkcaldy, Cowdenbeath and Edinburgh. We have received correspondence on the impact on the industry of recent changes and its concern about aspects of the legislative and financial framework under which it claims that it operates. Do members have views on the petition?

Claire Baker: The response from the Treasury was a bit abrupt, but I sympathised with its suggestion that tax was not at the root of the problems that the bingo industry is experiencing. When the industry gave evidence to us, it discussed other issues, such as the smoking ban and an ageing clientele. The follow-up letter that John Swinney sent to the Treasury tries fairly to tease out the thinking behind the tax situation in which bingo halls find themselves and to draw out more information about where they sit within the gambling industry, in comparison with casinos, bookmakers and gaming machines. It is fair enough for us to wait for a response from the Treasury to the cabinet secretary's second letter, which will give us more justification for the current tax situation of bingo halls.

The Convener: That is a helpful suggestion.

Claire Baker: Have we received responses from the local authorities to which we wrote: Fife Council, the City of Edinburgh Council and Glasgow City Council?

The Convener: No. Are members happy with Claire Baker's suggestion?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Robin Harper: I want to correct something that I said earlier about PE1089. I did not want to give the impression that I do not think that it is essential that we carry out research into the individual chemicals concerned—clearly, there is a great deal of alarm about them. The organisation that I quoted was not WWF, but Greenpeace. I should have remembered, because it took a bagful of dust from my house.

The Convener: As long as it was not magic dust, you will not get the polis coming to your door. Perhaps I know too much about that—I had better watch myself. I have been watching too many American gangster movies.

New Petitions (Notification)

15:52

The Convener: Committee members have a note of the new petitions that have been lodged. We will have two major meetings before the recess. I have asked Fergus Cochrane to prepare a summary paper for the end of the term on how we wish to handle matters after the recess. I refer both to the number of people who have asked to speak directly to the committee and to the pressure points of petitions that have been lodged. Would members like to comment on the new petitions that have been identified?

John Wilson: I have a query about PE1096 and PE1097. I assume that Dumfries Welfare Rights is an independent organisation and is not part of a local authority.

The Convener: We will check that. I know that some welfare rights organisations are arms of social work services.

I ask members to stay behind after the meeting to deal with a couple of issues. I thank members of the public for their patience and hope that they have enjoyed this meeting of the Public Petitions Committee.

Meeting closed at 15:53.

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