

# **PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE**

Monday 30 March 2009

Session 3

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# **PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE**

## **6<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2009, Session 3**

### **CONVENER**

\*Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)

### **DEPUTY CONVENER**

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

### **COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)

\*Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP)

\*Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)

\*Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)

\*Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP)

\*Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)

\*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

### **COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES**

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Nicol Stephen (Aberdeen South) (LD)

\*attended

### **THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED :**

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Walter Baxter (Brainhelp)

Ron Beaty

Mark Buchan (Fraserburgh Academy)

◊Susan Cross (Families Outside)

Hannah Gray (Fraserburgh Academy)

Christopher Hair (Kemnay Academy)

Fiona Henderson (Fraserburgh Academy)

Kevin Hutchens (Aberdeen Trades Union Council)

Martin Laing (Scottish Parliament Technology and Facilities Management Directorate)

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)

Jenna McDonald (Fraserburgh Academy)

Tina McGeever

Alan Morrison (Fraserburgh Academy)

John Noble (Fraserburgh Academy)

Louise Perry (Fraserburgh Academy)

Dr Glen Reynolds

Matthew Roger (Fraserburgh Academy)

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)

Superintendent Innes Skene (Grampian Police)

Stewart Stevenson (Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change)

◊by video link

### **CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Fergus Cochrane

### **ASSISTANT CLERK**

Franck David

Jonathan Orr

### **LOCATION**

Fraserburgh Academy, Fraserburgh

# Scottish Parliament

## Public Petitions Committee

*Monday 30 March 2009*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:01*]

### Petitions Process Inquiry

**The Convener (Mr Frank McAveety):** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee, which is sitting not in a committee room in Edinburgh but in Fraserburgh academy. In particular, we welcome students from Fraserburgh academy and from elsewhere across the region, who have come along to see the process of the committee.

I am the MSP for the Glasgow Shettleston constituency and the convener of the Public Petitions Committee. We have a full complement of committee members; the fact that they have all found their way here is an endorsement of the quality of the petitions before us and a recognition that we wish to engage as effectively as possible with the people of Scotland. I invite committee members to introduce themselves, so that people are aware of the areas that they represent, either as constituency members or as regional members.

**John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD):** Good morning, everybody. I am the Lib Dem member for Ross, Skye and Inverness West. I am delighted to be here.

**Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab):** Good morning, everyone. I am equally delighted to be here. I am the Labour and Co-operative MSP for Glasgow Anniesland.

**Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab):** I, too, am delighted to be here. I am one of the Labour MSPs for North East Scotland.

**Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):** I am another committee member who is happy to be in Fraserburgh. I am a Conservative MSP for North East Scotland. I live in Aberdeen, so the Broch is quite handy for me—it took me just under an hour to get here.

**Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP):** Good morning. I am a North East regional MSP and, despite my London accent, a member of the SNP. I, too, live in Aberdeen, so it was a gentle drive up the road this morning. I am delighted to be back in Fraserburgh.

**Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP):** Good morning, everybody. I am an SNP MSP for the city of Glasgow, and I am the Parliament's newest

MSP. I became a member seven weeks ago, after one of our members passed away.

**John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP):** Good morning. I am an SNP list MSP for Central Scotland. I am glad to be here.

**Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green):** Good morning. I am a Green party MSP for Edinburgh and the Lothians. I have a connection with the north-east in that I went to Elgin academy for a year.

**The Convener:** To my immediate left are some of the staff of the Parliament: the clerks to the committee and official report staff. The reporters will record what is said by parliamentarians, as well as contributions that are made by individuals during the question-and-answer session and the wider discussion—our discussion will all be recorded for the record.

Because of our commitment to one of our key petitions, about engagement, we also have the opportunity today to have a video link-up. I hope that, through the school's technology, we will be able to link up with individuals in Edinburgh who wish to give evidence on parts of the committee's discussions. I hope that, through the video link, we will hear voices from the screen on our right. Unfortunately, those of you behind the screen will not see the individuals concerned, but we can assure you that people will appear there to make a genuine contribution.

I record our appreciation for Fraserburgh academy. Before we were members of the Scottish Parliament, a number of us had experience of working in schools. It is always a delight for us to visit schools, but I know that it can cause inconvenience for the school. I therefore thank the school, particularly the rector and the staff, including the key members of staff other than the headteacher—the janitorial staff—who ensured that everything was in place for our visit, which I hope will be of benefit.

One reason why we chose Fraserburgh academy as a location for the meeting was that we were aware that it has a particular commitment to ensuring that its young people develop as full citizens and, as part of that, are clearly aware of the parliamentary and political process. I know that they are already a wee bit nervous and I do not want to make them more so, but young students from secondary 2 and students from other year groups will make a contribution shortly. I am sure that they will be a credit to the school and to their families, and I hope that they will gain something positive from the experience.

A number of committee members are from the north-east. Several MSPs who are not members of the committee are here today for specific items on the agenda. I will introduce them for the agenda

item concerned and we will hear from them then. For administrative and procedural reasons, I indicate that all electronic devices should be switched off because they can interfere with the recording system.

The first item on the agenda is the continuation of our grandly titled inquiry into the public petitions process. In essence, it arose from a petition for which one of the main petitioners was the Young Scot organisation, which petitioned the Parliament about how the Public Petitions Committee could engage more effectively with the public, and with young people in particular. It will be helpful to hear views from the young people here on how we can engage with them and deal more effectively with their interests.

Unlike our normal meetings, everybody in the room can participate in this open session. The inquiry is about how we can make the public petitions process more effective. We lead the way among many Parliaments in the world in how we engage with our citizens. We know how the public can view politicians—we are not immune to that perception—but we are keen to ensure that our Parliament is accountable more effectively to the people in Scotland than perhaps people have felt other institutions have been to date.

The Public Petitions Committee was based, in part, on the simple, democratic Scottish idea that people can raise an issue by petitioning their Parliament. A petition can be submitted by an individual or a collection of individuals, or it can have thousands of signatures. We get a bit of criticism in the media sometimes for the petitions that we consider, but we cannot refuse a petition. No matter how interesting, unusual or meaningful a petition is or is not, it must be discussed by our Public Petitions Committee. That does not mean that we always agree with a petition, or that we think that all petitions should be thoroughly discussed by other committees or in the Parliament chamber. However, the reality of the democratic process that we engage in is that the Public Petitions Committee must discuss each petition.

Something that is now regarded as conventionally sensible or acceptable might have started out as an idea that was regarded as a wee bit eccentric or unusual. Times change and so does how people view things. We therefore have a sense that the Public Petitions Committee is the voice of Scotland: diverse, as it should be, but sometimes as wacky as it can be—that is the reality of life. We all have a variety of opinions, some of which we are happy to express and others that we are a wee bit shy about expressing, because we wonder whether people will agree with them. Perhaps the benefit of the petitions

process is that it allows some of that to be aired in our Parliament.

We have arranged a series of opportunities for members of the public to tell us how they think the public petitions process could be more effective. We have held a number of public sessions on this matter in other parts of Scotland, and people have not been shy about coming forward with their views. I invite those who are here today to give us their views or to ask us questions.

**Bill Butler:** I will kick off with a few general questions that members of the audience can respond to. What do you think that the petitions process is for? How well does the Parliament publicise the existence of the petitions process? How can we do better?

**The Convener:** If people want to speak, it would be helpful if they would stand up—if they are able and confident enough to do so—so that we can see them across the room. It would also be helpful if they would say who they are and whether they are here as an individual or are representing an organisation.

The two members of the Parliament staff with microphones are not about to start singing; they will pass one of the microphones to anyone who wishes to speak.

**Dr Glen Reynolds:** I am the prospective parliamentary candidate for the Labour Party for Banff and Buchan. On behalf of the constituency party, I would like to say what a joy it is to have the committee here in Fraserburgh in particular and in the north-east of Scotland in general.

I am sure that committee members are aware of the report about the Public Petitions Committee that Dr Christopher Carman, then of the University of Glasgow, produced in 2006, around the time that the committee received its 1,000<sup>th</sup> petition. The report said that the fundamental problem that the committee faces, in terms of its aim to be inclusive, concerns the social background of the people who petition the committee, in that they are substantially male, middle class and well educated. Is that still the case?

As admirable as the intent of the committee is, you must be truly democratic in reaching out to people in the poorer areas—for example, areas in which there is substantial council housing. As I understand it, that is not the case at the moment. If you are to be truly democratic, do you not have to address that? To what extent have you addressed that issue since that report was published in 2006?

**The Convener:** We will take a few questions and then either I or other members will respond.

**Kevin Hutchens (Aberdeen Trades Union Council):** I represent the Aberdeen Trades Union

Council. Again, welcome to the north-east. I hope that the Public Petitions Committee will come here again. I see this visit as an example of democracy and freedom of expression at work; it is very much in the spirit of the Scottish Parliament, which is about bringing democracy and control of services closer to the people of Scotland.

I have been involved with several petitions. One was about making United Nations day a public holiday; one was about human rights education; and the most recent was against cuts in public and voluntary sector funding, which was submitted on behalf of Aberdeen Trades Union Council.

My organisation has made a written submission to the inquiry. However, in view of the committee's visit to the area, I will reinforce some of our points.

10:15

I am pleased with the level of support from the committee's staff. They were helpful in the course of communication by e-mail and letter, and they were very polite and courteous on the phone. I am particularly pleased regarding liaison and regarding people with physical disabilities coming to the Public Petitions Committee. Two of the people who came along to the committee were wheelchair users. I am pleased at the hearing that the committee gave to the views of the Aberdeen Trades Union Council and of our two witnesses from Future Choices and Glencraft. I am also pleased with the way in which the meeting was recorded, in writing and on video.

However, I will focus on something that I am not so pleased about—the length of time that organisations have taken to respond to the committee's request for information in relation to questions that were asked. Our petition is still under active consideration. In many ways, I am pleased about that. However, as of today, none of the requested further information has been passed on. Some of the organisations that were asked for information on the first occasion made no formal response; I refer to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, in particular.

In practice, that meant that, while key bodies such as the Scottish Government took more than two months to reply to the first call for information, Aberdeen Trades Union Council—a voluntary body—was left with only weeks in which to respond to what was said. That, incidentally, did not take too long, as we felt that the Government had avoided many questions that we and the committee had raised. In the light of that, we propose a time limit of, say, 21 days in which respondents must reply and a requirement on all organisations to reply as of duty.

My final point is perhaps not within the remit of today's inquiry. Aberdeen Trades Union Council

suggests that, given the way in which events have moved on, a roving inquiry into cuts in public and voluntary sector funding should be initiated, starting here, in the north-east of Scotland, in Aberdeen.

**The Convener:** Thank you.

**Walter Baxter (BrainHelp):** I am the chairman of a charity called BrainHelp. I am here to thank the committee for the way in which our petition was handled. I was delighted with the outcome and the response. I felt that the whole procedure was very straightforward. I am pleased to say that our petition was successful. I am prepared to answer any questions that the committee may have regarding the petitions procedure or any of the difficulties that I came up against.

**The Convener:** Thanks, Walter. Walter Baxter submitted a petition to the committee several months back—perhaps even longer ago than that—and the result has been much more progress on the issue than had happened before.

We do not close a petition unless we are satisfied that we have had a chance to get full responses to the issues that we have raised. We acknowledge that there are variations—I speak euphemistically—in the response of public organisations and other agencies to the issues that we raise. I have authored a number of letters to some fairly large public bodies that have not respected the process of the Public Petitions Committee as much as they should have done. We have had to respond robustly to them, and that will continue. We will not shirk from taking on any vested interest if it stands in the way of a legitimate interrogation of a petition.

We welcome Kevin Hutchens's views on how we can ensure that the process is more effective. As part of our overall debate, we will discuss issues such as time limits for responses to requests. We get as frustrated as the petitioners probably have been about not getting the information that we hoped we would have received or about organisations not responding to us. It is a constant battle, but that is the nature of life. We constantly have to battle with different organisations and institutions to get them to respect the decision-making process. People think that policy committees are the only parliamentary committees that matter, but we think that the Public Petitions Committee is one of the fundamental tenets of the Parliament and we want it to be respected.

I am sure that Bill Butler will want to comment on some of the points that have been raised.

**Bill Butler:** In response to the first gentleman who spoke—it was Dr Reynolds, I think—I point out that some school students will petition the committee today. That kind of breaks the cycle of white middle-aged men, like Dr Reynolds and me,

bumping our gums. I believe that it is important that we try to come out of the Parliament, as we have done today, to engage people more directly in a much more inclusive process.

We cannot drag people screaming and kicking before the Public Petitions Committee, but we do not need to do so. We already have an encouraging level of engagement—we want it to be higher—and some important issues have been dealt with through the petitions process. For instance, thanks to the late Mike Gray's petition on cetuximab, the Scottish Government has begun to change policy on the drugs that health boards dispense to those who suffer from terminal illnesses such as cancer, which the late Mike Gray suffered from. That is an important development.

We are a bit better than Westminster, where I believe that petitions are chucked into a bag somewhere and left to be forgotten about. The Scottish Parliament is leading the way, but we should not be complacent. That is why we want to hear people's views today on what could be done to improve the process.

Convener, I will leave it at that because I think that it is time for the public to have more say.

**The Convener:** I will let Nanette Milne and others respond, then I will take more questions.

**Nanette Milne:** In response to Dr Reynolds, I should say that our main reason for coming to Fraserburgh is that we are concerned about the very issues that he raised. For example, when I highlighted the public petitions process at a fairly sizeable meeting of ethnic minority people that I attended in Aberdeen a few months back, I discovered that about 90 per cent of my audience had no idea what a petition was. We need to overcome that basic communication problem if we are to reach many of those who never engage with our committee. I hope that we might hear some positive suggestions on how we could improve things in that respect. We are aware of the weaknesses, but we have not yet found the solutions.

**Robin Harper:** Convener, it occurs to me that, although we have no powers to compel organisations to give evidence to our committee, whenever we ask for a response we could perhaps add a polite note saying that failure to reply within a reasonable time will result in our inviting the organisation to appear before the committee.

**The Convener:** On the issue of voluntary sector funding, we received a petition from the voluntary sector two weeks ago and our clerks are in discussions with other parliamentary committees on whether an independent committee inquiry on that issue is needed. Although I cannot guarantee that such an inquiry would necessarily start in

Aberdeen in the way that Kevin Hutchens suggested, members will interrogate the issue either through our committee or through another committee. In a sense, that demonstrates the point that we want to make, which is that we will not let go of an issue unless we are satisfied either that we have gone as far as we can with it or that others in the Parliament can deal with it.

On accessibility, I will not kid anyone on about the reality of making parliamentary processes meaningful for our most disadvantaged communities. As the University of Glasgow research demonstrated, the reality so far is that the educated and well informed are much more able to access and use the petitions process than those who live in areas such as my constituency in the east end of Glasgow. However, one thing that we have done is to take the Public Petitions Committee to Easterhouse, Berwickshire and Fraserburgh—we will have one or two other opportunities, too—so that we can at least try to identify the issues more effectively.

Those who can dominate the news agenda or decision-making machinery will always be reflected in the stats, although we can nudge the process a wee bit more in favour of the ordinary citizen. More important, the champions will be other ordinary citizens such as the gentleman at the back who said that his experience was very positive so that he believes that we can take an issue forward. That is despite the fact that sometimes we have to say that we totally disagree with somebody. It is our right as politicians to make our judgment on the issues, as long as we do that within a framework in which people engage as effectively as possible.

I invite others who have not yet had a chance to speak to contribute.

**Tina McGeever:** I am the wife of the late Mike Gray, whom Bill Butler mentioned. I lodged a petition with the Public Petitions Committee for my husband, who was terminally ill at the time, about the equity of drugs provision throughout Scotland, particularly cetuximab. We found the process of the Public Petitions Committee really heartening. It was very accessible from the moment that we submitted our petition and we got great support throughout the process. I am really glad to say that the petition is still current and I hope that things are moving on. The most important thing is actually getting to that point where people find out how to access the Public Petitions Committee.

I say to the first speaker today, Dr Reynolds, that I am not a man and I was born in Clydebank—so things may have been slightly askew but they are moving on. However, it is important that the Parliament and the Public Petitions Committee get out to where the people are and it is great that there are a lot of young



people here today. I urge the committee to use anything available to it on the internet, such as Facebook or Bebo, to engage young people in the petitions process. The most important thing is that anyone can use the process. Even if someone does not think that they can use the process, they should just take that step over because people at the other end are there to help them. How we get that message across to other people who might think that they have something to say is the most important thing. You are certainly allowed to say things to the Public Petitions Committee. I urge people, especially young people, to think about the best way to get a petition across.

**The Convener:** Thanks, Tina. I always love the look on teenagers' faces when we say that we want to use Bebo and Facebook—it says, “That’s our personal space; you stay out of it, you old codgers!” However, Tina McGeever raised a good point when she spoke about how young people can engage in the process to access the Parliament. Perhaps we shall hear some young voices on that point. Do any young people—and not-so-young people in a moment—want to comment? If not now, will you think about it and say something later about how we can be more effective for you? You will be the voting generation in the near future and it is important that we hear your perspectives as well.

I see that a gentleman at the back wants to speak.

**Ron Beaty:** Good morning from a not-so-young person. I welcome the Public Petitions Committee to the north-east; it is good to see you. You have saved me paying for bed and breakfast in Edinburgh, which is also beneficial. I represent the school bus safety group, which has a petition in front of the committee. The Milne and Oldham families are here today too.

I do not recognise whatsoever some of the things that have been said so far. Our petition experience has been so positive it is unbelievable—the current petition is my second on school bus safety. I say to anybody here that lodging a petition is simplicity itself; it is easy to do.

The other great thing is that appearing before the Public Petitions Committee is refreshing because the committee is non-political and the MSPs take a great interest in the petition that is before them. The process is obviously well thought through and it is easy to get a petition into Parliament; it can be done through the internet or in hard copy. The clerks—I see Fergus Cochrane there with his usual smile—make things so easy for petitioners and take away any problems. It is an extremely positive experience.

I will not say too much because our petition has still to come before the committee and we are not

sure of the outcome, although we are hopeful. However, I encourage organisations or youngsters who want to put a petition before the Parliament to do so because it is a great democratic thing to do. On behalf of our group, I thank the committee for hearing our petition—we will take it from there.

10:30

**The Convener:** As I said before a previous committee meeting, flattery gets you everywhere, so thanks very much. Can I hear some other perspectives on the Public Petitions Committee? The young gentleman at the back wants to speak.

**John Noble (Fraserburgh Academy):** Thanks for calling me young.

**The Convener:** I was being ironic.

**John Noble:** I am another middle-aged white male.

I am the headteacher of Fraserburgh academy. First, I give a warm welcome to the Public Petitions Committee and all the members of the public. I am particularly pleased that Mr Beaty and the Milne and Oldham families are here for the Public Petitions Committee’s visit because we are very much behind the campaign for improved pupil safety, not just on buses but generally. We have been working hard to improve that in Fraserburgh.

One of the first points to be raised was on how the Public Petitions Committee can reach more people in Scotland. Another reason why we are delighted to have the committee here is that we see it as an important part of democracy in action in Scotland. The fact that the committee is willing to come out to schools in other parts of the country will widen people’s access to the process. However, we in education also have an important part to play. We have young people here who are about to present before the committee, which we are pleased about, but we have others here being aware of the process. That awareness needs to be spread throughout our schools.

To return to the first gentleman’s point, we can widen access by spreading awareness of the process throughout Scottish education, particularly as part of the new curriculum framework that is being developed in Scottish schools, so that we use our heritage and environment to enhance education in school. A link with the Public Petitions Committee is a strong way in which to do that.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much. Are there any other general observations? We have a few other questions that we want to get through, so we will move on. If other issues come up during this quick question-and-answer session, feel free to come in when you want.

**Marlyn Glen:** I direct this question, at least to begin with, to the young people in the audience. How can we let people know about the public petitions system and steer them through it? How can we improve people's knowledge of the process? How did you find out about the Public Petitions Committee? Are you here only because your teachers told you to be, or had you heard about the committee before?

**The Convener:** I am a former schoolteacher who was used to pupils in a class sitting there thinking, "I hope he's no gonnae point me oot." Unfortunately, old habits die hard.

**Marlyn Glen:** The one direct question is this: how can we help people get to know the public petitions system? For instance, would posters round schools be helpful?

**The Convener:** A youngster wants to speak. You have broken the ice, young man—well done.

**Christopher Hair (Kemnay Academy):** In my opinion, very little is done in schools to highlight to young pupils the work of parliamentary committees or the Parliament as a whole. We are here today only because we do modern studies at school which, as the committee will know, involves awareness of parliamentary committees and other aspects of the Parliament. However, very little is done with younger year groups or even senior year groups to highlight what parliamentary committees or the Government actually do. It might be good for you to put in some form of—I do not know; you know more than I do about what you should be doing.

**The Convener:** I would love to create that illusion, but that is the critical issue that we have to deal with. We are only custodians of the Public Petitions Committee, and others—maybe even some of the young people in this room—will be in charge of the Parliament and the committee in the future. We need to think about how we can build a democratic system that, in spite of the cynicism that can exist, people think is worth having, compared with the alternatives.

Over the next few years, the Scottish Parliament and the United Kingdom Parliament will be seriously discussing lowering the age of voting to 16—indeed, some pilot work has been done on that in relation to health board elections. You are saying, as a modern studies student, that there is not enough information out there for youngsters. How do we build people's citizenship knowledge so that they can make informed decisions about the future direction of their country?

**Christopher Hair:** It might be good if, for example, the committee could do a presentation day in schools, perhaps accompanied by a local MSP. You could use the event to describe to pupils what you do and how we could bring a

petition to Parliament about an issue that we are concerned about. That does not seem to happen at the moment.

**The Convener:** I sometimes think that it might be useful if there were an event that we might call democracy day, when we would encourage youngsters to think about ideas for petitions. If we put investment into the event, young people and other citizens would be made to feel that they can make a contribution.

Do members of the committee have any views on the youngster's contribution?

**Robin Harper:** The Parliament has an MSPs in schools scheme. It operates mainly with primary schools, but I think that any school can ask an MSP to come into the school. The scheme responds to demand rather than being a big, self-advertising campaign. Perhaps it should be advertised more.

**The Convener:** An important point for those in the audience who are taxpayers is that there is a cost element to what we are talking about. The education process is critically important for our Parliament, but the scale of our education provision is such that it cannot meet the demand. If we wanted to expand it, we would have to make a choice to devote resources to it. However, how things get reported in the media can prevent members from wanting to make such choices—such an allocation of resources could easily be misrepresented as a waste of money. If we are to spend money in that way, we need to have a sense that citizens are saying that, in the long run, that sort of investment in our democratic process is right. The investment is not designed to benefit any elected member; it is designed to give the citizens of the country a much more direct knowledge of what happens.

**Bill Butler:** The cheapest form of government is dictatorship, but no one would want that—not even the convener. We need to spread the democratic process, and that is not a cheap thing to do. We have just passed a bill that includes provisions for pilot schemes for direct elections to health boards. I had some involvement with that policy in previous years. Those pilots will cost some cash, but I think that it will be cash well spent.

I have a question for the first student who was brave enough to speak, although he did not give his name and therefore spoke anonymously. Why do you and your colleagues not think about petitioning the committee for greater outreach education? That would be an ideal petition, as you have suggested the idea already. As Robin Harper said, the Parliament has an education outreach scheme but, as the convener said, extending it would have resource implications. It is up to you to

say, "There is a cost to democracy, but it is a cost that is worth incurring." That is just a suggestion.

**Nanette Milne:** The Hansard Society is carrying out a review of the education outreach programme—I have a meeting with one of its representatives on Wednesday to discuss my thoughts on the matter. Perhaps the committee could raise the issue with the Hansard Society to see whether there is any way of involving more schools. I have been to a number of schools in this area—indeed, I have been to one of the primary schools in Fraserburgh, so Fraserburgh has not been left out—but there is obviously an issue that must be addressed.

**The Convener:** If I am right, the people who have spoken who have already been involved with the petitions process feel that it is reasonably accessible and that the language that is used is not too complex. We will continue to work at that, although I do not think that there is any big problem in that regard.

What do the young people think about the language that parliamentarians use? Does it just switch youngsters off?

**Bill Butler:** The light on my microphone is not working—could someone switch this oldster on?

Do the young people feel that, even though the Public Petitions Committee has come to your town, the meeting's format is still too formal? Would you prefer a round-table sort of affair?

**Louise Perry (Fraserburgh Academy):** I am Louise and I am a sixth-year pupil in Fraserburgh academy. I am quite pleased to be here today. My modern studies teacher, Mr Morrison, is over there at the front—that is him with the glasses.

**The Convener:** You are getting in his good books there, well done.

**Louise Perry:** I have been doing modern studies for two years now, and I am quite enjoying it. I am used to the way that you guys are speaking because Mr Morrison tends to use quite a lot of posh words, as it were, when he is teaching, so that we will write our essays in a more formal fashion.

I am pleased to have been given this opportunity to sit in on the committee. I knew quite a lot about the Scottish Parliament, but I did not know so much about what the Public Petitions Committee does. It is quite interesting to be able to listen to what you guys have to say.

Have you guys ever thought about holding a meeting just for young people? Quite a lot of the people who are here today represent organisations or are older members of the public, but if you had a meeting that was just for the youngsters, that might enable them to engage

directly with you and tell you what they think about the committee and discuss issues that they might want to raise in a petition.

**The Convener:** We have had engagement with members of the Scottish Youth Parliament, but that is a helpful formal suggestion.

I am sure that you and the other students have plenty of ideas. I know that, over the next eight or nine weeks, you will be in an incredibly emotional period of your time in school—my son is going through that period at the moment—but it might be helpful if you could submit some ideas to us about ways in which we could open up the petitions process. One of the most compelling pieces of evidence that we have heard is that we are not engaging with young people as we should be. That is true of many swathes of our society, but the committee should be cognisant of that matter and should try and deal with it.

Some of those ideas might be useful. I will let you back in, but Anne McLaughlin is desperate to raise the issue of engagement with young people. I would be joking if I said that I knew the world my son is in when he is on MSN—I probably should not need to know half the things. MSN is his world; that is the nature of teenagers today. Teenagers will want things such as MSN to be part of the process when they come to their working life or go to university or college, so we need to be more aware of that.

10:45

**Anne McLaughlin:** I reiterate what the convener said: it is really important for us to hear from young people. Is this the right setting for you? Is the language that we use the kind of language that you relate to, or are we making you fall asleep?

Before I was elected, I worked for another MSP. One day last year, I was discussing a project that we were trying to do in a school with a 17-year-old colleague—I am just a wee bit older than him—and I suggested that we should ask pupils to fill in a form to find out how useful the project was. I was about to begin making up the questions when he said, "No, don't do that. We hate filling in forms." It had been so long since I was at school that I had forgotten all of that. However, when I thought back, I remembered that I hated doing that kind of stuff—there is enough paperwork at school without also having to fill in forms.

As I am sure you all know, MSPs are completely out of touch with people of your age group. Please do not assume that things are obvious to us. You should not be afraid to send us ideas that are obvious to you, because they may not be obvious to us. I return to the example that I have just given. I suggested that the pupils should fill in a form

because, throughout my working life, I always ended up having to fill in a form. We get used to doing it because we know that we have to do it and we forget how much we hated it when we were younger. That is just one example of how MSPs can forget things because we are that bit older. As I said, if something is obvious to you, please do not feel that it is too obvious to put to us. These things are important. We will listen to all your suggestions.

Earlier, I explained to my colleagues about Facebook. I will ask for a show of hands. How many of you are on Facebook? Three. How many are on Bebo? Lots of you—I thought so. I think that I am pretty cool because I am on Facebook but, from the small number of you who use it, I see now that that is obviously not the case. I am aware that lots of younger people prefer using Bebo or a messenger service to Facebook.

If you were on Bebo and you got messages telling you about the Public Petitions Committee, would that be an intrusion? I do not know much about Bebo, but let us say that a group on Bebo wants to double the number of school holidays and sends you a message asking you to put that to the committee. Would you find that an intrusion, or is it a good way to get across the message? I know that not all of you use Bebo, but what are your thoughts on that? I am looking at you because I like your hair—and you put your hand up. Someone else has their hand up—I like your hair, too.

**The Convener:** You can fight over the hairstyles.

**Hannah Gray (Fraserburgh Academy):** This is really embarrassing.

**The Convener:** Don't worry. On you go.

**Hannah Gray:** I am Hannah. Dinna put stuff on Bebo. We get enough of it a'weys else. Bebo is oor thing. Just dinna dae it.

**Anne McLaughlin:** Okay.

**The Convener:** I probably agree with you on that, Hannah. However, one of the big achievements of Barack Obama's successful election campaign was his effective use of networking sites to communicate his message. It might be okay for politicians to do that when they have a popular message to put out, but it becomes more difficult to do when the message is not a popular one. There is no doubt that Barack Obama's use of networking sites was a tipping point in mobilising the support of many people.

Politicians are in the terrible business of trying to win people's hearts and minds. I apologise for that, but that is our purpose in life. It gives us an ambivalent relationship with the public we serve. People say, "All you're looking for is my vote." Our

reply is, "That's why I'm standing for public office, in case you've not noticed." The question is how we engage better with people. My boy gives me the same sort of horrified look that you gave us, Hannah, at the suggestion that my colleague made. We are trying to be hip and trendy, but we are probably failing abysmally. I do the dad dancing at family functions now, and you can imagine how bad that is. The question is how we can be more effective for your age group. You are young citizens making your way in the world, and we need to get the sense that you want to engage.

**Hannah Gray:** You really need to stop being so formal. You come in here and put down these tablecloths and the little bottles of water—it is scary.

**The Convener:** But if I walked in here wi a shell suit and a pair of trainers, you would say—

**Hannah Gray:** That would be far better.

**The Convener:** But you would think, "He's obviously fae the east end of Glasgow, and he's dressin doon for ma benefit." How can we win?

**Hannah Gray:** Aye, I ken, but then I feel I could speak to you. I come in here, and there are TV crews a'weys. I dinna ken fit you're daein wi them—if you're daein it just for the fun of filming it, or if you're using it for something—but I have to admit it is scary.

**The Convener:** Do you think that we would be better having a much more informal workshop with young people, which would allow youngsters to express themselves on their own terms, rather than on our terms?

**Hannah Gray:** Aye. You could come in and walk about the school wi jeans and a T-shirt or something and speak to folk. I admit that this is scary, and I had nae idea fit the first two folk were speakin aboot, with aa their fancy language. You need to speak to folk, instead of talking to them.

**The Convener:** Fair enough. I will shut up, then, if that is what you really mean. Thanks, Hannah, and don't worry about the points that you are making—you sound just like my daughter.

**Anne McLaughlin:** Is there general agreement among Bebo users, for example, that you would not want to hear about the committee using Bebo?

**The Convener:** I think your hair is lovely, too.

**Anne McLaughlin:** It is.

**Matthew Roger (Fraserburgh Academy):** I am Matthew Roger, from Fraserburgh academy. I am quite a confident person, but this meeting is very formal, and it is quite nerve-wracking standing up here. I disagree with the girl who was speaking about Bebo. You are not going to please everybody if you put the Public Petitions

Committee on Bebo and make it accessible to Bebo users, but you will definitely attract new young people who will support the committee and who will learn how to use the petitions system.

**The Convener:** Good.

**Nigel Don:** I want to go back to the previous thought. This might be a challenge to the teachers—if the headteacher is listening, that is good. It occurs to me as we are speaking about this that I have no idea where youngsters get their knowledge from. Could the school—for example, the sixth-form modern studies teacher—take on a little task? Could somebody give us some thoughts on where schoolchildren—teenagers—get their knowledge from? It is an open-ended question. What counts as a source of knowledge?

**The Convener:** Is the modern studies teacher here? Could I impose on you, Mr Morrison? You obviously have a key responsibility for the subject in the school curriculum. How do you feel we can achieve that sharing of knowledge?

More important, the two youngsters who have just spoken to us are trying to tell us about the structures that we have created. I should explain that the committee has to go through some necessary processes, because of how it is put together. I am conscious of how formal that is, and I would rather that we were not so formal. However, we need to cope with the process because of our statutory requirements. The question is how we can allow the voices of young people to be heard, rather than just those of the convener and other committee members.

**Alan Morrison (Fraserburgh Academy):** Thank you very much for putting me on the spot here.

**The Convener:** The kids gave me money to do it earlier on.

**Alan Morrison:** I had been hoping that this was just going to be a forum for the pupils of Fraserburgh academy and the surrounding area.

To respond to something that Louise Perry said, I say that I do not really use posh language, but I do use language that is acceptable for the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

**The Convener:** Which is very useful, I find.

**Alan Morrison:** The term to use is “proactive”. The fact that you are here today in Fraserburgh academy, up in the north-east, away from committee room 1 in the Holyrood Parliament, says a lot. We have public petitioners here, and you are giving young people, including pupils of the academy, the opportunity to put forward petitions, which they have thought quite a bit about. You are giving young people the opportunity to interact with you in the democratic

process. Accessibility is the key thing—it is one of the four key watchwords of the Scottish Parliament, as many of our pupils should be aware. It is about making yourselves more accessible, perhaps in a more informal manner, as has been suggested.

**The Convener:** I think that we will give Mr Morrison pass marks. That was great—thank you.

I will move on to other questions, so that we can sweep up some other responses. The next question is about scrutinising the role of the committee.

**John Wilson:** This question is on the issue of which petitions the committee should consider. When the Scottish Parliament was established in 1999, the UK Government gave it devolved powers and reserved many powers to itself. If you stay for the rest of today’s proceedings, you will hear one of the Scottish Government ministers explain that some of the powers to take forward certain petitions in the way that the petitioner would like do not lie with the Scottish Government.

The committee wants to explore whether it is relevant or legitimate for us to continue to deal with petitions on issues—such as international issues—on which it is not within the devolved powers of the Scottish Parliament or the Scottish Government to make decisions. The issue will arise with the pupils’ petition on the G20 conference. It could be argued, as it has been by some of the committee members in the past, that the Public Petitions Committee should not consider that petition because it is on a reserved issue. We would like to hear your views on whether it is legitimate for us to consider any petition that comes before us.

**The Convener:** Are there any strong views on that from members of the public? I see that Mr Beaty wants to speak again.

**Ron Beaty:** I am sorry to speak once again.

**The Convener:** I am just noting it in relation to possible time constraints later in the meeting.

**Ron Beaty:** It is good that that question was asked because, with regard to our petitions on school bus safety, many transport matters are not devolved but lie with Westminster. When we appear before the Public Petitions Committee, we rely on it to raise those issues with Westminster, as there is no way in which we can do so. It is very important that petitions on subjects that are not devolved are brought before the committee, as there is no other way for such issues—especially the ones that our petitions raise—to be discussed. It is great. The committee should consider the petitions that it needs to consider—that will do us fine.

**The Convener:** Are there any other strong views on whether we should deal with petitions that sometimes stray into reserved areas? Do people feel that because we are a Public Petitions Committee for the Scottish Parliament, we should at least have a chance to discuss an issue—whatever it is—in the Scottish Parliament, even though the powers to deal with it are not necessarily within our remit?

**Walter Baxter:** In considering a specific petition, the committee at least draws the issue to the public's attention, whether or not the Scottish Parliament has governance over that area. The people down at Whitehall might then realise the reaction that the issue is causing up here in Scotland. Depending on how much publicity is given to a specific subject, I am sure that it would help a lot if you considered a petition on any issue that concerns the people of Scotland.

**The Convener:** Perhaps Robin Harper will touch on another aspect that links in with that, to do with where the best process lies. Should it lie with the Scottish Parliament, or could other models be encouraged or developed?

11:00

**Robin Harper:** This has occurred to me while I have been going round schools with the MSPs in schools programme. The presentations that I hear are often to do with issues that are very much under the control of local councils rather than under the direct control of the Parliament. I am speaking about simple things such as the maintenance of a public park, the placing of bus stops or local road safety plans. It has often occurred to me that it would be good for councillors to join the MSPs in schools programme. Because powers over such issues are devolved from the Scottish Parliament to the local authorities, it might be useful for the 32 local authorities to have their own petitions system. I wonder whether there will be a reaction to that idea now or whether the pupils might like to lodge a petition calling for a petitions committee in their local council.

**The Convener:** I am conscious that we have other items to discuss and that the young students are nervous enough about those without keeping them waiting for far too long. I want to pull together the discussion on the Public Petitions Committee. We have had a good chance to explore some of the issues, but I issue an open invitation to everyone to chip in ideas, even after today's meeting. You can do that through our wonderful new Bebo networking site that we will develop over the next 24 hours. Whatever form or fashion you want to follow, I am sure that school staff will help you to follow the process through to the clerks.

We are open to any good suggestions that could make a difference to how we engage. I thank everybody for saying that getting out and about and being proactive is a good model for the committee and I hope that it has been of benefit. We are still conducting our inquiry on accessibility to the Public Petitions Committee so I hope that some of your suggestions will be included, even those from Hannah Gray, who had a good go at me. I am happy to take your comments on board, Hannah.

## New Petitions

### G20 Summit (International Development) (PE1242)

11:02

**The Convener:** We move to the next part of today's business. This part of the meeting is even more formal than the previous part and is for the petitioners, who will try to interrogate their issues with committee members. The questions are contained in the new petitions that have been submitted. I invite to the table the first group of students from Fraserburgh academy.

PE1242, by Mark Buchan, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government, as part of its international development policy, particularly in relation to Africa, to lobby the Prime Minister as leader of the G20 host nation to take urgent action to address extreme poverty and deprivation in Africa and to reduce the debt of African countries. Alongside young Mark Buchan today are fellow second-year students at Fraserburgh academy: I welcome Jenna McDonald and Fiona Henderson. You have a few minutes to explain your petition and then we will do our best to get you through. You will be absolutely fine. On you go, Mark. Or is Jenna McDonald taking control?

**Jenna McDonald (Fraserburgh Academy):** Before we start, on behalf of Fraserburgh academy I wish Mr Butler a happy birthday.

**Bill Butler:** Thank you. You have revealed the secret that I was keeping from the committee members.

**The Convener:** You have suitably embarrassed him, Jenna, so well done; that was a good start.

**Mark Buchan (Fraserburgh Academy):** My petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to lobby Gordon Brown, as leader of the UK, the G20 host nation, to take urgent action to address extreme poverty in Africa and to further drop the debt.

I have been interested in the problems of poverty in Africa ever since I went to see U2 in 2005. I was inspired by Bono to try to do something about poverty in Africa but, as I was in primary school, there was no further action that I could take.

Recently, I went on to the ONE organisation's website and I saw that, nearly four years after Live 8 and the make poverty history campaign, little action has been taken. Africa is still in the same state of deprivation. After that, I wrote to the First Minister, Alex Salmond, to ask him to lobby Gordon Brown to invite an African representative to the G20. Last month, I was given the

opportunity in my modern studies class to come up with a petition for the Public Petitions Committee's visit to the school. That is how my petition came about.

The number of people living in poverty in Africa is shockingly high. More than 1 billion people across the world have no access to clean water. There are huge death tolls from diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Many of those deaths could be prevented with an injection that would cost less than 25p.

Child mortality is also a huge problem. Every year, nearly 10 million children die without seeing their fifth birthday.

One person dies due to extreme poverty in Africa every three seconds. From the time I began this presentation to the time I finish, 60 more people will have died due to extreme poverty. Every year, 18 million people die as a result of poverty. That is the equivalent of the combined populations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland multiplied by two.

The Scottish Parliament needs to take action. People are suffering and we, in this modern economic country, need to do something more. We need to get behind the cause for Africa and show the Prime Minister that here in Scotland we support the cause to make poverty a thing of the past.

The Scottish Government's international development policy includes as an objective:

"to complement the work of the UK Government and other international development programmes",

but it says nothing specific on debt relief. The Scottish Government must show Gordon Brown that more support needs to be given. That would complement the work of the UK Government and that of development programmes in Africa.

Africa is calling for help. In this day and age, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no one should be subjected to poverty. Africa needs the support of the Scottish Government. Today, here in Fraserburgh, we are in a position where we can make a difference. The petition is not for me, but for Africa. Let us take the steps to make poverty history once and for all.

I will finish with a quote from Jayne and Edwin Wiseman of the Star Fish Project who started an orphanage in Kenya:

"Help us help Africa help itself."

**The Convener:** That was fantastic. Well done.

I invite committee members to respond to the issues that have been raised.

**Bill Butler:** Mark, that was an excellent and moving presentation. It is obvious that the petition stems from your own feelings from Live 8 and

seeing Bono and U2 those few years ago. Things are still desperately bad in Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa.

As well as working with Malawi, which is one of the poorest countries in Africa, should the Scottish Government make representations to the UK Government to release a specific amount of money for Africa, or should it press for more resources and training, as well as money, in order to help African citizens to help themselves? What do you think, Mark?

**Mark Buchan:** It is a case of money and resources. Africa needs things like education. Across the world, 2.6 million children are without primary education. Things like that need to be addressed as much as the debt. Without education, how will Africa's youth ever progress?

**Bill Butler:** As you probably know, the current Scottish Government and the previous Scottish Executive, which was led by Jack McConnell, have used non-governmental organisations to send out folk with expertise in education and health to Africa. Obviously, you think that such assistance is necessary. Do you think that we also need to wipe out the debt of those countries as part of a three-pronged approach?

**Mark Buchan:** The debt is an important aspect. If their debt is wiped out, Governments can use their own money and resources to start to improve living conditions.

**Anne McLaughlin:** Mark, I think you did particularly well there. I do not think that you are nervous; if you are, you are certainly hiding it very well.

Everyone has heard the figures—that somebody dies in Africa every three seconds. However, it was a telling moment when you said that, from the start of your presentation to the end, 60 people would have died. That really got me. That kind of comment brings it home how important it is that the world does something.

I have worked in developing countries, not in Africa but in Sri Lanka, so I have a big interest in international development. I want to congratulate you on your petition; it is obvious that you have been working on these issues for a number of years.

I am sure that you will be making your own representations, but this committee would certainly be willing to write to the Scottish Government to ask for its views on debt relief and on getting rid of debt, and to ask what representations the Scottish Government is making to the UK Government. Any correspondence that we receive would be copied to you, so you would be involved in the process.

**Robin Harper:** I am another MSP who has worked abroad: I was in Africa for two years, in Kenya. It was a wonderful experience, and it made me very aware of the need for education in Africa and of the tremendous opportunities that education can bring.

I am sure that you are aware of the figures on debt, which have been pulled together for committee members. Despite the fact that the world agreed that it would start to pay off Africa's debt, the debt has actually gone up. It was \$225 billion in 2000, and it is \$256 billion in 2009. I have been trying to do the sums in my head, but I am pretty certain that the money that the United States Government and the British Government have managed to pull together to bail out our banks could have paid off Africa's debt completely.

There is a very strong case for this committee to send your petition on to the Government as a chivvying note saying, "Come on, when are you going to make a dent in the enormous debt in Africa, which is not even reducing but is still building up? You'll have to work with other countries, because we're not going to do it on our own." Well done on your petition, Mark.

**Nanette Milne:** I, too, would like to say that Mark's presentation was excellent. It is a very important subject.

A concern that is often expressed, and one that I share, relates to the use of funding that goes to some of these countries, where the Governments might be a bit more corrupt than Governments in countries that we are more familiar with. If the committee is going to write to our Government, we should raise that concern. Do you have any thoughts on how we can ensure that funding goes to the right place, so that the people who benefit are the people who ought to benefit, rather than Government officials who are lining their own pockets?

**Mark Buchan:** It is true that a lot of the Governments are corrupt. People from the Star Fish Project in Kenya have told me that, when shoebox appeals go to Africa, the boxes are often kept to one side so that politicians can come and take what they like before everything else is sold. A lot of the contents do not get given to the poor.

If we give the money to politicians, it could be used in ways that do not benefit the poor. The best way to address the problem would be for the money to go to development. Targeting education, clean water, and the epidemics of HIV/AIDS and malaria would probably be the best way to ensure that the money does not go to waste but goes towards developing the country and taking people out of poverty.

**Nanette Milne:** So you are promoting self-help—encouraging people to help themselves. I



agree with that. I have experience of such initiatives, not in Africa but in one of the countries of the former Soviet Union. People there have been helped, but previously we had found that goods that we sent ended up in the wrong hands. Your comments were very helpful, thank you.

11:15

**John Wilson:** My question is along the same lines as Nanette Milne's question about how we resolve the problem of poverty in Africa. As Mark said when he talked about the Star Fish Project, aid that goes to Africa is usually redistributed not by the organisations that are trying to alleviate poverty but by Government agencies that take the goods and moneys, which do not reach the poor. We could eradicate debt in Africa, but that will not resolve the issue of getting resources to those who are most in need. As Nanette Milne suggested, some countries with the worst poverty are in civil war. Alternatively, they are almost dictatorships and—to counter Bill Butler's earlier comment—it costs a lot of money to police those states. How do we get resources directly to those who live in poverty, so that we alleviate the problems that exist for many citizens of African countries?

**Mark Buchan:** As I said in my presentation, I wrote to Alex Salmond, the First Minister, to ask him to lobby Gordon Brown, as leader of the G20 host nation, and ask him to invite a representative of the African Union to the G20 summit. Gordon Brown has done that. We can build on that if the UK Government and Governments of other powerful countries co-operate with and work alongside the Governments of Africa to find ways in which aid can get through. They should also work to cut debt and give those countries the resources that they need, without the politicians taking more of those resources.

**Marlyn Glen:** I am always keen on individuals doing what they can. In bringing the petition, Mark, you have definitely done a massive thing, given the publicity. Another way in which individuals can help is by promoting fair trade. Do you want to comment on that?

**Mark Buchan:** The fair trade movement is good, because farmers who in the past did not receive the right amount of money for what they did—and went further into poverty as a result—now get the money that they deserve. The movement is starting to make good progress and is really helping the cause of making poverty history.

**Marlyn Glen:** That is something that everybody can contribute to, in schools and other organisations.

**The Convener:** Is Fraserburgh academy doing any development or partnership work? If not, given

that the rector is here, this might be a good opportunity to put pressure on him.

**Mark Buchan:** We had a diversity day, which was about winter festivals and Christmas in foreign countries from which we have pupils in the school. Fairness and equality have been well promoted in the school. The school has done good work and we need to continue to make progress.

**The Convener:** Members from Glasgow will know that secondary schools in the area have worked well with identified projects. Part of the S6 development programme involves youngsters going out for a week, near the tail end of the academic year, when all the exams are finished. That is humbling, because they spend a year fundraising and then give their time to do something. The effect of identifying for young people their responsibilities as global citizens is remarkable—they are much better citizens and young people as a result. However, there can be cynicism. Your mates might say, "Why are you bothering about this, Mark? Everyone is selfish." How do you deal with it when your mates ask why you are bumping on about the issue, or say that you just heard about it on a U2 album or Bono said something about it? You are motivated and the issue matters to you, but what do you say to your pals when they are a bit more sceptical and think that it is okay to buy certain products?

**Mark Buchan:** It is not so much what I say, but what I show them. There is a photograph from the Sudan famine in 1994—you might have seen it, because it is shown fairly often when people talk about poverty. The picture is of a young child of one or two years of age, a kilometre from a United Nations food camp, crawling past a vulture that is waiting for the child to die. It is a disturbing image. When I saw that photo, I thought, "That is a waste of human life. Real people are suffering in Africa while I'm here in Scotland, which is economically powerful and part of the UK." I thought that I needed to do something and make a difference.

**The Convener:** We found that even though the schools had 4,000 pupils and had very basic provision all the kids were smiling. Back in Scotland, teenagers are manically depressed about the weather, not having the latest fashion and whatever. We need to balance our priorities. Parliamentarians here and in the UK certainly feel a very strong responsibility to do as much as we can, if not more.

**Mark Buchan:** I agree. We have been born in a powerful country that has a strong Government and strong allies, and it is our responsibility to do something for the less well off countries in the third world.

**Bill Butler:** When you say to your fellow students, "I'm not doing this just because I saw

Bono on TV", and tell them about the stark reality, do the majority of them respond positively? Do they want to get involved?

**Mark Buchan:** They have responded positively. We were talking earlier about social networking sites; a group that I started on ending poverty in Africa has had a lot of support from my friends. They have also really supported me in my work on this petition and in what I have been trying to do to make a difference for Africa.

**Bill Butler:** That is excellent.

Earlier my colleagues asked you about fair trade. Is there a fair trade campaign in the school? If not, would it be a good idea to make it a Fairtrade school?

**Mark Buchan:** It would be a good idea if the canteen and vending machines stocked fairly traded products. After all, we are already a health promoting school.

**Bill Butler:** You should probably take that up. You seem to me to be a natural campaigner.

Is it the case that it does not matter who does what as long as Governments, not only at Holyrood and Westminster but across the world, co-operate? Indeed, is the key to this issue simply to make it clear that although the Scottish and UK Governments are playing a part, they have to play more of a part, and hopefully will?

**Mark Buchan:** All the Governments have to play a part. They all agree that poverty must be addressed, but they have to co-operate and focus on the issue. They have to say, "We're powerful countries. We have to make a difference for the poor of the world."

**Robin Harper:** Following the point about corruption, I think that it is important not to confuse Parliaments with Governments. I attended, on behalf of the Scottish Parliament, a week-long conference in London organised by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association on the subject of corruption in trade and aid. The parliamentarians at that conference were telling us that we must support democracy, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, to allow them to look at what is happening and to control their Governments. I took that message back to the Scottish Parliament, and you have woken me up to the need to do a bit more to carry it forward. Perhaps the Scottish Parliament could do more to support parliamentarians, particularly in Malawi, in their bid to have more of a say in how money is spent.

**Nigel Don:** I, too, congratulate Mark Buchan on bringing a very important petition to our attention. As you have obviously done a lot of research on this matter, I wonder whether you can give me a few clues to a question that I have.

You spoke about debt and trade. I do not know much about economics—these days, I am not sure who does—but people have told me that import tariffs, which put a tax on goods, make it difficult for Africa and other places to trade with more developed countries. I suspect that Americans are as bad as most people on that. Have you researched that? Is that relevant?

**Mark Buchan:** I return to the Star Fish Project, which was charged a lot of money for taking old clothes that people in the Fraserburgh area had donated to an orphanage in Nairobi. The project received a big donation from Tesco of summer clothes that had not been sold, and it was charged a considerable amount of money for taking the clothes into the country and giving them to the orphanage.

**Nigel Don:** So customs duties are a problem in both directions.

**The Convener:** We are in the final stage of dealing with the petition, which is discussing how we will proceed. You have made it clear that you want the committee to raise issues with the Scottish Government, that you want the Scottish Government to influence what it can within its powers and that you want the UK Government to deal with matters.

We will discuss how we will deal with the petition. I am open to suggestions from members.

**Bill Butler:** Mark Buchan has made an incontestable case that is relevant now. Given what colleagues have said, I think that no one will disagree that we should write to ask the Scottish Government to write to ask the UK Government what it is doing about debt relief for African countries in general and in connection with the G20 summit.

Mark Buchan talked about co-operation. We should write to ask the First Minister and the Government what support they are offering Scotland-based organisations that are trying to help in countries that suffer extreme poverty. That would begin to address the thrust of the petition that Mark Buchan has submitted.

**The Convener:** Do other members have positive suggestions?

**Anne McLaughlin:** It would be worth asking the Scottish Government what it does to assess how well money is being spent—how much of it reaches the people whom it is intended to reach, as Mark Buchan said.

**Nanette Milne:** I would like to know what exchange, twinning and educational programmes the Government is involved in with the countries that Mark Buchan's petition concerns.

**Robin Harper:** We could ask not the Scottish Government but the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body how we are supporting parliamentarians in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Nigel Don:** I return to world trade and import tariffs. If we are writing to ask the Government and Gordon Brown about what is being addressed at the G20 summit, that is one issue that needs to be addressed.

**Marlyn Glen:** Can we ask how the fair trade Scotland programme aids countries?

**The Convener:** Mark, you heard the earlier comments about the timescale. We will write to a series of decision makers and authorities about what they can do to address the issues that your petition raises. We will raise the matter directly with the Secretary of State for International Development, the Prime Minister, Scotland's First Minister and key Government departments.

As you have petitioned the Parliament, you will be kept up to date. Young Fergus Cochrane is your point of contact. If you want to find out more about the progress that your petition is making, you can e-mail him at the Scottish Parliament. You have his contact details, because you are a petitioner.

On the committee's behalf, I say that you are quite frightening, because you are better than any of us. That is a remarkable concession from me. That you, as a second-year pupil, are so confident in front of us is a remarkable testimony to your commitment. I am sure that, whatever you do in life—whether you want to be active in politics—

**John Farquhar Munro:** He has two women with him to support him.

11:30

**The Convener:** They are there for the next petition, so we will see how the axe falls with the two able women beside Mark.

Although you are only in second year, Mark, you are confident, passionate and thoughtful. I was looking round the audience when you were speaking about what motivated you and I could sense the audience responding to you. That is a great skill to have. I hope that we can do something that helps you and your petition and that you can use that. Whatever you do in life or apply to do, the fact is that you have been in front of the Public Petitions Committee of the Parliament, which few young men or women will be able to say that they have achieved when applying to do something. You should never underestimate what you have done today. On behalf of the committee, I can say that we genuinely appreciate that and I hope that we can respond to some of the issues that you raised.

Thanks very much for your time, Mark. If you want, you can stay for the next petition, with our permission, and avoid going back to class, if that is helpful. I trust that that is okay, Mr Morrison.

**Alan Morrison:** Yes.

### **NHS Services (Rural Areas) (PE1243)**

**The Convener:** For the next petition, we have another couple of young S2 students from Fraserburgh academy: Jenna McDonald and Fiona Henderson.

PE1243 calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to consider how we can ensure that funding of local hospitals in rural areas is increased to ensure that they are properly equipped and staffed so that they can treat more local people, thereby better meeting the needs of the local population and ending the need for patients to undertake long journeys for treatment. *[Interruption.]*

**Jenna McDonald:** Fiona and I feel strongly that—

**The Convener:** Sorry, Jenna, but I am waiting until that bell stops ringing. When I was teaching, I always had to do that.

I welcome both the students. I presume that you will make an opening statement, Jenna. I am sure that you will do well—good luck.

**Jenna McDonald:** Fiona and I feel very strongly about our petition, which deals with the health of citizens and the impact of health care provision in rural areas such as Fraserburgh. At present, for any major health concerns, people in rural areas have to travel considerable distances for assessment and treatment. For example, people in the Fraserburgh area have to travel to Aberdeen. As the committee may be aware, perhaps from travelling here today, that is a considerable journey. That journey may use valuable time for one's medical case, which is why we wish extra funding for local hospitals so that they are properly equipped for any health issue that they may face.

We asked the members of our modern studies class whether anyone had had personal dealings with Fraserburgh hospital that ended in a journey to Aberdeen royal infirmary, which takes at least 50 minutes. Unfortunately, many hands were raised. On a personal note, my sister Charlene, who was eight years old at the time, was taken to our local hospital in Fraserburgh complaining of horrendous stomach pains. After a three-hour wait in hospital, a doctor finally arrived and immediately had to send for an ambulance to take her to Aberdeen sick children's hospital because, in that three-hour period, her appendix had ruptured. If her admission in Aberdeen had been delayed any

longer through travel, the situation might have been fatal.

What if Fraserburgh hospital had the medical facilities and staff to diagnose and treat such medical complaints so that there would not be a risk to life? What if Fraserburgh hospital and others like it had the medical facilities and staff to carry out diagnoses and do routine and emergency operations so that there would be no risk to life from journeys and so that action could be taken immediately for the benefit of the patient?

We can give other illustrations. For example, a classmate's grandfather recently suffered sudden back pains. After phoning NHS 24, he was advised to go to Fraserburgh hospital. He could not receive an X-ray there because that service runs only on certain days, so he was given the choice of going to Peterhead or Turiff for treatment. What if there was not enough time to travel to those places? If Fraserburgh hospital had had the diagnostic equipment to treat that local citizen at the time—right then—valuable time would not have been lost.

Let us prevent such stories. Please ensure that local funding of local hospitals in rural areas is increased so that the hospitals are properly equipped and staffed, and local people's needs are better met so that they do not have to undertake long journeys for diagnosis and treatment. We all deserve quick and effective medical attention when it is needed. Help answer the question: what if?

**The Convener:** Thanks very much, Jenna. Fiona, do you want to add anything, or are you happy to come in during the questions?

**Fiona Henderson (Fraserburgh Academy):** That is fine.

**Nanette Milne:** That was very well done, Jenna. You have raised a very important issue that concerns people in all rural areas. I was involved in the maternity service issue, which affected Fraserburgh and Aboyne—I was probably more involved in the Aboyne side of the situation, along with my colleague, Mike Rumbles, who is the constituency member for that area and is with us today.

One of the important issues that concern the health boards, which are responsible for delivering health care, is the cost of having the proper equipment and staff in every remote hospital and setting. I do not know whether you know about telehealth, but it is like videoconferencing. With the appropriate up-to-date equipment, I could sit in Aberdeen and talk to you just as we are talking now. The way in which the system works means that people such as your sister could go to the hospital in Fraserburgh and get in direct contact with one of Aberdeen's medical specialists much

more quickly than they would be able to if they had to travel to Aberdeen. That would mean that the treatment would be delivered a lot more quickly because the diagnosis could be made earlier.

That might not be as ideal as having all the equipment to deal with the situation in Fraserburgh, but I think it would help quite a lot. I would be interested to hear your views on the development of telehealth, which is a growing part of the health service.

**The Convener:** Jenna, you mentioned that you had conducted a poll of fellow pupils. What kind of things did people think it would be reasonable to expect to be able to access at their local community hospital rather than at a general hospital further away?

**Fiona Henderson:** It would be good if something could be done about the X-ray machines. At the moment, they run only on certain days. If someone's life is in danger when the machines are switched off, they have to travel down to Aberdeen.

**The Convener:** Teenagers are, by nature, boisterous and are prone to receiving sporting injuries, for example. What did people say about the need to get that sort of injury treated locally?

**Fiona Henderson:** It would be helpful to have some way of treating such injuries in Fraserburgh. Peterhead has telemedicine, so why should we not have it?

**Bill Butler:** You have told us that you have heard from your fellow pupils that Fraserburgh should at least have X-ray machines and an accident and emergency unit, certainly for minor injuries. Do you think that it would be possible to have every medical facility located here in Fraserburgh, or do you think that certain things have to be located a little bit further away? Do you think that it would be practical to have everything here?

**Fiona Henderson:** It would be helpful to have some stuff, even if we cannot have everything. We can always go to Peterhead or Aberdeen, but it would stop us having to go on long journeys if we could have the few main things that we need, such as X-ray machines that are always operational.

**Jenna McDonald:** Our petition is aimed at ending the stories that you hear about Fraserburgh not having enough equipment by making a start on expanding the amount of equipment that is available here.

**Bill Butler:** You want to begin to make things better.

**Jenna McDonald:** Aye.

**Robin Harper:** It is accepted that ambulance response times are measured and that everyone

across Scotland has a right to expect an ambulance to arrive within a certain time, depending on the area. You would probably agree that we should be thinking of establishing some sort of right in rural communities to a hospital facility that delivers a range of treatments and diagnoses within a certain journey time from that area. Would that be useful?

**Fiona Henderson:** Yes.

**Anne McLaughlin:** As a Glasgow MSP, it is useful for me to hear what you have had to say today. You have spoken passionately and well. Obviously, Jenna, the experience that you went through with your little sister is very important to you.

In cities, it can occasionally take 50 minutes to reach the hospital, if you are trying to get there during rush hour or when there is a big football match on. However, sometimes, MSPs who represent urban areas need to be reminded that people who are in a geographical situation such as yours face particular difficulties. I take seriously my role as a Glasgow MSP, but we are part of the wider Scottish Parliament, which is supposed to take the whole of Scotland into account.

**The Convener:** John Farquhar Munro's constituency is a rural constituency, like the area that we are in today. Do you have something to say on the matter, John?

**John Farquhar Munro:** As the convener says, I live in an extremely rural area on the west coast of Scotland. Beautiful though it is, it has problems. I was interested in your suggestions about hospital treatment. Do you agree that it would probably be prohibitively expensive to provide the necessary equipment in every rural community hospital?

**Jenna McDonald:** Yes, but it would be a massive achievement just to make a start in every rural hospital. Peterhead has telemedicine, and Fraserburgh should have the same opportunity to get the more modern technology and equipment. We just want to help rural hospitals and stop people having to make really long journeys, which could cost someone's life—I am thinking about the three-hour wait that my sister had to go through, followed by the journey to Aberdeen. That sort of thing is starting to affect people.

**John Farquhar Munro:** What sort of distance would you accept as reasonable? Do you think that Aberdeen is a long way away?

**Jenna McDonald:** Aberdeen has the equipment to treat certain medical issues. However, a 50-minute journey might cost someone their life or have an effect on their future.

**John Farquhar Munro:** The medical profession regularly tells us that, if you want specialist treatment in a hurry, there are particular places in

the country that are established as the places to go for that treatment. For instance, if someone needs major heart surgery, they will not go to Peterhead, Fraserburgh or Elgin; they will be sent to one of the recognised centres of excellence for those operations. I take it that you have no objection to that.

**Jenna McDonald:** We are aware that Aberdeen would carry out the major procedures. Like I said, though, Peterhead has been given a telemedicine facility, but Fraserburgh has not, and the surrounding areas are affected by the fact that Fraserburgh has not been given at least a start in access to modern technology and equipment. You never hear about Fraserburgh getting any further in modern medicine technology.

**John Farquhar Munro:** I am sure that, like me, members of the committee will be quite happy to support your petition, as long as you accept that the 60-odd miles to Aberdeen is not a long distance.

**The Convener:** He is saying that because he drives around Skye regularly.

**Marlyn Glen:** To go back to your original "what if?" question, it strikes me that what you are really asking for is equality. We are always keen to say that we should treat everybody equally, but, as John Farquhar Munro said, there are huge difficulties with funding. It is right that people have equal access to the national health service, and it would help if you had telemedicine here in Fraserburgh. Would that, in your view, be a beginning at least?

11:45

**Jenna McDonald:** Yes.

**Fiona Henderson:** Yes.

**The Convener:** You are doing well so far. You have been asked some pretty difficult questions—even health board officials sometimes do not want to, and sometimes cannot, answer difficult questions.

We now want to pull everything together. You are saying that you want to know how decisions are made about allocating resources, and why broadly equivalent areas seem to get different resources. That issue concerns all elected members: no matter which areas we cover, we wonder why one area has something and another area does not, and how certain decisions are made. You want us to explore that for you—you have said a couple of times that another part of the region has got something that your part has not, and that you think that the areas are broadly similar in terms of need and so on.

We were trying to make the point in our questions that certain acute services can only be provided by specialists. The reality is that a person with a serious head injury will be transferred to the Southern general in Glasgow for treatment, given the nature of the injury. However, if other injuries can be dealt with locally, we should try to roll out those services a bit more effectively.

We now get to the bit where we decide what to do with the petition. I am happy to hear members' suggestions.

**Nigel Don:** I thank Jenna McDonald for raising the issue. Those of us who live in Aberdeen, which is a long way from the rest of Scotland, know that some people tend to forget what it is like to live in places such as Fraserburgh.

We ought to write to Grampian NHS Board and ask for its view on the quality of the distribution of services in its region. We know that it will say that there is not the volume of work to sustain a general hospital north of Aberdeen, and certainly not in Fraserburgh, but I think that we and the petitioners know that there is. However, we can legitimately ask the board what research it has carried out and what data it has in relation to equality in the provision of services throughout the rural parts of Aberdeenshire and Moray.

**Bill Butler:** I congratulate both Jenna McDonald and Fiona Henderson as petitioners who have made a very reasonable request: that health boards—as my colleague Nigel Don has mentioned—and the Scottish Government examine the way in which resources such as money, staff and equipment are distributed.

It might be a good idea to write not only to the local health board but to the Scottish Government to ask whether the Government plans to allocate more resources—or even a degree of extra resource—so that more equipment and more staff can be located where that would be appropriate: in Fraserburgh. That will, I hope, get the Government thinking—as I know it is already—about the way in which it provides for people who live in rural areas, some of which are very isolated.

**Nanette Milne:** I will follow up on telehealth or e-health. In the Scottish Parliament, quite a lot of pressure has been put on the Government recently to expand the provision of telehealth throughout the country. It would be interesting to find out from the Government and health boards—specifically Grampian, which pioneered telehealth in the first place, but perhaps others—how they see that developing and whether it will be possible to bring in other communities such as Fraserburgh. The petitioners say that Peterhead already has telehealth, but how feasible would it be to extend that to other, slightly smaller communities in the same broad area?

**The Convener:** Are there any other suggestions about how we wish to encourage the delivery of a more effective local service? That is central to what Jenna McDonald and Fiona Henderson are asking for.

**Robin Harper:** This general point has probably been made already, but it is important. During previous committee investigations, we have found that the quality of information available to us was often not what we wanted. Therefore, it is very important that we press the Government on how it monitors and gathers information on the roll-out of new services and on how we will be able to tell whether they are as successful and effective as everybody hopes that they will be.

**Bill Butler:** Both Fiona Henderson and, in particular, Jenna McDonald, when she spoke about her sister, brought up journey times and how time is an important element if we want to treat people effectively and safely. We should ask the Scottish Government and the NHS board about what they are doing to ensure that journey times are as brief as possible so that people can access any major surgery that might be needed.

**The Convener:** After that series of suggestions, John Wilson will offer a concluding one.

**John Wilson:** Although we agreed to write to Grampian NHS Board, it would also be useful to write to other rural health boards, such as Highland NHS Board and Borders NHS Board, to find out what exactly is happening in those areas and whether there are common problems throughout rural health service provision in Scotland. We could then focus the minds of the Government and health boards on tackling the issues.

With the convener's permission, I suggest that we write to other rural health boards to ask for their views, especially on e-networking and e-medicine. We could also ask about any new technologies that are coming online that would assist rural hospitals to deliver services—for example, by linking Fraserburgh with Aberdeen. Other issues in other areas might come through the pipeline, which could help us to deliver in a better way the care that is required in a rural setting.

**The Convener:** We will pursue on behalf of Jenna McDonald and Fiona Henderson the matters in their petition. As I said to Mark Buchan earlier, we will respond to you directly. I echo comments by committee members and thank you for submitting the petition. I hope that we can make progress on the issues. I invite members of the audience to show their appreciation of these youngsters' bravery and commitment with a round of applause. *[Applause.]* With that ringing in your ears, you are free to leave.

### A90/A937 (Safety Improvements) (PE1236)

**The Convener:** We move on swiftly to consider PE1236 and comments by a not-so-young person—Mike Rumbles. I am sorry, but as you do not get a round of applause in your own household, you will get none here.

Several parliamentarians have expressed an interest in the petition, including Mike Rumbles and Richard Baker, who is here to speak to this petition as well as others. I see that Lewis Macdonald and Stewart Stevenson, who is the local constituency member, are present for other items on the agenda.

PE1236, by Jill Campbell, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to improve safety measures on the A90 by constructing a grade-separated junction where the A937 crosses the A90 at Laurencekirk.

I invite Mike Rumbles to say a few words.

**Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD):** Thank you, convener, for your kind invitation; Jill Campbell cannot be here today.

I start by quoting from the Scottish Parliament information centre briefing, which says that on 2 March 2005, the previous convener of the Public Petitions Committee closed consideration of the petition by saying:

“I think that there is a longer-term issue, and Mike Rumbles will have to keep an eye on it. If the petitioners want to get back to the committee, we will be more than happy to hear from them.”—[*Official Report, Public Petitions Committee*, 2 March 2005; c 1558.]

I am keeping more than an eye on the issue; I am keeping both eyes firmly fixed on the matter.

Jill Campbell has been involved with the campaign for well over five years. The reason why her petition has returned to the committee and why I am here today is that there is a feeling among local campaigners in Laurencekirk that the Government has made an error based on a misunderstanding and on not having the correct information in front of it.

I will explain the situation. In 2005, when the safety measures went in, including the 50mph speed limit, the new road surface and the speed cameras, the previous minister described those as short-term measures, similar to the measures that were put in place at Forfar, where the road goes on to a grade-separated junction. The Laurencekirk community is the only one of its size between the cities of Dundee and Aberdeen that does not have a grade-separated junction. The petition is entirely about saving lives. There were a number of deaths before the safety measures were introduced in 2005.

We requested meetings with the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change in order to get the Laurencekirk grade-separated junction into the strategic transport projects review, which he was writing, and to ensure that he had all the information on board. In his letter of 9 October, which I am happy to give to the committee, the minister said:

“Following the introduction of the safety measures, there have been two slight injury accidents reported.”

He went on to say:

“In the circumstances, I do not feel that a meeting about this matter would be useful.”

The minister would not even meet Jill Campbell or me, as the constituency member. I wanted to meet the minister so that, when he produced the strategic transport projects review, he would have all the information. It seemed bizarre to meet me after the STPR was published, but that is what he agreed to do.

In the meantime, following a freedom of information request, Jill Campbell obtained a whole set of statistics from Grampian Police, who said that, in fact, the Scottish Government did not have the correct information. According to Grampian Police, between 2005, when the safety measures were introduced, and 2008, the number of casualties at the location was 21, six of which were serious and 15 of which were slight. There were 35 collisions. By the grace of God, nobody has been killed at Laurencekirk since the 2005 safety measures were put in place.

We had a meeting with the minister, at which all of that was raised. I have been absolutely fair to him. He was quite clear when he told Jill Campbell and me that the Laurencekirk junction was not his priority, and that other areas had greater priority. When we pressed him to tell us what areas had greater priority than the Laurencekirk junction, he refused to tell us. He said that it was impossible to give us that information.

We feel that there is a catch-22 situation at Laurencekirk. This is a cross-party issue, not a party-political issue, and involves all the regional members, some of whom are on this committee. We are interested only in ensuring that the Government, which makes the decision, had and has the information before it. We tried to influence the decision, which, in our view, the Government made without the right information. How do we put right that wrong decision? That is what Jill Campbell is concerned about. I support her, and I am sure that the regional members support her, too. The question that the petitioner is asking the committee to consider is how we put right that wrong decision.

**Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab):** I back the case that Mike Rumbles has made, on

which there is cross-party concern. It is important to get clarity from the Scottish Government on a number of issues. First, on the number of injuries—including serious injuries—that have been sustained because of the lack of a grade-separated junction, why is there a disparity between the figures that the community activists, including Jill Campbell, have found and what the minister stated in his reply to Mike Rumbles?

Secondly, in reviewing the situation, where will the junction go on the list of transport priorities under the strategic transport projects review? Now that it has access to the information, which should have been there from the beginning, will the Scottish Government revise how much priority is given to the project under the terms of the strategic transport projects review?

12:00

**The Convener:** Thank you. I invite questions from members of the committee.

**Robin Harper:** A few questions occur to me. It would be interesting to know how many drivers have been prosecuted for speeding on that stretch of road, because that might help us to understand whether irrational behaviour is a contributory factor in accidents.

**Mike Rumbles:** I raised the issue with the procurator fiscal's office. There is anecdotal evidence that sheriffs are convicting more people for speeding on the road, but we cannot get the statistics, because they are confidential and will not be released. We have tried to get all the available information, but we have got only the accident figures from Grampian Police, which give a picture that is different from what the Scottish Government says.

**Robin Harper:** It seems bizarre that you cannot get hold of the statistics. Will you pursue the matter with the Scottish freedom of information commissioner?

**Mike Rumbles:** The Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 does not apply; there are exceptions in the act that ensure that information about prosecutions is not divulged by the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. From information that I have had from sheriffs—I will not go into detail—I can tell you anecdotally that more people are being convicted for speeding around Laurencekirk, despite the short-term safety measures that have been put in place.

**Robin Harper:** Even if the Government decided to start talking about a grade-separated junction, it would take a long time for the project to be included in a budget and for the junction to become a reality. What more needs to be done to make that stretch of road safer?

**Mike Rumbles:** The safest approach would be to have a grade-separated junction. The problem for us, for Jill Campbell the petitioner and for local people is that because a grade-separated junction at Laurencekirk is not in the current strategic transport projects review, the project cannot get into the next review until 2022, so the time lag that you talked about will kick in only then.

Even if a decision were made soon, it would take several years to build a grade-separated junction. We know that a new junction cannot be built overnight; we are realistic about that. By the grace of God there have been no deaths yet, but I am certain that there will be deaths if action is not taken soon.

**Nigel Don:** We are going round the loop for at least the second time. My concern is that the right information should be in the public domain and that decisions made by the minister—who is listening to the meeting—should be transparent and clear, so that we can end the debate about the statistics. We all know that politicians have to prioritise, but we should at least ensure that we have the right information.

As I understand it, the issue is the number of accidents at the junction to the south of Laurencekirk. However, perhaps we should also be concerned about the number of accidents at the junctions to the east and north of Laurencekirk. If a flyover was built at the south junction—that is probably where it would be built—and was used effectively, the other two junctions could be closed up, or people could at least be prevented from crossing the carriageway at those points. Am I right in thinking that part of the issue about statistics is the length of road over which they are collected?

**Mike Rumbles:** Nigel Don has hit the nail on the head. That is what the problem is all about. The campaigners are interested in having a grade-separated junction at the main junction at the southern end of Laurencekirk. That is one of three junctions; the other two are further round the bypass. The issue is the number of serious accidents and near fatalities when people try to get in and out of Laurencekirk.

I do not want to get into a debate about which junction should be grade separated. The point is that if there was a single grade-separated junction, there would be no more accidents at the other junctions, because no one would try to cross the A90 there. Many members will have driven up the A90 to get here and will realise the danger of crossing the road. I try never to cross the A90 other than at a grade-separated junction. I can use such junctions at Newtonhill, Portlethen, Stonehaven and Forfar; I cannot do so at Laurencekirk. People will die unless that mistake is put right.



**Nigel Don:** Thank you for clarifying the issue. It will help if we can be clear about the statistics for that stretch of road. We will have to be slightly careful, because I expect that the road out of Laurencekirk to the north would continue to be used as a feeder to the northbound A90.

**Mike Rumbles:** People can use both the central and the northern junctions, as long as they do not cross the road.

**Nigel Don:** I guess that we would want to close off the middle junction, because it is of no value.

**Bill Butler:** You talked about a meeting that you had with the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change on 25 February. Did the minister make no concession on the statistics that you provided? Did he agree to look at them again? You said that he responded to you and others by saying that other areas had greater priority. Did he provide a rationale for that approach?

**Mike Rumbles:** Those are very good questions. I do not want to put words in the minister's mouth, because I am speaking on the public record about a private meeting. However, I am sure that he would not disagree when I say that, at the meeting, he accepted that there was no disagreement about the statistics. Jill Campbell and I were dumbfounded by that, because there was an obvious disagreement between the statistics that he mentioned in his letter to us and the freedom of information statistics that Jill obtained from Grampian Police. I asked whether we could see the minister's statistics, but they are confidential to the Government and will not be published. It is another catch-22 situation. How can we ensure that we are talking about the same statistics if we do not have the necessary information?

Bill Butler's question about priorities hit the nail on the head. I can understand any minister telling Jill Campbell, the campaigners and me that we have a good point and that everyone would like to see a grade-separated junction at Laurencekirk. I am sure that if the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change had pots of money, he could build one tomorrow, but he does not and he must make decisions on priorities—we all understand that. However, he would not tell us what his priorities were, so that other people, such as the campaigners, could make judgments on the matter.

This is an ideal public petition, because my constituents need to be able to make judgments. They should not have to take a minister's word for it when he tells them that a project is not on his list of priorities. I asked the minister where the project appears on that list, but he would not or could not tell us. The Public Petitions Committee could get that information out of him.

**Nanette Milne:** I want to ensure that I have got the facts right. The A90 Dundee to Stonehaven junction strategy that appeared in August last year recommended that a feasibility study be carried out to investigate the possibility of converting one of the Laurencekirk junctions into a grade-separated junction, as well as other options. Is that study on-going? Have you received any indication of when you may hear the result?

**Mike Rumbles:** The minister has told us only that a camera will be installed at the junctions to check drivers' behaviour this month and in April. He reiterated the point at our meeting of 25 February, but he has given no commitment to do anything with that fact-finding mission. We talked about irresponsible driver behaviour at the junctions—at least that is being investigated—but we do not know what will become of that information.

What concerns us all is the time that it will take even for a decision to be made about whether a grade-separated junction should be installed. The minister does not disagree that such a junction is needed at Laurencekirk; the disagreement seems to be about whether the project is worthy compared with other priorities. We do not know what those priorities are, but I have examined the statistics. I repeat that our aim is to save lives. We need a commitment to open government that will allow all of us to look at all of the figures and to be assured that the minister has made the right decision. If he is wrong and a mistake has been made, he should be big enough to rectify that.

**The Convener:** Do members have any other questions? We have had a chance to consider the issues previously, but do members have any points on which they want to follow through?

**John Farquhar Munro:** The petition mentions the improvements that took place in 2005. Has the situation improved since then, or have the same sorts of accidents occurred?

**Mike Rumbles:** That is the nub of the matter. When the 50mph zone, the speed cameras and the resurfacing of the road were first provided as so-called temporary measures, the idea was that the junction would later become a grade-separated junction like the one at Forfar. However, we have now waited four years for that and drivers have got used to the speed limit. As I said earlier, I am hearing evidence locally—albeit anecdotal evidence—that sheriffs are prosecuting more people for speeding in the area, so people are either forgetting the new speed limit or they are getting used to it. Those safety measures were intended to be temporary, but they seem to be somewhat permanent. They ain't gonna work.

I keep coming back to this point—it is a good point on which to finish—that the petition is about

only one thing: it is about saving lives. We need to ensure that we use our limited resources to do that effectively.

**The Convener:** I am conscious that we need to consider other petitions and we need a five-minute comfort break. Do we have any other immediate questions, or can we perhaps summarise what we will do next with the petition?

**Bill Butler:** I think that we should correspond with Transport Scotland to ask what the situation is with the statistics for the Laurencekirk junction. We should seek an explanation from the minister—or from Transport Scotland on his behalf—on exactly what the Government's priorities are and how they were arrived at. We need to get those facts into the public domain if possible and then continue from there.

**Nigel Don:** We should get back in touch with the Scottish Government, Grampian Police, Aberdeenshire Council and Transport Scotland to establish whether they all use the same statistics—whatever those statistics might be and whatever conclusions they might draw from them. If we have different numbers sloshing around, we have no chance of having a sensible discussion. If everyone uses the same numbers and the response from the Government or Transport Scotland is based on those numbers, people at least have a defensible position. Most of the discussion will then be about policy, which is what we should be talking about.

**Nanette Milne:** We also need to know the timeframe for the feasibility study.

**The Convener:** We have a series of initiatives to take forward, so the petition will remain open while we continue to explore those issues with the minister and the responsible agencies.

Mike Rumbles might want to express a view on the other petitions that we will consider later, but I thank him at this point for his contribution so far.

12:13

*Meeting suspended.*

12:26

*On resuming—*

## Current Petitions

### School Bus Safety (PE1098 and PE1223)

**The Convener:** Item 3 is consideration of current petitions. First, we will consider PE1098 and PE1223 together. PE1098, from Lynn Merrifield, on behalf of Kingseat community council, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to make provision for every school bus to be fitted with three-point seat belts for every school child passenger and to ensure that, as part of a local authority's consideration of best value in relation to the provision of school buses, proper regard is given to the safety needs of the children.

PE1223, from Ron Beaty, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to take all appropriate action—whether through amending guidance, contracts, agreements or legislation—to require local authorities to install proper safety signage and lights on school buses, to be used only when necessary when schoolchildren are on buses, and to make overtaking a stationary school bus a criminal offence.

Ron Beaty made a contribution to the meeting earlier today. He is sitting in the public gallery for our consideration of the petition. I also welcome to the committee Stewart Stevenson, the constituency MSP for Banff and Buchan and Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change. He was present for our consideration of the earlier items and listened carefully and attentively to our deliberations. In respect of our consideration of PE1098 and PE1223, I welcome him in his capacity as the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change. We all have to wear different hats; I am sure that Stewart Stevenson's focus today will be on the petitions that are under consideration.

There are two other MSPs at the committee today. I welcome Richard Baker, who is a regional list MSP for North East Scotland; and Lewis Macdonald, who is the member for Edinburgh Central—of course, I meant to say Aberdeen Central. Lewis Macdonald looked disappointed when he heard me say "Edinburgh Central", as he thinks Aberdeen Central is much more interesting.

Members have a paper from the clerks. Unless you wish to make any opening remarks, minister, we will move straight to questions from the committee.

**Bill Butler:** The Scottish Government will shortly publish a road safety framework. What positive impact will the framework have on the two petitions that are before us?

**The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson):** What we will shortly publish will have an impact. It is important also to say that we are working on the subjects of both petitions in advance of publication. It is not necessary for us to wait for publication to respond to a problem. Indeed, we should congratulate Aberdeenshire Council on the considerable work that it has done on the subject. Although the road safety strategy will address a number of issues to do with road users generally, it will focus more on drivers. The two petitions that are before the committee today raise the specific issues of seat belts and safety in the vicinity of school buses.

12:30

**Bill Butler:** What progress has been made prior to the publication of the road safety framework?

**Stewart Stevenson:** Aberdeenshire Council, Aberdeen City Council and Moray Council have been working together with us. We have sought to navigate on the basis of contemplating anything that we are not forbidden to do. For example, although I do not have the power to change the design of the sign on a school bus that says that it is a school bus, we have established that, in the legislation, there is no upper limit to the size that the sign may be. That might be an oversight, but it provides an opportunity that we are considering in order to increase the visibility of school buses.

We are also pursuing with the councils, through the contracts that they have with operators, the appropriate use of the school bus sign. In other words, we want to ensure that the sign is not mounted on a bus when it is not being used as a school bus, so that people will not think, "Och, that sign is always on the bus." We want to ensure that the sign is on the bus whenever the bus is genuinely carrying schoolchildren under contract.

We are considering what lighting there should be on a bus, including lights that flash. There are opinions for and against that. Some people think that flashing lights might suggest a bus in distress, which other motorists should overtake, although the message that we are trying to convey is rather different. There is more work for us to do in considering that option. Another option is for school buses to have dipped headlights on at all times.

Aberdeenshire Council has also come up with a publicity campaign entitled one second, one life, reminding people that it takes only one second to end a life. With the council, we are looking at

SeeMe technology, which will be piloted at certain locations to signal when there is a school bus in the vicinity. It uses a transponder system that pupils can wear, which says that school pupils are in the vicinity. Indeed, bus drivers could wear it as well.

Those are a series of actions that can be taken in advance of the publication of the road safety strategy, and I am pleased to say that Aberdeenshire Council and the adjacent councils are working with the Government on those.

**Bill Butler:** I am obliged.

**Anne McLaughlin:** Local authorities have responsibility for school transport. You have mentioned several local authorities. Are you satisfied that, in general, local authorities are meeting their responsibilities for school transport correctly?

**Stewart Stevenson:** There is no local authority in Scotland that would not want to have the highest standard of safety on its school transport for its pupils.

The first petition is on the subject of seat belts. We have made it clear, through guidance and policy direction, that contracts should incorporate a requirement for seat belts. The petition asks specifically for three-point seat belts, but many of the buses that are in operation have two-point seat belts. I do not make a particular distinction between the two. It is also important to ensure that, where seat belts are fitted, they are actually used. Having them fitted does not save any lives; it is using them that makes the difference. In law, I do not have the power to say that seat belts must be fitted and used. However, the local authorities have the opportunity, when they renew contracts, to consider including that requirement in the contract. I strongly advise that they do so.

I would make the point that school transport comes in all shapes and forms, including taxis, hire cars and scheduled buses, along with chartered school buses. We have a diverse set of provisions for wheeled transport. However, as I said, the authorities have the guidance that we issue and I hope that as many as possible will act on it.

**Marlyn Glen:** You mentioned that some authorities use public service buses. Even on organised trips with children aged three to 16, there are no rules about seat belts for children on such buses. What can be done to close that loophole? How many councils use public service buses for school transport?

**Stewart Stevenson:** I think that it would be fair to say that almost all councils make some provision that relies on public service buses and, therefore, there are rules that govern that.

Certainly, the major bus companies have at least two-point seat belts on most of their buses. The bus that I take relatively regularly from Aberdeen to Peterhead has a two-point seat belt, which I use, due to personal exposure to some of the consequences of not wearing a seat belt. However, I have to say that, almost invariably, I am the only person on the bus who does so. I suspect therefore, that we should focus on getting people to wear them equally as much as we focus on getting them fitted.

As I said, we do not have the power to require bus companies to fit seat belts or to require that those that are fitted should be three-point seat belts. However, we are certainly of the view that it would improve safety if they were fitted and used.

**Marlyn Glen:** Research is important, because we need to know the facts. Has research been undertaken to determine whether local authorities have revised their procedures in light of the good-practice guidance that was issued in 2007?

**Stewart Stevenson:** I am prepared to engage with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the issue. It is not for the Government to audit what councils are doing, but I would be surprised if local authorities did not want to take every possible action to ensure that there is the maximum possible safety for all passengers, and particularly school students.

**Marlyn Glen:** I will take that as a no—there has been no research. We want research to be done so that we can base our work on facts and not on anecdotal evidence.

**Stewart Stevenson:** We have some basic facts on who has seat belts. We can make that available to the committee, but I suspect that that might lead to further questions, which I think it would be proper to address to COSLA.

**The Convener:** I am conscious of our limited time, so I think that we should concentrate on our core questions.

**John Wilson:** You have answered a couple of the questions that I was going to ask, minister. One was about the size of the signage on the vehicles and the other was about removing signs when the bus is not being used to transport children to and from school.

Has the Scottish Government commissioned any research on the pick-up and drop-off points that are used, or has it been involved in discussions with local authorities on the issue? One of the points that came up in our previous session on this issue was the danger that is presented by some of the pick-up points that operators are using. It seems that that issue involves as much danger as anything else in the school transport system does.

**Stewart Stevenson:** The member is quite right to focus on the pick-up points. The two sets of parents who have been with us in the audience today both lost children at pick-up points. We need to ensure that pick-up points are assessed for suitability. I know that the council in this area is involved in that. In rural areas, of course, there are extremely large numbers of pick-up points. In Aberdeenshire, there are either 400 or 4,000—I have temporarily forgotten which, but it is a large number either way.

The SeeMe initiative that I referred to earlier is precisely targeted at trying to make pick-up points safer by making drivers who approach them when they are in use more aware that they are in use. We note that the technology has apparently been successfully implemented in Sweden.

Strathclyde partnership for transport has commissioned MVA Consultancy to produce guidance on risk assessment for pick-up points, and has indicated that it is willing to make that available to councils. Aberdeenshire Council, which covers the area in which Mr Beaty lives and works is developing further work in this area.

**Robin Harper:** If that research resulted in identifying at least the most dangerous pick-up points, one of the issues in the petition could be addressed, at least partially. It asks about a reserved matter, which is to do with whether drivers can be punished in the courts for overtaking stationary school buses. If those dangerous pick-up points were marked with the zig-zag lines that forbid overtaking in any case, that might assist matters. Would it be worth investigating that?

**Stewart Stevenson:** The member is absolutely correct. However, I hope that identifying the most dangerous pick-up points would lead to consideration of a range of alternative strategies such as relocating pick-up points, carrying out road engineering works or ensuring that the drivers of the buses work to some sort of processes and procedures.

Although I do not necessarily think that this point is a huge impediment, I am not sure about our legal ability to paint those zig-zag lines in the places that the member describes.

As a point of general principle, however, I should say that no idea should be ruled out of consideration, because I suspect that there is no single intervention that will magically transform the situation. It will almost certainly require a range of interventions that are different for different sites and, indeed, for different seasons.

**Nanette Milne:** If a council decides that it wants signs to be removed from school buses when the children are not on board, does it have the clout to enforce that if the bus company does not comply?

**Stewart Stevenson:** At the end of the day, the issue is to do with getting the right contract between the purchaser and supplier. Entering into a contract with the council is something that the bus company does voluntarily, and it is up to the council to lay down the requirements that it has of that service. If it were understood that the company would not get the next contract if it did not obey the rules on taking the signs down, that would be helpful. In civil law terms, it would be perfectly proper to incorporate that in a contract. Although legislative courses might be pursued, that is one of the key ways in which councils can take action in this area, and it is quite outwith the powers of Westminster or the Scottish Parliament.

12:45

**Richard Baker:** I am heartened by what the minister said about research into pick-up points, given local concerns about recent tragedies. I know that the minister is well aware of them and has worked hard on the issue. It would be productive if the research and advice from Strathclyde partnership for transport could be made public and reported on to the committee and Parliament to see what progress could be made. Although no single intervention would make a key difference, such reporting would be an important measure.

Although there has been a lot of local work on the issue, concerns have been raised recently about the standards of school buses more widely. I am keen to hear the minister's thoughts on that and to ask what dialogue needs to take place between the Scottish Government, councils and bus operators. I understand that he has given guidance to local authorities, but should these matters be considered as part of the single outcome agreements?

**Stewart Stevenson:** Strathclyde partnership for transport has said that it can make available the manual that it developed to any local authority that wishes it. I am sure that SPT will wish to make the manual as widely available as possible, but I am not entirely certain whether it would be possible to put it in the public domain, purely for the very narrow reason that I do not know what contract SPT had with the consultants that it used and it might be that an inhibition is involved. SPT could answer that question.

The member spoke about the standard of buses. Like others, he will be aware that, as a result of action that was taken in Aberdeenshire recently, several buses that were being used for school services were identified as not being fit for purpose and not meeting the rules. Two of the buses were taken off the road at once. I welcome that sort of action while deprecating the fact that the buses were found not to be fit for purpose

while being used. The collaboration by the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency, the police and the council has been useful and should be repeated as often as is necessary.

The major bus operators operate services to very high standards. There are a few operators who are clearly not meeting the safety requirements or operating to the standards that we expect and we should come down hard on such people.

**Richard Baker:** I welcome that answer, but any reporting back that could be done within reason to the committee or the Parliament on the issue of pick-up points would be helpful. Given what you said, it is a crucial point.

**Stewart Stevenson:** I will seek to facilitate that, although I emphasise that, as minister, I will not report back directly. However, we take a keen interest and will see what we can do.

**Anne McLaughlin:** I have a general question. I am pleased to hear the minister speak about a wide range of measures and say that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. One of the challenges facing the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament is that some of the measures that you come up with will be reserved to the UK Government, which will be asked to implement them. What if it does not do that? I am looking for an assurance that the Scottish Government will work imaginatively to find ways round the problem, although perhaps not on a legislative basis, and that if the UK Government does not want to implement changes, we will try to implement them anyway by taking a slightly different approach.

**Stewart Stevenson:** As I said in my opening remarks, with our partners in the councils we will contemplate doing anything that we can identify that could make a contribution and to which there is no explicit legal inhibition to our doing. I do not think that anyone expects this to be the outcome, but I have the legislative power, for example—and have exercised it—to change the design of a lollipop lady's lollipop, but I do not have the legislative power to change the design of a school bus sign. That is just the way the cookie crumbles.

As I say, we have established that the upper limit of sign size is not restricted and will use every opportunity presented by that to do what we can. However, we are not able to legislate to make the sign twice the size that people have been using. Councils might be able to deal with the issue through contractual arrangements, provided, of course, that there is good evidence that a trial is worth carrying out and that evidence from the trial suggests that it is the right thing to do and should be taken further. We should always be driven by the evidence. There are lots of ideas out there,

some of which, when examined, are not as clear cut as one might immediately think.

**The Convener:** We have had a good question-and-answer session on this matter. As we wish to pursue certain issues, we will keep the petitions open. I thank the minister for his patience in sitting through this and earlier items, and I hope that we can make progress not only on the critical issue of seat belts in buses but on the even more important issue of road safety for children making their way to and from school.

**Stewart Stevenson:** I will be very happy to respond to further questions on these petitions and on the previous petition that Mr Rumbles spoke to. With regard to that petition, I point out that Mr Rumbles has previously been told that the numbers that were given for Laurencekirk junction were different because the questions were different. The numbers are actually the same, and I will be happy to confirm that in writing when you ask me about it. I have to say that I was somewhat surprised to hear Mr Rumbles, long after he had been told that the numbers were identical, repeating a point that he had legitimately made to me. As I say, the numbers were not different; it was the questions that were different.

Thank you, convener.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much, minister. I did not think that you would miss such an opportunity.

### Community Prisons (PE1150)

**The Convener:** I really want to press on with the next petition, but we need a minute or two to get the link up. I will introduce the petition while we check whether there is a line to Edinburgh.

PE1150, by David Wemyss on behalf of Aberdeen prison visiting committee, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to consider whether larger prisons that are more remote from prisoners' families offer the best way of rehabilitating offenders and whether, as an alternative, localised community prisons could receive stronger support.

We definitely have an audio link with the Families Outside organisation, which is based in Edinburgh. I cannot guarantee, though, that we will get a video link. We are working on that.

**Martin Laing (Scottish Parliament Technology and Facilities Management Directorate):** Hi, this is Martin from the Parliament.

**The Convener:** Hello, Martin. We can hear you.

**Martin Laing:** How good is the sound quality?

**The Convener:** It is absolutely perfect at our end.

**Martin Laing:** Thank you. I should let you know that there is a fire alarm in the building. We have been told to stay where we are, but we might have to evacuate if the alarm goes off in the middle of the conference.

**The Convener:** It always happens when we are not there.

**Martin Laing:** Can you see us?

**The Convener:** Yes.

**Martin Laing:** We can see you, too. I will pass you over to the witnesses.

**The Convener:** Thank you for your time.

I welcome to the meeting Superintendent Innes Skene from Grampian Police, who is with us in Fraserburgh. We are joined by Richard Baker MSP, whom I introduced earlier, and Lewis Macdonald MSP, both of whom have expressed an interest in the petition. I welcome Lady Cullen of Whitekirk and Susan Cross from Families Outside, which is based in Edinburgh. I hope that you can hear us.

Can you hear us?

**Susan Cross (Families Outside):** Yes, we can hear you.

**The Convener:** Thank you for your patience. I know that it has taken a long time to reach this petition.

We will move to questions. I ask members to indicate whether they are directing their questions to Grampian Police or Families Outside.

**Nigel Don:** My question is for the ladies in Edinburgh from Families Outside. Why is it important that local prisons are local?

**Susan Cross:** Families Outside is the only national charity that works solely to support families of the people who are involved in the criminal justice system. We recognise that maintaining family ties can reduce the risk of reoffending by up to six times. About 50 per cent of prisoners lose contact with their families during their time in prison, usually because of the cost and distance of visiting, both of which are obstacles to the contact that can help to reduce reoffending.

A third of visitors use public transport. Our figures are based on research that we have carried out in the past. Public transport can be patchy, it may not be available at the right time, and it can add an extra burden on visiting if someone has to travel, if they have children—

12:56

*Temporary loss of sound.*

12:57

**Susan Cross:**—scheme that can help people to—[*Interruption.*] Pardon?

**The Convener:** You are okay. On you go.

**Susan Cross:** The assisted prison visiting scheme can help with the cost of visits, but it does not cover every visit that the visitor can make. It is limited to two visits a month, and quite often, particularly in the case of remand prisoners, their entitlement to visiting is much more than that.

Distance can work against people in other ways. There are times when social workers have to accompany children on visits. Again, that impacts on the ability and resources of people to visit as often as they wish in order to keep in contact. As I emphasised before, a good way of preventing reoffending is to maintain family contact.

There is another angle to the issue. Like the Scottish Prison Service, we encourage the involvement of families in the whole process as someone goes through the criminal justice system. We are talking about integrated case management, which involves—[*Interruption.*] There are organisations that help prisoners through their offending behaviour and bring them together to talk about—[*Interruption.*] We would encourage families to become involved in that. Again, a distant—[*Interruption.*]—can stop that, as well.

**The Convener:** We got the vast majority of that. We also liked the ambient beat track when the fire alarm went off. We have the gist of what you were saying. I will pass back to Nigel Don.

**Nigel Don:** I appreciate that the petition that we are discussing is of particular relevance to Aberdeen, but I would like to take your view on the distance that folk have to travel to prisons in other cities. Glasgow and Edinburgh are large places; siting a prison within the locus of a large city does not necessarily mean that it is accessible. There is a suggestion that Aberdeen's prison might be in Peterhead—around 35 miles up the road. How does that compare with the experience of folk in Glasgow or Edinburgh who visit prisons in those cities?

13:00

**Susan Cross:** It can be difficult to visit any prison. For example, the public transport timetable may not match up with visiting times, and people may have to travel long distances. Our argument for keeping things close to Aberdeen is that many of the prisoners are from the city. Aberdeen is also

a transport hub—people have to come into the city before going out again. The bus journey to Peterhead can take about an hour and 10 minutes, and then there is a wee bit of a walk to get to the prison. For a half-hour visit, you can be talking about a long round-trip, which can be difficult for people. In other parts of the country, the journeys can be just as difficult.

We have always tried to encourage collective thinking among the prison service, local authorities and transport authorities, in the hope that they can work out ways of getting people to and from prisons.

**Nigel Don:** I conclude from what you have said that a prison should be sited at a transport hub, rather than away from it. That would apply to Aberdeen, Edinburgh or anywhere else.

**Susan Cross:** It would certainly help people who wanted to visit.

**Nigel Don:** Thank you.

**The Convener:** I am conscious of the time, but local members who are interested in the issue are here.

**Richard Baker:** I wanted to ask about the importance of involving community organisations—for example, charities that work with offenders on or just prior to their release. In this area, most such organisations are based in the city of Aberdeen, rather than in Aberdeenshire and closer to Peterhead.

**Susan Cross:** Yes, that is an issue. For example, organisations that work in drug support or employment support tend to be centred on urban areas, so if the prison were closer to the centre, it would be easier for the organisations to go to the prison. From the point of view of families, we are concerned that prisoners might not get the support that they need.

**Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab):** I have a short question for Families Outside, and it picks up on the point about prisons being at a transport hub. When a prisoner's family is from a rural area that is not near a prison, are you saying that that family is even more disadvantaged than a prisoner's family from a city if the prison is somewhere other than at a transport hub?

**Susan Cross:** I am sorry—the sound link is not very clear. I did not quite catch your point.

**Lewis Macdonald:** Are prisoners and families from rural areas even more disadvantaged when a prison is located away from a city?

**Susan Cross:** I would say so. Rural transport can be a difficulty for anyone, not just for people who need it to get to a prison. Those families will have more of a challenge.

**Lewis Macdonald:** I have a question for Superintendent Skene. At a previous meeting, we heard evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, who appeared to dismiss concerns that Grampian Police had raised about travel between Aberdeen and a new prison at Peterhead. He seemed to dismiss the fears as groundless. Can you explain the report that you made?

**Superintendent Innes Skene (Grampian Police):** Yes, sir. Grampian Police appreciates that the Government's figures show a projected increase in the prison population. We therefore understand that issues will arise in future, and we are aware of Dr McLennan's report on Aberdeen prison and its suitability for the future. However, the establishment of a new so-called super-prison at Peterhead would create a number of logistical issues for the force. There would be a fairly major shift in service up to Peterhead, and the issue for the force would be shifting a very large number of prisoners from the force's centre, in Aberdeen, out to Peterhead. The challenges and risks associated with that are broadly to do with the distances and travelling times that would be involved. There would also be challenges for the local police: if an establishment of such a size were built, the policing population in Peterhead would have to be reassessed.

**Nanette Milne:** There are issues of confidence and security in the movement of prisoners between Aberdeen and Peterhead. I am also concerned about the police time that would be involved. The distance from Aberdeen sheriff court to Peterhead is much greater than the distance to Aberdeen prison. What effect would moving prisoners to Peterhead have on police resources, which can be stretched?

**Superintendent Skene:** Reliance Custodial Services has the contract for conveying prisoners from court to prison. There can be difficulties on the road network in the north of Aberdeen, and we are concerned about the time that it would take to convey prisoners between Peterhead and the court.

To give members an idea of the scale of the problem, I took a snapshot of prisoner movements in a particular month, which showed that in the region of 600 prisoners travelled between Aberdeen prison and the courts. Given that Aberdeen prison is within two miles of the sheriff court, where most business is, our concern is that moving to the new Grampian prison would create logistical problems for us.

On security, I am aware that concerns have been raised about our submission to the committee last August. We used the word "escapes", which was seized on as a specific concern—and rightly so. Escapes from police custody or Reliance are rare, but logistical

problems would be created if we increased the distance between the courts and the prison. Difficulties getting through traffic and difficulties with prisoners would be issues for Grampian Police, so we must be mindful of that. It is in such areas that we envisage the most demands being placed on us.

**Robin Harper:** I presume that the Government's figures on the expected increase in prisoner numbers are based on the fact that the number of people aged between 15 and 25 will increase. We cannot do anything about the number of people who have been born, but we can do something about reoffending. Do you agree with the general proposition that we must do everything that we can do to reduce reoffending? The petitioners say that their approach would reduce reoffending, whereas what is currently proposed is likely to increase reoffending, so do you agree that there is a case for the petition in that regard?

**Superintendent Skene:** It would be madness for a police force to say that it was opposed to anything that reduced reoffending. The best approach is to prevent crime, rehabilitate offenders, reduce reoffending and therefore reduce the number of people in the prison establishment.

Grampian Police engages on a number of fronts with criminal justice partners, the Scottish Prison Service and social work departments and does everything in its power to reduce reoffending. I am not in a position to say whether the location of a prison facility would act against the principle of reducing reoffending. We want the best possible prison facilities for the community that assist in rehabilitation and lowering reoffending rates.

**The Convener:** I invite Lewis Macdonald to speak, after which Families Outside can make a final contribution.

**Lewis Macdonald:** I have a short, factual question for Superintendent Skene on the 600 journeys a month that he said take place between Aberdeen prison and the sheriff court. Is that 600 2-mile return journeys or 300 journeys each way?

**Superintendent Skene:** The monthly figure is in the region of 100 journeys and the vans have six cells for prisoners.

**Lewis Macdonald:** So it is 100 journeys a month at the moment. Instead of that involving a 2-mile trip, it would be a 70-mile round-trip if the prisoners went to Peterhead.

**Superintendent Skene:** Yes.

**Lewis Macdonald:** How many remand prisoners are involved in those 100 journeys?

**Superintendent Skene:** I do not have specific figures on that but, if Aberdeen prison closed



down, I presume that the movements would be to HMP Grampian.

**Lewis Macdonald:** And that would include both remand and convicted prisoners.

**Superintendent Skene:** Yes.

**The Convener:** I invite Families Outside to comment now. We obviously have a busy schedule today, so we are trying to get as much information as possible as quickly as possible. Are there other critical observations or pieces of information on this and other issues that affect families that you feel that the committee would benefit from?

**Susan Cross:** There is nothing that has not been raised already. We would just emphasise that family contact is an important part of the strategy for reducing reoffending and that about 50 per cent of prisoners lose contact with their families. Another relevant statistic is that 22 per cent of booked prison visits do not go ahead. An SPS survey found that one reason for that was travel difficulties.

**The Convener:** I thank Susan Cross and Lady Cullen for putting up with the fire alarm inconvenience at their end in Edinburgh and with the length of time that, for genuine reasons, it took us to reach this item on our agenda. We had some fantastic contributions from young pupils here at Fraserburgh academy earlier in the meeting, and we spent a lengthy time eliciting their views. I thank you for your patience in Edinburgh and for your contribution. I think that we have it all on the official record, and I hope that it will benefit the committee in its deliberation on the petition.

I thank Families Outside and Superintendent Innes Skene of Grampian Police for their time. We have enough information to take the petition to the next stage, which we will discuss at our next committee meeting.

### **Family Mediation Services (Funding) (PE1120)**

**The Convener:** The next petition is PE1120, by Brian McNair, calling for the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review its family law policies and spending levels to ensure that greater emphasis and funding is attached to family mediation services and providing more focused family support to children. The petitioner has been in front of us on a couple of occasions. Do committee members have views on how to deal with the petition?

**Bill Butler:** We have had detailed information from the Scottish Government on the funding that it will make available to family mediation services in each year up to 2010. Given that, I think that we should consider closing the petition.

**The Convener:** Are there any other comments from committee members? Do we concur with that suggestion?

**Robin Harper:** It would be open to the petitioners to come back to the committee if, in 2010, there was a significant drop in the available funds for mediation services. We could alert them that our closing the petition would not be the end of the matter in that regard.

**The Convener:** We approve the recommendation to close the petition, while noting Robin Harper's comments.

### **A977 (PE1221)**

13:15

**The Convener:** PE1221, by Fossoway and district community council, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Government to recognise that the A977 is part of the strategic road network in central Scotland and that the opening of the new Clackmannanshire bridge will lead to increased traffic on the road, so funding should be provided for traffic mitigation measures to provide long-term safeguards for the community. The committee has previously discussed the petition.

**Nigel Don:** I know how the petitioners must feel, but I wonder—with frustration—whether we should close the petition because we have the clear message from the Government that the road will not be trunked. We need to accept that and to recognise the state of affairs. By closing the petition, we would send back to the community council and the community the message that we have tried but we will not obtain the answer that they want, so they will have to explore with the local council other ways of dealing with the road. I am sure that the petitioners have a real issue. By closing the petition, we can send them the message that it is clear that the road will not be trunked, so they will have to live with that.

**The Convener:** So we will close the petition on those grounds.

### **Forensic Services (PE1226)**

**The Convener:** The last current petition is PE1226, by Chris Morran, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that the Scottish Police Services Authority board's consultation process on the provision of forensic services is open, fair and transparent and fully engages all relevant parties. We have previously discussed the petition.

**Lewis Macdonald:** It is clear from the written evidence that the committee has received from the chief constables of Grampian Police and the Northern Constabulary that the consultation

process has not been satisfactory. That is the view of the police forces that are served by the forensic laboratory at Aberdeen. In responding to the committee's invitation to make comments, the Scottish Police Services Authority recognised explicitly that the process had been unsatisfactory and had been seen to be unsatisfactory by many who were involved. For example, it conceded that the lack of minuted meetings as part of the consultation process was not a satisfactory basis on which to make the closure proposals, which are significant and worrying.

The committee might wish to investigate the matter further and to hear from the chief constables of Grampian Police and the Northern Constabulary, the Scottish Police Services Authority and the petitioner—Unison, which is representing scientists and other members of staff at forensic laboratories throughout Scotland—in support of the written evidence.

**Richard Baker:** The proposals have been a cross-party concern: Nanette Milne, Mike Rumbles—who was here earlier—and I have all supported Lewis Macdonald's campaign. The promised consultation document has not yet appeared. As Lewis Macdonald said, given that the consultation of organisations including Unison and the police forces has not been what it should have been, it is important that the committee keeps a keen watching brief on the issue to ensure that what the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and the SPSA have promised transpires.

**Nanette Milne:** I agree absolutely with what has been said. I was heartened after the meeting that local representatives had with Vic Emery—I do not remember his position in the SPSA—because he encouraged us to look forward to a proper and meaningful consultation, which is essential. As Richard Baker said, that has not yet taken place, but I hope that it will soon.

We should keep the petition open and keep an eye on the situation. I would be happy to follow Lewis Macdonald's suggestion that we hear from some of the people who have responded to what was almost a non-consultation.

**The Convener:** Several fundamental issues are involved, which I am happy to try to pursue.

**Nigel Don:** Should we give the SPSA a month or two of grace to sort itself out? I am slightly worried about our running something in parallel, although I certainly do not want to let go of the petition.

Both the chief constables have made the point that the consultation was inadequate, and they and others have said that they have not yet seen a compelling case from the SPSA. We all have our guns trained on the SPSA, and it knows that. I would be slightly concerned about the committee

running something in parallel with the work that the SPSA is, correctly, doing. We should let the SPSA do that work and then have a quick look at what appears.

**The Convener:** Bill Butler has a final helpful suggestion.

**Bill Butler:** I hope that it is helpful, convener. I agree that we should not duplicate work, which I think is what Nigel Don was saying, but we should set a timescale that is not too extended so that we come back to the issue when we have the information. At that point, as Nanette Milne and other colleagues have suggested, we can interrogate—in the nicest possible fashion, of course—the agencies involved and the individuals who are responsible. I support the non-duplication of work, but we must be as expeditious as possible.

**The Convener:** There is fairly broad agreement. We will continue to pursue the issue, and we will determine what to do when we have the further information.

I thank Lewis Macdonald and Richard Baker for their patience, as they have been here for a considerable period. I hope that their time will be of benefit to the petitions in which they have expressed an interest.

## New Petitions (Notification)

13:21

**The Convener:** Agenda item 4 is notification of new petitions, which is a procedural matter. Are members happy to note the new petitions that have been submitted?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Petitions Process Inquiry

13:21

**The Convener:** Agenda item 5 is on our inquiry into the public petitions process. It is suggested that we hold two further oral evidence meetings on 21 April and 19 May. Members have received the list of suggested witnesses, which we have discussed. We will also take evidence on our commissioned research, which will echo the earlier points about making the committee more relevant and accountable to the wider community. Are members happy to accept those recommendations on our inquiry?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** The meeting has been a long shift, but the rector of Fraserburgh academy is still with us. I appreciate the support that his teaching and non-teaching staff have provided to make the meeting a success. A buffet lunch is available, although I am conscious of the distance from here back to Aberdeen, as was evidenced in discussion of the petitions. I thank the staff for their kind consideration in supplying lunch.

Finally, I thank the rector for the tremendous work that the school is doing in producing fantastic young citizens. I am sure that, whatever they do in life, they will be a credit to the schools that they have come from. Some of those young faces might appear in the Scottish Parliament in the near future. Good luck to them, whatever they do.

*Meeting closed at 13:22.*



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