

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 3 November 2009

Session 3

£5.00

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Printed and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by
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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

15th 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:

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)

Jack McConnell (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)

Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Graham Ross (Scottish Parliament Research, Information and Reporting Group)

Kimby Tosh (ProjectScotland)

Susan Watt (ProjectScotland)

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Fergus Cochrane

ASSISTANT CLERKS

Franck David

Linda Smith

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Tuesday 3 November 2009

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

New Petitions

National Youth Volunteering Policy (PE1278)

The Convener (Mr Frank McAveety): Good afternoon. I welcome everyone to the Public Petitions Committee's 15th meeting in 2009. All mobile phones and electronic devices should be switched off as they interfere with the broadcasting system.

We have a fairly full agenda. A slight change has been made to it, which we will address in due course.

Item 1 is consideration of seven new petitions. We have copies of the petitions and members have been given all the supporting information. The first petition is PE1278, by Kimby Tosh, on behalf of ProjectScotland, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Government to demonstrate how it supports national youth volunteering opportunities that deliver skills development for all young people in Scotland and to develop and implement a national youth volunteering policy for Scotland.

I welcome Kimby Tosh, who is here with Susan Watt. The format of the meeting has been broadly explained to you—you now have a chance to expand on your petition. I also welcome to the meeting the several members who have expressed an interest in the petition but who are not members of the committee. They will contribute in due course.

Kimby Tosh (ProjectScotland): Hi. My name is Kimby. I am 18 and I am from Alyth. I am here today because I feel strongly that other young people all over Scotland should be given the same opportunity as I have had to volunteer full time as part of a nationally organised and supported scheme. Members will have read my story, so I do not intend to tell it again, but I will explain how doing my ProjectScotland placement at the Strathmore Centre for Youth Development—also known as SCYD—changed me.

When I started as a ProjectScotland volunteer, I had no confidence or self-belief. Throughout my placement, I gradually began to work on that, with the huge support of ProjectScotland and my line manager—so much so that I decided to apply for

funding from big challenge to start an alcohol peer support group. I succeeded in that application. My speaking here today is one of the best examples of how much I have grown in confidence and self-belief. I now feel that I fit into my community and I am glad that I have helped other young people. They know me and they know that if I can change, so can they.

Another way in which ProjectScotland played a major part in my life relates to taking responsibility. Before, I always blamed someone else—the fault was never mine—and I was not the most reliable person. Then I had to start arriving at work on time, keeping records and admitting it when I said or did something wrong. Now I am a full-time employee at the youth centre, the local youth forum's chairperson, a member of the Perth and Kinross youth council and a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament. I also manage the alcohol peer support group.

For me, ProjectScotland was not the light at the end of the tunnel, but the light that guided me through the tunnel. I will be forever thankful for its support and guidance.

I know that the Scottish Government is encouraging ProjectScotland to become an employability scheme, but it is much more than that. Yes, it makes young people more employable, but it gave me the chance to learn more about myself and to become more confident, as well as enabling me to do something to support other young people in my community. If the Scottish Government agreed to support a national youth volunteering scheme and to develop a strategy for youth volunteering, not only would that be good for the young people who participated, it would benefit their communities and Scotland as a whole.

ProjectScotland has inspired many thousands of people. What is to become of those young people, their hopes and their aspirations if ProjectScotland is not properly funded?

Thank you for your time.

The Convener: Thank you, Kimby. I invite Susan Watt to add to that if she wishes.

Susan Watt (ProjectScotland): Kimby is a superb example of a young person who has been through the ProjectScotland experience. I highlight what she said about not just her development but her having an impact on the community around her and on other young people in that community. That is really important. Before we came into the meeting, Kimby told me that she now has her mother and her younger brother volunteering. That illustrates the ProjectScotland effect: it grows arms and legs, and it gets people linked with their community, which is really important.

The Convener: On behalf of the committee I thank you for your positive contribution, Kimby, which was demonstrative of the skills that you have developed. I hope that we will hear more from you in this question-and-answer session, especially on the benefits that the project can bring to young people in Scotland.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am delighted to be here this afternoon to speak in support of the petition. It is good to see Kimby Tosh here again—I seem to be seeing an awful lot of Kimby these days. People might think that there is something going on, but I assure them that that is not the case.

The Convener: None of Kimby's friends would think that, Murdo. Sorry. [*Laughter.*]

Murdo Fraser: Thank you, convener.

Kimby tells her story well. I have heard it a number of times in the past. Kimby is a real inspiration and role model to a lot of young people around Blairgowrie and east Perthshire. Her growth in confidence as a young woman is clear for everybody to see from the presentation that she has given the committee. That demonstrates the strength of the project that she was involved in at ProjectScotland, and the benefits of her volunteering opportunity. The sad thing is that there has been a substantial fall in the number of youth volunteering places at the Strathmore Centre for Youth Development, which is where Kimby did her placement. Youngsters today are not getting the opportunity that she and her colleagues had only two or three years ago.

At the present time, when there is a high level of youth unemployment, it is even more essential than it was previously to have a national youth volunteering scheme. It was important before, but youth unemployment was not the issue two or three years ago that it is today. It is vital that we do not have a lost generation of youngsters. If we cannot provide employment for everybody, we need to consider other ways of using people's talent and ensuring that youngsters do not fall through the net. Volunteering schemes can take up that slack.

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): This is not the first time that I have heard from Kimby Tosh, who is always an inspiration to everyone who listens to her. Her confidence is demonstrable, and it has come largely through her work in ProjectScotland, as I think Kimby would agree.

I am very supportive of the petition. One of the few things that Murdo Fraser and I have in common politically is our support for ProjectScotland, which has cross-party support.

I have a few questions. Having listened to Kimby, we know why ProjectScotland is good for individuals. Kimby is one of thousands who have benefited from it. Could Kimby and/or Susan tell us why a national youth volunteering scheme such as ProjectScotland would be good for Scotland?

Susan Watt: The important thing, which Kimby explained, is young people getting involved and doing something useful with their time and doing something useful for their community. There is a danger in the scheme becoming less than national, and just happening in the central belt. Communities all over Scotland need young people to become engaged, enthusiastic and involved. Young people need to aspire to do more and to do different things. The danger is that we have only little pockets of that, which do not impact on the rest of Scotland. Having several thousand Kimbys throughout Scotland is quite something to imagine, but that is what we could bring to Scotland.

Bill Butler: Can you say a wee bit more about how volunteering has proven to be beneficial to communities? Can you give us facts and figures?

Susan Watt: Yes. We have had more than 3,000 ProjectScotland volunteers throughout Scotland since we launched, who have contributed more than 2.2 million hours of volunteering to Scottish communities, which is a significant amount. That has all been done through third sector organisations, so the volunteers all work with not-for-profit partners for the good of communities, whether geographical, thematic or whatever. For example, they have worked with Forestry Commission Scotland, building paths in forests and opening up forest areas to local communities. Young men who have never been in a forest in their lives get enthusiastic about taking their parents, brothers and sisters to show them what they have done. Such things give the ProjectScotland effect to the much wider community.

Bill Butler: What are the beneficial effects to the wider Scottish economy? The written evidence states that there is a £21.4 million benefit to the Scottish economy, but some people have questioned the worth of ProjectScotland and the national youth volunteering scheme because of the cost. For instance, your original business plan showed a target of 2,000 volunteers for 2008-09. If you had been able to achieve that volume, what would the unit cost have been? People such as the First Minister seem concerned about the costs.

Susan Watt: The unit cost would have been about £2,000, with £1,820 of that going directly to the young person as a subsistence and travel allowance. The subsistence allowance element is crucial in enabling young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds to get involved in ProjectScotland, which is important. The

organisation finds it difficult to raise funds for the subsistence element, which is a significant amount of money. Basically, more than 80 per cent of our costs go directly to the young people.

Bill Butler: The unit cost of about £2,000 seems a good deal to me, but I suppose I am biased. That figure is now on the parliamentary record, so perhaps it will be a corrective to mistaken figures that have been bandied about in the chamber.

Kimby Tosh made the point that ProjectScotland and the national youth volunteering scheme are much more than employability schemes. Can you develop that point?

Susan Watt: Yes. We have had a lot of dialogue with the Scottish Government on where ProjectScotland will fit into the new framework, with funding moving from central Government to local government and so on. We have been pushed towards Skills Development Scotland, which seems like a sensible place to go, but its funding, certainly for subsistence allowance and so on, is for employability schemes such as get ready for work. We see ProjectScotland as being a bit more than that, and all inclusive. We are for 16 to 25-year-olds, not just for one particular group of young people, which is important.

Bill Butler: So you are saying that the Skills Development Scotland path is probably the wrong path.

Susan Watt: I think that it has limited opportunities for us, because it focuses much more on 16 and 17-year-olds coming out of school. ProjectScotland is a great opportunity for such young people because it offers non-formal learning and fits with the curriculum for excellence and so on, but that is not all that is required; there must be more. We have older young people who do not fit those criteria.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): I want to ask about what communities can get out of volunteering. We talk quite a lot about the ageing population of Scotland. The image of volunteering is that it often involves older people. Obviously, they do hugely important work. You mentioned work in forestry. Are there examples of similar areas in which young volunteers work?

14:15

Susan Watt: Absolutely. We have worked with more than 300 not-for-profit partners in all areas of community work. Although Kimby Tosh's placement was with youth work, which obviously was more youth focused, we have had many teams of young people working on environmental projects with the Scottish Wildlife Trust, which is another organisation that has really embraced ProjectScotland volunteers. The good thing about

that is that they can mix with volunteers from different age groups and very different backgrounds. We have also worked with the scouts and had young people doing outward bound activities with school groups. We are simply trying to develop opportunities that young people will want to engage with. For example, in the multimedia and arts sector, we have placements with Glasgow Film Theatre, Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop and other such organisations.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I have two questions, one of which follows the parliamentary convention of asking you to agree with what I am saying. I hope that you will.

Can you run the overall costs past me again? I want to work out what the actual operating costs are once the subsidy costs are taken away.

Susan Watt: The average travel and subsistence cost for a six-month placement is £1,820. In its short life, ProjectScotland has restructured three times to reduce its overheads. I also point out that there is an economy of scale, which means that the more young people we place, the lower the unit cost. If, as I said in response to Bill Butler, we placed 2,000 young people, the complete overhead cost would be in the region of £250 to £300. We have pared things back as far as we can.

Robin Harper: Your average, fairly cheap business consultant would charge between £200 and £300 a day, but you are giving these young people six months' training for less than that. Do you agree that that is a complete bargain?

Susan Watt: I agree that it is a bargain, but we can do it only because many third sector organisations work with us and, for example, absorb the costs of line managing the young people.

Robin Harper: It is a no-brainer of a bargain.

Susan Watt: Yes, although I might be biased.

Robin Harper: So am I.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): Turning to some of the practicalities, I know that Kimby Tosh approached a youth organisation for help with her placement. How do you find your volunteers?

Susan Watt: When we first launched ProjectScotland, part of our remit was to change the culture of volunteering and get young people involved. As a result, we did a lot of marketing, created a youth brand, built a very funky website on which we advertised opportunities, and carried out a lot of activity with young people, schools, colleges, youth clubs and so on. In the very early days, we also had some television advertising to raise awareness of our organisation. As Kimby

Tosh will probably agree, at the moment it is very much word of mouth; after all, 97 per cent of our young people say that they would recommend us to their friends. It does not get much better than that.

Nanette Milne: So you have a queue of young people waiting to take up opportunities.

Susan Watt: Absolutely. Indeed, several people in the organisation that Kimby Tosh is involved with are already saying that they cannot wait to be ProjectScotland volunteers.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP): The petition refers to developing and implementing a national youth volunteering policy, and we have talked a lot about ProjectScotland in particular. I think that I know the answer to this question, but do you think that only ProjectScotland can develop and implement such a policy?

I also have to say that I really enjoyed reading Kimby Tosh's story and listening to her evidence, and I would not mind talking to her later about some of the specific details of her work with young people and alcohol. I congratulate you, Kimby, on the real personal progress that you have made in mentoring a peer group and so on. I was quite a confident 18-year-old, but I certainly could not have done what you have done today—or, indeed, have done it so eloquently.

Susan Watt: You asked whether ProjectScotland is the only solution. It probably is not the only way of delivering a national youth volunteering scheme, but it is here and it is doing it. A significant investment has been made in building the awareness and the brand to enable that. We have partnerships and we have developed placements that young people enjoy. We have a drop-out rate of less than 15 per cent, which is pretty good for young people's schemes. ProjectScotland exists. If the switch were flicked, we could rise to the challenge and place significantly more young people throughout Scotland.

The Convener: I ask Kimby Tosh to add to that and tell us what it would mean if we did not have ProjectScotland.

Kimby Tosh: In our community, half the work would not get done. Most of the ProjectScotland volunteers who have begun placements with us have started new projects for the community. Some are like mine—the alcohol peer support group—and there is a self-harm peer support group, but the volunteers do many different things. Without them, young people would not have that support in their community.

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): Good afternoon, girls. I am sure that members think that you have done a

wonderful job in presenting the petition and I am sure that it will get a lot of support—at least, I am willing to support it. The problem seems to be the lack of finance. No matter what other problems you face, the financial one is the biggest. Our papers state that, for 2009-10, the support from the Scottish Government is reduced to nil. Is that a fact?

Susan Watt: Yes.

John Farquhar Munro: So where will the money come from to keep your project afloat?

Susan Watt: We are fundraising like crazy, but the challenge is that subsistence allowances are not very appealing for traditional trusts and foundations. We have spoken with some community planning partnerships and got small numbers of opportunities, but those are mostly central belt-based. We are doing work in the east end of Glasgow. However, it is hard work for a very small team to go round the 32 community planning partnerships—in fact, it is not only 32 bodies; it is 32 times whatever. We acknowledge that a lot of funding has gone through the local authority route, but it is difficult to tap into that. Our challenge for this year and next is to ensure that we have some sustainable income to enable us to continue.

John Farquhar Munro: That is important. Do the participants in the scheme—the individuals who come forward and are happy to do some volunteering—do so openly and without any restrictions on carrying out the functions that are set for them, or does their participation detract from their looking for permanent employment elsewhere?

Susan Watt: Kimby Tosh might answer that also, but our experience is that young people come to us because they actively want to do so. It is volunteering. Kimby might go into the reasons why young people want to volunteer. They make a proactive decision to go out and do something with their life and they see ProjectScotland giving them the opportunity to do that. That is why the subsistence allowance is important. Young people might be coming off jobseekers allowance to give themselves the opportunity for more development.

Marlyn Glen: You mentioned local authorities. Will you expand on that and say how you persuade them to give funding?

Susan Watt: It is very difficult at the moment. Our experience has been that local authorities have gone with the existing programmes in their areas for the more choices, more chances group. We have been saying that we can be a solution. ProjectScotland can contribute to several national outcomes and a number of local outcomes, but so can many other things, so we are selling our wares in a very busy marketplace. In addition,

local authorities have not previously had to pay for volunteering, and youth activity budgets are no longer ring fenced, so we have a very difficult sell. It is a slow process.

The Convener: Do you feel that you are being heard a bit more effectively in the dialogue that is taking place behind the scenes, as it were? Is there the opportunity to persuade ministers to revisit the recommendation?

Susan Watt: We have an on-going dialogue with John Swinney. We also have cross-party support, and we get together every now and again to discuss developments. That has very much pushed us towards the Skills Development Scotland route, which is not really going anywhere. We have been speaking to Skills Development Scotland for two years now, but budgets are restricted. Skills Development Scotland's focus is more on employability than on the more generic skills development that ProjectScotland offers. I do not think that that is the solution for all young people in Scotland.

The Convener: In your experience, what impact has this period of uncertainty and change of direction had on the young people?

Susan Watt: We cannot offer the same volume or choice of opportunities that we did in the past, because we just cannot support the same volumes of young people on placement. Last year, we placed only 403 young people in opportunities, whereas we placed more than 1,100 young people in the previous year. The impact has been significant. As Kimby Tosh said earlier, people are queuing up to take the next placements with SCYD.

The Convener: Do members have any other questions?

Bill Butler: Unless the Government agrees to revisit the need for a national paid youth volunteering scheme, how long can ProjectScotland survive?

Susan Watt: Placing a similar number of young people as we placed last year, ProjectScotland could survive probably for a year and a half or two years at most. It would depend on how much fundraising income we could generate.

Bill Butler: So the issue is crucial.

Susan Watt: Yes.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I read that ProjectScotland had hoped to get corporate sponsorship. I note from figures that have been provided to us that approximately £1 million was raised from corporate giving, but it was hoped that almost 50 per cent of funding in future years would come from corporate sponsorship. What has been the problem? Are corporate bodies less keen to

give to voluntary work with young people, or do companies just feel that they cannot afford to give because of the general economic situation?

Susan Watt: There are perhaps two elements to that issue. When ProjectScotland was launched, we set ourselves very tough corporate fundraising targets, which—hindsight is a great thing—I am not sure were entirely realistic at that time and are certainly not realistic now. Initially, we had some significant corporate support from Scottish Power and Bank of Scotland, but both those companies are in a different situation these days. To a certain extent, the money is just not available. We still have corporate support, but it tends to come from smaller organisations that might support the cost of one or two volunteers within their community. That has worked quite well.

The Convener: That has triggered a couple more questions, which I want to give members the opportunity to ask.

14:30

Anne McLaughlin: Susan Watt said that a number of corporate employers are struggling, that things are a wee bit different now and that finances are not what they were. Kimby Tosh said in her written statement that local authorities have budgetary constraints. The Scottish Government will face £500 million of cuts in the next year, so there is financial difficulty. Susan said something else that concerned me, which was that she thinks that the organisation has 18 months to go, unless this committee gets what it is asking for. Will that happen regardless of what funds are raised?

Susan Watt: No.

Anne McLaughlin: If you are able to raise the funds, through whatever means, you can continue. Is it just that you would like guaranteed funding?

Susan Watt: Yes. We can raise funds for our overhead costs and so on. The real challenge for ProjectScotland is the allowance for young people, for which it is very difficult to raise funds. That is our concern. If the organisation is to be sustainable, funding needs to come from somewhere. Corporate employers are telling us that they do not think that they should be funding that and that the Government should be doing so.

Anne McLaughlin: I am glad that you clarified that. I can see the sense in having future employers fund it, because you are equipping young people to be able to go into employment and giving them broader skills than they would get otherwise. I am glad to hear that it is not a certainty that without this funding you will definitely close in 18 months' time. It is just a matter of convincing funders to fund that type of project.

Susan Watt: Kimby Tosh might have something to say. A charity that has to raise money for project costs, overhead costs and subsistence is really going to struggle in this economic climate. Our cost base appears to be so much higher than schemes such as get ready for work, in which young people could get involved.

Robin Harper: My question follows on from Anne McLaughlin's comments. You are delivering young people who, after six months, have more empathy, are more adaptable, are better at expressing themselves and have more self-confidence and more than half a dozen other critical skills that make them far more employable in the present situation. Your corporate sponsors acknowledge that—that is why you get funding from them—but Skills Development Scotland does not.

Susan Watt: We do not really fit with any of its specific objectives at the moment.

Bill Butler: I hope that colleagues around the table want to support whole-heartedly the petition in Kimby Tosh's name for a national youth volunteering scheme. I know that these are straitened times and that the Government has pressure on it, but we have to realise that, even in the coming financial year, there will be £600 million extra in real terms—a 1.3 per cent real-terms increase. It is a question of priorities. I sincerely believe that the Government made a mistake in cutting direct funding to ProjectScotland in 2009-10, but the need for a national, structured, paid youth volunteering scheme is still absolutely there. In reply to a question from one of my colleagues, Susan Watt said that ProjectScotland would be able to take up that challenge. I agree that that would make sense. Why reinvent the wheel? It is not just about the cost but about the value to the country, communities and individuals such as Kimby Tosh.

The committee should get behind the petition and do a number of things. We should write to the Scottish Government asking whether it will introduce—or reintroduce, I suppose—a national, structured, paid youth volunteering policy. We should ask it what work it has done actively to promote volunteering as a positive option for young people aged 16 to 24 and what direct funding it provides to the bodies that facilitate volunteering projects for young people. We should also ask whether it is providing additional targeted funding for youth volunteering—if so, how much; and, if not, why not? We should also ask what the wider economy gains for every £1 that is spent on youth volunteering programmes—I think we know that the answer will be positive. Also, what does the Government see as the wider social and community benefits and how does it quantify them?

We should also ask a selection of local authorities whether they support the proposed national youth volunteering policy and, if so, why; we should ask Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People the same question; and we should ask some of the youth organisations such as YouthLink Scotland and the Scottish Youth Parliament, of which Kimby Tosh is a prominent member, whether they support the proposal. There is an overwhelming case in favour of the petition. I say that not in a partisan fashion but simply on the basis of the facts that we have heard today and in other forums. The Government should reconsider the ill-judged, mistaken decision to cut off central funding.

As far as I am concerned, having listened to what Susan Watt and Kimby Tosh said, if a level of Government funding is not reintroduced, ProjectScotland will go to the wall in a year and a half to two years—of that there is no doubt. Members of the committee surely must not allow that to happen. I hope that members agree that we must urge the Government to think again.

Robin Harper: The bottom line is that it is just as important for a Government to invest in social capital as it is for it to support the banks. In fact, I would say that it is rather more important.

John Wilson: As well as writing to the Government and the organisations that Bill Butler mentioned, I suggest that we write to a couple of the beneficiary organisations that Susan Watt mentioned—such as the Scottish Wildlife Trust and the Scout Association—to find out what benefits they have received from the scheme and what impact there would be on their services if the scheme was not there. We should give those organisations an opportunity to tell us about the benefits and the impact.

The Convener: I am conscious that Jack McConnell has joined us. We are at the tail-end of our discussion, but does he want to add anything? I know that he has asked questions about the matter.

Jack McConnell (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): I hope that my comments will help the committee in its deliberations. I deliberately stayed out of the earlier discussion as my views on the importance of ProjectScotland and the national youth volunteering scheme are well known, but in the light of the discussion, I would be grateful if you would let me add two points, convener.

First, in the two years since it was first announced that Government support was to be withdrawn from ProjectScotland, I have tried to persuade potential corporate sponsors and foundations to fill the gap. I am sure that Susan Watt and others have done so as well. I have to tell the committee that there is a real problem in

convincing either foundations or companies in Scotland that ProjectScotland is worth supporting, because, in withdrawing the money, the Government has indicated that it does not believe that the organisation is worth supporting. There is a chicken-and-egg situation. The strong signal that has been sent out by the withdrawal of public money does not give companies and foundations confidence that, if they were to invest, that would allow the organisation to continue in the long term.

My second point goes back to ProjectScotland's origins. An important study was done before the decision was made to establish the organisation, and one thing that came up in that initial investigation is that no example could be found anywhere in the world—from America to Europe and Asia—of a national full-time youth volunteering programme that did not have public money behind it as the basis of the funding. It is always the case that additional money could and should be raised through corporate sponsorship or charitable fundraising, but there are no examples anywhere in the world of a completely privatised scheme. All the existing national full-time youth volunteering programmes in the world have the support of the Government and public money behind them. That is an indication of the parameters within which we will work here if such a programme is to be successful in the medium to longer term.

The Convener: Thank you. I am conscious of the time that remains for other items on the agenda. We have had a series of questions and observations and have heard some recommendations and ideas from committee members for taking the petition forward. In addition, one or two other members have spoken to the petition. We will pull all of that together and, at the next stage, we will seek answers to questions and return to the petition at a meeting in the relatively near future. We will keep the petition open and take it to the next stage, having, I hope, explored those issues.

The fact that we have had an open discussion this afternoon will, I hope, concentrate the minds of those with whom we will have to engage in dialogue behind the scenes. It has been recognised that there are differences of opinion among elected members about the decisions that we would like the Government to make and the difficult decisions that it has to make. There is a case for our trying to influence and shape some of that over the next period. I hope that today's discussion will have made a contribution to the further opening up of a debate with those who matter. I recognise the contribution that has been made by Murdo Fraser and Jack McConnell, who are not members of the committee but who have come along this afternoon.

We will keep the petition open and explore the issues. The petitioners should feel free at any time to get in contact with the committee's clerks about any issues that arise as they pursue negotiations and discussions that could be of material interest to the petition's direction. As they have heard from members, there is a genuine willingness to find ways in which to resolve the issue to the satisfaction of ProjectScotland. Important as that is, the most effective contribution to today's discussion was Kimby Tosh's honest appraisal of the effect that the work that ProjectScotland does has had on her and other youngsters like her throughout Scotland. I hope that we will be able to take matters forward. I thank the petitioners for their time this afternoon.

NHS Translation and Interpretation Services (PE1288)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1288. However, because of the problems with travel in the north-east of Scotland, the petitioners have, unfortunately, not been able to find their way to Parliament today to speak to the petition. We will, therefore, hold the petition back to a future meeting due to the unforeseen circumstances. We hope that the weather conditions will calm down. Nigel Don may wish to comment on the petition.

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): It is unfortunate that the petitioners are unable to be here. When I received the papers on the petition last week, I was able to raise the issue with NHS Grampian, with which we had a meeting last week—I say "we" because Nanette Milne was also there, along with other representatives from the north-east. I am grateful to Nigel Firth, the equality and diversity manager of NHS Grampian, for giving me a briefing that the clerk and the petitioners now have, which can be added to the committee papers before the petition is considered. I hope that we have managed to move things on. To an extent, I am apologising to the committee for being rather peremptory in addressing the matter when I had the opportunity to do so, before it had even got to the committee.

The Convener: Thanks for that information.

Dairy Farmers (Human Rights) (PE1263)

The Convener: PE1263, by Evelyn Mundell, on behalf of Ben Mundell, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to accept that individual dairy farmers have human rights and that those have been breached by the operating rules of the ring-fencing mechanism that is attached to the management of milk quotas, which should have been carried out in accordance with objective criteria and in such a way as to ensure equal treatment between farmers and avoid market and competition distortion.

Peter Peacock MSP, who represents the Highlands and Islands region, has expressed an interest in the petition. I invite him to make some comments, after which we will discuss the petition.

14:45

Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words. I know that the committee has a big agenda today, so I will try not to take too long.

The Mundells, who are in the public gallery, consulted me because they live in the Highlands and Islands region. They consulted me earlier this year about the situation, which has been going on for a long time. As members can see from the petition, over the years they have at some point or another dealt with almost every MSP in the Highlands and Islands region. To say that the Mundells feel grievously offended by what has happened to them or that they feel upset, angry, dismayed, victimised, unfairly treated, discriminated against and impoverished as a result of their experience would be grossly to understate what they feel. Members would find, if they were to meet Mr and Mrs Mundell, that there are virtually no words that can express how distraught they are about the situation in which they find themselves—they are at their wits end over it.

The case is complex and it has a long history, so I will not go through it all, but, in essence, because of where the Mundells live and farm they were caught up in the ring-fencing arrangements for the south isles milk quota. A quota would usually be regarded as an asset, but the way that the ring-fencing arrangement operated meant that there were severe restrictions on their ability to trade in the way in which a normal farmer would be able to trade. Many of those who were farming in that area at the time of the ring-fenced trading are no longer doing so. The Mundells believe that the restrictions that were placed on their activities by the ring fencing so significantly affected their freedom and so substantially damaged their economic interests that its effect removed the benefit that would usually be provided by a quota.

The restrictions on individual freedoms and normal rights in such circumstances are justified by Government on the basis of the public interest, but the Mundells contend that there was a lack of proper procedure when conclusions were arrived at about the public interest and the consultations that took place on the matter some years ago. As the committee will have seen from the supplementary submission that Mr and Mrs Mundell have provided, they believe fundamentally that their human rights have been breached. They set out in the two-page supplementary paper a range of reasons, which I will not repeat, why they believe that that is the case. For them the

fundamental issue is that their human rights have been breached by the actions of the Government, for which they have not been compensated in any way.

In the past, the Mundells have had replies from the Government on some of the issues that have been raised, and MSPs have asked parliamentary questions and have had letters from ministers. I am sure that the committee, in determining what it will do, probably wants to write to ministers again, but that is unlikely to add anything to what the Mundells already know from such correspondence. If the committee were minded to write to ministers, it would be beneficial to ask the Government to address the human rights issues raised in the petition to get that information on the record. It is obviously a matter for the committee, but it may be worth while to seek the views of NFU Scotland, the Equality and Human Rights Commission Scotland and the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, all of which have been in some way associated with, or have contemplated being associated with, the matter. I appreciate that that is very much territory for the committee. Having heard what I have had to say and in the light of what the committee has read about the matter, I hope that it will be able to take the petition further in seeking some clarification, at the very least, about how the situation has arisen and what the justifications are for it.

Nanette Milne: My colleague Jamie McGrigor has indicated to me that he is very supportive of the petition. His comments are along the same lines as those made by Peter Peacock.

The Convener: We have a short note from Jamie McGrigor indicating his position. He requests that the committee consider

“what options remain open to my dairy farming constituents”

and the “human rights implications” as perceived by the petitioners.

Do members have any observations or comments on the petition?

Anne McLaughlin: We should do as Peter Peacock suggested and write to all the different bodies to ask for their take on the matter. We should also write to Government ministers. I know that Peter Peacock said that the Mundells have done that, but it is a complex matter and the committee should seek clarification from the Government.

The Convener: Peter Peacock raises a number of points, and I do not sense that committee members demur from his comments. I suggest that we pull those comments together as the basis of the inquiries that we wish to make, including any possible referral to the Equality and Human

Rights Commission. The matter could be viewed as a commercial transaction that has had major implications for people's property and ownership rights, so it might be worth asking the EHRC for its comments.

Robin Harper: We should also ask why dairy farmers are not allowed to use their own assets to diversify their businesses either within or outwith agriculture.

The Convener: We will keep the petition open to explore those issues, and we will discuss it again at an appropriate meeting. I am sure that the MSPs who have expressed an interest in the matter will continue to give it their attention when it comes back to the committee. I thank Peter Peacock for his time.

Geodiversity Duty (PE1277)

The Convener: PE1277, by Mike Browne, calls on the Parliament to urge the Government, through Scottish planning policies and planning advice notes, to establish a geodiversity duty that integrates all necessary local and national structures for the efficient collection, analysis and sharing of geodiversity data to inform better decision-making processes.

We have received some communication on the issue. Do members have any comments?

Anne McLaughlin: I welcome to the public gallery Mike Browne, who is from the group regionally important geological and geomorphological sites in Scotland, and Seonaid Leishman and Margaret Greene, who are from the RIGS group in Strathclyde. Margaret Greene has given us a letter, an important paragraph of which states:

"Scotland's geodiversity is remarkable. For our size we have some of the most varied geology in the world. Over the ages the bedrock has been sculpted by ice, river and waves to produce the landforms we see today. The soils reflect the underlying geology and past climates, and the landscapes are evolving today."

That sums up why we would not want to lose any of the geodiversity that we have in this country. Although the subject seems very complex and I cannot claim to understand it fully, I understand that the petition asks that we incorporate in any future planning bills protection for geodiverse sites of interest. I suggest that we write to the Government to ask whether it will establish a geodiversity duty in the terms that the petitioner specifies.

The Convener: That is a reasonable suggestion.

Robin Harper: I agree with Anne McLaughlin. The British Geological Survey, which is based in Edinburgh at King's Buildings, has a huge amount

of useful data and expertise that are probably not used to the full in Scotland. In general, we need a greater awareness of the geology of the country. Educational establishments, and schools in particular, should give the subject a little more attention than they give it at present, as it is very important.

The Convener: I see that there are no further comments. Members seem to support the petition; we will identify the areas that require attention and the organisations that we intend to write to.

Members indicated agreement.

NHS 24 (Free Calls from Mobile Phones) (PE1285)

The Convener: PE1285, by Caroline Mockford, calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to make arrangements for all calls from mobile phones to NHS 24 to be free of charge to users. Do members have any comments?

Nanette Milne: The petition makes some valid points, particularly about the more disadvantaged people who use NHS 24. We should take the matter forward, perhaps by writing to the mobile phone companies and the Scottish Government to find out whether some arrangement can be made so that such calls are free of charge.

John Wilson: I support the petition as a parent who has just paid the phone bill for his daughter, who spent some time in communication with NHS 24 in Scotland regarding the possibility of having swine flu. I noted from the bill that the call was charged at a higher-than-usual rate.

The mobile phone companies should bear some responsibility for addressing the issue. If we view NHS 24 as an emergency service, I would hope that the mobile phone companies would view it as such when it comes to charging.

The range of mobile phone companies that we might contact for their views includes T-Mobile, Orange, Vodafone and O2. I suggest that we also write to the Office of Communications to find out its views on how NHS 24 operates its service—not just in Scotland but throughout the United Kingdom—and to ascertain whether it has had any deliberations about how telephone companies should charge for such services.

Marlyn Glen: I was interested in the consideration that is being given to a three-digit non-emergency health number. That seems a really good idea—better than more expensive option. I do not think that most people are aware of all the details of the split in the cost between the caller and the NHS for land-line calls, rather than mobile phone calls. That seems strange to me. The rules do not seem to have been thought out; they seem simply to have grown.

NHS 24 will phone back if somebody asks it to or if their credit has run out. I wonder if the service responds to text messages, which we might think are much less expensive. People could text first and get a call back. Could we inquire about that, too?

The Convener: There are some good suggestions there. We need to keep ahead of the impact of developing technology. Let us get answers to those questions, and we will bring the petition back to the committee in due course.

Tobacco Products (Display) (PE1286)

The Convener: PE1286, from Kate Salmon, calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to amend the Tobacco and Primary Medical Services (Scotland) Bill by removing the proposals relating to the ban on the display of tobacco in shops. I invite comments. We know that the issue is covered in what is a major bill that is being considered in the Parliament.

Robin Harper: It is generally accepted that it is not the job of the Public Petitions Committee to interfere in a bill while it is passing through the proper processes in Parliament via another committee. This committee might offer an appropriate route before a bill is introduced, but not while it is going through the process. It would be proper, as well as wise, for us to suspend further consideration of the petition until the bill has run its course through the parliamentary processes. If there is any further action to take following that detailed scrutiny, we could consider that.

The Convener: No one will disagree with that. The very issues that are contained in the petition will be discussed further at stages 2 and 3 of the bill anyway. Let us suspend consideration until the completion of full scrutiny by the relevant parliamentary committee and the Parliament itself.

Disclosure Scotland (PE1289)

The Convener: This is the last new petition today. PE1289, from Dr David McNally, calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to clarify the legislation governing Disclosure Scotland processes to ensure that teachers who work for more than one local authority do not have to apply for a disclosure certificate in relation to each authority.

15:00

Marlyn Glen: I get correspondence about Disclosure Scotland quite often, with people complaining about having to do multiple applications for what seems to be the same thing. We should write to the Scottish Government to ask what it is doing to close the loophole that exists. I

understand that the introduction of the protection of vulnerable groups scheme will have an effect. We need to ask what effect the scheme will have on the issues that the petition raises.

Some of the proposals seem nonsensical. There are volunteers who do not have lots of money, yet it costs them £20 a time to apply for a disclosure certificate. That seems absolutely wrong, not just as far as the individual is concerned but as far as whoever they are volunteering for is concerned. The Government should consider whether another approach can be taken, or whether financial help can be made available to people who are disadvantaged by the need for multiple disclosures.

The Convener: The committee is agreed on that. We will raise those questions and then bring the petition back to the committee.

Let us move on to item 2.

John Wilson: Sorry, convener, but I would like to add something about the process of applying for a disclosure certificate. It would be useful to get some information from the Scottish Government about turnaround times for the application process. I have heard about people who have been appointed subject to satisfactory disclosure certification, only for them to find that they have lost their job, because the certificate has come back with something that their potential employer has identified as problematic in relation to their employment.

Some employers argue that they must regularly ask staff to go through the disclosure application process because of time gaps following the original application, during which issues might have arisen. We should extend our questions slightly to ask how quickly applications are being dealt with—as well as asking the questions that Marlyn Glen suggested.

The Convener: We will follow those points through.

I suggest that we have a comfort break before item 2. We are also waiting for some primary school pupils to arrive.

15:02

Meeting suspended.

15:10

On resuming—

Current Petitions

Sports Facilities (Primary Schools) (PE1256)

The Convener: The next item on the agenda is consideration of current petitions, the first of which is PE1256, by Jack Ferrie on behalf of the 2007-08 primary 7 class in St Machan's primary school—I presume, then, that Jack is no longer in the class. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Government to provide additional targeted funding to ensure that all primary schools have access to appropriate all-weather sports facilities to encourage an active healthy lifestyle from an early age.

We tried to get people from the school to come through for the meeting, but circumstances have prevented that from happening. I know that pupils from the school have raised the issue with David Whitton, the local constituency member, who has joined us this afternoon. David, do you wish to comment on the petition?

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): Yes, convener. Thank you for inviting me along to the meeting.

The petition came about as a direct result of my visit last year to St Machan's primary school, during which I was asked what could be done to improve the state of the football pitch. I suggested that the school petition the Parliament; one of the P7 pupils, Jack Ferrie, took up the challenge and, indeed, appeared before the committee to give evidence.

As the convener rightly points out, Jack Ferrie has now moved on to St Ninian's high school in Kirkintilloch, which, as one of the six schools built in a £100 million public-private partnership project, is brand new and has a state-of-the-art, third generation Astroturf pitch with floodlights on which, no doubt, Jack can play football to his heart's content. That does not alter the fact that his former primary school in Lennoxton still does not enjoy such facilities, and the point made by Jack and his fellow pupils was that investment was needed in an all-weather pitch to ensure that they could enjoy the same outdoor activities that other schools, including his new secondary school, were able to offer. Of course, such a pitch would serve not only the school but the Lennoxton community, including the various amateur football clubs in the area.

Jack has now moved on from St Machan's but, if the Government could see its way to providing the

necessary finance for a new pitch, it could at least be enjoyed by the pupils who come after him and the school itself.

The Convener: Thank you. Looking at you, David, I was just thinking that you must have been held back a good number of years to still be in P7.

I know that members are aware of the Health and Sport Committee report on pathways into sport and physical activity, which highlighted access to facilities as a key issue. Do members have any comments on how we might move the petition to the next stage? I think that we still need to explore issues such as equity of access to all-weather sports facilities and how the rest of the community can benefit from them.

Nanette Milne: A question that sticks out for me is how the Government's target of two hours of physical education a week can be achieved if pupils cannot use their playing fields and have no access to a suitable indoor venue. It just does not make sense. We should write to the Government to ask how it will address the issue.

Marlyn Glen: It would also be useful to ask local authorities to carry out an audit of the number of primary schools that have suitable indoor and outdoor sports facilities. Surely that information needs to be known if any target for PE is to be set.

15:15

Anne McLaughlin: It would also be worth asking the Scottish Government about how the 2014 Commonwealth games legacy plan will impact on children of primary school age. I know that the Health and Sport Committee is considering the issue, but I would be broadly supportive of pursuing our consideration of it a wee bit further. We are trying to encourage young people to petition the committee, and the more that we can get out of this for them, the better.

Robin Harper: I add one small note of concern. I would be worried, for environmental reasons, if all outdoor pitches became artificial ones. Yes, there should be access to all-weather outdoor areas for children's play, but we should not necessarily take the view that they should all be artificial outdoor pitches.

John Wilson: On the basis of what David Whitton has said this afternoon, I think that it might be useful for us to write to the Government to ask how many all-weather pitches have been provided since 1999 and how many of those have been provided under private finance initiative and PPP schemes. We could also ask whether those pitches are full-sized pitches. In North Lanarkshire, there was a playing fields review and it was found that many of the all-weather pitches that are being provided, particularly for primary schools, are not

full-sized football pitches. My personal issue is about whether the pitches that children at new schools play on match the pitches that children at other schools play on. We might be reducing the size of all-weather pitches to fit in with cost considerations.

Rather than go back just a couple of years, we might be as well to go back over the past 10 years and find out how many all-weather pitches we have provided, what the condition of those pitches is and whether they are full-sized football pitches or just small all-weather areas.

The Convener: Let us pull all of that together. Given the recent announcement about investment in the school estate and the debate about models of funding public projects, we can ask whether there is discussion at the moment, as part of the school estate review, about the provision of sports facilities in primary and secondary schools. The matters are obviously devolved to local authorities as the deliverers of those facilities, but we can ask about the engagement at a national level, with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and others, on guidelines and guidance relating to the development of such facilities.

Much of the investment in schools over the past 10 years has involved a mixture of different funding mechanisms. Some have resulted in top-quality provision; others—even under PPP—have not provided additional sports facilities. Sorting out the management arrangements and who can access the facilities has been equally difficult, although I am very supportive of encouraging janitors to have the keys available so that folk can use the facilities. That is a broad issue that we might want to explore.

In terms of the other issue that the petitioner has raised, I take on board what Anne McLaughlin has said. The Commonwealth games legacy plan will be relevant to young people only if it has an impact on their immediate environment. Therefore, as well as approaching several local authorities for their views, we could raise the matter with the local authority in which the young person's school is located. That would give us a sense of its direction of travel on the matter.

Do we agree to keep the petition open?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: You can report back to the headmistress that you have behaved very well today, Mr Whitton. I am quite enjoying this—although I know that there is always a payback.

Independent Midwifery Services (PE1052)

The Convener: PE1052, by Jayne Heron, calls on the Parliament to urge the Executive to promote the services of independent midwives

and to ensure that such services continue to be available to pregnant women in Scotland.

Nanette Milne: I suggest that we close this petition, as the petitioner has asked us to do so. Further, there is to be a joint review by the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments into compulsory professional indemnity for all health professionals. That will no doubt take into consideration the subject that the petition deals with.

Robin Harper: It is worth noting, however, that a recent report has shown that, throughout most of Scotland, mothers have little choice about where they give birth.

The Convener: Do we agree to take Robin Harper's point on board but close the petition, in light of the information that Nanette Milne mentioned?

Members indicated agreement.

Scottish Prison Population (Catholics) (PE1073)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1073.

Marlyn Glen: Before we discuss this petition, I would like to ask for some information. It has been suggested that we might commission research into the subject of this petition, but it has also been suggested that we commission research into the subject of PE1169. Is it possible for the committee to agree to commission research into both subjects that the petitions deal with, or must we choose only one? I would like to know that before we start discussing either of them.

The Convener: The wisdom of the clerk is required.

Fergus Cochrane (Clerk): Graham Ross, from the Scottish Parliament information centre, might want to help me out on this one.

At this stage, we do not have any information about how much any research might cost or how long it might take. However, I do not think that there is anything to prevent the committee from commissioning two pieces of research. Once you have invited tenders—if you decide to do so—you will have an idea of how much each piece of research might cost, which might factor into your decision.

The Convener: The other gatekeepers apart from the committee are SPICe, the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body and the Conveners Group.

Graham Ross (Scottish Parliament Research, Information and Reporting Group): Any proposal would have to be approved by the Conveners Group. However, as Fergus Cochrane

says, there is nothing to prevent the committee from commissioning two pieces of research, if it feels that that is required.

The Convener: Other colleagues will have to consider our request in light of available resources. Of course, I would hope that, if we have decided that we would like research to be conducted into two areas of concern, we could persuade our colleagues to allow that to happen.

In case anyone was wondering who the person is who has taken a seat at the table, I should introduce him. He is Graham Ross, one of the key researchers from SPICe who deals with requests for research and further examination of issues.

PE1073, which has been in the system since 2007, is by Tom Minogue. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to investigate and establish the reasons for the apparently disproportionate number of Catholics in Scottish prisons. In previous meetings, points were raised about other religious persuasions that might also be disproportionately represented in prison.

Do you have any opening comments, Graham?

Graham Ross: We have approached academics to ask them whether they think that there is any merit in researching the issues that the petition raises. In my experience, if you ask academics whether any further research is required, they will say yes, which is what happened in this case. They provided us with their thoughts on some issues that the petition raised.

I have discussed the matter with colleagues in SPICe and with the clerk to the committee, and we have decided that it would be helpful if the committee had more information before it decides whether to commission external research. To that end, we could carry out a scoping exercise. There are issues about how far the research might go: it might involve examination of certain areas in the criminal justice system such as policing, decisions that procurator fiscals have made and sentencing, as well as the experiences of the Roman Catholic and Muslim populations. It could end up being quite a wide-ranging research project.

In our scoping exercise, we would approach one or two academics with an interest in the area and ask them to flesh out where they think that the research might go, highlight any difficulties that might be thrown up and say how they might overcome those difficulties. We would then bring that information back to the committee, to allow it to make a final decision on whether it wants to commission external research.

John Wilson: The responses that we have received from academics so far have been useful and enlightening and have revealed that there is a lack of research into the issue. The petition refers

to the disproportionate number of Catholics in Scottish prisons. As the convener said, when it first came before the committee, I indicated a preference for widening its scope, because religious minority groups seem to be disproportionately represented in our prisons. The question is: to what extent can we do that? One or two pieces of evidence have indicated that, if we start to look at religious groupings, we need to look at subsections, deprivation backgrounds, social backgrounds and other issues.

I welcome input from SPICe to flesh out the matter so that we can have some meaningful research carried out that will, I hope, highlight issues of concern in relation to the disproportionate number of people in prisons from both particular religious groups and particular socioeconomic backgrounds in deprived areas. On a visit to Barlinnie 18 months ago, we were told that staff could identify the five areas in Glasgow from which the majority of prisoners come just by geography, never mind by religious background. We should try to flesh out that information. Given some of the feedback that we have received from academics so far, I think that it might be a worthwhile piece of research.

The Convener: I am conscious of the fact that other members want to comment. I sense that the committee wants to consider a scoping exercise. I ask members to keep their contributions brief, given the time constraints to which we are subject today. I think that we are broadly in agreement about wanting to get to the next stage, at which we will be best able to determine whether there is scope for commissioning fuller research.

Robin Harper: I reinforce the point that John Wilson has made. It is extremely important that we cover all the factors that could—or do—lie behind whether people go to prison.

Graham Ross: That is the point. There is already a body of evidence that shows that there is a clear link between social deprivation, poverty and offending behaviour—the academics have highlighted that. We want to be confident that any research that the committee commissions will go beyond that. If the committee were to commission external research, one of the first things that the researchers would do is look at the evidence on the link between social and economic deprivation and crime that is already available. They would then go beyond that, to look at the issues that the petition raises.

We would need to be wary of allowing the project to become too big or to range too widely, because it would then lose focus on what the petition seeks. The scoping exercise will address that issue. In the exercise, we will ask people not to submit a research proposal but merely to flesh out the detail of what and whom they would look

at, the difficulties that might arise and how they would overcome them. That information would be fed back to the committee for a decision.

Marlyn Glen: It will not surprise members that I approach the issue from an equalities perspective. I am in favour of conducting a scoping exercise. Professor Andrew Coyle refers to the fact that

“the prison population is unrepresentative of the Scottish population”.

However, there are very few women in prison. We do not want to make the prison population mirror the population of Scotland in that respect. The Equal Opportunities Committee is focusing on reducing the number of women in prison, because we have found that there are too many there who should not be there—I do not think that I am giving away too much from our inquiry. The piece of research that we are considering could be massive and difficult to carry out. Will it consider just religious affiliation or race and colour, too?

15:30

Graham Ross: That is one issue that the scoping exercise could tease out. The original petition focused on the disproportionate number of Roman Catholics in prison; the numbers stack up on that point. From the process of us going to academics and asking them to provide us with more information, they, like John Wilson, teased out the fact that there is a disproportionate number of Muslims in Scottish prisons.

The scoping exercise would ask what groups would be looked at and how wide-ranging the research would need to be, but we would need to be careful to ensure that it also addressed the issues raised in the petition. The scoping exercise would bring the information about how wide the research could or would be back to the committee. We do not want it to go too wide. As Marlyn Glen knows, the criminal justice system is huge and we would probably have to look at quite a few areas of it to get to the bottom of the numbers that are stacking up. However, from our point of view, the scoping exercise seems a sensible next stage before we say that we want research proposals to be set and that we are going to commission the research.

The Convener: Okay. We will take the petition on to the next stage and invite Graham Ross back at a future date to discuss the scope of the exercise that could be considered. We will then have to determine how to address the petition.

Local Museums (PE1083)

The Convener: PE1083, by John Arthur, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish

Executive to support the creation of local museums such as the proposed Leith museum.

Again, the petition has been in front of us on a number of occasions and we have explored many of the issues that it raises. From the information that we have been provided with, we know that a formally constituted company limited by guarantee has been set up to explore options for support from various funding sources for such a museum. I do not know whether there is anything more that the committee can do. We have asked for the petitioner's views and he has not responded, so on that basis, and because of the developments that the local member has been supporting, we should close the petition.

Members indicated agreement.

Electricity Transmission Lines (Underground Cabling) (PE1087)

The Convener: The next petition, by Nancy Gardner, calls on the Parliament to consider and debate using underground and, where appropriate, undersea cabling for new electricity transmission lines such as that proposed between Beaulieu and Denny.

I do not want to comment on any of the speculative newspaper articles, but some final public announcements are still to be made, so I suggest that we suspend the petition for three months.

Members indicated agreement.

John Wilson: Convener, I agree that we should suspend the petition, but not for three months. We should suspend until such time as the Government has made its announcement. Rather than our waiting three months to bring the petition back to the committee, if the announcement is made fairly soon, as is speculated, it would be useful to be able to bring it back as soon after that date as possible.

The Convener: Thank you for that suggestion; we will take it on board.

School Bus Safety (PE1098 and PE1223)

The Convener: The next two petitions are broadly on school bus safety. PE1098 by Lynn Merrifield and PE1023 by Ron Beaty have both been before the committee on numerous occasions.

We can see from our papers that there are still some outstanding issues, so I suggest that we keep the petitions open and explore some of those issues. Nanette Milne, do you want to add anything?

Nanette Milne: There is a significant overlap between what we can do and what the

Westminster Government can do. Aberdeenshire Council has been pretty proactive in trying to progress school bus safety matters, while Malcolm Bruce, the member of Parliament for the Gordon area, has had a—I cannot remember the terminology.

The Convener: Private member's bill.

Nanette Milne: He has presented a private member's bill at Westminster, and I have read the report on it. I do not think that it was received terribly favourably, but it might be interesting to hear about his experiences at Westminster.

I wonder whether we should have a discussion with some of the interested parties. Malcolm Bruce would be a good person to invite, and perhaps someone from Aberdeenshire Council, since it has been so proactive. Perhaps we could also invite whoever runs the yellow buses, given that they obviously operate very well.

The Convener: We can also invite an individual from the Yellow School Bus Commission.

Nanette Milne: It might also be worth asking some young people from the Scottish Youth Parliament who are involved in transport.

The Convener: Yes, I think that we want to try to get a perspective from different areas about young people's experiences.

Nanette Milne: We could also perhaps invite a council that has not done very much, although my instinct is to invite a council that is proactive.

The Convener: Yes, I would much prefer the discussion to focus on good practice rather than on what is not being done.

John Farquhar Munro: Many of the school buses that are on contract have lap belts, but they are different from what is being called for by PE1098, which wants three-point seatbelts. That might be an issue for many operators.

The Convener: In light of all those suggestions, are members happy to approve that we take the petitions on to that next stage?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Community Prisons (PE1150)

The Convener: PE1150 is from David Wemyss, on behalf of Aberdeen prison visiting committee. We have had a number of discussions on the impact of a change to community-facing prisons, which would allow prisoners' families greater access, and we have explored different options to deal with the issues that the petition raises. Without going into too much detail—given that we have all been involved in the matter—I say that we have tried to see whether there is any opportunity for further parliamentary discussion of the issues. I

know that members from all parties have been involved in discussions in the north-east. As Lewis Macdonald has been what might best be described as particularly tenacious in pursuing the issue, I will take comments from him and then from Nanette Milne.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab):

As the convener said, the committee agreed in principle at its meeting in June to seek a parliamentary debate on the issue. That was very much welcomed by the Aberdeen prison visiting committee, which invited MSPs to join it for a discussion on the best way forward. Seven MSPs from four different parties attended that discussion—including Nanette Milne and Nigel Don—which took place at the prison at the end of September. The agreement around the table was that, of the different options available, a committee debate provided the best format for parliamentary consideration both of the proposed closure of Aberdeen prison and of the general principle of community prisons. Therefore, it seems opportune to suggest that that should continue to be the committee's objective. If members agree, that would respond positively to the unanimous view of that meeting and the clear view of the prison visiting committee.

Since that meeting, other discussions have continued. We now have a new chief inspector of prisons in Scotland, but the outgoing chief inspector has stated clearly that, in his view, community prisons are the right model. Therefore, it would be entirely appropriate if the committee sought parliamentary time for that debate at the earliest possible date.

Nanette Milne: I agree with Lewis Macdonald that we should push to get that debate. The petition raises a significant point of principle about community prisons, although it focuses largely on Aberdeen because the prison in Aberdeen may be about to close. I had been concerned that we might not have enough time on our hands, but I now know that no planning application has yet been made for the community-facing prison, so the committee should be able to flush out all the general issues in our discussion.

There seems to be little doubt that community prisons, where prisoners have ready access to their families and relatives, help significantly with rehabilitation. When I was reading the papers as I came down in the train—I managed to get a train part of the way from Aberdeen today—I was shocked to read that the average family attendance figure for Scotland's prison estate is 7 per cent. If family contact is an important factor in the rehabilitation of prisoners, that is appalling. I would like to push on with the petition.

Robin Harper: I agree with everything that Nanette Milne said. We have part of a report by

the previous chief inspector of prisons, which states:

“Research evidence points to the importance of good family contact for reducing reoffending on release.”

I would have thought that the main aim of prisons, apart from punishment, should be to reduce reoffending on release. The report continues:

“Issues of family contact are perhaps the most frequent issues raised by prisoners with inspectors – a sign of their importance. The difficulties are great. Some prisons are difficult to reach and the families of most prisoners are poor. In particular the families of prisoners held in a central facility rather than a local prison may have considerable distances to travel”.

That applies not just in Aberdeen but throughout Scotland.

If we have not already done so, we should ask the Government for its response to that part of the inspector’s report and ask what it is going to do about it, especially given the figure that Nanette Milne mentioned. It is appalling that only 7 per cent of families get regular access. That means that we are missing out on the opportunity to help 93 per cent of prisoners to adapt to life outside prison on their release. The issue is huge. We must continue the petition.

Marlyn Glen: I agree that the petition should continue.

The Convener: We have a series of options in front of us. The issue is difficult and sensitive for many members, but we have broad agreement in principle to seek time for a debate. I know that the clerk looks for the wisdom of Solomon at those moments when he has to negotiate such matters with the Parliamentary Bureau, the chamber desk and so on, but we will endeavour to find the time.

The reality of the timescale is that, if we are fortunate enough to get one of the contested slots for debate, it will not be before the new year, but we will explore the option. I know that the north-east members of the committee and others had discussions with the prison visiting committee and said that they would endeavour to secure a committee debate, so we will try to meet that obligation.

We will explore option 3 in the briefing and keep members informed as much as possible about our journey through the maze of bureaucracy to try to get a resolution. I hope that that is helpful.

Befriending Services (PE1167)

The Convener: PE1167, from Christine McNally, on behalf of Clydesdale Befriending Group and other supporting organisations, is about the positive impacts that befriending services for adults with learning disabilities have on the “The same as you?” strategy. It asks us to

ensure that adequate funding is provided to support befriending opportunities and promote social inclusion.

Karen Gillon, who has supported the petition, has been called back to her constituency this afternoon, but she has expressed her continued support for the petition and would like the Scottish Government to address the points that the petitioner has raised. Unless members are minded otherwise, I suggest that we keep the petition open at least to explore those options on behalf of the petitioner. Do members agree to that?

Members indicated agreement.

Magazines and Newspapers (Display of Sexually Graphic Material) (PE1169)

The Convener: PE1169, from Margaret Forbes, on behalf of Scottish Women Against Pornography, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce and enforce measures to ensure that magazines and newspapers that have sexually graphic covers are not displayed at children’s eye level or below, or adjacent to children’s titles and comics, and that they are screen shelved—sorry, I mean screen sleeved—before being placed on the shelf. Sorry—I almost contradicted the intention of the petition there.

Do members have any suggestions on how to take the petition forward? Marlyn Glen has said that research might be carried out that relates to the petition.

15:45

Marlyn Glen: The research that the Equal Opportunities Committee has commissioned is specifically on goods that are aimed at children that have inappropriate sexualised imagery. It is not about the kind of magazines and newspapers to which the petition refers—it is a specific piece of research on a different subject. I do not think that it will touch on the issues that are raised in the petition at all. I just want to be clear about that.

When the Cabinet Secretary for Justice came before the committee, he was fairly supportive of the petition, but I was not clear how willing he is to have the Government carry out research on the issue. There is a definite need for research. I wonder whether, before we make a decision, it is worth writing to the Scottish Government to ask whether it will do any research, although members might think that that issue has already been decided.

The Convener: We will hear views from other members and then explore those points.

Anne McLaughlin: It was good to get that clarification from Marlyn Glen, because initially I

thought that we should wait until the Equal Opportunities Committee had published its report. I now understand exactly what it is doing and I agree with Marlyn that we do not need to wait for that report.

The cabinet secretary was broadly supportive of the petition, although I was not clear whether the Government would fund research. He was clearer that, if research was produced that indicated that a problem exists, the Government would be supportive of doing something about the issue. That is what I took from the meeting. It is worth writing to the Government to ask whether it will commission research. If it will not, the committee could go ahead with that. I feel that there is a problem, but we cannot just say that we are sure that there is a problem because we have seen it ourselves; we need to know the extent of the issue before we tackle it.

The Convener: The committee wants to deal with the issue. The questions that we raised with the cabinet secretary encouraged him to think more proactively on the matter. We note Marlyn Glen's comments about the Equal Opportunities Committee's research. Given today's discussion and the previous one, we should write to the Government to set out the broad thinking and to ask whether the Government will carry out research on some of the issues. We will await a response and then, if we need to, we can commission our own research. Is that sensible?

Marlyn Glen: Yes, but it might be helpful to let the Government know the breadth of the research that we are talking about. For instance, it is important that we examine the level of non-compliance with the voluntary code and that we test the public's perception of sexually explicit front covers being in view of children in shops. However, that is not enough. If we are going to go ahead with research, it is worth while going the whole way and covering more. We should consider the social cost of the problem and the reasons why the code is not adhered to. We should consider what is needed to improve the voluntary code and, importantly, its enforcement, and whether it should be made mandatory.

The Convener: Anne McLaughlin has that quizzical look on her face that sometimes worries me. On you go, Anne.

Anne McLaughlin: Actually, I had decided to say nothing but, as you are inviting me, I will say that it would be useful to clarify what comes under the remit of this Parliament and what comes under the remit of Westminster. The area is one of those in which there is crossover. It would be good to have absolute clarity on that, so that we know where to direct the questions.

The Convener: The clerk says that he will take that on board and deal with it.

Social Rented Housing (Standards) (PE1189)

The Convener: PE1189, from Anne Lear, on behalf of Govanhill Housing Association, calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to conduct an inquiry into the responsibilities of private landlords, the levels of social housing that are below tolerable standard, the impact of slum living conditions on the health and wellbeing of residents and the wider community, and whether such conditions merit housing renewal area status and additional Scottish Government funding. I declare an interest as a constituency member for the affected area.

A letter from Govanhill Housing Association has been submitted to members in addition to the papers that were previously submitted to them.

Given my constituency interest, I will defer saying anything about the petition until the end of the discussion. Anne McLaughlin and I have worked with Govanhill Housing Association and elected councillors to address genuinely held concerns about the impact of poor housing on the community in the past few years.

Do members have any comments or observations to make?

Robin Harper: I suppose that I should declare an interest and then say nothing.

The Convener: I thought that you were going to say that you are a private landlord.

Robin Harper: After an absence of many years from the field, I hope that I will become a private landlord again before Christmas. I shall then happily submit myself to whatever regulations are in force.

The Convener: After the jail sentence, you will have to. I acknowledge what you say.

There is a request by the director of the housing association for a possible committee visit. I have explained to the director that we have already determined the committee's external visits, but we could consider other arrangements if members think that that is worth doing.

Nanette Milne: I have a lot of sympathy with the petition, but is it sufficiently wide enough for the committee to take it any further? It is specifically about one area. That is a question.

The Convener: Okay. I know that.

Anne McLaughlin: I understand what Nanette Milne is saying, but the petitioner's response is quite detailed, and the petition may have wider implications for other communities at some stage.

As the convener said, Govanhill has special requirements and quite complex needs. Because the housing association has gone into so much detail about the things that it would like to be further clarified, I would like to keep the petition open and get more clarity. I will say no more than that because I know that the convener has a few things to say. However, I support pushing things a little bit further because of the particular conditions in Govanhill and the particular situation that it faces.

John Wilson: I regularly visit Govanhill and am aware of the issues there. It was nice of the housing association to invite the committee, whose convener is the local elected member, to visit the area. I am not sure what that says about the convener.

On how far the Scottish Government can take the matter, it is clear that there are implications for Glasgow City Council. It is the local authority that should deal with a number of the issues that the housing association has raised to do with the landlord situation, compulsory purchase orders and improvement orders, for example. If members want to continue the petition, we need to get to the bottom of the council's response, because it has much of the responsibility for dealing with the issues. It can make representations to the Scottish Government and get housing action approval for the area, but those representations have to be in line with the overall plan that it is mapping out with other housing providers in the area.

There is no point in asking the Scottish Government to invest money if we do not know what the overall plan is or we are not taking action against landlords under the existing legislation. There is a mixture of landlords that includes housing associations, local authorities and private landlords, but Govanhill Housing Association is concerned about the private landlord situation. That should be addressed by the local authority.

The Convener: There are two or three immediate observations to make. John Wilson is right to say that the community is still awaiting formal responses from Glasgow City Council to a number of questions that the petitioners have raised through the community organisations. There is also an issue around the dialogue that the council and the Government would need to have to address both the legislation and the resource implications. As the letters from Govanhill Housing Association indicate, extensive and long-running resources are required. Those of us who have been involved in the issue for 10 years know the ups and downs that there have been.

The other issue is that councils have again been asked to pull together their housing plans and Glasgow City Council's documents are out for consultation at present. I note with interest that the

below tolerable standard element does not seem to feature predominantly in the council's plans, so there will be concern in the community that has the highest concentration of BTS housing in the whole of Scotland that the matter is not being treated as a priority. There are no other areas in which the scale of the problem is quite the same—that is the dilemma that it faces.

I will make a couple of suggestions. I have an interest in the matter, as does Anne McLaughlin, as a Glasgow member. Could we ask two or three other members of the committee to meet Govanhill Housing Association in its own area to hear evidence from tenants that we can use as part of our feedback? I would volunteer to do that, but they are probably sick and tired of seeing me. I think that it would be useful for us to do that, and I am sure that Anne McLaughlin would encourage that. If one or two other members of the committee could do that, that would help to strengthen the debate on the petition.

John Wilson: I would be willing to participate in that exercise if we could extend it slightly to include representatives of tenants from the private landlord sector. The housing association tenants have fairly good housing conditions; the issue is the other housing providers. It would be useful to get some evidence of what they have to live with and how they are treated by their landlords. Govanhill Housing Association may be able to facilitate that by bringing in other tenants to give us their views.

When we discussed the petition initially, a number of issues apart from housing arose in relation to the slum conditions—I am paraphrasing the petition, not saying that I think that Govanhill is a slum area. Those other issues included the policing of the community and the police's involvement in trying to address residents' concerns about other activities that are going on. If we visit Govanhill Housing Association, it would be useful to have representatives from the local police who could tell us what exactly is happening there. We might also invite representatives of Glasgow City Council to tell us what the council is doing on the BTS issue and what it is doing to monitor the licensing of multiple occupancy flats. I know that there are breaches by private landlords in Govanhill, which we need to crack down on. If we could deal with some of those issues on the visit, I would be quite happy to go along.

16:00

The Convener: Those suggestions are extremely helpful, because we need to get an holistic view. We will not resolve the fundamentals, or even begin to start resolving them, without the partnership of the police and other regulatory organisations that deal with people's willingness to

comply with the law, and the council, which has a role in providing services to the community. We, as local MSPs, have received information on recent developments, but there is a need to keep the pressure on. We can continue the petition in one or two areas that the petitioners identified in their extensive letter and, taking on board John Wilson's point, raise them with the Government and Glasgow City Council, as the two key organisations with the resource opportunities. In addition, we can ask the clerks to liaise with the housing association to pull together a broader framework. We could try to facilitate that some time in the new year, depending on our diaries, so that two or three committee members can pay a visit and hear about the experiences of local residents, particularly those at the sharpest end, as John Wilson said, who own properties and have seen their value plummet because of problems, and those who rent from private landlords. We can also hear about the wider impact on the neighbourhood.

I thank members for their patience and for accepting the recommendations. I acknowledge Nanette Milne's initial comment about trying to ensure that we take a much broader perspective. We will endeavour to do that.

Independent Vehicular Ferry Routes (PE1192)

The Convener: PE1192, from Donald Ewen Darroch, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to state how it is supporting and promoting independent vehicular ferry routes between the islands and the mainland, and how the planning system is playing a constructive role in supporting the economic and social future of such routes. Jamie McGrigor, who cannot be here today, supports the petition. He supports organisations providing lifeline ferry services and hopes that the Scottish Government can work with those organisations to maintain those services. Do members have any comments on how we should deal with the petition? We await a major strategy report on ferries.

Nanette Milne: While we await the strategy report, it might be appropriate to suspend consideration of the petition.

The Convener: I accept that recommendation. We can get an update on how early in 2010 the strategy report is expected.

John Farquhar Munro: You mentioned ferry routes that provide a lifeline service to communities, but there are other, privately owned ferries that would probably also come into the equation. Our briefing paper refers to just NorthLink and Caledonian MacBrayne, but I can

think of other private sector operators who might have an interest.

NHS Services (Rural Areas) (PE1243)

The Convener: PE1243, by Jenna McDonald and Fiona Henderson, calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that the funding of hospitals in rural areas is increased to ensure that they are properly equipped and staffed so that they can treat more local people, thus ensuring that there is no need for long journeys to centres of bigger populations. Do members have any comments on what to do with the petition? We have had it in front of us on a couple of occasions. I do not know whether we can add much more to it, given that local MSPs will continue the pressure to ensure that further resources are allocated. Can we recommend closing the petition?

John Farquhar Munro: Yes.

The Convener: We will close the petition on that basis.

Anne McLaughlin: The petition was lodged by two students from Fraserburgh academy. I congratulate the two girls on presenting the petition so well. We should acknowledge that some of what they wanted to achieve has been achieved, and that they were part of that.

The Convener: I appreciate that. It was an oversight on my part not to say that and I thank Anne for doing so.

Rosyth Bypass (PE1255)

The Convener: PE1255, by Carol McKenzie, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to commit to developing a Rosyth bypass to cope with any increase in the number of heavy goods vehicles diverted from using the Forth road bridge. As members have no comments, I will close the petition on the basis that the transport review has been announced.

Court Reporters (PE1257)

The Convener: PE1257, by Mark Hutchison, calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to take measures to ensure that solicitors acting as court reporters, who knowingly supply false information to a sheriff, are not immune from prosecution, and that their reports are amended to correct any inaccuracies before the court makes a decision.

I ask that we continue the petition, because we expect the Scottish Government's research study, which may address some of the points that the petition raises, to be published in January 2010. Are members agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Vitamin D Supplements (Guidance) (PE1259)

The Convener: PE1259 is the final current petition for consideration today. I congratulate Ryan McLaughlin and his family for their patience; they have been in the gallery for most of the afternoon, along with other representatives from the Multiple Sclerosis Society Scotland. The very good petition that Ryan McLaughlin presented to us some months ago calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to produce new guidelines on vitamin D supplementation for children and pregnant women, and to run a broader awareness campaign to ensure that people know what levels of vitamin D supplements they should be taking.

We have been briefed that we will have a more subdued presence from Ryan McLaughlin this afternoon, rather than a Braveheartian response coming down the Royal Mile. To get so many young people mobilised and to get the coverage that you did through your endeavour and energy is testimony to your commitment and to the idea behind your campaign. We are very supportive of the petition and we hope that we can continue to raise its concerns with those who can make decisions that are helpful to you.

I know that you and your family have met the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing and the Minister for Public Health. I congratulate you on that—I hope that further developments will follow that discussion. Do members have any comments on how we wish to take the petition forward? Presumably we want to continue with it, but do members feel that any specific issues need to be identified?

Nanette Milne: I would like to hear about the Government's response to its meeting with Ryan's family.

The Convener: Okay.

Anne McLaughlin: I was going to ask about that, but I also wanted to find out whether the leaflet that details the new guidelines on vitamin D supplementation has been issued, as it would be good to see a copy.

The Convener: Are there any other comments?

Robin Harper: The healthy start scheme is a safety net for vulnerable women and children in disadvantaged families. NHS boards may provide vitamins to non-beneficiaries of the scheme—how many do so? Also, how can we be sure that those who are not in receipt of vitamins are aware of the importance of vitamin D? It is not just about receipt of the vitamin, but whether people know how important it is.

The Convener: The petition raises a number of issues with regard to other statutory organisations,

so we want some proper detail on that. We want to pull together the information so that we can find out exactly what the responses have been and where the gaps are. Those gaps can perhaps be filled by better direction from the health department through dialogue with the minister, or the matter can be raised through some of the national organisations using their guidance and recommendations. We will take that forward.

I know that it has been a long afternoon for Ryan and his family—it is surreal to have a conversation in which the individuals who are involved cannot come to the table, but there are parliamentary procedures with regard to who we invite. I know that the family is keen to pursue these matters.

We want the issue to remain current and we will progress it. I am happy to receive any further material or information that Ryan McLaughlin, or others who support the petition, thinks would benefit us in our dialogue with the organisations about which the petition raises concerns. We will keep the petition open and explore the points that committee members have raised. I thank you for your time and patience.

New Petitions (Notification)

16:09

The Convener: Members have been notified of the new petitions that we have received. Do we accept them?

Members indicated agreement.

Work Programme

16:09

The Convener: The paper on our forthcoming work programme suggests dates for meetings. Fergus Cochrane may want to comment on it.

Fergus Cochrane: I had a meeting last week with Young Scot and the Scottish Youth Parliament about the committee's idea for a young people's petitions meeting. The paper gives the suggested date for such a meeting as Tuesday 20 April at Holyrood. For various reasons it would be useful to put that meeting back to 15 June; however, that would impact on the suggested date for one of the committee's external meetings, which is 1 June. If members agree to have the meeting on young people's petitions on 15 June, the committee might want to consider bringing the date for the external meeting forward from 1 June to sometime in May.

The Convener: Are the suggested meeting dates fine, including the proposed changes?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Are members happy with the suggested venues?

Nanette Milne: The paper suggests that the meeting on 15 March be held in "St Andrews, Moffat". Does that mean St Andrews or Moffat?

Fergus Cochrane: Yes.

Nanette Milne: I wondered what St Andrews had to do with Moffat.

The Convener: It is just a posher name—St Andrews or Moffat. So, on 15 March we intend to go to St Andrews.

Fergus Cochrane: It is one or the other—there is an option.

Nanette Milne: St Andrews would be easier for me.

The Convener: Let us make the call now—St Andrews or Moffat?

Nanette Milne: St Andrews.

John Wilson: I caution against our going to St Andrews at that time of year, convener. That will be in university term time and there may be issues about the availability of venues on that date. If we are going to St Andrews, it might be more appropriate to move that meeting to September, before the academic year has begun—although I might be wrong about that. Robin Harper might have more idea about the situation in St Andrews.

Anne McLaughlin: It might be more fun to go there during university term time.

Nanette Milne: Can we ask the clerk to explore that?

The Convener: If we can agree all the other venues, we can decide the venue for 15 March later. Are those venues agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The final decisions that we need to make are whether we should consider only new petitions at our meeting on 26 January and only current petitions at our meeting on 9 February. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Meeting closed at 16:13.

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