

RURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Wednesday 8 March 2000
(*Morning*)

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RURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE 5th Meeting 2000, Session 1

CONVENER

*Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con)
*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
*Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
*Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
*Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)
*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)
*Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING MEMBERS ALSO ATTENDED:

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)
Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)

WITNESS

Sarah Boyack (Minister for Transport and the Environment)

CLERK TEAM LEADER

Richard Davies

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Walsh

ASSISTANT CLERK

Tracey Hawe

LOCATION

The Chamber

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs Committee

Wednesday 8 March 2000

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 11:51*]

The Convener (Alex Johnstone): Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to welcome members of the committee to this meeting.

I have apologies from Richard Lochhead, who is unable to attend.

I welcome Linda Fabiani and Janis Hughes, who are reporters from the Transport and the Environment Committee. I welcome back Andrew Dickson and Jane Hope, whom we have met before in connection with the national parks bill.

I offer a special welcome to the Minister for Transport and the Environment, Sarah Boyack, who is here today primarily to give us an update on the progress of the consultation on the draft national parks bill and to answer our questions.

Draft National Parks (Scotland) Bill

The Convener: I invite Sarah Boyack to address the committee. We will then have questions. I understand that the minister has until quarter to 1 for this purpose.

The Minister for Transport and the Environment (Sarah Boyack): I will keep my introductory remarks short, as I know that what the committee wants is a progress report, as members have already had a briefing from officials on some of the content of the bill. I will concentrate on the consultation process and some of the issues that have emerged from it. Members have received a brief note on some of the key issues that people have raised with us, which gives a flavour of the consultation process.

This is the most recent stage of consultation. Scottish Natural Heritage carried out fairly extensive consultation before it prepared its advice for Government. The draft national parks bill is based pretty closely on its advice. The consultation on the bill, which members have seen, was done against the background of its advice to us, which had been in the public domain since last February. There has been a lot of consultation to get us to this stage.

We published the draft bill, together with

explanatory notes and a set of notes about the policy background to the bill, in January. Those documents were sent to everybody who was involved in the SNH consultation, community councils in both the national park areas, local authorities, non-governmental organisations, public bodies, private organisations and umbrella bodies. Anyone who asked for copies got them and we sent out 2,500 batches of paperwork. We felt that it was important to put the documents on the internet so that people who were not involved in organisations could gain access to it. We supplied officials for meetings that were requested by community councils or other groups.

The consultation period ended on Friday and we have received 350 responses so far, a fairly weighty set of comments. Most responses were written, although some were e-mailed. We are continuing to log and deal with any responses that were received after the deadline. If it is possible to do so, we will take account of those points when we decide on amendments.

The next stage is to produce a summary of the responses, identifying the issues that have been raised and how we will address them in the bill. We will not be able to please everybody. Part of the purpose of briefing you today is to give you a sense of the range of comments that we have received. Sometimes there are completely opposing views. Organisations have made constructive comments and have tried to tease out the areas in which they think we need to amend the bill. It is important that we give people a serious and coherent explanation of why we have or have not amended the bill in the light of the comments that we have received. We will give people feedback so that they know that we have not ignored their comments, even if we have not given full weight to them in the bill.

Over the next couple of weeks we will analyse the responses and work out the extent to which we will amend the bill. We hope to introduce the revised and improved bill before the end of March to allow the committees to start formal scrutiny. Obviously, there can be further amendments at stage 2. It is important that I reflect on the consultation responses and introduce amendments where it is appropriate to do so.

It will be clear to you from the consultation responses paper that we have given you that the issues of the membership of boards and the aims of national parks have attracted most comment. I will not run through that paper now, but I will be happy to answer questions that have arisen from the paper or from discussion at your previous meeting.

The Convener: Thank you. I see Lewis Macdonald champing at the bit, so he can ask the first question.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): I am very interested in what you say about the responses. The Rural Affairs Committee emphasises the wider questions of rural development. From that perspective I am favourably inclined towards the draft bill because its aims include the promotion of the economic and social development of the areas that are affected. I recognise that those aims are a little different from some of the standard sets of objectives for national parks that one finds elsewhere in the world. Is there a general recognition that social and economic development must go side by side with conservation objectives? What initial analysis have you done of responses on that point?

Sarah Boyack: We have received much comment on that area from various perspectives. Some organisations suggest that we should not include social and economic aims in the four aims of the park and argue that we need to give greater weight to natural heritage and conservation issues. Equally, there has been strong support from many organisations, which are pleased that social and economic objectives are included in the bill. I will now have to consider those comments.

The purpose of national parks is to conserve areas because of their special character. However, a key lesson that can be learned from national parks elsewhere is that the people who are affected directly, the local communities, have to be involved in the process and to feel part of the park. That is why social and economic aims are important. There must be a direct relationship between the national park and local people.

The national parks in France have done some interesting work. An integrated approach to social and economic aims has been taken and the parks have worked with farming communities, local tourism bodies and other interested parties to achieve the overall objectives of the park in a way that meets the needs of local people. I am keen to strike a balance that will reflect people's interest. That balance will be struck by the integration of those four aims, not by pitting social and economic objectives against nature conservation objectives.

The key objective is the designation of the park, and I will reflect on some of the comments that have been made today.

12:00

Lewis Macdonald: I agree with what the minister has said. Does she agree that some good examples are already in place? I spoke to Linda Fabiani about South Uist before the meeting opened and it seems to me that corncrakes and crofters work well together in the western isles. Is that kind of combination of conservation and

economic objectives what you hope that the bill can build on?

Sarah Boyack: Absolutely. The situation in the western isles lets people see that those aims can work together in a self-reinforcing way. When I appeared before the Transport and the Environment Committee, we talked about the fact that the way in which local economic development takes place is critical for nature conservation objectives. We talked about the powan, a rare fish in the Loch Lomond area. The delaying of some construction work for two weeks allowed the powan to spawn. That is a splendid example of economic development and nature conservation being delivered by an integrated approach. The purpose of the park is to allow such dialogue to take place.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I look forward to the responses. I am pleased that there is an emphasis on the involvement of local people and local organisations in the parks. I am interested in the mechanisms by which their involvement will be ensured. Sometimes local people have been involved in initiatives but it has turned out that only lip service was being paid to the idea of involvement. I am keen to ensure that that does not happen in relation to the parks.

Sarah Boyack: That issue is important and has been raised by a number of organisations. It is related to the point about the aims of the national park. Part of the purpose of designating a national park is to involve local communities as a means of ensuring that there is an integrated approach to the management of the area. Paragraph 5 of schedule 1 identifies the need for those who live and work in the parks to be involved in the formal authority process. That is an important commitment.

At the Aberfoyle launch, organisations that were based in the park area and national organisations said that they agreed fully with the proposals in the draft bill but asked for an assurance that they would be on the authority's board. We have limited membership of the authority boards to 20, to keep them manageable. The boards will be important, but I should stress the importance of advisory committees.

We will encourage each national park to determine the appropriate size of its board and the kind of advisory committees that will be required. For example, one committee might examine agricultural issues, while another might deal with nature interpretation and tourism issues. The character of each national park will determine what the appropriate advisory committees are. The national park boards and the advisory committees will both be ways in which local stakeholders can become involved in the park.

The advisory committees should be flexible. As the term advisory committee can legally mean either committee or committees, it is up to the national parks to decide how many committees would be appropriate, whether the committees are sectoral or to what extent they would fit into the zoning policies of a national park plan. Those are the main ways in which we would expect people to be involved day to day in the organisation of the parks. Furthermore, if the national park plan is to be effective, it will have to go through a formal consultation process involving local communities and key stakeholders.

Cathy Peattie: I wholeheartedly agree that it is important for all key stakeholders to be involved at all levels of the plan. Will you consider some form of monitoring mechanism to ensure that key stakeholders are, and continue to be, involved in the process and that they are local people? Perhaps places could be ring-fenced for local people, because, despite the best intentions, local people's voices are sometimes not heard.

Sarah Boyack: Cathy Peattie's comments raise two issues, the first of which is reporting mechanisms. The national park plan must be transparent and accessible and the park authority will need to make progress reports on the plan's implementation.

The second issue about ring-fencing is much more difficult, because it depends on what is meant by community and how each community defines itself. Obviously, community councils provide a well-defined set of local stakeholders, and were a key part of the consultations undertaken by SNH and the Cairngorms Partnership. However, how we ring-fence the involvement of each individual community, settlement or local stakeholder group is a very difficult question to answer definitively.

We might want to add some local flavour when the designation order for each of the national parks is issued. Local consultation can then take place on issues such as boundaries, the park's powers and the composition of the park authority. Although we must acknowledge the importance of communities, I do not want to be any more specific about the definition of community in the primary legislation. Each national park might have a different kind of community and stakeholder.

Cathy Peattie: I was not suggesting that we define which key stakeholders are involved, but that we acknowledge that local people need to be involved.

Sarah Boyack: We have stipulated that 50 per cent of the board should be made up of representatives from local authorities, which is one way to involve local interests. There might be national interests that also have a local

stakeholder interest, and we must get that balance right. We need to reflect on that issue before we decide who will implement the park plans.

The Convener: I am keen to ensure that any member who wishes to speak on Lewis Macdonald's or Cathy Peattie's lines of questioning has the chance to come in before we move on to something else.

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Minister, you outlined the division of membership on the national park authority. Have any authorities in which half the membership has been appointed by central Government and half from local authorities worked well and to local people's satisfaction?

Sarah Boyack: The obvious examples are the different national park authorities in England and Wales. However, we are keen not to replicate that approach, but to identify which aspects will work best in Scotland, which is why the designation orders are important.

The issue is partly to what extent local communities feel that they have an ownership of the park authority and how well it is reporting back to them. The consultation process that we have had so far is important in that respect, as it has involved those different communities. It will be important for us to respond to the feedback on the bill that we have received, as that will send out a clear message.

We have good evidence that the process works where there is balance. I am keen to give good examples of where one can add value to the park by involving local communities or stakeholders. This is not a top-down process—we must involve local communities.

Irene McGugan: Given that an advisory body is to be established as well, was any thought given to ensuring that the park authority is composed 100 per cent of local representation, with the national interests being represented on the advisory body?

Sarah Boyack: By designating a national park, we are saying that the national park is not just for those with local interests. We have identified key areas that have a national importance to Scotland. I do not want to replicate the regional park mechanism, which is entirely locally based and regionally focused. We are making a commitment that the Scottish Executive will fund the national parks, which is a responsibility that we take seriously.

We must strike the right balance, as there are key national stakeholders who need to be involved in the park process. However, the different national stakeholders will vary between each national park. There will be an opportunity to use

both the park authority board and an advisory committee to get the mix right in the different authority areas.

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I am glad to hear you say, minister, that you want to ensure that the local community feels ownership of the park authority, which is an important point. I speak not only as a member of the committee but as a constituency MSP for West Aberdeenshire, where the Cairngorms national park will have a major impact. I know that during the consultation exercise, a number of people responded to you and to me with the view that direct election of local representatives should form some element of the board's composition.

Paragraph 4 of schedule 1 of the draft bill says:

"The Scottish Ministers shall, before appointing any directly appointed member, consult

(a) such persons as appear to them to be representative of the interests"

of local people. I feel quite strongly, and I know that a number of my constituents feel strongly, that the Executive should be willing to examine the option of some form of direct election by local communities to the board. We are not suggesting that the majority of the board should be elected directly. You may say that local authority councillors will represent local opinion, but they have many other duties and their wards may not include the specific national park areas.

I would like to hear your response to my specific point about whether, as a result of the consultation process, the Executive would accept some form of local election of some of the board's members.

Sarah Boyack: On the basis of the comments that we have received so far, the Executive would not necessarily accept that proposal. One of the difficulties in identifying key community areas is that they are so dispersed. For example, there are a lot of community interests in the Cairngorms area and a huge number of local community councils. I am keen to have a good spread of involvement across a potential national park area, which might not be achieved through direct elections.

I hope that we will achieve formal accountability by safeguarding the situation through local authority appointments of people who have been directly elected to those local authorities. You commented on the weight that each councillor would put into the national park authority. I think that being a member of a national park authority will be quite a demanding job, given the responsibilities that will come with it.

Mr Rumbles: That is my point.

Sarah Boyack: It is important to get across the

fact that the national park authority will not be just another committee. A whole host of different communities will have interests, and I am not convinced that a direct election to the national park authority is the way in which to tackle community involvement.

As Cathy Peattie said, reporting mechanisms are important. My opinion is that we cannot just set up an organisation and say, "Go off and do the work for four years and then come back and tell us what you have done." The success of national parks will hinge on the regularity of communication as the park authorities go about their work. The Cairngorms Partnership has done innovative work and we should be looking at the ways in which it has involved local people and young people.

We have to get the right mix of being innovative and of having an accountable structure so that people can clearly see the chains of responsibility. We have to involve local people in a way that does not commit them to devoting huge amounts of their time if they want to be part of an authority. They should be able to be involved in different areas of the authority's work—whether that be through an ad hoc advisory committee or a standing advisory committee. Without being too prescriptive, we have to give people the sense that they have an opportunity to be involved at different levels.

12:15

Mr Rumbles: On local authority representatives making up 50 per cent of the boards, I am sure the minister is aware that councillors are elected to represent their wards and therefore have a different agenda. You mentioned the importance of the boards; the only sure way of having proper representation of local communities and their interests on those boards will be for those communities to have some direct form of input to them. In representations from my constituents, I have been told that a bottom-up approach would be far more appropriate than the top-down approach suggested in the schedule. I therefore ask the minister to reconsider the way in which communities are represented.

Sarah Boyack: It is not my perception that local community involvement will necessarily come through only the local authority representatives. There may be space for local interest groups of national importance that would have a strong case for being on the national park authority and the advisory committees. We will have to come back to that in the final formulation of the bill, after examining all the responses to it. We have to send out the right messages.

Lewis Macdonald: My interpretation of the schedule is that a local authority would have the

discretion to nominate, as one of the people representing the local area, the secretary of the community council in the area affected by the national park, for example.

Sarah Boyack: Yes, the authority would have that power, and it would then have to sort out appropriate mechanisms to ensure accountability. The local authority has that power to choose representatives, in the same way that I have the power to choose the national representatives.

Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): The points that I was going to raise have been covered already. I would like to confirm my support for what has been said: there has to be a fair distribution of membership of whatever board or management group is set up to manage the national parks. The concept of national parks is, I think, fairly well accepted.

I would not be happy if the membership of the management board were dominated by the conservation or preservation groups; I do not think that that would be appropriate. As Mike Rumbles said, there has to be a local input to the management board. It has been suggested that the majority of members should come from the local authorities. That is a welcome suggestion, and one that we can debate in the future.

In saying that representatives should come from the local authority, we have to remember that where national parks have been established, a member of the local authority may be directly nominated to the board. I am not sure what the mechanics of that should be. However, the local authority, the community councils and other local groups should have an input, as should the other agencies with an interest in conservation and preservation of the countryside.

The point that I want to get across is that the local authorities, as directly elected members of the area, should have a place on that board. There are other issues of finance and planning, which will arise later in the meeting.

The Convener: I would like to ask a few questions about the breadth and depth of the consultation exercise. Do you feel that it was completely balanced, or were certain groups under-represented in the response?

Sarah Boyack: We supplied multiple copies of the consultation document to some of the organisations, to enable them to distribute it directly. Quite a few community councils in the Cairngorms area requested that. We printed an extra run of documents, as there was such great demand for them. We tried to ensure that anyone who had an interest was made aware of the consultation process.

I was up in the Cairngorms recently, and I am

conscious of the great extent to which people feel they have been consulted. We have an obligation to manage the process so that people recognise that this is the primary legislation stage and that the next stage will be equally important. Some local groups will probably argue that the next stage is more important, in the context of deciding whether to be in or out with the national park and what should be in the designation order.

Part of our task when working our way through the bill is to acknowledge that some issues will be fundamental to the present bill stage and that other issues—such as that about planning, which John Farquhar Munro raised—will be critical at the designation order stage. We will need to secure agreement on the right powers for each national park and must ensure that there is appropriate consultation at that stage.

The Convener: I would like to raise one other point—you can tell me how important it is, in case I am attaching too much significance to it. I understand that, in a response to the Transport and the Environment Committee, you expressed confidence that the overarching legislation that we are discussing would be applicable to an entirely marine national park. Do you feel that those who might be affected by such a park in the future were made sufficiently aware of the circumstances that the legislation may place them in in the longer term, or do you believe that it is not appropriate for them to be concerned at this stage?

Sarah Boyack: Our main focus has been on terrestrial national parks, as we have set as our top priorities Loch Lomond and the Trossachs and the Cairngorms area. We have consulted the key interest groups that have been involved in the consultation process with Scottish Natural Heritage. The national coastal forum was consulted on marine national parks in the draft bill. It would be possible to have a marine national park on the basis of the primary legislation that we will discuss in detail shortly. There is already a marine national park in England. We have issued an electronic petition, inquiring whether we could establish a marine national park, but our top priority is the two land national parks that I have identified.

The character of a marine national park might be very different from that of the Cairngorms national park; the issues would be different. A marine national park that is attached to the coastline could also be different from a detached marine national park that incorporates no physical land mass. That is why the primary legislation must have a broad base and concern itself with key principles, and why the secondary legislation would be critical. Discussing the designation of a marine national park without consulting all the fishing, oil and freight interests would be inconceivable. A range

of specific key interests would have to be involved in that consultation process.

The focus has been on terrestrial parks, but that has not ruled out the opportunity for a future discussion on marine national parks, in which all those key interest groups could be involved. Issues that may not be relevant in the context of terrestrial national parks would be critical to any discussion of marine national parks.

The Convener: Does anyone want to introduce a new angle to the discussion?

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I note from the issues that members have raised that there seem to be highly contradictory attitudes towards planning. On the one hand national park authorities should be planning authorities; on the other they should not. That makes things a little difficult to resolve.

The consultation response e-mailed to us by the Royal Town Planning Institute reveals strong concerns about there not being a single planning authority for the national park, and indicates that there would be a lack of consistency and coherence if different planning authorities dealt with different parts of the planning process. I wonder whether, in the light of the consultation responses you have received, minister, there is any way through that maze of argument.

Sarah Boyack: It would have been extremely helpful to me if we had had geographically based arguments and if it had been clear that everyone in one area was in favour of planning powers whereas people in another area were not. Life is not like that, however, and the designation order will have to deal with that.

It should be possible to have flexible approaches in the various areas that could be designated. The key powers that local authorities have on planning are the structure plans, local plans, development control on each application and the enforcement of decision making. It would be possible, therefore, to give different powers to different parks. That point has been addressed for national parks in England.

I do not want at this stage to come to a view and present my conclusion; I want us to go through the process of considering each national park area, having decided on recommendations on the boundaries. There are questions about how many planning authorities would be in an area and about identifying the main planning pressures. We have to get it right.

Whatever powers we come up with, we need to involve the Scottish Executive in an appeal process and in ensuring clear lines of accountability between the national park and the planning authority, and between the local authority and the planning authority. That applies to

developers and local communities, who will need to note which stages of the process will involve them in any planning issues. We need to discuss those questions in much more depth when we get to the next stage, which concerns the designation orders. The key thing is that the bill will provide the enabling powers that will let us get things right at that stage.

Getting those matters right will not be straightforward, and we need to focus consultation on them for the next stage.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I want to talk about the aims of the park and reflect on some of the comments on community involvement.

Many of the local communities' fears about their involvement are to do with conflict over the aims of the parks: between conservation aims and economic aims. Will there be anything in the bill to ensure that both those aims have to be combined and resolved before the conservation aim takes the upper hand? Will there be a form of appeal whereby people feel that they have been properly consulted and that everything has been done to resolve such a conflict before it happened?

Sarah Boyack: One of the purposes of the park authority and of the park plan is to identify such potential issues. Birdlife—birds needing some form of protection—is one example. There may be a strong tourism argument suggesting that we would need interpretative facilities to enable people to go bird-watching. There may also be strong local arguments to suggest that that could be linked with local facilities, which could be run by local people.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds might argue that there are particular areas which ought not to allow for any viewing by humans, but that it might be appropriate for people to go bird-watching in other areas. That would involve identifying an area of common ground more than one of opposing interests. Through zoning and the national park plan, areas could be identified where a large number of tourists would not want to be encouraged, whereas other areas could accommodate managed bird-watching. That could fit in with the local economy and would have both a social and a nature conservation benefit. One of the main challenges of the park authority would be to identify and synthesise such issues to resolve through an integrated approach what might be a conflict now.

There must be many other examples of that sort. There will always be a potential problem, but one of the park authorities' jobs will be to come up with processes to resolve it.

Lewis Macdonald: I have two related questions about the park plan. First, do you feel that the

requirement on public bodies to have regard to the park plan is tough enough to ensure that it is adhered to? Secondly, what jurisdiction would the national park authority have over UK bodies, such as the Ministry of Defence, whose functions are not devolved but which may operate within national park areas? How would the national park authority be able to ensure that they adhered to the national park plan?

12:30

Sarah Boyack: The phrase “have regard to” is a legal phrase that has weight, but does not sound particularly strong to the layperson. What it would mean in practice is that any public body would have to be able to demonstrate that it had read the park plan and considered how that would affect its operations. It would be up to the Scottish Executive to hold that body to account and ensure that it had had regard to the plan.

This comes back to the process of drafting the park plan. There would be a consultation process, and we would expect major public bodies to have engaged in that process, identified their interests at an early stage and been able to make an input to it. That is what happens with development plans, where there is a lengthy statutory process. When the plan was finalised, public bodies would have to have regard to it, because the process of drawing it up would have been transparent and the public bodies would have had an opportunity to get involved.

On jurisdictional issues, I would want to look to best practice in England and Wales. Northumberland National Park offers a good example of that. The park and the MOD have agreed a statement of intent, so that when either organisation decides to do something or to carry out particular exercises, it gives fair warning to the other. These things are difficult to set down in statute, but Northumberland offers an example of one way to proceed. In those circumstances, we would expect the two organisations to have regular meetings, so that information could be passed between them.

I do not think that a blanket approach is appropriate, as everything depends on what the key interests in each national park authority area are. It would be up to the organisations involved to establish a good relationship, as it would be in the interest of none of them to end up in a high-profile public conflict. Resolution of problems at an early stage will always be the best way forward. Rather than reinventing the wheel, we want to pick up on existing practice. If something works somewhere else, or if it works well in general but may be improved, we should learn from that.

The Convener: Lewis Macdonald highlighted

the issue of the parks’ relationship with the military. Because of the slightly different circumstances that exist in Scotland, where one power is devolved and the other is reserved, might there be additional scope for conflict here?

Sarah Boyack: That is why I cited the example of Northumberland National Park, which has a direct relationship with the MOD. The critical issue is to get such a relationship at the right level. The MOD has issued a declaration of intent in conjunction with Scottish Natural Heritage, so some good links have already been established. I do not think that we should expect problems where they may not arise. We should examine past and present experience to see what we can learn from it and how we can improve on it.

Mr Rumbles: I have a question about the timetable—a matter that I raised when we discussed this issue before. The Executive has set the target of having enabling legislation in place by the summer. If we are to adhere to the timetable outlined in the consultation document, everything will have to be done between next month and the beginning of July, which does not give us much time. Minister, bearing in mind that this is the first bill that the Rural Affairs Committee will have considered, which do you think is more important: that we achieve the target or that we spend time on the bill to get it right?

Sarah Boyack: We need to do both—it should not be an either/or question. The bill is pretty much on schedule so far. It would not be possible to overemphasise the huge amount of consultation that has taken place to get to this stage. I am keen to fine-tune the legislation in light of the responses that have been received. I do not want to exaggerate the difficulty of taking the legislation through committees. I am sure that every committee has the problem that there is not infinite time in which to manage the process. It is up to each committee to schedule its work. I expect this committee to set up a schedule of meetings and make demands on how often it wants to meet me.

It is not just that I want this committee to meet my target. We must give the people whom we have consulted—sometimes more than once—the sense that we are making progress and are not back where we started last February when Donald Dewar announced that national parks legislation would be introduced. There is a sense in some communities that this is a good proposal. They want the benefits of national parks and not to be endlessly consulted by the Scottish Executive or Scottish Natural Heritage. We need to get moving, and I look to the committee to tell me that that is possible.

Mr Rumbles: How much time has been spent on consultation and how much will be spent on getting the legislation right in committee? This is

where we do our job. I get the impression that we are being rushed.

Sarah Boyack: The key issues, which are outlined in the paper we circulated, are appointments to authorities, the aims, planning, the plan, Gaelic issues, advisory groups, and funding. Planning could be taken out of that list as it is properly an issue for the designation order. It is my job to ensure that there is adequate funding. When the issues are boiled down, it can be seen that the key ones are manageable. They relate to the function of the park, which we need to get absolutely right.

The weight of comment that we have received on the aims has helped us to think through what we want to present to this committee. There is a bit of work for us to decide what to include in the bill on appointments to the national park authorities. If I thought that we were in major difficulties, I would want to take more time and would not want to rush things. I think that the bill is manageable, but it is up to Alex Johnstone to manage the process and to decide how many meetings we need. Officials can talk with clerks to establish what the most contentious issues are and on what we need to spend most time.

The Convener: We can move on to when we will meet the minister again. We have a meeting next Tuesday, if that is suitable for you, minister.

Sarah Boyack: I suggest that we liaise after the meeting to agree on when I will come back to talk to you—I will see what is moveable in my diary and what is not. I am aware that I need to clear my diary for this matter, but I cannot do so now.

The Convener: In view of the depth members have chosen to go into aspects of the bill at this meeting, I think that members agree that there is scope to consider other aspects of it.

Dr Murray: We have a summary here of the types of issues that have been raised in the consultation process. When will we be able to see the responses to the consultation, which will inform the questions we ask?

Sarah Boyack: I think that the responses will not be available until after Tuesday next week. Many responses came in bang on the deadline. We have analysed the first 150, but we need to crunch through the last 100 to get at the key issues. I will look at my diary for the end of next week, but as Parliament will be meeting then, we may not be able to meet until the beginning of the following week.

The Convener: One option is to meet on the Tuesday of the following week.

Sarah Boyack: We can discuss this after the meeting. I suspect that everybody else needs to consult their diaries.

The Convener: We will arrange a suitable time to meet you again after information on the responses is available. I thank you for meeting us. I am sure that there is much that we still have to ask you. We have taken every opportunity to get up to speed on national parks, and I think that we have taken a major step forward today. I thank Jane Hope and Andrew Dickson for accompanying you.

The next item is future business. We will consider arrangements for the visit to the Highlands and Aberdeenshire, and we will discuss the e-mail that has been sent to members. Do members agree that we should take this item in private?

Members indicated agreement.

12:41

Meeting continued in private until 12:56.

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