

RURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 23 May 2000
(Morning)

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RURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE **14th 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 ALSO ATTENDED:

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)

Professor Mark Shucksmith (Adviser)

WITNESSES

Councillor Andrew Campbell (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Mr Allan Watt (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

CLERK TEAM LEADER

Richard Davies

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Walsh

ASSISTANT CLERK

Tracey Hawe

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs Committee

Tuesday 23 May 2000

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:09*]

The Convener (Alex Johnstone): Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen, for your early attendance this morning. I understand that most of you came down from Aberdeen on the same train. We have received apologies from Alex Fergusson and Alasdair Morgan.

Item 1 is included to avoid any misunderstanding; it is on whether we should take item 5 in private. Item 5 is consideration of the draft paper summarising the outcome of the recent fact-finding visit to the Highlands and Aberdeenshire. It would be normal practice for us to receive such a report in private. Is the committee agreed that we take item 5 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you.

Rural Employment

The Convener: Item 2 is likely to be the main business of today's meeting. We will receive further evidence in our inquiry into changing employment patterns in rural Scotland. The committee will hear from Mr Allan Watt and Councillor Andrew Campbell, who represent the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. I propose that we follow our established routine and allow the witnesses time for a short presentation to highlight the issues before members ask them questions.

A paper containing suggested areas of questioning was circulated this morning by e-mail. Extra copies are available. Have committee members received a copy of that paper?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Using those questions as a guide, we will be able to raise the issues that are important. As ever, members should feel free to direct the discussion into any areas that are not covered by those questions. I now invite Allan Watt and Andrew Campbell to address the committee.

Mr Allan Watt (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Thank you, convener. Many thanks for inviting us to present our evidence to you. I

understand that all members have a copy of our report and the presentation overheads. I would like to spend time on one diagram in particular.

In the report, we have tried to set out a national local government response, to provide a broad framework for individual council responses. Most rural councils, if not all, will be responding formally if they have not done so already. We are pleased that the inquiry has focused on the broader employment issues, rather than on a narrowly defined sector. COSLA has called for that for some time, and we are keen to work closely with the Parliament in future.

Yesterday, the Minister for Rural Affairs launched "Rural Scotland: A New Approach". We welcome the line that is adopted in that approach, which suggests that the emerging work of the community planning task force will be to roll out community planning to ensure that the rural voice is heard and that the needs of rural areas are prioritised. That was a welcome statement, as we had been waiting for some time for a formal response from the Executive. What we have heard over the past few months has been encouraging.

We would like the Executive to recognise the need to shift the focus from agriculture to a wider concept of rural development, in which environmental and social issues are bound up. That must be reflected in all that the Executive and other bodies dealing with rural development do.

10:15

There must be a specific Scottish response. The announcement by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food of a £1.6 billion seven-year rural development plan has much to commend it, but the department's approach tends to be fairly centralist and top down, which is not appropriate for Scotland. Any policy response to this inquiry should set out regional differences and be subtle enough to address them. The Minister for Rural Affairs has already acknowledged that, both in his document "Rural Scotland: A New Approach" and in the forward strategy for Scottish agriculture. We need to take a subtle approach and I shall explain how I think we can do that.

Within that subtle approach, we need an holistic perspective that is capable of joint service delivery and much better integration of services. Our challenge will be to squeeze more out of the public pound, a sentiment that has been reflected in evidence to the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee during its review of enterprise networks. One of the big challenges facing rural Scotland is that we need a critical mass of demand to justify public services. That is difficult to achieve in rural communities. In many areas, when a local school or shop is forced to close, we

hit a downward spiral—it can be difficult to stop that trend. There must be a subtler way of recognising the need for key rural services.

Many remote rural areas are facing the impact of population decline and a lack of vibrancy. Often, there is also an imbalance of population structure, with young people moving out. In some cases, that can be offset by people moving in, but often those people are elderly, which puts additional pressures on services. We must be alert to the fact that the overall figures do not always reveal such subtle changes, all of which will have an impact on downstream activities. For example, a reduction in agricultural employment will impact on downstream services and rural service providers, which in turn will impact on the ability of local authorities to react positively.

We have long said that we must consider added value in agriculture. None of that is new, but it is heartening that local government is working with others' markets and other initiatives. A tremendous breadth and depth of work is taking place. We took evidence on Friday and were delighted with what we heard on that front. There are little indications that, working jointly, we can begin to address some of these issues. However, we must be alert to the fact that a number of key industries are contracting out, which denies benefits to local communities. If those industries bring in employees from outside the area only for the day and then those employees disappear, the knock-on benefits also disappear.

We are delighted by and hopeful of the role that telematics may play in rural Scotland. They could have a profound effect, but we must ensure that there is a level playing field in terms of the infrastructure. If we are not careful, there could be information-rich and information-poor areas. We must ensure that all people can benefit from telematics and that we do not simply accelerate the divide between the haves and the have-nots in technological awareness and access.

Since the early 1980s, we have seen a marked reduction in rural services. That tends to have a cumulative impact. What is often forgotten is the direct effect on people who are employed in the public sector in rural areas. A reduction in the budgets of rural local authorities can have a direct impact on the number of people who live, work and add vibrancy to rural communities. The loss of former public utilities and local government jobs over the past 10 to 15 years has also impacted on the number of people who live and work in rural Scotland.

Without making my evidence sound too much like a whingeing session—I shall come on to some more positive aspects in a moment—I think that it is important to point out those issues. We are concerned about the potential impact of the Postal

Services Bill, which some have estimated could result in a loss of up to 40 per cent of rural post office businesses. On Friday, Post Office Counters challenged us to work jointly with post offices. That is something else that the committee's inquiry might address.

We are aware that, in order to respond to tighter global economic demands, public and private services have been centralised, with knock-on effects for rural Scotland, such as the closure of schools, shops and hospitals. If we are to address that trend, we must consider how we can link up with the agencies to tackle those problems.

The greatest challenge is to ensure that rural communities benefit and flourish during the current rapid change and that policy responses are better integrated, more effective, locally responsive and part of a strategic framework for rural policies and actions. The secret will lie in resisting a quick fix, while recognising that we will need some early wins to keep things moving. Scotland was ahead of the game with the rural white paper, because it took a thematic approach rather than a narrow, sectoral approach. However, we have failed to build on that; we need a rural champion to do so.

Independent research from the University of Birmingham has confirmed that we are also ahead of the game on community planning. There is real potential in the work that is now going ahead throughout Scotland for community planning to provide a powerful strategic framework to unite agencies, policies and services. I draw the committee's attention to the diagram in my submission, which shows the potential for a community plan to draw together a plethora of agencies and partnerships to address key rural issues.

At the same time, community plans are capable of being subtle enough to listen to local communities and powerful enough to react upward to provide a voice that can respond positively to the Executive, to Westminster and to the European Union. Without that powerful local voice, there will be no mechanism for drawing together the disparate range of services and policies that is subtle enough to take account of regional differences.

I welcome comments from the committee.

The Convener: We now move on to comments and questions, as usual. Who wants to start?

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): Thank you for your report. I have some questions. I will start with community planning, but I will bring in some of the other issues that you raised. You said, quite rightly, that a bottom-up, local and powerful voice is required. It is clear from evidence that we have taken that it is important that a bottom-up approach is taken and that some way is found to

facilitate community participation in planning. What are your views on progressing that approach? We often talk about involving communities, but we are not very good at it.

Mr Watt: I have a number of thoughts on that matter. I chair Angus rural partnership and the Tay estuary forum, so I have been at the sharp end of partnership working and know that it is extremely difficult. One has to deal with wicked issues, such as how to balance, or mesh, a positive, joined-up response from the service deliverers with taking on board what is being said from below. COSLA is absolutely clear on the need to clear out the range of partnerships—there are far too many of them, which makes it difficult for the big players, if you like, to commit fully to them. Equally, we must be much better at responding to local demands. That is why we said firmly that, at local authority level, we need a powerful strategic statement, which should be a community plan that is capable of listening and responding to local demands.

All 32 authorities in Scotland have submitted their community plans; I have reviewed them all. I was heartened by the efforts that have been made to link with local people within the plans. Rural strategies were pushed from the rural white paper onwards, but little progress has been made on them. I suggest that that is because they have been overtaken by community planning as the strategic statement.

The COSLA line on rural strategies is that they may still be required to run parallel with community planning, in order to incorporate the rural voice in the community planning effort and to raise specific rural issues. However, that approach will vary across the country. We are convinced that in the Highlands, for example, that approach may not be necessary, as one could argue that the Highlands is an entirely rural area. In areas such as south Lanarkshire, which has a rural-urban split, one might want a rural strategy to run parallel with the community plan.

Councillor Andrew Campbell (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I will make a general comment on where I think we are today in rural areas before I say something about community planning. We have a 35 per cent reduction in gross output in the rural areas, and the effect of that on human life is immeasurable. The trade union movement would not accept the pressures that are being put on people who dwell in those areas—indeed, the European Parliament would not accept those pressures. The reason why those people have no voice—other than the National Farmers Union—is that their voices are diverse; it is difficult to distil them into one voice that says, “This is what is happening to the human element in rural areas—let’s take action against the massive change.”

I understand that, like local authorities, the Scottish Parliament has a statutory obligation to undertake a variety of services, which means that the opportunities for exercising financial discretion are limited. In rural areas, we have suffered considerably because of some of the legislation that has been passed—I am talking mainly about deprivation.

I believe that, if rural Scotland is to survive, the base industries of forestry, agriculture, tourism and fisheries must have a viable economic base on which we can keep the rural infrastructure going. As Alan Watt rightly said, the community plan seems to be the most sensible way of drawing together the rural fabric and of moving rural Scotland forward.

10:30

Elaine Murray will know that Dumfries and Galloway has a community plan manager, who is paid by the health board, the enterprise company and the council. We have made logical gains by bringing those three bodies together. The health board and the enterprise company have been speaking to each other over the past year and that has been a massive move in the right direction. I believe that all public agencies should be brought together—we must make them work together to deliver at grass-roots level, as Cathy Peattie suggested.

I have tried to give you my view and the view of COSLA. We are faced with a massive job, and I am trying to highlight the fact that we are now at a critical stage. If something is not done quickly for the base industries, the decline about which you are so concerned will continue. That is why we must try to halt it. Through the Scottish Executive and through Westminster, members should get to grips with the fuel and freight expenses that are costing agriculture, forestry and, to a great extent, tourism and the fishing industry in rural Scotland very dear, as you will know.

Cathy Peattie: Thank you for your answer, Councillor Campbell. You are right—there probably are too many partnerships. It is important that people get together and concentrate on the issues.

I am interested in the wider partnership and in the participation of the community, including voluntary organisations and so on. There are some good examples of voluntary organisations playing a key role in partnerships, working alongside enterprise companies, health boards and councils. However, sometimes only lip service is paid to partnership and I am interested in how we can ensure that voluntary organisations play a full role, rather than being unequal partners. Their voices and their good ideas should be listened to.

For example, community economic development should be considered, as that may be the way forward for certain communities, particularly in relation to service delivery.

Mr Watt: As someone who serves on partnerships on a voluntary basis, I can only agree with Cathy Peattie. However, the bigger agencies must work harder to try to ensure that we draw on different strands of opinion and involve different people. In order to do that, the partnership must be interesting and exciting and people must see that their work is being acted on. That is the secret.

We are beginning to see people locking into some of the working groups that are emerging through the community planning framework. For the first time, those people are beginning to see a connection with their work, how their work connects with the work of others and, if you like, the end game. That is the real test for community planning.

Cathy Peattie: Do you agree that that is because some of the organisations that I talked about have participated in the development of the community plans?

Mr Watt: Yes.

The Convener: I will take members in the order in which they indicated that they wished to speak—we will try to get the party balance right before the end.

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I am interested in the views of witnesses, as representatives of local government, on the grant distribution system, on which the Scottish Executive can have an impact. In COSLA's submission, you welcome the Scottish Executive's invitation to councils for submissions to inform its review of local government finance. I am interested in your views of how the cost of delivery of services to rural areas could be quantified. You will be aware that the Arbutnott report made a stab at that and that there has been quite a lot of controversy over whether the appropriate mechanisms were used. You will also be aware through COSLA that a number of rural areas did rather badly in the grant-aided expenditure distribution, which seemed to militate against rather than in favour of rural areas.

You suggest in your submission that the low incomes, increased cost of living, access to and increased cost of delivery of services in rural areas need to be investigated. How is COSLA tackling that? Is COSLA attempting to work out some sort of formula or series of indicators that would allow those factors to be taken into consideration?

Councillor Campbell: Yesterday we were at Battleby where the Minister for Rural Affairs

launched—what was it? There are so many glossy magazines. It was "Rural Scotland: A New Approach". He took the opportunity of challenging us on exactly Dr Murray's point, that we complain about not getting a sufficient share of the £21 million top-sliced for deprivation, but we must tell the Executive what the problems are and they will see what they can do. That can be answered in two ways, focusing on the political problem of getting our fair share or on making a contribution. We feel that the indicators are not correct at present. There are deprivation hot spots throughout rural Scotland that are not easily defined.

The Penhale, Noble, Smith and Wright proposals for England and Wales go a long way towards what we might want to say in a paper that would be useful to the committee. The kinds of composite indicators that would give a truer picture of rural Scotland would include income deprivation—rural areas have the lowest incomes in the whole country; and employment deprivation, which is cyclic—and some measurements were made in summer, a higher time of employment in rural areas. Also important are health deprivation and disabilities; deprivation resulting from geographical access to services; housing deprivation—I do not need to tell committee members about housing deprivation in the areas they represent; and education, skills and training deprivation—once again, that is about getting to it. People in Glasgow or Edinburgh can jump on a bus to get from A to B. People in rural Scotland cannot do that. They probably have to run a car, a massive cost for a low-income family.

In my own area, Dumfries and Galloway, the £21 million that was top-sliced off GAE last year was equivalent to £600,000. You may say that that is not a lot but it equates to 1.5 per cent in council tax. Although we do not get it we still have to spend it, so we had to raise council tax by 1.5 per cent because of that top slicing. That was pretty drastic for rural areas.

The Convener: Was that all you wanted to ask?

Dr Murray: Yes—unless Allan Watt wants to add something.

Mr Watt: COSLA has made the point about the increasing costs of rural service provision and the closure of key services in both the private and public sectors, through the appropriate channels. The knock-on effect is substantial. Quite often local government is the last resort, jumping in to provide a service. A number of councils are beginning to track the loss of rural services. I know that in Angus, for example, there is something called the rural facilities information service, which tracks the closure of key services. The results have been quite worrying. Increasingly, councils are the last resort.

In a more positive vein, grants to rural shops and similar schemes have shown us a way of working with the enterprise companies and the Scottish Grocers Federation to retain vital services. That is worth developing further.

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): My question is not 100 miles away from the same subject. COSLA has been quite closely involved in formulating the social inclusion strategy. How effective do you think social inclusion partnerships and some of the other measures in the strategy are or might be in dealing with the causes and consequences of employment change in rural areas?

Mr Watt: I have been directly involved in formulating the social inclusion strategy and I welcome the work that is currently being done to promote social inclusion. I worked with Mark Shucksmith on that. However, rural deprivation or exclusion is much less obvious than exclusion elsewhere. It is not area based or geographically concentrated, so it is much harder to define. For that reason, policy responses in rural areas have to be much more subtle than those in urban areas.

Because it is more difficult for people to understand fully what rural social exclusion is about, the policy responses are not always as powerful as they might be. One of the issues that this committee may want to examine is what would constitute a subtle response to rural social exclusion. I remember the early work that Mark Shucksmith did, which revealed clearly that rural social exclusion is often people centred and that very wealthy people can often be found living alongside very poor people. In the urban areas that is not the case and social exclusion tends to be much more concentrated, which makes the policy response easier. This is all about subtlety, and whether we have time for that, I do not know.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): I noted that in answer to an earlier question, Allan, you commented that there were too many partnerships and that there was a need to clear some out. I would be interested if you could expand on that a little.

I would also like to point out one or two related developments. You will be aware of the recommendations of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, which include the establishment of local economic forums. Much of the inspiration for that has come from the Grampian model. Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Enterprise Grampian, Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council and Aberdeen Chamber of Commerce have for some time operated something similar—the north-east Scotland economic development partnership. Does that hold out any lessons for other areas that combine rural and urban interests?

In Grampian there has been discussion about what other partners to pull in, because, obviously, the organisations to which I have referred are big agencies. They include two local councils. There are many other people with an interest in economic development. Is it necessary to restrict local economic forums to a small number of powerful players, in order to have focus and to avoid involving a plethora of groups, or should they be flexible from area to area and from case to case?

Mr Watt: Ross Finnie referred to that as what the Americans call a wicked issue. I will answer your last question first. I think that community planning ought to be capable of embracing the local economic forums recommended by the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee. However, we recognise that in certain areas it may be sensible to have an economic forum that is spread across a much bigger geographical patch. There is a big debate about the level at which community planning can best operate. We take the view that it should operate at local authority level, but that it should be flexible enough to operate at a broader regional level, where appropriate.

It is entirely appropriate that Grampian should have such a powerful voice on economic development. However, it needs to lock into community planning. I say that because economic issues cannot be detached from social or environmental ones. Locking local economic forums into community planning frameworks will mean that they both retain their powerful strategic role and are informed by the other issues that affect community planning. For Grampian and for many parts of rural Scotland the key issue will be the relationship between local economic forums and community planning.

10:45

Perth and Kinross Council, along with many other councils, have sought to track the number of partnerships that exist. It came up with a figure of around 120 partnerships within the local authority area. That leads me to ask myself how Scottish Enterprise Tayside can commit fully to 120 partnerships. The answer is that it cannot. How can the local authority do that? The answer is that it cannot. We have to be selective and to have a framework. There is a strong suggestion that community planning would provide that framework.

I guess that there will be some tough decisions ahead and that some of the bigger organisations may be forced to say that they can no longer support a particular partnership in a particular way and that they must focus on the bigger issues. If enterprise companies and local authorities spread

themselves too thinly, they may fail. Equally, there has to be a way of building in people from the grass roots. Some interesting models for doing that are beginning to emerge.

Councillor Campbell: When it comes to partnership working, we must learn to give as well as take. Everybody tends to want to hold their own ground, but if that happens we will be unable to make the system work.

Mr Watt: I have learned that partnership working is all about collaborative advantage. The people who are sitting around the table in partnerships have to be clear about what they want—what they will get from those partnerships and what they can give to them. In many partnerships people are not clear about what they want and what their organisation will gain from partnership working. In some cases, we have forced partners to ask themselves what they expect to get from a partnership and what they will give in return. There is a great deal of fuzzy thinking around this issue.

I know that in Canada the big agencies involved in coastal partnerships have been asked to work out the financial value to them of being part of a big strategic partnership. That has been very revealing. The agencies have then been asked to top-slice an element of what they gain to help run the partnership. There are lessons in that for rural Scotland.

Lewis Macdonald: Are you saying that the big agencies acquire the biggest financial benefit from partnerships?

Mr Watt: Yes.

Cathy Peattie: Do you think that being involved in partnerships benefits the big agencies in terms of their relationship with local communities? Local authorities have a track record of working at local level, but some of the other big agencies are not used to speaking to local people and organisations.

Mr Watt: The agencies would be daft not to take advantage of that. One of the accusations levelled at quangos is that they are not democratically accountable. Locking them into community planning would allow them to say that they are getting closer to communities and to the democratic process.

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I apologise for not being present during your oral presentation. However, I read your written submission with great interest. Forgive me if I cover ground that has already been gone over—stop me if I do.

I refer you to paragraph 5.5 of your submission, which was mentioned earlier. The last line of that paragraph talks about

“the increased cost of delivering services to rural populations.”

That is something that we have discussed a great deal. The submission also refers to

“the increased cost of living in rural areas associated with accessing services”.

That is the issue that I want to highlight.

I will give you an example. As a result of the local government financial settlement, Aberdeenshire Council, the authority that I know best—I represent West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine—has just lost 150 jobs. In 1995 the council wanted to decentralise its administration—to have local jobs in local communities and villages. I believe that Aberdeenshire Council is unique in having its headquarters outwith the authority area.

Villages in my constituency, such as Aboyne and Ballater, have had outstations, which the council is now closing. Consequently, people who want to pay their council tax, make inquiries and access council services and facilities will not be able to do so. They are about to have to travel into Aberdeen city. The bus fare from Aboyne to Aberdeen is £5.50 one way—it is not like paying 80p to jump on the bus in Edinburgh to go down to the council offices. Decentralisation provides not only services that people can access readily, but local jobs in local areas. I am well aware of the constraints on Aberdeenshire Council, which wanted to—and did—go down the decentralisation route and is now having to centralise. My question is whether that is happening to the same extent throughout COSLA and the rest of rural Scotland.

Councillor Campbell: You are absolutely right. In 1996-97, Dumfries and Galloway Council decided to have one-stop shops. The money was found in 1998, the building alterations took place in 1999 and I was supposed to open the shops last week. The council area spreads 120 miles from Langholm to Stranraer and 40 miles from the sea to the hills. In the past year, through the community planning process, we have been making close contact with and meeting the enterprise and health boards. At those meetings, it emerged that the health board had spare buildings in Stranraer and two buildings somewhere else and that the enterprise board had outlets here, there and everywhere. In our wisdom, we had spent money over three years on a one-stop shop system for the council, but all of a sudden, we realised, “Hey, boys. We are completely out of step”, and that we should have a combined system.

We are now engaged in a process of thinking how we can justify a £1.3 million spend on new premises. We do not want to be isolated and provide services only for the council. The

challenge is to draw bodies together through community planning. By doing that, I hope that we will address some of the problems that you raised and that there will be outreach in various areas.

Mr Rumbles: Are you keeping the one-stop shop concept?

Councillor Campbell: Yes, but if we had involved the other players in the field we could have done a better job. Unfortunately, local government is so slow to move that it took that amount of time. Information technology and e-commerce have come into play as well. I give the one-stop shops as an example, so that other parts of rural Scotland will not fall into the same traps. There is a good lesson to be learned. If we can pull agencies together to deliver a joint service, we will be doing rural Scotland a tremendous service.

Mr Rumbles: That is my point and I would like to pursue it. When a council has a restricted budget, the decision to centralise its dealings with individuals is down to economies of scale, which save money. When we talk about outstations and one-stop shops we are talking not only about rural employment, but about the knock-on effect on the rest of the rural economy and on access.

I know Aberdeenshire well, where centralisation is happening. I deplore it and hope that it is not happening elsewhere. You have given the example of Dumfries and Galloway. Is the retreat from decentralisation happening outwith Aberdeen, or is Aberdeenshire the only place where it is happening?

Mr Watt: We do not have specific facts and figures on that. However, the costs of decentralising are higher than centralising; otherwise we would not see the trend that we are seeing now. My initial response is that I would be willing to bet that authorities are being forced to centralise. It is a bitter irony that just at the point when it looks like we are going to get unequivocal support for community planning and working closely with the people, local government, which has taken the lead on decentralisation, is going to be forced to make an about-turn and centralise. That will send a terrible message about community planning and about our eagerness to deliver services as locally as we can and seek joint service provision. However, as some of the bigger organisations begin to embrace community planning, they may begin to say that they will commit more fully to joint service provision and sharing of buildings, for example. We may be able to reverse the trend.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Centralisation is meant to be a way of saving money, but how does that equate with the cost of economic development to rescue a small village that has lost council jobs, which needs more

funding from the council to prop it up? It is almost a chicken-and-egg situation: you take away one thing and end up having to spend more on another.

Mr Watt: I cannot argue with that analysis. Unfortunately, circumstances often force councils to make difficult decisions, which are often the last thing that they want to do. They do not have to fund the consequences directly, but they will pay indirectly. That is where there needs to be much closer integration of national policy. People need to consider the situation in the round.

We have heard a lot about Longbridge, for example, with people beginning to work out what whatever happens there will mean for the entire area—if one job goes at Longbridge, five will go in the local community. We have not yet seen deep economic analysis of what the loss of local government jobs in a community could mean for that community. We may not be talking about thousands of jobs but, in percentage terms, the loss could be as high if not higher.

Rhoda Grant: I agree: one job lost in a small area can have the same impact as the loss of thousands of jobs in a large area.

Can you see any way of encouraging partnership working between agencies? I know of a community in my constituency which had access to money and decided that it needed social services, health, elderly care and so on. That community had its own pool of money—most do not—to start funding a project to build sheltered housing, medical beds, social work services and so on together. With the funding, the people fought to bring in all the agencies to finish the project. In a way, however, projects of that kind need somebody in the centre, who is not attached to any of the agencies, to pull everything together. Everyone says that the project is a great example of how to provide services in the same spot at a low cost to all the agencies, but it seems that something is stopping the same thing happening all over.

Mr Watt: That is to do with partnership working in general and about how to make unwilling partners sit round the table. I believe that the boost for community planning will revolve around key carrots and sticks, which may be delivered nationally to give real encouragement to agencies to engage properly and, if they do not, to encourage them in another way—with a stick. If there is proper commitment to community planning, it will provide a national framework for it to happen and will not allow individual egos or small empire-building ambitions to get in the way of good, joint, community-based projects. The framework needs the extra boost—there is no doubt about that.

Councillor Campbell: The framework is there for match funding, but there needs to be a leader and the different partners need to be able to build on that. I do not think that we are doing that as well as we should. Funding is available, if it can be sourced and providing that legislation allows it. If funding cannot be achieved through match funding, there will come a time when legislation must be examined to find out whether it allows such processes to take place. We are on an ever-evolving machine and the changes that are taking place mean that such matters must be watched—legislation must allow for match funding.

11:00

Mr Watt: The point about carrots and sticks is that the carrots can take different forms—they need not necessarily be financial. Some fiscal measures could be relaxed, which would provide encouragement. This is not about pleas for money—we must examine the issue in the round.

Rhoda Grant: The community in Lochcarron to which I referred had community fund money that was left over from the oil industry. That community could have given up a hundred times, because the problems of trying to get people to work together make it almost impossible to get funding. The situation must be made easier. It is sensible to allow things to happen, rather to have them fought for.

Mr Watt: That relates to the point that I tried to make earlier about ensuring that frameworks are in place to allow groups such as the one to which you refer to develop. We ought to be making things easier for people, not more difficult, as always seems to be the case. A joined-up, integrated framework at local level can respond better to the initiatives that come from such groups. We do not have such a system at the moment; sometimes it seems that what we have is its opposite.

Rhoda Grant: Would it help if local government, for example, had a joint budget for community services?

Mr Watt: You have touched on one of the carrots to which I referred. I think that, through community planning, we will begin to see a drive towards joint budgeting. If we could say, "Hey, there's money in here", that would be a big incentive for agencies to take partnerships seriously, and would certainly focus their attention.

Councillor Campbell: Somebody must be the leader, however, otherwise that will not happen. That is the way life is.

Rhoda Grant: And whom did you have in mind? [Laughter.]

Dr Murray: I want to talk about the importance

of information and communications technology to rural areas. There is a problem in that the introduction of telematics infrastructure and support can be more expensive in less populated areas. Companies that are involved in such activities will often charge more because there is not such large demand. Unless there is a way of overcoming the problems of bringing the ICT infrastructure to rural areas, telematics might act against the interests of rural areas because those areas will become information-poor while more highly populated areas become information-rich. Have you any thoughts about how that might be tackled so that rural areas can benefit from the advantages that ICT could bring, such as not having to travel and so on?

Mr Watt: Yes. There must be a clear understanding of which areas have adequate coverage and which do not. First, a fairly extensive survey must be done on what is available in rural areas so that we can establish the extent of the shortfall. Once we are armed with that information, we can make it clear that those rural areas where there is a shortfall will suffer unless there is a level playing field. If nothing is done to encourage the introduction of that infrastructure, that will say something about our attitudes to such areas.

We do not have information on e-coverage and the depth of such coverage at the moment; I do not know of any one who does. We want to live in an information society in a modern nation. The Finns, for example, have decided to ensure that no matter where a person lives, they should have access to top quality coverage. Perhaps that is the standard that we should try to attain.

Councillor Campbell: As Elaine Murray said, it is massively important that we structure e-coverage correctly. I am aware of a rural company that wanted to use an ISDN line, for which the cost would have been £220,000. That same service is provided in Glasgow for £3,000. That company would have provided up to 36 jobs. The impact on rural areas of the well-paid jobs that can come on the back of ICT is colossal. I know people are talking to BT—which was, perhaps, the culprit in that example—but Thus plc provides the same service. There are a few providers, but there must be a drawing together of those who are in the telematics business. That would give us a better idea of how best to ensure that rural areas are not socially or telematically deprived.

We should focus on and build on the strengths of rural areas. Everybody loves to live in a rural area—that is a massive strength.

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I want to move the discussion on to social infrastructures in rural communities and, in particular, to talk about retaining young people in rural communities. That is a challenge. If we are to

have a vibrant rural economy, people must live and work in rural areas. We must, therefore, encourage young people who were born in those areas to remain in them and we must encourage other young people to move into those areas.

There are pressures on local government funding because of a perceived lack of amenities in many rural areas. There have been cuts in voluntary groups' budgets, which have a knock-on effect on services for young people. I am interested to hear your comments on provision of services for young people. Is there a challenge in encouraging young people to stay in rural Scotland?

Mr Watt: It is safe to say that provision of facilities for young people is essential if we are to enable and encourage them to stay in those areas. There is evidence that some more remote rural areas are losing young people. Without young people, the life-blood of rural areas is lost and without their life-blood they die—that is how fundamental young people are to those areas.

There is acknowledgement throughout local government that retention of young people in rural areas is crucial, but—as a result of pressures on budgets—local authorities are sometimes forced to close key facilities. On a positive note, there is increasing examination—through the community planning framework—of how facilities can be kept open, perhaps in conjunction with other service providers. For example, a lot of good work is being done in rural schools that provide after-school care clubs, adult education and so on. Attempts are being made to provide more services through schools to keep communities vibrant.

There is a limit to what local government can do on its own to ensure that young people stay in rural areas. Some good work is being done in economic development, but all the agencies must examine the problem. I am not sure whether I have answered your question fully.

Richard Lochhead: It was a difficult question.

Some large rural communities in Scotland do not have sports centres; the lack of such facilities makes young people desperate to leave those communities and move to the cities. That is not healthy for the future of local rural economies. Do COSLA and local authorities analyse the availability of facilities for young people? To my knowledge, they do not. Perhaps I am wrong; if so, I would like to be corrected.

Mr Watt: I will answer the specific question later, but I know that Councillor Campbell would like to come in on this.

Councillor Campbell: Richard Lochhead's question follows on well from the question about telematics, in terms of young people and how we

retain them in rural areas. I do not want to keep on about my area, but the Crichton college campus in Dumfries now has departments of Glasgow University, Paisley University, Bell College and Dumfries and Galloway College working together. We have 350 students; that figure will rise to nearly 700 this year and we expect it to rise further. The students are not all 18-year-olds, however; the age range is from 18 to 50 or 60. The campus is working closely with the schools, and the fact that students can travel there by bus for two years, rather than having to go to Glasgow or Edinburgh, helps us a lot. In a low-wage economy, that could also be very important for the young people's further education strands. I am sure that the University of the Highlands and Islands, with its Open University-style focus, also liaises with the schools in its area.

Having said all that, there is nothing wrong with students going to the city for a period of their lives to learn the other skills that people get from being in the city, aside from the education process.

Mr Lochhead mentioned recreational facilities; I believe provision of such facilities to be paramount. As was mentioned, local authorities' budgets for such facilities are tight, but there are means of trying to maintain them. We may have to use private finance initiatives; we are seriously considering that method for the bigger projects. In the immediate term, we are starting to bus children—up to 18 years old—to recreational facilities. That bussing is free, and gives children who live in rural patches the opportunity to get to some source of recreation. I believe that if we do not give them that opportunity, they are disadvantaged considerably compared with someone in the city, who can jump on a bus or walk around the corner.

Mr Watt: Pressures mean that it is often difficult to create new sports centres in rural Scotland and to maintain the existing ones. When I have the good fortune to go to Scandinavia and see the quality of sports facilities there—often in fairly small and remote rural communities—I find it quite sad to come home and see what we have here. It is quite embarrassing—that is not the COSLA view, but a personal observation. I feel strongly about that.

There are some good examples of collecting information in Scottish local government. High-quality information is collected, based on rural settlement units, on the movement of facilities across five-year or 10-year periods so that the authorities can begin to track the availability of facilities. Some information exists, but it is patchy. Following local government reorganisation, it has been difficult for the smaller authorities to sustain high-quality research and information staff and services. The previous quality of information is

perhaps not there, because of economies of scale.

The Convener: I want to go back to what we were discussing before Richard Lochhead's point—partnership and other funding arrangements. The funding to support partnership activity is allocated through competitive means; that leads to winners and losers. Some areas become partnership-rich, while others become partnership-poor. How does COSLA view that tendency?

Mr Watt: There is some concern about that. Economies of scale mean that some bigger, more powerful authorities and organisations are capable of producing very professional bids. That is not to say that the lesser, or less attractive—less sexy, perhaps—packages should fail, or be considered less deserving, because the council has not been able to submit an all-singing, all-dancing presentation with the bid. I have a real fear about that, and about the effect of economies of scale, particularly for rural Scotland. When a lot of work is done on a bid by the usual suspects—the one or two people who burn the midnight oil—it can be dysfunctional and disheartening when the bid fails. For some reason, the blame seems to rest with those people, who are in any case under-resourced. All the good work that has been undertaken jointly with the community begins to disappear. I have a real fear about that.

I made specific comment to the Minister for Rural Affairs yesterday about the rural challenge fund, which—it has been suggested—needs to be devolved to community planning level. I sit on the judging panel for the rural challenge fund, and I find it extremely difficult. We have all the applications in front of us, and officials are there to explain what the applications are about. I have to come to an almost impossible decision about a project that I have never seen in my life, which is located in an area that I am not that familiar with. That is wrong; it is far too centralist. We need to be much more intelligent in how we devolve such budgets to community planning level. I use that as one example, from personal experience. I think we have got it wrong at the moment.

The Convener: Where there is a contrast between challenge funding and needs-based allocation of funds, do you have a preference, or is it a matter of horses for courses?

Mr Watts: It should principally be needs-based. If it is not, we get into the competitive disadvantage situation, in which there are winners and losers. If we began to track that, we would find that the winners are those who are able to put a powerful, cogent case, because they have the resources to do so. We need to get away from that.

11:15

Mr Rumbles: I recognise the criticism of the present system, but are you advocating that we should move away from the centralised approach in assessing the bids—say, in Edinburgh—and decentralise budgets to councils to judge? Is that what you are suggesting?

Mr Watt: I am suggesting that the budgets are decentralised to community planning level, so that the partners can sit down and decide. The needs-based approach for each area needs to be handled centrally; otherwise there would be an enormous bun-fight.

Mr Rumbles: But the decision making—

Mr Watt: The decision making, I would suggest, should be done through the community planning steering group. This is an emerging model, and I am just floating some thoughts on it, but it is consistent with the COSLA line over the past two years.

The Convener: If there are no further questions, or lines that members want to develop, I would like to express the committee's extreme gratitude to Mr Watt and Councillor Campbell for coming along, giving us the benefit of their views and answering our questions. Your contribution towards our inquiry into changing employment patterns in rural Scotland is greatly appreciated. Thank you for your assistance.

Councillor Campbell: Thank you very much, convener. These are difficult, but challenging times. If we can all work together—including the Scottish Executive—we can make a difference in rural Scotland.

Petitions

The Convener: Item 3 is consideration of petitions. Two petitions have been presented for discussion: PE51 from Friends of the Earth, regarding genetically modified crops, and PE138 from Andrew Stuart Wood, regarding quality assurance powers for Scottish beef and lamb. Members should declare any interests that they have in either petition.

The purpose of our discussion on PE51 is to pass any comments on the petition to the Transport and the Environment Committee, which is the lead committee on the issue. We discussed this petition on 29 February and agreed to reconsider the matter once the Parliament had had the opportunity to debate the subject of genetic modification. That debate has taken place, so the petition is on the agenda.

Members have received a briefing that outlines the legal advice on the scope for action. In light of that information, does the committee want to offer any advice to the Transport and the Environment Committee on the petition? It should be noted that, if the committee wants to question the Parliament's legal advisers, that should be done in private.

Lewis Macdonald: I read the legal advice with interest; it confirms the widespread view that there is limited discretion in these matters for both the UK Government and the Scottish Executive. We must start with the decision that the Parliament arrived at on 23 March, on the motion with which members will be familiar. That motion acknowledged the public concerns over GM foods, supported the Executive's precautionary approach and the regulatory regime that has been put in place, and recognised the excellence of the Scottish biotechnology industry. Those are the key points of the motion on which the Parliament decided.

The situation has changed a little since that debate, because of the revelation that there has been an accidental release of some GM seed across the UK, not just in Scotland, by a north American supplier. We may want to reflect on that when coming to any conclusions. The Friends of the Earth petition is in two parts. Part 1 deals with "the release of GM crops into the environment by way of trials or commercial planting".

Given the decision that the Parliament arrived at in March, and the legal advice that we have before us, there is not much to be gained from detailed discussion of that first part. Part 2, which deals with possible ways of monitoring the situation, is probably the part on which our debate should focus.

The Convener: Are there any other comments?

Richard Lochhead: I am sympathetic towards the petition. We must talk about the recent developments before we address the petition. A field trial has gone ahead, of which we are all aware, and on which there was a debate in Parliament. The fact that there are now crops in Scotland that have been contaminated by GM seeds—albeit accidentally—makes a mockery of that field trial, especially if the crops that have been contaminated continue to exist.

This is a big issue in Scotland. On the one hand, the Executive is saying that we must go ahead with that field trial, to check whether GM crops are safe; on the other hand, fields have already been contaminated by GM seeds. The Parliament should address that, and the committee should also be concerned. The Executive's policy will be left in a mess if the contaminated fields are not destroyed.

As the briefing note indicates, several options are open to the committee. One option is for the Parliament to launch an investigation into GM crops, through the Rural Affairs Committee or through a joint inquiry by two committees of the Parliament. We cannot sweep aside a petition on GM foods, given what has happened.

Mr Rumbles: I commend Lewis Macdonald on his initiative and support the points that he made. The legal advice is clear, and Richard Lochhead has gone off-beam with his comments. The Executive's policies have not been kiboshed at all. The problem lies at Westminster, as this is not a devolved matter. From the legal advice, it is clear that part 1 of the petition is not within the competence of the Parliament. The advice says:

"The Scottish Ministers and the Scottish Parliament must comply with Community law."

Therefore, part 1 of the petition is inappropriate, and we should not respond to it. As Lewis Macdonald suggested, we should focus our debate on part 2 of the petition and not draw it further than the petition that is before us. The agenda item is the petition, not any other issues that Richard Lochhead might want to raise.

Richard Lochhead: As Lewis Macdonald said, there have been developments since the petition was received; we cannot divorce those developments from the petition.

Mr Rumbles: We need to consider the petition that is before us.

Irene McGugan: The facts must also come into our debate. One of those facts is that the precautions that are being taken are not regarded as adequate. From the experience in Canada,

there is now evidence to show that the safety distances that have been outlined are not adequate.

There is also the outstanding issue of liability, which is not mentioned in the petition but which is pertinent. The livelihoods of beekeepers—who have been contacting everybody—and organic farmers are at risk. They do not see the Parliament taking any positive action to safeguard their livelihoods or to give them any guidance about who is ultimately responsible. Should their produce become contaminated and unable to be allowed into the food chain, who is responsible? Where do they stand? Those are issues and questions that it is incumbent on us at least to address in any way that we can.

Mr Rumbles: The Executive has made it quite clear that the precautionary principle is paramount, and there are safeguards for the trials. The one trial that is taking place in Scotland is part of a much wider UK trial and is therefore a UK issue.

The petition's first sentence shows that it has been bypassed by events; it reads:

"We the undersigned declare that there should be no release of GM crops into the Scottish environment".

Although we may want to broaden out our discussion, the petition is no longer relevant.

Richard Lochhead: Genetic modification is a massive issue in the country right now, and at some point the Parliament must bite the bullet. We have had a debate in the Parliament; that is fair enough. However, no comprehensive investigation of the technology has been undertaken by the Parliament.

Mr Rumbles: This is not a devolved issue.

Richard Lochhead: But it is a matter for the Parliament. As the legal briefing indicates, there are options open to the Scottish Parliament. We cannot ignore that. The committee should decide what options are available to it to make progress on the situation. If we recognise that this is a major issue, we should ask for it to be investigated by the Parliament.

Cathy Peattie: It is always difficult to decide how to move forward, when we know in our hearts what should be done. It is fair to say that, through no fault of the Executive, we have moved on. What has happened has happened, and it has been acknowledged that a mistake has been made. Having said that, I think that an inquiry of some kind might make sense. I would be interested to hear what the Minister for Rural Affairs has to say about the matter; we should invite him to discuss it with us.

Richard Lochhead is right to say that people are concerned about, and interested in, the whole

issue of GM crops, but it is difficult to consider the first part of the petition when things have moved on. That is the reality of the world that we are living in. As someone who was not in favour of the experiments that took place, my argument has moved on too. In a sense, we have had no control over the accident that has happened.

11:30

Dr Murray: We want to guard against using every issue that comes up in Parliament as an opportunity to debate the constitution and the devolved settlement. I agree with Mike Rumbles and Lewis Macdonald that the Scottish Parliament's powers are inhibited in relation to the first point of the petition. However, as others have said, an advisory process could be established.

The issue that has just arisen is not to do with the Scottish Executive or the trailing. It is to do with contamination of commercial crops. It appears that some action can be taken, because the GM component is likely to be sterile in any case, so action needs to be taken not now but later in the year, when the seeds that might carry the gene can be destroyed. A lot of good could be done by establishing an advisory body that could cut through the misinformation that surrounds this area. Organic farmers, whose livelihoods might be affected, have every right to produce organic products safe in the knowledge that their crop will not be contaminated, and people have every right to consume food with the knowledge that it does not contain genetically modified organisms. An advisory body could give information to those people and make a valuable contribution to the debate.

The Convener: Members of the committee seem to be broadly of the opinion that the first point of the petition has in effect become irrelevant.

Lewis Macdonald: The petition has been overtaken by events, rather than becoming irrelevant. The Parliament has taken a view of the general point addressed by the first demand of the petition and since then a commercial company has released GMOs into the environment. That means that the need for field trials is, if anything, greater than when Parliament took its decision. Once the technology exists, one cannot set up a boundary somewhere and say, "This shall not pass." We need to know what effect GM crops will have.

Mr Rumbles: The petition has not just been overtaken by events. The legal advice to us is absolutely clear: we have no locus in the first part of the petition. The legal briefing states:

"The release into the environment of GMOs is a field regulated by Community Law . . . Scottish Ministers and the Scottish Parliament must comply with Community law."

We have no locus in the first part of the petition and it is therefore irrelevant in terms of our powers. We could not accept that demand even if we wanted to.

The Convener: Do we accept that the issue addressed in part 1 of the petition has been overtaken by events and that the committee will not take a position on that point?

Richard Lochhead: I would like to add that the committee's response should be relevant to the whole petition. We should not give separate responses to points 1 and 2.

The Convener: It is difficult for us to respond to point 1 in the circumstances.

Lewis Macdonald: If we are to respond to point 1, we should respond in the terms that we have described.

Mr Rumbles: The legal advice on section 1 says:

"Accordingly the proposed course of action . . . would be outwith the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament."

We have no locus in this matter; it is as simple as that.

The Convener: Do we agree not to take a position on item 1 of the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Part 2 of the petition leaves us some options to consider. Having listened to the committee's views on part 2 and on the on-going events that have become relevant to the petition, I suggest that we take further advice. I would like to hear the views of the minister and some of his senior advisers on this issue before considering it in greater detail.

Lewis Macdonald: I agree. Is there a time constraint on the response that we should make to the Transport and the Environment Committee, or can we take our own evidence first?

Richard Lochhead: At some point, we must bite the bullet. This is a huge scientific, health and moral issue in Scotland, and the Parliament has competence over a number of related matters. We cannot keep avoiding the issue. The only way forward is for the Parliament to undertake an inquiry into GM technology. As part of that inquiry, we could hear evidence from the relevant ministers. I am not saying that the inquiry should be conducted by this committee; it might be a joint inquiry with the Health and Community Care Committee. That is certainly an option that we should explore.

Mr Rumbles: Phrases such as "We cannot keep avoiding the issue" do not do the Parliament any good. I hope that Richard Lochhead recognises

that we had a major debate on the whole issue of GM crops not so long ago. I would not call that avoiding the issue.

Richard Lochhead: I think that it is an insult to the Parliament to say that that debate was a proper examination of the issue. One of the arguments used against the Executive motion was the fact that MSPs, and others in Scotland, do not feel fully informed about the issue. That is why the motion was opposed.

Mr Rumbles: It is not proper to argue that we keep avoiding the issue, because the Parliament has just had a full debate on it.

Richard Lochhead: There has been no investigation or proper analysis of the issue.

Mr Rumbles: That is what we are trying to do now. We are not avoiding the issue.

Rhoda Grant: I have concerns and I agree that we need to know more. I suggest that, as Lewis said, we should invite the minister and/or scientific advisers to give evidence. We could launch an inquiry—I do not oppose that idea—but we must be more informed about how to progress.

The Convener: There would be benefit in moving quickly to invite the minister and relevant scientific advisers to address us on the issues mentioned in part 2 of the petition and on the choices that we could make. We might also want to discuss some of the practical issues raised by more recent events. I assume that those same scientific advisers would be qualified to advise us about that. We could arrange that at the earliest possible opportunity, to inform the continuing debate in this committee, in the Parliament and in the country.

Lewis Macdonald: I agree. I was disappointed by Richard Lochhead's comments, which seemed to divide the committee, although we clearly share common concerns. To try to treat this as a party political issue about devolution or independence seems a waste of an opportunity to reach a common view and move forward as a committee.

Richard Lochhead: That is cheeky.

Lewis Macdonald: I hate to say it, but this has happened before. It would be useful to take evidence, particularly from the Minister for Rural Affairs, on those aspects of the GM issue that impact on the countryside. The lead minister on GMOs is the Minister for Health and Community Care, but I have heard no evidence that the GMOs in the field trials in Aberdeenshire are in any way doubtful in terms of food safety. I understand that they would not be in the field trials if they had not satisfied that test. We must recognise that health is the lead department, but that there is a rural affairs angle. Before we respond to the Transport and the Environment Committee, it would be

useful to invite the minister to address us.

Richard Lochhead: I could be mischievous and say that the Executive parties were ganging up on me by saying that the issue is party political. Although I am happy to accept that we should invite the minister to give evidence, the session should be part of a constitutional inquiry, not for us to find out whether we should have an inquiry. This issue merits a proper parliamentary inquiry.

The Convener: Hypothetically, the committee could suggest that the Parliament should investigate the issue. However, we should also consider whether there should be an independent inquiry instead. The second section of the petition raises issues on which we are not currently qualified to judge.

Mr Rumbles: What we all need is more information. That is the first step. The convener's suggestion to call the Minister for Rural Affairs to come before us and give us that information before we do anything is sensible.

Richard Lochhead: That is what an inquiry is all about.

Mr Rumbles: This is not an inquiry.

Cathy Peattie: I agree with Mike Rumbles. I do not take a party line on this matter, because I feel very strongly about GM foods. I want to hear the minister first, and then discuss how we move forward.

Dr Murray: Furthermore, given the committee's current work load, we are hardly in a position to take on yet another full-scale inquiry. The convener's suggestion would at least give us the opportunity to ask the minister some preliminary questions and then decide whether we wanted to proceed with an inquiry.

The Convener: Does the committee agree that I should write to the Minister for Rural Affairs, inviting him and appropriate scientific advisers to come before the committee at the earliest possible convenience to discuss the issues raised in part 2 of the petition and other issues that might be raised about recent events concerning GM crops?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We shall move on to the next petition, PE138, which has been passed on to the committee by the Public Petitions Committee. The petition calls for the Scotch Quality Beef and Lamb Association to be granted independent status under the Agriculture Act 1967. If the committee feels that the question is justified, we could obtain a briefing from the Scottish Executive on the work of SQBLA, which no longer exists under the name in the petition.

Richard Lochhead: I have a practical suggestion. Two weeks ago, Alex Fergusson and I

met Andrew Wood, the Scottish Beef Council and the National Sheep Association to discuss a topic that was directly related to the substance of the petition, although we did not discuss the petition itself. Alex Fergusson and I were the only two MSPs who turned up at that open meeting—

Dr Murray: Some of us had committee meetings, which is why we were not there.

Richard Lochhead: I am just saying that it was an open meeting and that we were not the only MSPs who were invited.

The Convener: I was invited myself; however, health problems prevented my attendance.

Richard Lochhead: As a result of that meeting, Alex and I wrote to the new body, Quality Meat Scotland, outlining some of the concerns that were expressed about representation on the new body, its title and the levies raised in Scotland by the Meat and Livestock Commission. We also requested a meeting with Ross Finnie, which is scheduled for June. If the committee thought it worth while, we could report back after the meeting, given that it will address the same issue as this petition.

Dr Murray: My suggestion was not going to be terribly different. Given our work load, perhaps we should ask for a written response from the minister and the National Farmers Union to the points made in the petition.

The Convener: We could certainly take this opportunity to invite written responses and take advantage of the meeting that Richard Lochhead mentioned by having committee members report back. We could conveniently fit that report in on 27 June. Would that provide an adequate time scale to solicit responses and consider the matter further?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Does the committee agree to appoint Richard Lochhead and Alex Fergusson as reporters on the subject and ask them to report back to us on 27 June?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The final petition is PE113 from the Campaign for the Reinstatement of the Borders Railway. I am delighted to invite Ian Jenkins to the table to speak to the petition.

When we discussed this petition on 2 May, the committee asked me to write to the Presiding Officer to seek a debate in the chamber on this subject. It seems likely that the debate will be held on 1 June and, as we have requested the debate, committee members have to consider how to approach the issue. However, from communication that I have received, I understand that there are concerns that 1 June is too early for

the debate to take place. Although I am delighted to take comments from any member of the committee, I am keen to hear what Ian Jenkins has to say as well.

11:45

Dr Murray: As you know, I am supportive of the campaign to reinstate the Borders railway and am very pleased that the Rural Affairs Committee and the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee supported the petition. Although I am very happy that we have been given time to have a debate, I am not so happy about the choice of 1 June. First, very little background material is currently available, which puts a lot of pressure on the campaign managers to get paperwork to us in a short period of time. I believe that one of them is out of the country, which makes things even more difficult. Secondly, the petition, which was signed by something like 17,000 people in the Borders, is about a railway between the Borders and Edinburgh. It will be difficult for those people to attend a debate in Glasgow—where the public gallery is rather small—which means that Glasgow is probably not the most appropriate place for the debate. It might be better and more convenient for the campaign if the debate happened later in the year, perhaps after the summer recess.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Etrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Thank you for allowing me to speak today. The Borders railway will be crucial to the Borders economy and will also benefit Edinburgh and Midlothian with access to a new job market and new residential opportunities. It would be a flagship project for the whole of rural Scotland and it would be tremendous if this committee were to back it. A working party has been set up that includes many interested parties, such as Borders Council, Midlothian Council and the City of Edinburgh Council. At its most recent meeting, the working party decided to appoint a project manager and set up management procedure to progress the issue. It was also felt that September or early October would be the ideal time to have this debate. Obviously, we want the whole Parliament to endorse the project. If such endorsement is given on 1 June, that is fine, but we would prefer September. Elaine Murray's comments about access to the Parliament are also important.

Lewis Macdonald: Unfortunately, I was not at the meeting at which the committee endorsed the petition and, as a result, I am seeking some clarification. According to the briefing note that we have received, the petition was initially brought to the attention of the Transport and the Environment Committee and the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee and I am slightly surprised that the petition has been offered to this

committee for debate. Obviously, as local members, Ian Jenkins and Elaine Murray will welcome that. However, given that this is specifically a transport matter, I wonder whether it is appropriate for this committee to debate the subject. There are a number of campaigns, not least the Campaign for Rail Enhancement Aberdeen to Edinburgh, of which I have been a long-standing supporter.

The Convener: Is that a vested interest?

Lewis Macdonald: I am sure that the Transport and the Environment Committee will be looking at all of those. I am slightly surprised that after we looked at the subject of the petition and said that it was a good idea, the matter did not go back to the Transport and the Environment Committee to be raised in Parliament. I would be interested in your comments.

The Convener: It would be appropriate to ask Richard Davies to go over the circumstances that resulted in this request being made. It would be fair to say that, having been asked by the Transport and the Environment Committee to give an opinion on the petition, this committee decided that it backed the principles in the petition, and it was suggested that I write to the Presiding Officer suggesting that time be given to debate the issue in the chamber. It has transpired that that time, for whatever reason, has been allocated from committee chamber time.

Mr Rumbles: It is up to whichever committee to take whatever action it feels is appropriate. At our meeting, we felt that we wanted to help progress this matter by raising it in Parliament. That is why we asked the convener to take the action that he did; it was appropriate action for a rural affairs committee to take.

Lewis Macdonald: I do not doubt that.

The Convener: It is a strange set of circumstances that has led to the Rural Affairs Committee in effect sponsoring the time that is required to debate this matter. By the same token, there is no reason why that should not happen.

Ian Jenkins: The other day in Glasgow, the issue of the Borders rail link was raised at question time. I pointed out that this was an occasion for joined-up thinking. We should not be too uptight about saying, "This is a parcel for the Rural Affairs Committee." I realise that time has to be parcelled, but this subject resonates across the committees of this Parliament. We have an ideal opportunity to debate the matter, and I would not want to miss it, but the ideal time to do so might be in September.

The Convener: We need first to consider whether it is possible for us to propose this debate for 1 June. To be honest, it would be possible for

us to go ahead on 1 June. We have the interested people and parties to sustain the debate. The next consideration is whether it would be appropriate for us to go ahead with the debate on 1 June. We need to consider our position and take an early opportunity to communicate the views of the committee to the Presiding Officer.

Rhoda Grant: I do not want to sound negative, but my concern is that we are supporting the debate, as Lewis mentioned. I did not understand that it would be supported using our committee time. My concern is the one that I expressed about our previous debate. The most important topic that we are working on is our inquiry on unemployment in rural areas. I am a wee bit concerned that, if we have a debate soon, it might prohibit us from having the debate that we want to have on changing employment patterns.

Richard Lochhead: That occurred to me, but my understanding is that the Parliamentary Bureau supplies days for committees, rather than matching the days to requirements. Therefore, any debate that we have will not count in any sort of quota. It would not matter if the debate was initiated by the Rural Affairs Committee. However, is there potential for a jointly sponsored debate? Is that constitutionally acceptable?

Richard Davies (Clerk Team Leader): The Public Petitions Committee sent this petition to the Transport and the Environment Committee to take the lead role. The Transport and the Environment Committee was awaiting views from other committees. I understand that the Transport and the Environment Committee will not have had a chance to discuss this matter before 1 June, so it would not be able to contribute to the debate.

Mr Rumbles: I was present at the committee of conveners meeting when this was discussed. The process is that bids from committees go to the committee of conveners, because the Parliamentary Bureau liaises with the committee of conveners about which committee's debates should take place. Let me put it this way—there was not an overwhelmingly positive response from the committee of conveners, because the reports from committees are not ready yet. It is too early in the parliamentary process.

I imagine that, when we come back in September, we will have a flood of committees wanting to use the available slots. We should be aware that we can have this debate on the Borders railway while there is no great competition for the slot. In fact, I think that Parliament would be happy to have the debate. However, if we delay until after the recess we have to remember that you pay your money, you take your choice.

Lewis Macdonald: Is another slot available between 1 June and 10 July? That would help. I

do not want to suggest that we should not support this issue but, as Rhoda said, once we get into September there will be many competing priorities. If we said to the Parliamentary Bureau that we did not want to have the debate on 1 June, but we did want it at a future date, is there any indication what the bureau's response would be?

Mr Rumbles: We would take our chances with other committees.

Dr Murray: Mike's point is an important one. It might be difficult to postpone the debate until September if there are likely to be many other committee reports coming out at that time, which would put pressure on the time available for committee business in Parliament. Would the Executive be prepared to swap a slot and bring something else forward on 1 June and let us have its slot the following week?

The Convener: At this point we must remember that it may be necessary for the debate to go ahead. I should write immediately to the Presiding Officer indicating the reservations that have been expressed by a number of members over the proposed timing of the debate and expressing the desire of a number of members to have the debate take place later in the year.

Mr Rumbles: And that the debate should take place in Edinburgh.

The Convener: Yes.

Ian Jenkins: But we would not want to miss getting the endorsement of Parliament.

The Convener: Are there any other comments?

Rhoda Grant: Could the debate take place before the recess, rather than later in the year? I am worried because we have a priority, which we should be debating after the recess. I do not want to be petty, but I feel strongly about it.

Richard Davies: I cannot be certain, but my understanding is that a slot is available on 1 June for committee-led business. I do not believe that any slots are available after that date but before the summer recess. If that is the case, the debate would have to wait until September.

Dr Murray: Who dictates when these debates happen?

Richard Davies: The Parliamentary Bureau.

Dr Murray: Is the Parliamentary Bureau so inflexible that it would not rearrange the programme?

Mr Rumbles: The decision is made on the advice of the committee of conveners, although the final decision is made by the Parliamentary Bureau.

The Convener: At the moment there is little that we can do, other than write to the Presiding Officer on the basis that I described a moment ago, and prepare ourselves for a debate at short notice if necessary.

Subordinate Legislation

The Convener: Item 4 on the agenda is subordinate legislation. Before us today is statutory instrument 2000/1113, the Scotland Act 1998 (Cross Border Public Authorities) (British Wool Marketing Board) Order 2000. As a statutory instrument covering a cross-border public authority, the SI has been laid before the Scottish Parliament and Westminster. A note from the Scottish Executive is attached with the SI, and a note from the clerks. No officials have been asked to attend to speak to this SI. The last page of the Executive's note sums up the situation. The order resolves a doubt about how functions should be exercised; it determines that they should be exercised by UK ministers acting with the consent of Scottish ministers, rather than by ministers acting jointly. Are there any comments on this order and the accompanying notes?

Lewis Macdonald: It is straightforward.

The Convener: If we consider it to be so, is the committee content with the order?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Are we agreed that no recommendation be made to the Parliament?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That takes us to item 5 on the agenda. I remind members that we agreed that we would take this item in private.

12:00

Meeting continued in private until 12:10.

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