

# **RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 12 February 2002  
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

£5.00

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## RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

6<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2002, Session 1

### CONVENER

\*Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con)

### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)

### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
\*Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP)  
\*Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
\*Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab)  
\*John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)  
Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab)  
\*Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)  
\*Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)  
\*Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)

\*attended

### WITNESSES

Neil Kilpatrick (Quality Meat Scotland)  
Alasdair Muir (Quality Meat Scotland)  
Andrew Stuart Wood

### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Richard Davies

### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mark Brough

### ASSISTANT CLERK

Jake Thomas

### LOCATION

Committee Room 1



## Scottish Parliament

### Rural Development Committee

*Tuesday 12 February 2002*

*(Afternoon)*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:30*]

### Item in Private

**The Convener (Alex Fergusson):** We now begin our formal meeting. As I have to do at the start of every meeting, I ask everyone to check that their mobile phones are turned off.

I have received no apologies today, and I think that Sylvia Jackson will be joining us later on. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry. We have an apology from Irene Oldfather.

Item 1 on the agenda is for the committee to decide whether to take item 8 in private. Item 8 is a discussion on appointing an adviser to the committee in connection with the next budget process. As we will be discussing individuals and names, do members agree to hold that item in private?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Petitions

### Scotch Quality Beef and Lamb Association (PE138)

**The Convener:** The committee will consider petition PE138, in the name of Andrew Stuart Wood, on the constitution of the Scotch Quality Beef and Lamb Association. We will take evidence from Neil Kilpatrick and Alasdair Muir from Quality Meat Scotland and, after that, from Andrew Stuart Wood. I thank all the witnesses for giving up their time to attend the meeting. I shall invite both sides to make a brief opening statement before we ask questions, beginning with the representatives from Quality Meat Scotland. We shall then ask all the witnesses to withdraw while the committee determines what to do with the petition. I am well aware that the petition has been around for some time. Foot-and-mouth disease was not the least of the reasons for that.

**Neil Kilpatrick (Quality Meat Scotland):** I shall make a brief opening statement and then some very brief comments on the petition.

Quality Meat Scotland is the industry-funded body charged with developing quality assurance standards and supporting red meat. The board is representative of the industry and, crucially, of the consumer. Its members include representatives of each part of the gate-to-plate chain, including farmers, processors, wholesalers, auctioneers and retailers. The board also includes representatives from the Meat and Livestock Commission, who are technical and commercial experts.

Our business priorities ensure that our work is focused and that it makes a real impact. We exist to promote and provide a well-regulated, world-class quality assurance scheme with tangible trade and consumer benefit, to promote Specially Selected Scotch as the consumer-facing brand of Scotch beef, lamb and pork, and to be a catalyst to encourage best practice, promoting co-operation through the supply chain and providing insightful industry information.

In its first full year of operation, QMS has made a major impact during an extremely challenging period for the industry. The organisation played a major role during the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak, providing authoritative information and guidance and developing a major consumer confidence campaign designed to restore Scottish meat sales. Innovative campaigns designed to promote beef, lamb and pork were developed and implemented, and a great deal of work has gone into ensuring that Scotland's farm and quality assurance system continues to be admired throughout the world.

Priorities for the coming year include the completion of a major eating quality project and further integration of our quality assurance systems throughout the chain. To that end, we recently announced that hauliers have agreed a Specially Selected Scotch assurance framework. We also have a focused marketing programme and will maintain a positive and constructive working relationship with the Meat and Livestock Commission to ensure that we continue to benefit from its technical expertise and research.

I have some comments to make on the petition. We have had only 24 hours to view the current version of the petition. It is rather distorted and misleading and contains several serious inaccuracies. I will touch on a few of them.

QMS is not a private limited company—it is a company limited by guarantee. The directors of QMS were constitutionally elected. The process is not democratic in the sense that MSPs are elected by the public; the directors of QMS are nominated by the members of QMS—the National Farmers Union of Scotland, the Scottish Association of Meat Wholesalers and the MLC. The election was carried out entirely constitutionally. QMS is accountable to those members—they are, in effect, the shareholders of QMS. The managing director's appointment was made quickly and effectively—it took about two months.

The rise in membership is significant. We have increased QMS farm assurance membership in the past 18 months by 10 per cent and attracted a great deal of outside funding in relation to the levy funding that we receive. In the past year, QMS has added probably over £1 million extra funding to that in the Scotch Quality Beef and Lamb Association days. At least half of that has come from outside bodies, so we have been extremely active and extremely successful in that area.

One of the most important projects that we are running relates to eating quality. We have completed the whole of phase 1 of that project and are moving to phase 2. It is therefore simply untrue to say that we have done no research on improving eating quality.

I will pause there, as I do not want to go into any more detail, but there are a number of inaccuracies in the petition.

**The Convener:** If members refer to anything in the 20-minute informal presentation before the meeting, they should say what that was for the sake of the official report, which was not privy to the presentation.

**Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP):** How do the witnesses measure their organisation's success? Have measurements indicated that work has been successful?

**Alasdair Muir (Quality Meat Scotland):** Given that we are, in many respects, a trade association, we cannot simply measure the share of the market or growth. It could be said that success depends on from which side of the fence it is measured. If it is measured from the producers' side, success would mean getting a better price; however, if it is measured from the processors' side, perhaps success is getting a lower price out of the producers.

Are formal objectives and numbers put down to improve the total red meat industry? No. We set our own objectives. I am a marketing-oriented person. If we embark on an advertising campaign, we would expect awareness to increase by X per cent. I measure success in that way.

Do we measure success as crudely as by the price that meat attracts at the markets? I know that some people do. If the Scotch premium is X, everything is good; if it is higher than that, things are even better. I am not necessarily so basic in my approach. I measure our success by the awareness of, and demand for, Scotch meat. Can we create more demand for it? Can we satisfy that demand in the long term? Can we get information out there so that people can make measured decisions on which market they should penetrate? That is how we are doing it.

We have not said that it is necessary to sell 507,000 tonnes, or whatever the figure is, next year and that if that is not achieved we will have failed. The objective is to give clear direction to where the industry is going. We had to establish where we were coming from and where we were going. I am used to selling product; you buy for £10 and sell for £20. I do not have that luxury in the role that we have as QMS.

Most people who we are currently dealing with will say that we have focused a lot of attention—post foot-and-mouth disease, which was a major focusing of the mind—on what we have to do to get the best out of our Scottish beef, lamb and pork brands. We are achieving that. The eating quality project that will come through, although it will take 12 months, will also improve the situation. It will be a measurable benefit. You will be able to measure the quality.

How do we measure quality? We are examining ways of doing that by going to the consumer. It is the reaction of the consumers more than anything else that measures our success. If the consumers say that the quality is better and they want to buy Scotch, that is the most successful route that we can go down. I hope that everybody in the chain will benefit from that.

**Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab):** I want to explore a statement that was made in the supplementary submission by the

petitioner. He alleges that there has been

"No research done on improving eating quality as stated."

Mr Kilpatrick stated in his presentation that phase 1 has been completed and that QMS is now moving on to phase 2. How many phases are there in total and what does each phase consist of?

**Alasdair Muir:** Phase 1 is completion of the desk research that has gone into establishing the best practices that will go into achieving our aims. We have considered what methods other people are using, to establish the way to get the best out of our products. As part of that research we visited America, Australia and New Zealand to establish what they are doing and how they have improved their eating quality. We have investigated what we can learn from those processes, assessed all that information and built up a paper on it, which will now go out to tender.

We will invite different bodies to examine what would be the best way to apply those theories and, above all, practices to ensure that we get a better eating quality product out of Scotland for beef, lamb and pork. That will be done by working with various producers and abattoir groups in Scotland. We will pilot the process through them. The end of it all is that the meat will be sensory tested. Shear testing and so on will be done through consumer panelling. The consumers will dictate decisions by saying, "We like that; we do not like this." We will know why they like something because we will have measured all the factors that have gone into it.

We are about to embark on that process. The tendering documents should be going out as we speak. We must get that right in relation to all the legislation, because there are state aid rules and so on in Europe. That is to do with the Scottish Executive and the way that this has been funded. Phase 1, which is the desk research, has been completed. The documentation that has been produced will then go to the various tendering companies. They will start to apply the various things that we want to do and I hope that at the end of it all we will come back saying, if you do this you get the best eating beef, lamb or pork.

**Elaine Smith:** Is phase 2 the final phase?

**Alasdair Muir:** Yes. To be honest, we did not want it to be phased, but it had to be phased to accommodate state aid rules.

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP):** As a committed carnivore and dedicated consumer of Scottish beef and lamb in huge quantities, I would like to ask you a question.

To be serious, the past year has been dreadful. I welcome attempts to promote confidence in Scottish produce. I imagine that we all do. I want

to ask about the proportion of your total funding that goes towards reassuring the public and promoting confidence in Scottish beef and lamb. Am I right in saying that your total budget, including a levy of £3.76 million and some grant funding from Government bodies, is about £4 million and that more than £2 million of that is sent southwards to the Meat and Livestock Commission, which means that it is not being used to promote Scottish meat?

14:45

**Neil Kilpatrick:** I will make just a minor correction to that. We do not receive the money and send it back; the levies are collected by the MLC. We then have to put a business plan in front of the MLC and agree what funding it will give us for each year. Last year, we made a big pitch for more promotional funding. We were able to achieve that. We actually got more promotional funding from the MLC than was raised in the promotional levy. That was probably more because of the cull than anything else. We were successful last year on promotional funding.

We got much less back on the general levy. You are right: the majority of that money remains with the MLC. Whether that is good value for money depends on how we regard it. Some of what the MLC does is excellent: it has very good technical information; it has good consumer information, although that is United Kingdom rather than Scottish information; and it has a number of worthwhile research projects.

We are moving into a new era, helped by the Scottish Executive's negotiations with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We expect that we will negotiate with the MLC in a slightly different way in future and will buy back from it the retained core services that are particularly important and which we cannot do, or which it would not be worth doing, ourselves. That is the way forward.

We will examine the core services, identify those that are extremely valuable to Scotland and ensure that we keep them and a good working relationship with the MLC in those areas. After that, I expect that we will have the rest of the general levy to dispose of in appropriate ways.

**Fergus Ewing:** I appreciate the comments that you made in your answer. Of the total levy in Scotland, which was £3.76 million, £1.75 million was returned to QMS. So £2 million stays with the MLC.

**Neil Kilpatrick:** That is correct.

**Fergus Ewing:** Will you specify how much of that money has been spent on promoting Scottish meat?

**Alasdair Muir:** The majority of that has been spent on general levy activities.

**Fergus Ewing:** I want a figure. How much?

**Alasdair Muir:** Practically none of it was spent on promotion.

**Neil Kilpatrick:** It is not promotional money.

**Alasdair Muir:** It has been used more on the general levy activities, which includes the research and development about which you are talking. It could be health and education work; it could be work on the economic information that comes back to us from exports. That is what that money is applied to. I am trying to follow your question.

**Fergus Ewing:** So nothing comes back directly. It comes back in research, scientific and other services that the MLC provides. What is the total of the money that you have to spend and how much is spent on promotion of Scottish beef?

**Alasdair Muir:** Beef in particular?

**Fergus Ewing:** I am sorry; I meant to say meat.

**Alasdair Muir:** We spent about £1.7 million on promotion in the present fiscal year.

**Fergus Ewing:** That is good. I thought that the advert was quite effective, although there were hints of controversy. I will not go into those.

**Alasdair Muir:** That was unfortunate.

**Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I am a hill farmer and an MSP for the Highlands and Islands, which produces a lot of beef and lamb. Your predecessor organisation was the Scotch Quality Beef and Lamb Association. It promoted those meats. QMS also takes in pork. Are we just diluting the amount of money that is available to spend on promoting lamb and beef? Is it a good idea to combine the promotion of pork with that of beef and lamb? After all, pork is sold much more like poultry is.

**Alasdair Muir:** It is sacrosanct that the budgets for pork, lamb and beef are kept separate. There is not much cross-fertilisation. I would not take pork moneys and put them towards a lamb advertising campaign.

We are able to make immediate efficiencies in people management—our marketing manager might deal with both pork and lamb, or a technical person might be able to work on both.

I agree that pork could be perceived as a commodity. It is interesting to note that we have taken Scottish pork down the healthy eating route, rather than talking about the Scottish climate, hills or environment. That approach has been effective in terms of sales.

Funnily enough, I do not think that pork is

necessarily a competitor of lamb in the way that beef is; I think that it probably competes more with chicken than with anything else. Hence our advertising and marketing promotion has focused on quick and ready meals: the quick way to eat pork and the healthy benefits of eating pork. We treat it almost as if it were a white meat. So far, there is no proven conflict whatsoever. If anything, the campaign has enhanced the situation for everyone.

We have a pretty efficient team that has managed to cover all species. I should add that it is normal business practice—whether in the drinks industry or in other sectors—to have competing brands in your portfolio. All you do is manage the brands as a category. For example, we talk to the pork buyer, manage the pork campaign and then we move on to lamb. I am not talking about Scotch meat as a whole—I am talking about category management. With modern marketing techniques and the way retailers and processors look at the product, we are able to keep our campaigns quite well defined.

**Mr McGrigor:** You do not perceive a conflict of interests for your directors over the type of meat you promote.

**Alasdair Muir:** As far as I can gather, such a conflict of interests does not exist.

**Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP):** In the past couple of the days, some sections of the media have suggested that you are too successful and that, as a consequence, meat is being imported to be branded as Scotch meat. Are the definitions that cover whether meat can be called Scotch meat sufficiently rigorous? What are you doing to protect the brand by preventing an undue influx of meat that has been prepared elsewhere?

**Neil Kilpatrick:** The discussions on the Scottish-Scotch issue will probably continue for some time. The reality of the situation is that 95 per cent of animals that are destined to become Scotch beef are born on Scottish farms. The practice of bringing animals across the border and finishing them in Scotland is old and well established. Indeed, we would argue vigorously that that practice adds value. Our 90-day rule says that no meat can be sold as Scotch meat unless the animal has spent a minimum of 90 days in Scotland. In fact, the average in respect of finishing is probably much closer to six months.

The word “Scotch” is protected by European protected geographical indicator status, which is defined clearly in European law by the 90-day rule. Anything that has been in Scotland for a minimum of 90 days can be sold as Scotch meat. Our operation is entirely correct in the way in which it deals with that European legislation.



I stress that everything that is sold as Scotch meat has gone through the complete quality assurance process, irrespective of whether the animals have been born in Scotland or simply raised in Scotland in the way that I described. To us, that essential quality assurance underpins marketing. If we do not get the quality assurance standard right, we will not get the marketing right.

**The Convener:** I am not absolutely sure that that line of questioning relates to the petition, although it is a perfectly relevant question in the context of recent publicity. However, we should be discussing the petition.

**Stewart Stevenson:** I am in your hands, convener.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** I come back to the company's constitution. You said that QMS was set up by the three companies that elect members of the board. What is your relationship with producers and other members who obtain the quality assurance stamp? Do they buy your service at a cost? Do they have any say in how the company is run?

**Neil Kilpatrick:** The two Scottish stakeholders, the National Farmers Union of Scotland and the Scottish Association of Meat Wholesalers, are members of QMS. Each organisation has individual members. We regard our obligation to our stakeholders as being to all the individual members of those bodies. We consider all farmers, whether or not they are in the NFUS, and all meat wholesalers to be stakeholders. We also consider everyone—right through from the auctioneers, the finishers and the people who are involved in the process of cutting and packing meat to the retailers—to be part of the red meat industry. Our role is to serve the Scottish red meat industry. Anybody who has a stake in the Scottish red meat industry is a stakeholder.

**Rhoda Grant:** How would stakeholders who are not members of the NFUS put that across? Would they be consulted on the direction that the company goes in, or is it a simple question of supply and demand, whereby they would opt out of the scheme if they were not happy with the way in which the company was going? Would that be how they would show that they were not happy?

**Neil Kilpatrick:** When we hold meetings round the country, we try to ensure that the meetings are open meetings. Even if we were to use an NFUS meeting occasion, we would insist on the meeting being open, so that anybody could come. We welcome anybody to write to us, to express an opinion to us or to ask questions of us, whether or not they are in the NFUS or the SAMW. The coverage of membership through those bodies is good, but it is not 100 per cent, and we will always listen to anybody outside those bodies.

A number of technical advisory committees have been set up in the industry. They report to the QMS board. There is a committee for beef and lamb and a committee for pork. As a result of the wide representation on those committees, we receive technical and general opinion.

**The Convener:** Richard Lochhead started, so I will let him finish—briefly.

**Richard Lochhead:** Fergus Ewing spoke about the budget that you allocate to promoting meat. You said that the figure was £1.7 million. How does that compare with other small nations that that undertake similar promotional activity, for example, Ireland with beef and Denmark with pigmeat? How much do those countries spend on promoting their products?

**Alasdair Muir:** I would be lying if I said that I could give you an exact figure off the top of my head.

**Richard Lochhead:** You must have a rough idea.

**Alasdair Muir:** I could not even give you a rough figure. We definitely spend substantially less than is spent in Ireland and I am almost certain that we spend substantially less on pork than in Denmark. In New Zealand, less money is available for promotion in the domestic market. However, the export market is by far their largest market. Even for the promotion throughout the world of their product, they have only about 8 or 9 million New Zealand dollars. In New Zealand, a lot more work is done on the scientific and research side. Dividing that figure by three gives just over £2 million, which is on a par with the amount that we spend.

In comparison to other bodies, particularly the Irish body, we spend substantially less. I am not sure exactly what the proportion is, but I would estimate that it is a third or perhaps a quarter of the promotional support funds that the Irish have.

**Richard Lochhead:** So they spend three times the amount that we spend.

**Alasdair Muir:** I suggest that that is the case, but as I do not have the exact figures, please do not hold me to that. I will find out and let you know.

**Richard Lochhead:** It is fair to say that we spend far less promoting our meat products than most comparable countries.

**Alasdair Muir:** I just said that, funnily enough, we probably do not spend far less than New Zealand does. In the bigger picture, we are a relatively small player. I always say that in any presentation that I make. Our output in Scotland is equivalent to about 1.3 per cent of European agricultural output. That does not mean that we are ineffectual. We are a niche proposition and we

must market ourselves accordingly.

Personally—given my single malt Scotch whisky marketing background—I enjoy a niche proposition, which involves taking small budgets and driving them as hard as possible. We are trying to do that. We will never have the enormous budgets that some other countries have. With a niche proposition, it is possible to work with limited budgets and to do a fairly effective job. We will never have mass television advertising around the world, or even around Great Britain, for that market. Everything has to be targeted and focused.

**The Convener:** Thank you, gentlemen. We will now take evidence from Andrew Stuart Wood, who has been waiting patiently to speak. I ask the representatives of Quality Meat Scotland to follow that example while we hear his evidence. At the end, both they and Andrew Stuart Wood will have an opportunity to make a brief statement.

Thank you, Andrew, for taking the time to appear before the committee. You submitted petition PE138 some time ago. After you have made a brief opening statement, I will open the floor to questions from members.

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** I cannot thank the committee enough for inviting me along today. Before I go any further—I may be at the wrong meeting—I should say that I do not recognise the company that has just been described as QMS. I have the certificate of incorporation of a private limited company. I ask Neil Kilpatrick and Alasdair Muir, do you represent company no 205664?

**The Convener:** I cannot allow questions from one witness to another.

15:00

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** I have to know where—

**The Convener:** Once you have made your points, we can draw out the information that you seek in questions. I am afraid that we cannot have a debate between witnesses.

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** This debate is about assurance and promotion. The committee's timing is impeccable. Everyone has been given time to put their case, which is excellent.

I am not here to seek more money or to moan about being kicked from pillar to post, as the industry has been. The case that I wish to present is one of free competition versus a cartel. Members must understand that, although farming has gone through difficult times—regardless of whom we blame for that—there are still great opportunities in the industry. Family farming units are consolidating. Their position is strong, through the will of women—women who have gone out and found extra work outwith their farm. Europe is

expanding and more people will demand higher standards and quality from our food. We must deliver that at a competitive price. We must push down all production costs, including the cost of assurance. However, we must not weaken our position on promotion.

We are totally opposed to having assurance and promotion amalgamated. Both those tools are vital to our industry and should work separately, although in parallel with each other. There must be an independent Scottish agricultural produce commission that is accountable to the Scottish Parliament—accountable to each member of the committee. That would release the qualities of competition that are severely lacking within the present QMS cartel, which is not accountable to anyone, not even Ross Finnie.

We seek an independent body that would be accountable for the use of public funds. Levies and all the money that goes towards promotion and assurance are public funds. QMS is a private limited company. In a letter dated 17 May 2000, Mr Kilpatrick stated:

“this board is not intended to be representative of all the many bodies who form part of the Scottish meat industry.”

There is a significant difference between a limited company such as QMS and a council or association.

That is not how Ross Finnie MSP described the situation to Alasdair Morgan MSP in a letter dated 8 November 1999. In the letter Ross Finnie refers to an announcement that he was planning to make at Crieff

“concerning the formation of a new Scottish Quality Meat Council.”

It is good to see that the minister and Quality Meat Scotland are working in harmony and that everyone knows what is happening.

As members know, we have circulated a short summary of how we see the situation. However, I want to say more on some of the issues that need beefing up. QMS is being challenged legally on the definition of its 90-day rule—Stewart Stevenson MSP made that point. The rule relates to the brand names “Scotch” and “Scottish”. QMS is also seeking information from members—or rather customers—about current stocking rates and the effects of foot-and-mouth disease, most of which information is obtainable through the ministry census.

Why is QMS going to the expense of requesting that information? Why did it not monitor the situation as it developed during the course of the foot-and-mouth outbreak? Why was the vice-chairman, Mr Biggar, who worked in the recovery team in the south-west of Scotland, unable to obtain information on stock numbers, what was

happening and who was replacing what with what? QMS reckoned that premium Scotch beef was eroded from 26p a kilogram to 10p a kilogram. The Specially Selected Scotch logo was at risk of permanent damage because companies such as Buccleuch Beef went it alone. Buccleuch Beef does not use the logo and none of its butchers uses the logo in any of their promotions.

I move on to assurance schemes. If those were operated within a competitive system, it would open up a whole new ball game. We are talking about companies competing with each other and offering the same standard of assurance laid down by the Scottish agricultural produce commission, but being enhanced by other product diversity. That would create built-in savings. We are talking about halving subscription for farmers and about farm insurance being reduced from 60 to 10 per cent, depending on the assured ranking of each farmer. We are talking about bank interest rates being reduced for the same farmers if they prove worthy of that ranking.

We are also talking about animal health status being built into the system. That has been omitted from what QMS is doing. The Government could help us in that area, because we are talking about environmental enhancement—animals are part of the environment. We are already losing veterinary surgeons in rural areas, because large-animal practices are not viable. If we care about our animals, let us incorporate animal health status into the system.

We ask that no more public funding disappears into QMS. We ask that an inquiry or review—whichever is cheaper or more convenient—is put in place and that a Scottish agricultural produce commission is set up. I am not talking about setting up a new quango; I am talking about altering what we have—the MLC. We should alter that to make it our own Scottish commission.

There must be honesty, credibility, accountability and, above all, transparency. We do not have that with the close relationship between the NFUS and QMS. Other points are made in the circular that was sent round. Should we fail to break that cartel, the competition will be extracted from Scotland. The Scottish product will be taken from Scotland and processed down south. That would put Scottish abattoirs at risk and further erode the credibility of the “specially selected Scottish” logo. It would call into question farmers who are NFUS members and have assured status—almost like masons and politicians.

That is what we are considering. I urge the Parliament to consider this seriously and have a review. Do not continue down the road. You will destroy what the SQBLA set out to achieve.

Thank you for your time.

**Stewart Stevenson:** That presentation was interesting. There was a lot in it, but I took from it one key issue, which I would like to confirm before asking a real question. You are essentially looking for quality assurance and marketing to be divided and to be the responsibility of different bodies. That is at the core of your argument.

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** That is correct.

**Stewart Stevenson:** We are simple souls here, and only two farmers and a crofter are in the room. Will you tell us the two strongest reasons—just two, so we can remember them—that support the separation of quality assurance from marketing? Will you give us two rock-solid reasons that we can lock away in our minds and remember?

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** Quality assurance and marketing are entirely different. Assurance is about evaluating the situation; it is a tool that can be developed in various ways. For example, the department could use it for biosecurity in that lots of people coming on to farms would not be required. There would be one-stop visits. An assured person would come on to the farm, completely evaluate it and count the stock. People from the department would not have to come on to the farm. All that would be required would be for the department to maintain its legal obligation to European commissioners by doing spot checks.

That could be taken further by building in different areas of added value. Inspecting the animals is only one part of what needs to be done. We also need to look at medicines. There is concern about the fact that the quantities of medicines that are used on farms are not recorded. We do not know the extent to which antibiotics are used on farms, nor what drenches are used. That whole area is very itty-bitty and we need to pull that altogether.

Bringing in commercial companies to do the promotion would make it competitive. Also, instead of promoting only meat, they could promote meat and ale and pastry. In that way, an advert would be subsidised by the pastry manufacturers and by the ale industry and would be far stronger. The product would then get more advertising time on television.

**Stewart Stevenson:** I want to close off with one more question. When the QMS officials respond, I expect that they may identify the extent to which QMS covers quality assurance as distinct from marketing. However, I want to put it to you that a separate body is already responsible for quality assurance. Is it unclear who is currently responsible for quality assurance? Is that one of the core things that you are saying?

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** No. Let me make it abundantly clear. A host of companies out there could provide assurance. Those companies are

not necessarily in Scotland, but there are such companies in Wales and in England. There is no shortage of assurance schemes that work.

Instead of doing the processing in Scotland, those companies could take the stock out of Scotland. Every animal that was born in Scotland has an animal passport that states where the animal was born. That will define whether the animal is Scottish, not the 90-day rule. I can assure you that the public will want to know the animal's source. They will want to know whether the animal has come from Scotland.

**Rhoda Grant:** You said that the same people who carry out farm inspections for the Scottish Executive environment and rural affairs department should be involved in quality assurance. My impression was that quality assurance meant that the quality was greater than the baseline. How could SEERAD officials, who ensure that farmers conform to legislation, carry out the quality assurance checks that go a bit beyond the baseline to enable farmers better to compete with other parts of the UK and with other European countries? Should we have more stringent regulation of all farms in Scotland to ensure that they come up to a higher standard?

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** No. We want freedom of choice so that people will be rewarded. Everybody likes to be rewarded. The bigger the effort that you put in, the bigger the reward that you should get. I was simply suggesting that we could also attach some savings to SEERAD's work. Instead of the ministry officials coming on to farms to do inspections, the inspections could be incorporated within the assurance scheme.

**Rhoda Grant:** I am still a wee bit at sea. If you are saying that the ministry should carry out assurance scheme checks—

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** Sorry, I am not saying that the ministry should carry out the checks. The plan is that the assurance team that would do the assessments would save the ministry officials from coming out. The team that is carrying out the assurance assessments could also be under contract to SEERAD to do some of the inspection work. The team could also be given the obligation to count the stock for the purposes of the sheep annual premium and suckler cow premium schemes. The exact numbers would then be known.

**Fergus Ewing:** You have raised many important issues, Andrew. I just wish that we could have spent as much time considering those as we have spent on a certain member's bill over the past two years. I mean that seriously. You have raised many issues of great concern that we would all want to see from different perspectives. Precisely what reforms do you wish to be introduced to the

quality assurance side and the promotion side? How exactly would you like those functions to be carried out? What is wrong with the current arrangements for carrying them out?

15:15

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** At the moment, some assurance companies are unable to operate in Scotland. Allowing them to come in would drive down prices and costs to the farmers because they would do things more competitively. It is as simple as that. If only one company is working in a set area, it sets the price and the speed at which assured schemes evolve. Competitors would drive that whole system forward. Everybody would want to stay ahead of the game. If you want Scotland just to drag along, that is fine—we will go along with that—but it will not do the industry any good.

We are fed up with people talking down the industry and saying, "Oh, they need another handout." We do not want any more handouts. We want the shackles to be taken off us so that we can get on with the job. Companies should be allowed to come in and help us to do that. We want the commercial promotional bodies that have the worldwide knowledge and that want a cut of the cake to push us forward.

If you want to limit yourselves, limit yourselves. If you want to get out and fight the big, bad world, let us do it. We can do it by opening up the markets, while keeping control of the public funds through the commission that must operate under your control. You are answerable to the people of Scotland—I presume. Am I right? I hope so. Please take these suggestions on board. Take some responsibility and take the matter forward.

**Fergus Ewing:** So you would put in place a Scottish agricultural produce commission to collect all levies?

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** That is correct.

**Fergus Ewing:** What would its relationship be with the Meat and Livestock Commission? Do you envisage a Scottish meat and livestock commission?

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** No. I do not want a meat and livestock commission. I want a produce commission that takes in the produce of Scotland. Let us go forward together. It was a great idea to include pigs in the commission's remit. But hang on a minute. We do not produce just pigs, lamb and beef—there is far more out there. We have quality assurance on cereals and fish. Let us get the whole show up and running together.

**Fergus Ewing:** Excuse me, but I am a slow questioner, as my colleagues will tell you. I think that I am beginning to understand. Is it your intention to have a produce commission that would

be in overall charge of promoting all Scottish agricultural produce?

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** It would be involved in deciding who undertakes the promotion. The commercial promoters would come up with ideas for promoting certain products.

**Fergus Ewing:** I presume that competition would then come from commercial advertising companies, which would submit proposals and tenders to the commission concerning the best way in which to promote our marvellous produce. Is that correct?

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** That is absolutely correct. Multiple bids should be attracted from different companies to raise the stakes.

**Fergus Ewing:** We have heard that around £2 million of the total funding does not find its way back to QMS, which receives £1.75 million. You have said that you do not want a bigger pot—you do not want more handouts. I therefore presume that you are not calling for an increase in the total funding, which is £4 million. Do you think that it is right that around £2 million of that stays with the MLC? To be fair, that money is spent on certain functions and services. We heard about that at the beginning of the meeting but did not go into detail about it. That is probably our fault. Do you propose that something different should be done with the £2 million that stays with the MLC?

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** I want to clarify that situation. No money would go to the MLC. The only money that would go to the MLC would come from a Scottish produce commission, should it wish to buy into the services that the MLC provides. However, that money would be limited and I can assure you that it would not be £2 million. Much of the research and development takes place in Scotland. The MLC sources it from Scotland, takes our money and that is it.

**Fergus Ewing:** To play devil's advocate, can I ask you whether the MLC uses some of the Scottish research institutes in deploying some of its funding?

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** If that is what is happening, that is great. We would approach the institutes direct.

**Mr McGrigor:** As someone who pays a levy to SQBLA and having talked to others who have paid levies to SQBLA, I know that there was a feeling that people were not getting much out of it. It did not seem to make very much difference to the price, despite the tags that were sent to be put on certain animals. The things that people were told to do in respect of quality did not seem to improve the quality of the carcase.

Scotland has always had a very good reputation for quality beef and lamb—better than most other

countries in the world. Have there been many complaints about the quality of Scottish beef and lamb? Was there a reason for the raft of extra things that farmers had to do in respect of quality assurance?

You say that you do not want money to go to the MLC, but what about the expertise that the MLC provides? How can you replace that overnight?

What about the cattle that originate in England, come into Scotland and are sold as Scotch beef? Do you agree with that practice, or should it be a thing of the past?

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** We agree with it. There is no problem with such cattle coming into Scotland, but the meat should be sold at a different level in the market. It might not obtain the same premium as beef that is born, bred and reared in Scotland.

As I said earlier, we are not saying that we would completely disassociate from the MLC. We would work with the MLC and buy out the services that we felt were required in Scotland. However, no money should go directly to the MLC—it should go to our own commission. When we saw the need to buy a service that the MLC was providing and which it could provide more cheaply than we could do it ourselves, we would do that.

**Mr McGrigor:** My first question was about the raft of rules and regulations that were imposed on farmers in order to provide quality. Was there any reason for those, given that our reputation for quality beef and lamb was already exemplary?

**The Convener:** I am sorry, but that question does not really relate to the petition; the petition does not question the assurance schemes. We must stick to the subject of the petition.

**Richard Lochhead:** I get the feeling that you are frustrated because you feel alienated from what QMS is responsible for and what it does. There might be many farmers in that position. The producers have different interests, but there is only one promotional body, so people who are not happy with what it does have nowhere else to go.

First, how much support do your views have among farmers in Scotland? Secondly, can QMS be reformed to give people who hold your views a voice in the organisation, or do you feel that the views are irreconcilable, and that there should be a separate body altogether?

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** There is real frustration out there. I cannot evaluate how QMS quantifies its promotions; all I can evaluate is what farmers tell me, which is that if there were an alternative, they would be inclined to go with it. However, we will not find out whether that is the case until such an alternative exists.

What was your second question?

**Richard Lochhead:** Is it possible to reform QMS to ensure that people such as yourself have a voice?

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** I am not here to reform QMS. As a private limited company, it is a big boy and can get into the playing field like everyone else. As with any commercial venture, QMS should just go for it and compete with the other companies that are out there. However, I do not believe that a minister should be sitting behind it; the body should stand on its own two feet. Its representatives have already said—

**The Convener:** I am sorry. I am not trying to cut anyone short, but we must move on now.

**Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD):** My question follows on from what Richard Lochhead was saying. Your petition is dated 23 March 2000, which means that it is almost two years old. That is not your fault; time has just moved on. However, your petition says that it has been submitted by ordinary farmer members of the SQBLA scheme. What volume of support does the petition have? Has it been submitted in your own name? How many people are in your group? What proportion of the industry do you represent? I am sure that committee members want some sort of feel for the balance of the argument.

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** The truth is that our group is not large. There are five of us now. There were six, but one has retired.

**Mr Rumbles:** So there are five farmers.

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** Yes. That is the size of it. As a result, we do not have the resources to carry out any research. All we know is that all the farmers we have met are not 100 per cent behind QMS.

**Mr Rumbles:** I am looking for written or oral evidence about the level of support that you have, other than the five farmers in your group.

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** I cannot answer that question.

**Elaine Smith:** I was about to ask the question that Mike Rumbles raised, but you have clarified the point now. In your supplementary submission to the committee, you say that QMS is a private limited company. However, QMS representatives have told us that it is a company limited by guarantee. What is the significance of that status for QMS, and what are the important differences between the two titles?

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** A private limited company is not accountable to anyone, other than itself and its shareholders. I do not know the standing of a company that is limited by

guarantee; all I know is that QMS is not an association in the same way that the original body was.

**Elaine Smith:** What was SQBLA's status if it was not a limited company?

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** SQBLA was an association.

**Elaine Smith:** So it was not a company that was limited by guarantee.

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** That is correct. As a result, SQBLA was freer and more accountable to its members. There was closer contact between that association and its members, or subscribers; indeed, there was a feeling of unity and of being a part of something.

**Elaine Smith:** QMS representatives told us that they were accountable to the people who make up the organisation. There are also elections to the QMS board. Does that fact not raise an issue?

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** Yes. This comes back to what Mike Rumbles was saying. Has anyone evaluated the people who want to be part of QMS? The National Farmers Union of Scotland has been mentioned. Is QMS aligned with the NFUS? If that is where the organisation finds its strength, that in turn strengthens my argument that there must be some form of separation.

**The Convener:** No other members have indicated that they wish to ask questions. We have had a full session.

To balance the discussion, I would be happy to offer both parties one minute in which to make a closing statement, if they so wish.

**Neil Kilpatrick:** We do not have a great deal to add. A certain amount of misinformation has been put about. Last year, QMS put the quality assurance process out to tender and invited a number of quality assurance companies in the UK to tender for that work. The contract happened to be won by a Scottish company, but the tendering process was highly competitive. In my view, QMS proceeded in the correct commercial way.

15:30

**Andrew Stuart Wood:** I want to respond to that point. I must be careful not to become libellous and I apologise for anything that I say that might prejudice my case. However, the situation is that members of the QMS board are represented on the board of the company that won the tender. That brings me back to the point that I made earlier about the need for transparency. There must be segregation of the various bodies. The public must see that an independent body is in charge of the process. They must be able to believe that the quality assurance scheme is

something of value—something that they can trust—rather than some show that is being cooked along by the farming enterprises. People need to be able to know that when they take meat off the shelf, it is guaranteed.

**The Convener:** I thank all the witnesses for taking the time to come to give evidence to the committee. I must now ask you to step down, but you are more than welcome to stay on to listen to the deliberations of the committee.

Members have received from the clerk a cover note on petition PE138 and a copy of the Executive's response to the petition. The clerk's paper sets out our options for proceeding. As members know, the petition is of long standing and it would be appropriate for us to try to reach a decision today.

I was as critical as anyone of the way in which QMS was set up. It seemed to happen in a bit of a hurry and in a slightly cliquey mode, and I remember criticising that at the time. However, things have moved on considerably since the petition was submitted. I am particularly encouraged by recent statements by Ross Finnie, suggesting that he is not very happy with the fact that £2 million of the levy is retained south of the border and highlighting his desire to make QMS more accountable for its funding. It has also been suggested that QMS's money should be raised in Scotland and should remain here.

On those grounds, I am very happy to give QMS the benefit of the doubt and to allow it to do the job that it was established to do. I suggest that we note the petition for the time being and move on. That is my recommendation, but I am very willing to hear the views of other members.

**Mr Rumbles:** I agree with your recommendation. We must be very careful when we consider public petitions. I do not suggest for one moment that just because only five people support the petition we should ignore it. However, we have to consider what weight should be given to such a petition. The petition was submitted almost two years ago. Earlier I sought to establish how much momentum there is behind the petition; the answer that I was given suggested that it has the support of only five farmers. For all the reasons that the convener has outlined and the reason that I have just added, I think that we should simply note the petition.

**Richard Lochhead:** We have spent time discussing the petition, despite the fact that it was submitted two years ago, partly because at that time the committee expressed concerns about the establishment of QMS. We are not simply responding to a petition that was submitted to us, but we had some motivation for taking evidence on the issue. We should bear in mind the fact that

initially we had serious concerns about QMS.

Two years later, the situation has moved on and QMS is up and running. Some issues have been raised today, such as competition and input by a variety of interests into QMS, but it is difficult to tell how genuine or serious they are. At the least they should be conveyed to the Minister for Environment and Rural Development for a response.

One issue that I am not too happy about is the lack of an attempt to measure the body's success during the past two years. It appears that there are no measurements of success. There is a case for independent auditing of the body and what it has achieved. Is there a case for picking out some of the themes that have been mentioned today and asking the minister for an update, given that the last update that we had from the Executive was in 2000? We could ask for a more up-to-date response to some of the concerns, which would let the minister know that we are keeping an eye on the situation.

**The Convener:** A perfectly reasonable option is to note the petition but to write to the minister to highlight some of the concerns that have been raised today. If that is the feeling of the committee, I should be happy to ask the clerks to draft a letter to that end, which the committee could trust me to look over and send, or we could bring it back to the committee in a fortnight's time.

**Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab):** I reinforce what you said earlier. I have read the submissions, and I listened carefully to the statements of both parties and to the question-and-answer session. The path that you have outlined is the correct one. It would be an act of lunacy to do anything but note the petition.

**The Convener:** I am delighted to find you agreeing with me in a committee meeting, Mr Morrison. It makes a pleasant change.

**Elaine Smith:** Convener, you will be delighted to find that I also agree with you, although I also agree with Richard Lochhead about raising some of the points with the minister, because some fair points were made, which should be pursued in that fashion.

**Fergus Ewing:** I agree with Richard Lochhead's suggestion that we should write to the minister. The debate today has been initiated rather than concluded. In particular, I should be grateful if the minister could expand more fully on the views that are set out in the response that we received from the Executive, which admittedly was on 16 June 2000. By definition, it is sensible that the Executive should have a chance to update its response, as has been suggested by Richard Lochhead and others.

I wish the minister to address three points that have been highlighted by Andrew Stuart Wood today. The first is accountability. How can a company that is set up as a company limited by guarantee be made accountable? We heard in the informal presentation earlier that three members of the board are farmers. That is of value, but how are those farmers chosen? Who picks them? What input is made? What is the relationship between the company and the Executive? It seems that the company is totally free-standing. I have slight concerns about that.

Secondly, there is always a danger of Parliaments ignoring grass-roots opinion. Just because we have a petitioner who is not from the usual range of witnesses who provide us with useful evidence, that does not mean that we should just note the evidence. We need to gauge, as Mike Rumbles indicated, the level of concern in the wider community. Perhaps we can do that through specialist magazines and our own contacts. There should be an opportunity to do that and return to the matter at a later stage.

Finally, the petitioner has made a useful suggestion, which is that it would be sensible at least to get the Executive's response on having one body that is responsible for promoting Scottish food produce. Scotland the brand is a very powerful brand. It is of high quality across the board, as a result of high standards of legislation and hygiene—probably the highest in Europe, with gold plating in some cases. If we have high quality, for goodness' sake let us get the advantages of that. Is there not a risk, if we atomise the promotion of beef, meat, vegetables and fish, that there will be two, three, four or five bodies doing similar things, but all with the Scottish brand? Is there a way in which those bodies, for example, Scottish Quality Salmon, QMS and others, can work together more effectively? I am sure that they co-operate and interchange, but are we getting it right? Are we maximising the Scottish quality brand? I am sure that we would all wish to do that.

I am sorry if I have gone on a bit; it is most unlike me. I look forward to hearing from the minister in due course.

**Mr McGrigor:** I agree that we should formally note the petition. I also agree with Fergus Ewing that Scotland the brand is incredibly important. I hope that the Quality Meat Scotland campaign will progress, but QMS should consider that farmers will judge by their bank balances whether its campaign is working.

**The Convener:** I feel that members are happy to note the petition but want to draw to the minister's attention the concerns that have been expressed to us today. We will do that by a letter from me. Are members content for me to sign off

the letter after the clerks have prepared it?

**Fergus Ewing:** We should invite the minister to respond.

**The Convener:** I thought that that was the letter's purpose.

**Fergus Ewing:** I have noticed that that does not always work.

**Stewart Stevenson:** Not all of us get prompt replies from ministers.

**The Convener:** The letter will carry more weight if it comes from the convener rather than from a committee member.

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** I put on record again our thanks to the witnesses for giving us their time today.

### **Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park (PE417)**

**The Convener:** The committee will recall that we had a petition from Brian Smith calling for the inclusion of Cowal and Bute in the proposed Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park. Members will remember that Mr Smith gave a short presentation to the committee over lunch before our meeting on 21 January. Members questioned the petitioner after hearing his reasons for suggesting that Cowal and Bute be included in the proposed park. As the designation order has not been laid before Parliament, we do not know what the proposed boundaries will be, but there is no reason to believe that the Executive has included Cowal and Bute as the area was not mentioned in the draft designation order. The clerks' briefing paper sets out members' options on the issue. Do members have any comments on the petition?

**Mr Rumbles:** We have had several petitions about the boundaries of the proposed Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park. The committee unanimously supported the Killin community's presentation, which was extremely well made and deserved our full support. That was noted and sent to the Executive by the convener.

We must make a distinction between the Killin proposal, which was well backed and well founded, and the Cowal and Dunoon proposal. I noticed in the Executive's written response to the petition that its consultation surgery in Dunoon on 15 August attracted only six members of the public. The Executive's response says that the surgery

"focussed on the adequacy of funding, the planning position and the inclusion of the Argyll Forest Park within the proposed National Park area. No views were expressed about the inclusion of the Cowal, Bute and Inchmarnock areas."



We are now beyond the deadline for such consultation.

I did not feel that the petitioners' case was well put. I am not convinced that we should move further into Argyll the boundaries of the proposed national park for Loch Lomond and the Trossachs. The boundaries have moved once, to include Argyll forest park. The committee should consider petitions such as PE417 and consider the boundaries, because I am not convinced that Scottish Natural Heritage and the Executive have got them right. That is why we agreed unanimously to support the Killin community. Having compared the Killin community's presentation with the Cowal and Bute petitioner's presentation, however, I do not feel moved to support the latter's petition.

**Mr McGrigor:** I take on board what Mike Rumbles said, but I think that the Cowal community has a good case because the coastline forms a natural boundary. The Cowal area would bring a marine element into the proposed first national park, which at the moment it lacks.

At the end of the day, it comes down to money to a certain extent. I was disappointed that the funding is to be virtually halved—to £2.4 million, I think, from £4 million. There will be only so much cake to have. If the figure is smaller, that will make it more difficult for other areas to be included.

I do not agree that the presentation was bad—I thought that it was good. The land brought in—especially the marine element—would add to the depth of the park.

15:45

**Rhoda Grant:** I am not convinced that the petitioners' aims would be achieved by Cowal's inclusion in the national park. The presentation on the need for inward investment and boosts to the local economy was good, but I am not convinced that those would happen if the area were included in the national park. There are great opportunities on the national park's boundary for such investment without the restrictions that would apply in the park.

We have fed the petitioners' views to the Executive—which is right and proper—but at this stage I recommend that we simply note the petition.

**Richard Lochhead:** The issue is interesting. I know the area reasonably well and cannot think why it has less of a case to be in the national park than some other areas that are intent on being included. Perhaps the area has more of an economic case to be included in the national park, although economic criteria are by no means the only criteria that must be considered.

We understand that a final decision has not been taken. If the petitioners have a case and no final decision has been taken, we should express a view, or at least seek the minister's views. The Executive's letter finishes with an innocuous line that does not give a view on anything—it simply says that the Executive is aware of the case. Perhaps we should say to the minister that we appreciate that he is aware of the case, but ask him whether he has a view.

**The Convener:** The Executive says that it is

“aware of the depth of feeling behind these views. These comments have been taken into consideration alongside other responses (some 200) received as part of the consultation exercise”.

Do you think that we should go further than simply noting the petition at this stage?

**Richard Lochhead:** The minister must have a view. Perhaps we should try to find out what it is.

**Mr McGrigor:** I want to make one tiny point. The petitioners also make the important point that the number of hostelrys—bed and breakfasts and hotels, for example—in the national park is quite small. One of the main reasons for inclusion of the area would be that the number of places for people to stay when they came to the national park would be greatly increased.

**Stewart Stevenson:** Jamie McGrigor's point about accommodation is well made. The petitioners are clear that substantial commercial benefit can be gained from the area being in the national park. The committee would be unwise to take a precipitate decision not to put such arguments forward.

I would hate the committee to have the statutory instrument laid before it with the Executive's explanation on why it has come to its decisions and to find itself uncomfortable about the criteria that have been applied to include some extensions that could equally have applied to the petitioners' case. If we can, we should recommend to the Executive that the area should be included.

**Elaine Smith:** I would like to ask the clerks for clarification. The briefing paper says that the Public Petitions Committee received the petition on 2 November 2001. Is that the first time the matter was mentioned? When did the consultation process finish? If it finished prior to the petition's being laid, why was the matter raised after the consultation process ended? It would have been better if the petition had been included in the consultation process.

**Tracey Hawe (Clerk):** I understand that the consultation process concluded at the end of August. The petition was therefore received after the end of the consultation process.

**Elaine Smith:** I am not questioning the issue

that the petition deals with; I am questioning the fact that it was not put in as part of the consultation process.

**The Convener:** I think that that issue was explained to us—albeit in private—when we had our away day at Gartocharn. However, Elaine Smith makes a perfectly valid point.

**Mr Rumbles:** The clerks might correct me but, as far as I am aware, we met on 2 October to discuss petition PE393, which was submitted by the Killin community council. The *Official Report* of that meeting will show that we were impressed with the petition, which set out the reasons why the community should be included in the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park area.

I am trying to put my finger on possible reasons for the delay. I am not suggesting that anything untoward has happened, but the sequence of events is interesting. We met on 2 October and heard arguments that the Killin community should be included in the park. On 2 November—after the consultation period had closed and we had recommended that the Killin community be included in the park—the Public Petitions Committee received petition PE417. I note that the Public Petitions Committee tells us that the petition was signed by 629 people.

I am keen that we listen to local communities because the Executive and Scottish Natural Heritage might not get the boundaries right—in some cases, they definitely have not. The job of this committee is to weigh up the evidence that we receive and consider the balance of evidence and public feeling. One of the major criteria is community support. I would like to know what proportion of the total population of the Cowal peninsula the 629 signatories make up. I suspect that the community feeling is not that great, especially as we were told previously that only six people turned up to a meeting on the subject. The question is weighty.

**Stewart Stevenson:** Elaine Smith's procedural point was correct. The consultation process was publicised and the closing date was clearly identified. The petition has come in after that date. However, we operate inside the system and are familiar with the way in which it works. Many of the people who deal with the Parliament, the Public Petitions Committee and the consultation processes are adept and timely in their responses. The general public, on the other hand, generally become aware of issues such as this one only when its profile has been raised by other activities.

If there is an opportunity to consider a point of view because the decision has yet to be finalised, we do not, in practical terms, serve the needs of people in the broader community by rigidly adhering to rules. At the end of the day, the merits

of the case should decide the matter. If a decision is made at the end of a consultation period, evidence that is submitted two days after the end of the consultation period will have missed its opportunity, but if the decision will not be made for a long time after the end of the consultation period, we should not be too strict about the rules.

The ordinary public would not understand a decision that a submission had no merit because it had missed a deadline. Mike Rumbles's point about whether the petition reflects the broad feeling in the community is a better point. I too would like to know the answer to that.

**Elaine Smith:** It is important to discuss the issues before making a final decision, so I thank you for allowing me to speak again, convener.

I accept what Stewart Stevenson said, but the problem with his view is where to draw the line. If we were to get another petition next week, before the decision had been made, would we have to consider it? We have to say that the end of a consultation process is the cut-off point for submissions. If a consultation process is not long enough or has not been advertised properly, a post mortem of the process can be conducted.

I feel quite strongly that the process was correct. I am concerned that we would be doing nobody any favours if, as the clerk's paper suggests, we recommended that Parliament reject the order. That would not be in Scotland's interests or in the interests of the national park. Given that Ross Finnie knows the strength of feeling on the matter and knows that the petition exists, I feel that we should just note the petition and move on.

**Richard Lochhead:** I will make a compromise proposal, which is that the committee send a letter to the minister expressing sympathy with the petitioners' case and asking him to gauge the level of local support for the petition before he takes his final decision because we realise that it is difficult to do anything at this late stage.

**The Convener:** I welcome your attempt to find a compromise position; I think that we will need one. The minister may have made his decision. However, I will come back to that.

**Mr Rumbles:** I understand the spirit of what Richard Lochhead is trying to achieve, but I worry about it because it undermines any other cases that we put about boundaries. Consideration of the Cairngorms national park is also coming up.

I am considering the evidence that has been presented to us and the case for inclusion. I am not automatically considering the process. I am not convinced. I did not sympathise with the case that was put to us about extending the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park to the Cowal peninsula and Dunoon.

At the informal meeting that we had over lunch when we met in the area, someone on the committee asked the petitioners what level of support they had. I did not ask that question. They were asked what the level of support was among community councils, local councillors, Argyll and Bute Council, local MSPs and regional list MSPs. I have been trying to gauge the level of support for the petition. I cannot find any, other than the 629 names on the petition and the fact that six people turned up to the meeting.

We cannot say that we are sympathetic to the case that was made. I was not impressed with it. What happens with the Cairngorm national park when the community makes a really important case? I am trying to work out the implications for the future.

**The Convener:** On the petitioners' case, I have a certain amount of sympathy with the inclusion of the Cowal peninsula but not so much with the inclusion of Bute. I could understand the logic of having a road boundary around the national park. That is my personal opinion.

I also understand that there is a process whereby the Executive can revisit the boundaries of the national park after a certain amount of time following the park's establishment. Would the committee therefore be prepared to take roughly the route to which Richard Lochhead referred: to note the petition and write to the minister expressing a degree of sympathy with it but note that he is aware of its contents and the strength of feeling that is behind it?

**Mr Rumbles:** I am worried about the sympathy element.

**Mr Morrison:** For the second time today, I agree with you, convener.

**The Convener:** We are establishing a worrying trend.

**Mr Rumbles:** I am worried about the sympathy element because it gives the impression that we are in sympathy with the petition when I do not think that we necessarily are.

**The Convener:** I suggest that we state that we are in sympathy with some of the case that was put to us.

**Mr Rumbles:** As long as we are careful with the wording.

**Mr McGrigor:** I certainly am in sympathy with the case. Six hundred and twenty nine signatures is a big lot in such a sparsely populated area.

**Mr Rumbles:** How many people live there, Jamie?

**Mr McGrigor:** There you have me.

**Mr Rumbles:** You are a regional list member for that area: come on.

**The Convener:** Now, now.

**Mr McGrigor:** The number of signatures is certainly large for a petition from that area.

**The Convener:** The fact is that Mike Rumbles does not support the use of the word sympathy and Jamie McGrigor supports it strongly. I suggest that we say, "We express some sympathy with some of the case that was put forward." The Executive has not said that the area is not included. We cannot therefore say that it is not included.

**Rhoda Grant:** I suggest that we do nothing. By saying that we have some sympathy with the petition, we could damn it with faint praise. Saying to the minister that we are giving him the petition to consider but that we are not awfully sure about it might have a negative effect.

We have already passed the petition to the minister and he has given us feedback. The minister is aware of the issues and he will probably have carried out some work to investigate whether they can be met. That is why I suggest we note the petition. It is not that I do not understand where folk such as Jamie McGrigor are coming from, but by saying that we have sympathy with the petition we could have the opposite effect to what some members of the committee want.

**The Convener:** Would you care to propose another form of wording?

**Rhoda Grant:** I propose that we note the petition because we have already forwarded it to the minister.

**Mr Rumbles:** I support that.

**Mr Morrison:** I support that, too.

**The Convener:** I would not like the committee to be split over the issue. Rhoda Grant's point is fair. We have already sent the petition to the minister and asked him to note the feelings behind it. He has responded to that request. Noting the petition is an honourable position for the committee to take. Is Jamie McGrigor happy with that?

**Mr McGrigor:** Yes.

**The Convener:** Thank you. In that case, we will move on, but before we do, I congratulate the petitioners on their doggedness in pursuing their aims. Mr Smith is here today and I hope that he will understand the committee's position, which is taken in the knowledge that the matter can be referred to in the future, should there be a need for alteration of the national park boundaries. I wish Mr Smith every success in his campaign.

## Foot-and-mouth Disease

16:00

**The Convener:** Agenda item 4 concerns the foot-and-mouth issue that came up at the last meeting. Unlike other members, I am at a disadvantage, because I was not in the chair at that meeting, when the committee indicated its desire to consider the evidence it was given by Ross Finnie.

As requested, members have received a briefing note from the clerks that sets out the chronology and background to the issue. Options for considering the issue further are outlined in the papers and I seek members' comments. Comments should be restricted to the content of the instrument. We could write to the minister about the procedural considerations.

Do any members wish to comment on the content of the instrument? Mike Rumbles was looking keen for a moment.

**Mr Rumbles:** I was, until you said that our comments had to be about the content.

As the instrument was laid under the Animal Health Act 1981, it is not subject to parliamentary procedure. Considering all the other stuff that comes before the committee, which, quite frankly, is hardly controversial, I find it strange that no parliamentary scrutiny is necessary for the instrument. I am thunderstruck.

**The Convener:** Do you want to ask for the clerk's opinion on that?

**Mr Rumbles:** I did that last week.

**The Convener:** In that case you have already had the clerk's opinion. I am surprised myself. Nonetheless, the instrument has apparently been run past the Executive's lawyers and they agree that that is the case.

**Richard Lochhead:** I think we should write to the minister on two themes—the substantive measures in the statutory instrument and the procedures. We should protest about the procedures in the strongest terms because we asked the minister to come before the committee on the understanding that we would have an input into the consultation. That did not turn out to be the case. According to the briefing note from the clerks, the consultation exercise began on 22 January with a closing date of 31 January. The draft SI was sent to members on 28 January, before the consultation had closed. No changes have been made to the SI since the consultation closed. That suggests that the consultation was a bit of a sham and that many people were misled.

We should ask the minister to note our unhappiness with the procedures in this case. We

should not forget the fact that we cannot amend the SI because we have no input. Parliament has no input. We cannot reject or accept it. That is crucial given the importance of the issue to the livestock industry in Scotland and the level of concern over the proposed relaxations, even though they are welcome because they are a step forward.

The second theme of the letter should relate to the substantive content of the SI, in particular the timing of the relaxations. We should ask the minister to note the views of some members of the industry on the fact that they will have to wait several months for some of the relaxations regarding sheep and cattle. We should note that, as we understand it, the statutory instrument will apply to the whole of 2002, but we would like the minister to review that at the earliest opportunity. We should emphasise the fact that we do not want the instrument to last for the whole of 2002 if the evidence suggests otherwise. I think that the minister indicated that he was aware of the point, but we should reinforce it.

**Rhoda Grant:** I have some sympathy with the point about the procedure and we should write to the minister and express concern about not having an input to the statutory instrument. Richard Lochhead's points about the content of the statutory instrument were all made to the minister last week. It is only fair to acknowledge that the minister came and explained the standpoint. He answered the questions that Richard Lochhead put to him and that is available to read in the *Official Report*. However, it would be valid to write and express our concerns about the extent of our ability to scrutinise the statutory instrument.

**The Convener:** If I had had more time in the past few days I would have read the *Official Report* rather more carefully than I have done. I seek guidance from committee members. Was the point put to the minister that if the instrument is still in place in autumn 2002, hill farmers will have incredible difficulty with the store sales and separating the lambs?

**Mr McGrigor:** Yes. That point was put emphatically. Also, one of Mr Finnie's advisers seemed to concede that crofting townships might be allowed to use one field.

**The Convener:** I read that bit. Thank you.

**Stewart Stevenson:** Having read the *Official Report* to confirm what was said at a long and complex evidence-taking meeting, I am convinced that the minister did not make a case statistically or epidemiologically for the necessity of three cycles of the disease to be the period that set the movement orders at 20 days. He did not produce statistics and neither Mr Finnie nor his veterinary adviser provided adequate evidence for why three

cycles of the disease was a better standard—qualitatively or quantitatively—than, say, two cycles of the disease, which is what some of us were urging him to consider. That remains an important point and if we do not pursue it at this stage it may hang over the industry for years to come. There may be difficulties if that is embedded at the core of the argument. I would like to know more on that specific point because according to my reading of the *Official Report*, it was not addressed adequately last week.

**Mr Rumbles:** I want to go back to the procedural point. Perhaps the clerk can give advice on this. The briefing note says:

“The Disease Control (Interim Measures) (Scotland) Order 2002 was formally laid at the Scottish Parliament on Friday 1 February 2002.”

It goes on to say that the instrument is not subject to parliamentary scrutiny or committee approval. What does the fact that it was formally laid in the Scottish Parliament mean? Does it mean that the instrument was considered by the full chamber or that it was not debated at all? I really want to know.

**Tracey Hawe:** As I understand it, the order is formally laid, but it is not then referred to a subject committee, which is the usual procedure.

**Mr Rumbles:** So what happens to it?

**Tracey Hawe:** It simply comes into force.

**Mr Rumbles:** Is it put in a drawer somewhere and that is it?

**The Convener:** The word “rubber-stamped” springs to mind.

It is clear to me that the committee feels that we should write to the minister to express our concern about the procedure relating to the instrument—however correct it might be. We should also express our concern that we have had no input to the measure, although it is a subject on which we could have been of constructive assistance.

Most members seem to feel that the minister was made aware of the issues relating to the contents of the instrument last week. Do members think that we should make no comments on the content of the instrument in the letter to the minister, but simply refer to procedural matters?

**Stewart Stevenson:** I would like the minister to provide us with further information to underpin his argument that three cycles of the disease, rather than two, are necessary to protect the industry.

**Mr Rumbles:** I agree with Stewart Stevenson—the issue was mentioned but the statistical basis for it was not covered. The information would be helpful.

**The Convener:** Are members happy that we ask for clarification on that issue?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** We can say that we are sure that the minister will have noted the points that were put to him by members last week, but that we seek clarification. We can then draw his attention to the procedural difficulties that we have. Are members happy with that?

**Members indicated agreement.**

## Subordinate Legislation

### Environmental Impact Assessment (Uncultivated Land and Semi-Natural Areas) (Scotland) Regulations 2002 (SSI 2002/6)

**The Convener:** Agenda item 5 is subordinate legislation. Are members content with the regulations?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

### Import and Export Restrictions (Foot-and-Mouth Disease) (Scotland) (No 3) Amendment Regulations 2002 (SSI 2002/21)

**The Convener:** Are members content with the regulations?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

### Cattle Identification (Notification of Movement) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations (SSI 2002/22)

**The Convener:** Are members content with the regulations?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**Mr Rumbles:** I want only to reiterate what we said earlier: it is interesting that we have been presented with three uncontroversial instruments, but we cannot talk about the really controversial one.

**The Convener:** Point noted.

## Sea Cage Fish Farming

**The Convener:** Agenda item 6 is sea cage fish farming. Members have received a paper outlining the progress that has been made by the Transport and the Environment Committee, which is due to publish a report on stage 1 of its inquiry in March. I note that it has agreed a remit and issued a call for evidence for stage 2 of the inquiry, which will focus on more strategic issues. That reflects the fact that the Executive is developing a strategic framework for aquaculture, which should be available by the summer. Members will note that the paper addresses the matters that we raised when we last considered the report. Does any member wish to comment? John Farquhar Munro is our reporter on the subject.

**John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD):** Members have the paper, which gives a report on the activities that have taken place since our last discussion on the matter. The Transport and the Environment Committee has taken evidence and is continuing to do so. Some time ago, our suggestion to appoint a co-ordinator to collate all the information and make a final presentation was agreed by the Transport and the Environment Committee. The committee is shortlisting individuals for the post, but I am not aware that it has been filled yet. We wait with bated breath.

The paper is self-explanatory and notes the progress that has been made. It is important that we agree that I should continue to be the reporter.

**Members:** Hear, hear.

**The Convener:** We are all desperate to get to that item. I do not think that the committee would disagree. You are re-appointed, John. Many congratulations.

Sea cage fish farming is a subject on which I receive an increasing amount of mail. I do not know whether other members do. If we are to question the minister further on the matter, the right time to do so would appear to be when the Executive has published its draft strategy. We will, no doubt, receive a communication at that time. I suggest that we put that meeting firmly on the agenda. There is a great deal of concern out there—and it is growing. Is that agreed?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**Mr McGrigor:** Do we have any idea when that meeting might take place?

**Tracey Hawe:** I understand that the Executive hopes to finalise the strategy by the summer, but it may be possible to have a draft strategy before then.

**Mr McGrigor:** Before the summer?

**Tracey Hawe:** Yes.

I want to clarify another point for Mr Munro. I understand that tenders have just been sent out for the research contract and that the Transport and the Environment Committee hopes to make an appointment within the next 10 days.

**Elaine Smith:** I hope that we receive the strategy in enough time to enable us to read and digest it before we discuss it at the committee. That is not what happened with the agricultural strategy document, which we had to read on the hoof—if you will pardon the pun.

**The Convener:** That point was well made—pun and all.

On that note, are members content to move on?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** I do not want to downplay the importance of sea cage fish farming—I think that it will be a major issue over the next couple of years. However, I think that the right time to discuss it is when we respond to the publication of the Executive's strategy.

## Work Programme

16:15

**The Convener:** Agenda item 7 is the committee's work programme. Members have received the pink paper from the clerk. I propose to work through the issues in the order in which they are listed in the paper.

The paper asks whether members wish, or are content, to revert to a fortnightly meeting schedule, given the lack of legislative work.

**Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Rumbles:** At last. Did you say "revert", convener?

**The Convener:** We tried a fortnightly schedule once, for about three weeks. I am delighted to be the bearer of good tidings.

**Elaine Smith:** On that note, if someone is a member of two committees that meet every week, their timetable becomes quite heavy. I certainly hope that the Rural Development Committee will be able to revert to fortnightly meetings.

**The Convener:** We will do so for as long as we are able and for as long as our work programme permits it. There might be two exceptions to the fortnightly meeting schedule: we might need to meet weekly to accommodate consideration of the national parks affirmative order, and when we hold the away meetings that we have marked for our integrated rural development inquiry. We might need to meet between our fortnightly meetings at those times.

**Mr Morrison:** I agree. I would like to hear—informally, of course—from the good people who service the committee about the burden that meeting weekly as opposed to fortnightly entails for them. I have no doubt that a weekly cycle must be very demanding.

**The Convener:** Are you suggesting that meeting fortnightly might create a bigger work burden?

**Mr Morrison:** No, certainly not. The fortnightly cycle is definitely the best way forward.

**The Convener:** A fortnightly cycle will mean that, once a fortnight, the clerks will have double the amount of work. I am sure that the clerks would be happy to discuss that with you informally.

**Stewart Stevenson:** I would find it useful to have the meeting dates, so that I can knock them into my diary. In particular, it would be useful to know whether we are any closer to arranging dates for our various away meetings.

**The Convener:** We will come to that in a minute.

Our meetings will be fortnightly from, and including, 5 March. We will not meet on 12 March, but we will meet on 19 March, if my mathematics is correct.

Let us move on to the budget process. It is suggested that we seek an informal briefing from officials on 5 March. Are members content with that suggestion?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** There are three options for consideration of the budget and it would be useful if members would indicate which they prefer.

Option A is:

"Should the Committee not wish to take evidence from external groups, it is recommended that the Minister be asked to give evidence on 16 April. This would allow the Committee two meetings to agree a Stage 1 Report to the Finance Committee."

Option B is:

"If the Committee wishes to take oral evidence from external groups, it could do so on 16 April, with a view to hearing from the Minister on 30 April. This would allow only one meeting ... at which to agree the Committee Report.

Option C is:

"Alternatively the Committee could dedicate most of one meeting to budget issues, hearing from both external witnesses and the Minister on 16 April. This would allow ... two meetings to agree a report."

We must determine today which option we wish to go for. I am interested to hear members' views.

**Elaine Smith:** I am quite in favour of option C. It is better to take all the evidence at once, as members can follow their trains of thought and raise issues in line with that. Option C would also give us two meetings, although I am sure that the committee could manage to agree a report in one meeting. However, option C gives us leeway to hold two meetings, if necessary.

**The Convener:** I see a considerable number of heads nodding in agreement around the room.

**Richard Lochhead:** I favour calling both the minister and external witnesses to give evidence. In particular, I would like to hear from witnesses from rural local authorities, rather than from the committee's usual witnesses. We should try to call people from whom we have not previously taken evidence on the budget. Which is why I suggest that we invite rural local authorities.

I am relaxed about option B and option C. Option B is perhaps slightly more attractive, because we could hear from more external groups. We have not previously done that for the budget process, which is why we should devote more time to it. Other committees who take evidence on the budget process go round Scotland. The Rural Development Committee has

never left Edinburgh for budget process debates, so perhaps we should devote time to taking evidence from external groups. That would mean going for option B rather than for option C.

**The Convener:** I do not argue with that. It would be helpful if members could suggest witnesses whom they feel might have a relevant part to play in the process, but we probably do not need to do that today. If members would like to e-mail the clerks with suggestions, that would be very welcome.

Are members content that we go for option C?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** We move on to the draft remit for the integrated rural development inquiry. Do members have any comments on the remit? If members are happy with the remit, are they also happy to issue a written call for evidence based on the remit? Unless anybody says otherwise, I will assume that the answer is yes and will continue.

Would members like to ask for a written briefing on the remit from the Executive?

**Mr Rumbles:** Yes—that would be helpful.

**The Convener:** We move on to dates for the meetings outwith Edinburgh. We have so far pinpointed two such meetings. The proposed dates are governed by how suitable they are for the venues to which we will go. A bit of work has been done on that. We have pencilled in 19 March as the date for the meeting in Dalry. In case members are worried, the Dalry in question is Dalry in Kirkcudbrightshire, not Dalry in Ayrshire. That issue came to light when the estimate of costs went to the conveners liaison group—I was slightly worried to find that the trip for which I had been claiming 87 miles a week was put in at 73 miles.

**Rhoda Grant:** What was that?

**Mr Rumbles:** The convener's domestic circumstances.

**The Convener:** I thought that I was going to be done for fraud.

Are members contents that 19 March is a suitable day for meeting in Dalry—about which there will be more details in a second—and that 23 April is a suitable day for meeting in Lochaber?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** We want—in addition to a formal meeting of the committee—to carry out some fact-finding visits in Dalry. Perhaps the best way to do that, given that Dalry is a good two-hour drive from Edinburgh, would be to go to Dalry on Monday and carry out the fact-finding visits in the afternoon and early evening. We could possibly



meet some people in the evening and hold the meeting on Tuesday morning until lunchtime. We will almost certainly have to have an away day—a night away—so that might be a good way of going about things. Comments are welcome.

**Richard Lochhead:** Will that be on Monday 18?

**The Convener:** Yes.

**Mr Morrison:** How many miles from Glasgow airport is Dalry?

**The Convener:** It is probably no more than 40 miles away.

**Mr Rumbles:** The convener's suggestion is good.

**Mr McGrigor:** Was the suggestion that we go to Dalry on Monday night?

**The Convener:** Yes. Incidentally, it is suggested that we follow the same formula for Fort William.

**John Farquhar Munro:** You said Fort William. Is that the preferred location or do you have some other location in mind?

**The Convener:** Fort William is the location that has been examined. When I said Lochaber, perhaps I should have said Fort William. I apologise. Let us deal first with Dalry.

**Richard Lochhead:** Option A in the paper would allow us to go straight from Parliament. Committee members who must travel long distances might find that option easier than having to come down on the Sunday or Monday.

**The Convener:** I am sorry. What are you suggesting?

**Richard Lochhead:** I am looking at option A, which mentions Friday 22 March. I assume that we are talking about Dalry?

**The Convener:** That option is almost certainly out of the question because of the availability of accommodation in Dalry. Jake Thomas has indicated that since the paper was published the situation has moved on. We are now more or less stuck with 19 March for the visit to Dalry.

**John Farquhar Munro:** Are you suggesting going down on Monday afternoon or in the forenoon?

**The Convener:** We will travel on Monday morning and conduct fact-finding visits in the afternoon. I know that that does not suit Richard Lochhead, but it is necessary to enable us to hold the committee meeting on Tuesday morning and return on Tuesday afternoon.

**John Farquhar Munro:** That makes eminently good sense.

**The Convener:** Would Richard Lochhead be

able to join us on Monday evening?

**Richard Lochhead:** Probably not.

**The Convener:** Given the fact that most of us are content with that, we will have to take that option.

**Richard Lochhead:** You cannot keep everyone happy.

**The Convener:** Are members content to follow a similar format on 23 April in Fort William? We will use Monday for fact finding, hold a committee meeting on Tuesday morning and return on Tuesday afternoon?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** We now move on to the appointment of an adviser. First, do members feel that we should have an adviser for this exercise? If we are going to conduct an inquiry of any significance, it would probably be worth appointing an adviser.

**Elaine Smith:** Are we meeting now in private?

**The Convener:** I am sorry. We should be meeting in private while we discuss this last item on the agenda.

First, we must decide whether we want an adviser. Are members content that we should appoint an adviser for the inquiry?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** The recommendations at the end of the paper are that we consider the matters that are outlined in the paper, that we decide whether to revert to fortnightly meetings—we have decided to do so—and that we decide on arrangements for stage 1 of the budget process, which we have done.

Another issue is whether we should agree to set aside regular slots during our meetings for consideration of petitions. I was at a Public Petitions Committee this morning at which it was noted—John Farquhar Munro is a member of that committee and might be able to advise us on the matter—that an increasing number of petitions seem to be coming to that committee.

**John Farquhar Munro:** Today's meeting was particularly heavy; it lasted three hours.

**The Convener:** The Public Petitions Committee has perhaps been a little bit late in getting petitions to us in the past. It has been suggested that we should set aside at every meeting a slot for petitions. Are members content with that suggestion?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** There are two further points. Does the committee agree the adviser

specification that is attached? Finally, do we agree that the work programme that is set out in the paper should form the basis of the committee's work programme from February to June 2002?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

16:27

*Meeting suspended until 16:35 and thereafter continued in private until 16:45.*

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