

RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 30 April 2002
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

12th 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

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED :

John Scott (Ayr) (Con)

WITNESSES

Jonathan Hall (Scottish Landowners Federation)
Adam Harrison (WWF Scotland)
David Henderson-Howat (Forestry Commission)
John Kinnaird (National Farmers Union of Scotland)
John Mayhew (National Trust for Scotland)
Fiona Newcombe (RSPB Scotland)
Ian Rideout (Scottish Crofting Foundation)
John Thomson (Scottish Natural Heritage)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Richard Davies

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mark Brough

ASSISTANT CLERK

Jake Thomas

LOCATION

The Hub

Scottish Parliament

Rural Development Committee

Tuesday 30 April 2002

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:01*]

The Convener (Alex Fergusson): Good afternoon. I welcome committee members, witnesses and members of the public to this meeting of the Rural Development Committee. I also extend a welcome to Linda Smith, who is shadowing Richard Lochhead as part of the Scottish Parliament's business exchange programme. She might be pleased to hear that I cannot invite her to speak to the agenda, but it is nice to have her here with us. I hope that she gets something out of the afternoon.

We have a full agenda this afternoon. If we can get through it all, the committee will not have to meet next week. If we do not have time to consider all the items, we will have to carry over a couple to next week. I hope that members will not be averse to doing a little bit of overtime if it means getting through the agenda.

Integrated Rural Development

The Convener: We are continuing with our inquiry into what makes for successful rural development and what presents significant barriers to development. This is the third of a series of evidence-taking sessions that we are holding on the inquiry and is the first that we have had in Edinburgh. For some of the meetings, we are travelling around the country and trying to pick up individual experiences of rural development. We have had two such meetings so far and I think that they have been successful. This is our first meeting in Edinburgh and we will be taking evidence from a number of agencies and representative bodies in two groups of four.

On our first panel, I welcome John Kinnaird, the vice-president of the National Farmers Union of Scotland, Jonathan Hall, the rural policy adviser of the Scottish Landowners Federation, Ian Rideout, the chief executive of the Scottish Crofting Foundation, and David Henderson-Howat, the chief conservator of the Forestry Commission.

We have already received some written submissions and, in view of the lengthy agenda that we have, I suggest that we proceed straight to questioning rather than taking opening statements.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I have a question for all the witnesses. What do you think is the biggest barrier to rural development in your areas?

John Kinnaird (National Farmers Union of Scotland): The biggest stumbling block is the need for an understanding of what is required. The clear understanding has to be that everything has to be integrated from all sectors, with farming playing a pivotal role in anything to do with what takes place in rural communities. That has been highlighted in the Scottish Executive's "A Forward Strategy for Scottish Agriculture". We have to consider where we go from here. We are involved in many different aspects of rural life, not just direct farming and production of food, but environment and local biodiversity. That involvement must be enhanced and continued.

Jonathan Hall (Scottish Landowners Federation): The single biggest impediment to integrated rural development is the lack of integration with policies that relate to the rural sector. We are continually redefining policy—in agriculture, forestry, field sports and so on—to overcome the difficulties that were created by rural policy in the first place. New policies result from an attempt to ameliorate the externalities of the initial policies. There is a fundamental need to address the integration of policy. There are many examples where policy could fit together better, given the will and commitment of the decision makers, whether

they are the Scottish Executive, the UK Government or the European Community. That would allow those involved in rural business and rural life to have security and knowledge in carving out their living and achieve inclusion in a more integrated way.

Ian Rideout (Scottish Crofting Foundation): The first barrier is the definition of integrated rural development, which is different for different people and agencies. There is a lack of a joined-up approach to economic, social, agricultural and environmental factors. Several agencies deal with those areas and take very different approaches. The other barrier is the way in which moneys are utilised to support the infrastructure that is required to enable integration to be developed.

David Henderson-Howat (Forestry Commission): Another important factor is people—the people who live in rural communities and those who work for agencies such as the Forestry Commission. We can do a lot in terms of providing advice and funding, but the people who live and work in rural communities are the most important factor.

Rhoda Grant: How can we involve people more in decision making?

David Henderson-Howat: That is something that we have been thinking about long and hard. It is useful to think in terms of different levels of engagement. Communities do not want the same level of engagement. We are keen to ensure that information is available to communities and, beyond that, that we consult and listen to communities. On another level, there are communities that want to engage more actively, and we want to develop partnership projects with such communities. However, one must recognise that the situation will differ in different parts of the country and over time. People come and go.

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I see a couple of familiar faces today. Perhaps you should become honorary members of the committee, given how much time you spend giving evidence to us.

The debate about integrated rural development has been going on for years and years. There are many competing interests in rural communities: environmental interests, farming interests and so on. The challenge is how we integrate all those competing interests. There are interest groups, communities, businesses, local government and central Government as well as a plethora of organisations and quangos. How on earth can we co-ordinate all of them? The list does not even include the 5 million people who live in Scotland, but only the organisations with vested interests. How do we reconcile so many inherently competing interests and so many organisations?

Can you think of any way round that, or is it unavoidable?

The Convener: Do you want to ask anyone specific?

Richard Lochhead: John Kinnaird was about to reach for the microphone, so perhaps we should hear from him first.

John Kinnaird: It is a good question. We currently talk with a lot of other single-issue bodies and will continue to do so because we have the rural community at heart and integration is important. How you actually go about pulling everyone together is a difficult question to answer. The NFUS is probably the only organisation that tries to represent every interest: environmental, forestry and production. We must pull all those bodies together and talk to them, not keep them at arm's length. That has been done in the past and has caused a lot of friction and problems, but I believe that those barriers are being broken down. We are starting to sit round tables and talk with one another. Rather than finding that we always have a difference of opinion, we have a lot of common answers and goals.

I want to send a positive message to anyone and any community that we are talking together, looking at resolving problems and heading in the same direction. That can benefit everyone in the community, not just the production side, the environmental side or the forestry side. A lead might come from the Scottish Executive, which could set up a rural working group to pull all those bodies together. That way, we can talk to one another and we will know where we are going and what we are trying to achieve for the benefit of all in rural communities and the economy at large.

David Henderson-Howat: We have been thinking hard about this matter. One interesting source of advice that we have come across is people who are based in Britain but have done quite a lot of overseas consultancy work. Many of the problems of integrated rural development are not unique to Scotland. The same issues have been faced up to in many developing countries. We have found it quite enlightening to ask people whose main career has taken place overseas to travel around Scotland and talk to people and to advise us as to how we might do things better.

Richard Lochhead: Do any of the witnesses have examples, either from other countries or from anywhere in Scotland, of stakeholders in communities coming together and successfully agreeing the way forward?

Ian Rideout: We are an example of that. We have service level agreements with two of the agencies to assist us and them in getting the information from the people on the ground and then implementing solutions locally. We are

working hard to reconcile the agricultural and environmental input. In townships and the wider crofting community, there are many cases where that has worked extremely well. There may be suspicion among a number of crofters about the environmental elements. There are lobby groups in certain parts of the Highlands and Islands that are fundamentally opposed to any agri-environment schemes, but in the main the message is being heard. The real problem is integrating the economic and social elements, which is proving slightly harder to achieve because of vested interests in certain agencies and groups. On the environmental front, however, there are certainly cases where an integrated approach is working.

Jonathan Hall: Just to reiterate what other witnesses have said, it is important to identify ways of achieving consensus among the different interest groups. I was interested to hear Richard Lochhead use the phrase "competing interests". I agree that there are competing interests out there that are an obstacle or constraint to integrated rural development, but we have to consider why they are competing interests. At the moment, we have separate, disjointed and disparate policies that force land managers, communities and environmentalists to make decisions that are not necessarily compatible with or complementary to the interests of others. We must have integrated policy before we can achieve integrated rural development.

We are all aware of the three dimensions of economic, social and environmental issues. We must be a little more imaginative in trying to achieve a fundamentally economic objective by securing farm incomes and retaining jobs. In doing that we must consider some of the ways in which we can achieve environmental and social benefit at the same time. Jobs create employment, which creates social inclusion. Let us consider those factors rather than simply saying, "Let's generate income."

14:15

John Kinnaird: To answer the second part of Richard Lochhead's question, a classic example is the forward strategy, which has been achieved by all interested parties pulling together and coming up with a common interest and a common aim.

The strategy is a good example of how things have been integrated and interested people from all sectors throughout rural communities have come up with something that we can drive forward and work together on. It covers every aspect of rural communities and concentrates on socioeconomic output, which is vital.

Further down the line, the forward strategy has

highlighted something called land management contracts, in which there will be cross-compliance and a lot of pulling together of interests from different parts of the community. Such contracts will also play a major role.

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I want to concentrate on what Jonathan Hall has just said and what the written submission from the Scottish Landowners Federation focuses on. It says:

"Rural development will not be advanced by broad common denominators of policy, which do not fit the realities and priorities of particular sectors or locations."

It goes on to say that

"the Scottish Executive must implement policy initiatives which do not contradict one another".

We have just heard from John Kinnaird an example of Scottish Executive policies that are helping and are integrated. We have not heard from Jonathan Hall which particular policies would fit the bill. He has identified a problem without saying anything about the nitty-gritty. I am after the nitty-gritty.

Jonathan Hall: I will give you an example of the nitty-gritty. Production support for sheep farming is based on the sheep annual premium scheme, which is a headage payment. At the same time, the Scottish Executive has a rural stewardship scheme that endeavours to prevent overgrazing. The economics of sheep farming and the economics of environmental management on farms are therefore pulling in opposite directions. A payment is made to sheep farmers to retain sheep, while the rural stewardship scheme includes an option for a payment to remove sheep. That can hardly be integrated rural development thinking when an environmental policy and an income-related policy are pulling in opposite directions.

Mr Rumbles: In which direction should the policy pull?

Jonathan Hall: Both. It should serve an environmental function and an economic function as well as a social function. There is no need for those to be three-dimensional. They do not have to be on opposite axes of a graph at 90 degrees from one another. There can be support for farming activity in the hills that is complementary to the delivery of biodiversity and conservation management in the hills, given the right positive incentives.

There is a common denominator of activity in all that. Activity means employment and labour, so the social objective is delivered. The old cliché has been heard many times: let us stop paying huge sums of money to support huge numbers of sheep and start to pay the shepherd, maintaining his

employment ahead of anything else. That is another argument.

Mr Rumbles: I am still a little confused, to be honest. You are identifying what you think of as the broad problems with general policy but I am asking for a specific example. Can you bring to mind any examples, other than the sheep business?

Jonathan Hall: There are several. We are conducting a review of nitrate vulnerable zones in Scotland. Some 18 per cent of Scottish agricultural land is likely to be designated and action programmes will be imposed on farmers. There is no tie-up between the nitrate vulnerable zones under the European nitrates directive and the rural stewardship scheme, which is part of the rural development plan and which is co-funded by Europe. Why not create an incentive, by using agricultural support payments within the rural stewardship scheme, to ensure that there is no need to go down the route of designating nitrate vulnerable zones and imposing mandatory action programmes? In three or four years' time, we will implement the water framework directive, which will overarch those areas anyway.

The Convener: How would you fund the rural stewardship scheme to do what you suggest?

Jonathan Hall: We have to take some of the competition out of the situation, but the fact that resources are limited means that the situation will always be competitive to a degree. We need a much larger budget, but where the increase comes from is down to hard political choices.

There is a role for modulation, but modulation should not be implemented solely by the UK, as that would give the UK a competitive disadvantage. It needs to be at a pace that the industry can afford and the funds for rural development need to be accessible by those who have been modulated. That is the biggest bugbear among colleagues in the National Farmers Union. It is one thing to top-slice 2.5 per cent, rising to 4.5 per cent, of direct support payments from Brussels, but a lack of access to the funds—which is the situation that would result from securing another rural stewardship scheme—would make the situation harder to swallow.

The mechanism for increasing agri-environment schemes and so on has to be accessible. The mechanisms in the rural stewardship scheme rule an awful lot of people out. There is a danger that the scheme will result in the good bits being made better but the other bits, where value could be added, being ignored.

Richard Lochhead: I presume that all the organisations represented here today make representations to the Government. If there are many such contradictions in the Government's

policies, why is the problem still there? Is the Government not listening?

David Henderson-Howat: I had better answer that, as I am, in a sense, the only Government official present today.

We work hard with the Executive. An example of that is the review that we are carrying out of the farm woodland premium scheme. In conducting that review, we have to examine carefully the boundary between the woodland grants and the rural stewardship scheme. Boundary issues will inevitably arise between schemes that have differing origins and over which Brussels exercises varying degrees of influence. Those of us who work with the Scottish Executive must do our best to identify those anomalies and try to prevent them.

John Kinnaid: I do not believe that the Government is listening. I believe that the Scottish Executive is listening and is doing all that it can, but I do not believe that the UK Government is listening to what is required.

Richard Lochhead: Are you drawing a distinction between the UK and the Scottish Governments?

John Kinnaid: Yes. Funding for agri-environment measures in Scotland is woefully inadequate, given that everybody wants to take part in it—it is somewhere in the region of £30 million. In Ireland, by contrast, the sum is £80 million.

It is dangerous to suggest that modulation is a means of funding environmental issues. Modulation would need to apply to close to 15,000 people for funds to be given back to 300 or 400 people. That is neither equitable nor can farming sustain it. Farming is not profitable at the moment and it has not been profitable for some time.

It is important for us to consider funding. A large proportion of funding should come from Brussels, but UK Government commitment is needed for that to happen. The Scottish Executive is committed, but the funding is not coming through. It has to come—the industry cannot fund farming alone.

Fifty per cent of the funding for modulation is to come from the Government, but will that situation last for ever? With the mid-term review, I believe firmly that the figure is under threat. If it were to be threatened, that would lead to a further potential cut in funding for agri-environmental measures, which has to be wrong. The total budget is far too small and that is a UK Government problem.

I believe that the Scottish Executive would like to see an increase in funding, but it has to put pressure on the UK Government to go to Brussels and get an increase. That would be of benefit to

all. Any agri-environmental measures should and must apply to Scotland as a whole and not only to certain areas in Scotland. Why should it go to the east, the west or wherever? The measures should apply across the whole of Scotland.

If modulation has to apply, surely it is vital that the funds go back, if possible, to the individual holdings where agri-environmental measures can have a major impact across the whole of Scotland and not only in parts of it. We have to remember that the budget is woefully underfunded.

The Convener: To achieve some sort of vision—that is what we have to call it at the moment—would you favour a system in which all the current agricultural support is pooled? If so, at which point would a measure of whole farm support be made available to all farmers? When would that be done as part of a land management contract, for example, to avoid the current systems of bidding and subsidies? Is that a feasible alternative and, if so, what has to be done to achieve it?

John Kinnaid: We will be heading that way. There is a clear pointer that that will happen. You referred to that when you spoke about the land management contract. That is some way down the line. I understand that land management contracts will not be made available until 2005-06 at the earliest. We have to work towards that target. It is important that we do so on individual farms.

Taking funds away from production was mentioned. Members have to remember that 85 per cent of Scotland is covered by the less favoured areas scheme. The changeover to that scheme took away the linkage between headage and production. Payments are now based solely on area, which caused real distortion in the areas that the LFA scheme covers.

Although the same budget is spent, the majority of the winners under the scheme have large tracts of land with little economic downstream activity. That issue has to be re-addressed. With 85 per cent of Scotland covered by the LFA scheme, it is important that money is maintained for the purpose not only of production but of putting money back into the local community. We can see that, over the past two years, that has not happened.

The Convener: The LFA assessment does not take into account subsidies such as the sheep annual premium, which is one of the larger amounts of money that farmers receive. If all agricultural support is lumped into one fund, will that lead to the potential for an even greater distortion? Are you saying that it is not a simple thing to achieve?

John Kinnaid: It is not a simple thing to achieve. More work has to be done. I know that

the Minister for Environment and Rural Development is examining the possibility of pulling together a working group that would consider land management contracts and how they can be delivered. I am sure that that is how the bulk of farm support will be delivered in future. However, the detail of such contracts has to be correct before we can consider entering into them.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Is it right that 85 per cent of Scotland is under the LFA scheme?

John Kinnaid: Yes. We should argue in Brussels for even more of Scotland to be given LFA status. Many farms in the dairy sector are covered by it, but are excluded from many LFA payments. The less favoured areas scheme replaced hill livestock compensatory allowances. HLCAs existed for one purpose—to maintain employment in fragile rural communities. When money is taken out of such communities, that has a major impact on their well-being. It is vital that the money should remain there. We are talking about large tracts of Scotland—85 per cent of the country. The figure could be higher.

14:30

Mr McGrigor: It has been put to me that some of the tracts to which you refer are much better off than others, but are under the same scheme.

John Kinnaid: That is perfectly true. However, there are different rates of payment depending on the level of disadvantage in an area.

Mr McGrigor: My second question is for Ian Rideout. You say that crofting is still being held back by the fact that restrictions that were imposed as a result of foot-and-mouth disease have not been lifted. Will you comment on that?

Ian Rideout: The main example of those restrictions is the 30-month rule. Many crofters produce native breeds that mature more slowly. They cannot get that quality product on to the market at less than 30 months. The evidence that has been cited in support of the ban, which has been submitted to members and passed on to us, is fairly spurious. There is no logical reason for not lifting the ban, which is very detrimental to cattle producers in the Western Isles, particularly Lewis, and throughout the Highlands and Islands. There is no scientific reason for not lifting the ban.

Mr McGrigor: Is there no derogation for rare or native breeds? Is there not also a 40-month restriction?

Ian Rideout: Not at the moment. Everything is still governed by the 30-month rule. The argument for retaining the current restriction is that a suspected case of BSE has been found in a Highland cow somewhere, but no one will disclose

where the case was found. We suspect that it was found on a park in England.

Mr McGrigor: My last question is directed at the SLF, but it also relates to the Forestry Commission. First, I see nothing in the SLF's written submission about the significance of sporting interests for rural employment. By that I mean shooting, fishing and stalking interests, which are important in rural Scotland and affect a large number of areas.

Secondly, what is the Forestry Commission's policy on deer management? Are you making full use of the employment opportunities that that presents, by treating deer as a species to be culled rather than slaughtered?

Jonathan Hall: Paragraph 3 of our submission states:

"It is necessary that policies relating to agriculture, forestry and field sports sit alongside positions on biodiversity, tourism, SME development, waste management and"

all the other elements of the rural economy. All legitimate field sports should be encouraged and infrastructure support should be made available to them. However, as we know, there is no clear public support for activities such as shooting and fishing. Much employment effort—for example, the creation of the right habitats and environments—is subsidised by the private purse. I recommend that consideration should be given to field sports as a legitimate land use. Because of the multiple benefits that such activities generate, they should qualify for inclusion in an integrated rural development package, in the same way as other legitimate land uses qualify.

Mr McGrigor: I would like to qualify what I said earlier. In the past, the Forestry Commission treated deer as a source of income, but it appears that the policy has now changed. The commission used to bring in stalkers to cull deer and, to certain extent, to manage herds. Now it seems that deer are shot all year round for no reason. I know of forestry rangers whose incomes have been virtually halved by that change in policy, which has resulted in money being taken out of the local kitty, if you like.

David Henderson-Howat: There has always been an element of income from deer management. The objective of managing the deer is to protect the trees and the habitat, not to maximise income from deer. Having said that, there is a professional standard of deer management within Forest Enterprise. As a whole, the Forestry Commission works closely with the Deer Commission for Scotland. I think that Jamie McGrigor is talking about day permit shooting, for which opportunities still exist. Forest Enterprise has also been able to put a big effort into helping to develop venison markets.

Mr McGrigor: May I follow that up, convener?

The Convener: Okay, but this must be your last question.

Mr McGrigor: Although you say that there are day permits in certain areas, I am talking about the quite large number of places in which there are no day permits. The policy seems to have been reversed in those places. An enormous number of forests grew up with plenty of deer in them, but there seems to be a perception within the Forestry Commission that the only good deer is a dead one.

David Henderson-Howat: That is certainly not the case. As I said, our primary interest is the protection of the trees and the habitat. It is absolutely the case that we work with the Deer Commission for Scotland and, if out-of-season shooting has to take place, it will be undertaken under permit from the Deer Commission for Scotland.

Mr Rumbles: I will follow on from Jamie McGrigor's point. Deer fences and culling are live issues in Deeside, and have been brought to my attention. There is concern that there is too much reliance on deer fences—people are worried about the capercaillie. What are your thoughts about that? Does the Forestry Commission have the right policy on deer fences?

David Henderson-Howat: You are right to identify that as a difficult issue. We certainly recognise the potential threat of deer fences to woodland grouse. That is why our policy is that deer fences should be regarded as the last resort. There may even be cases in which the risks for woodland grouse are particularly high and where it is not possible to erect deer fences. We fully recognise that sometimes we have to try to square a circle, which can create enormous difficulties in areas in which there happen to be large deer populations. As things stand, we say that we do not want deer fences in places in which there is a high risk to woodland grouse species—particularly capercaillie.

Rhoda Grant: I want to ask about an issue that came up when the committee was in Lochaber. Many of the people who gave evidence to us at that meeting mentioned access to land for housing. There is a difficulty in building new housing and many local economies seem to be held back by lack of housing. The witnesses represent bodies that own or control land and I would like to know their thoughts on how making land available for housing could be made easier.

Jonathan Hall: The SLF has a rural housing committee and we are working closely with the Executive in an attempt to ensure that the rural private rented sector is able to play its part in providing affordable rural housing. We recognise

that the lack of affordable rural housing is constraining rural development, not least in respect of labour mobility.

We work with Communities Scotland, which was formerly Scottish Homes. Two years ago, Scottish Homes commissioned a survey from Heriot-Watt University, which surveyed the entire SLF membership—landowners and existing tenants—about housing provision. The survey tried to identify some of the constraints on further provision of rural housing and identified a number of conclusions and recommendations. It was clear from the survey that land availability was not a constraint and that the planning process, which tends to be neglected, was one of the biggest constraints on the provision of affordable housing.

Likewise, 99.7 per cent of the entire Communities Scotland grant of £175 million for 2000-01 is going to housing associations, which leaves only £1.2 million for other providers, of which the rural private sector is one. As members of the Rural Development Committee know, the more rural and area is, the more important the private sector becomes in housing provision. On 28 February, we met the Minister for Social Justice, Iain Gray, to discuss some of those issues and to raise our concerns that the planning system and the mechanisms for accessing grants are hindering further provision of affordable housing. The focus tends to be on what is referred to in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 as “social housing”. However, social housing is in the public domain, which means that the private sector gets ignored. There is a subtle, but very important difference between social housing and affordable housing. All social housing is affordable, but not all affordable housing is necessarily social—by which I mean public—housing. Although the private rented sector has a role to play, it is constrained both in its access to grants and grant support systems and by the taxation system, in particular the levying of VAT on renovations. Such constraints are disincentives to those who could provide housing in the rural sector.

Richard Lochhead: You mentioned housing associations. During the passage of the Housing (Scotland) Bill, there was controversy over the introduction of right to buy for housing associations. However, housing associations told us time and again that one of the reasons that they did not want the right to buy was that they could not expand out of rural communities because local landowners would not sell their land. Why should landowners sell land cheaply for local affordable social housing when, presumably, they could build nice big chalets on it and rent them out? Does your association address that issue? For example, do you have a code of practice, or even a presumption in favour of releasing land for social housing?

Jonathan Hall: We have a presumption in favour of releasing land for development if it is in the interests of the community and the landowner. After all, the land is the landowner's asset, and they should not necessarily just throw it away for whatever price. Equally, we have a code of practice for responsible land management that clearly states that all community involvement in decisions on individual land-holdings should be taken into account.

We like to think that, particularly with some of the larger estates that are owned by members of the SLF, any decisions on the sale or otherwise of parcels of land should recognise the community's demands and expectations. If there is a need for land and for affordable housing, we would encourage that land, where possible, to be made available. However, we are not a closed shop. We certainly cannot dictate the business objectives of what are, essentially, rural businesses.

Richard Lochhead: Should the SLF examine the issue and find out whether it can take any action? I am a little bit surprised that the SLF has gone out of its way to mention rural housing in its submission to the committee. You seem to have concluded that if there is a shortage of land for housing in rural communities, the SLF might be in favour of helping with that situation. What are you doing to achieve that aim?

Jonathan Hall: We are encouraging our members to engage more and more in rural housing provision. We recognise that, with the decline in the number of gamekeepers, shepherds and other labourers who are employed directly on farms and estates, existing housing has become available for renovation. However, as you rightly point out, we also have to consider the issue of new build. The current grant system provides no incentives for new build. If new build were to come exclusively from borrowings or private investment, the rents that would have to be charged to recover costs would make the housing non-affordable in the rural context.

We are negotiating with Communities Scotland to develop an in-house service within the SLF to bridge the gap between our members and the planning and local authorities as they draw up their local housing strategies. Instead of being viewed as a constraint, the land availability issue should not be an issue at all.

Richard Lochhead: Are you saying that there should be more assistance to help landowners to build houses on their own land, or more assistance to help other people to build houses on their own land?

Jonathan Hall: It does not matter—

Richard Lochhead: Are you talking about ownership within estates?

Jonathan Hall: Housing could be developed on estate land and those houses could then be sold off, or land could be released to housing associations so that they could build on it. We recognise that the lack of affordable rural housing is a constraint in respect of integrated rural development, as our written statement says.

14:45

The Convener: Does Jamie McGrigor have a question on the same subject?

Mr McGrigor: Yes. The issue is important. Last week, Hugh Allen of the Mallaig and North West Fishermen's Association told us that a processing factory in Mallaig closed down because the workers could not find anywhere to live. Is there something wrong with the planning process? Does that process consider the impact of a new business in an area and the fact that housing may be required immediately? Is there a presumption against allowing planning permission, as a view might be spoiled?

Jonathan Hall: There is always an element of that. With the development of national parks in Scotland, for example, there is a danger that that approach might be reinforced in some areas. Occasionally, there are conflicts between development of the built environment and landscape issues.

On the planning regulations, a review is under way of national planning policy guideline 3, which concerns housing development. I hope that something good will come out of the Scottish Executive's consultation and that a more sympathetic approach to housing development can be established. However, at the moment, there is a clear constraint. When local authorities receive planning applications, there is almost a presumption against and one is almost guilty until proven innocent. The case must be made. We are aware that housing is a significant problem in the remoter rural areas of Scotland, particularly when it is related to labour mobility.

Mr McGrigor: Do you think that landowners would be happier and more willing to release more areas of land if the planning authorities allowed them to?

Jonathan Hall: Certain individuals would definitely be happier and more willing. I know of individuals who would want to engage more in that aspect of land use and land management.

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): Several questions on examples of joint working between agencies have been raised. I spent most of yesterday with Forest Enterprise in Aviemore, at Rothiemurchus. I saw tremendous examples of joint working between Forest Enterprise, the local community, the local

farming community and business interests in that area. There seemed to be a vibrancy in the community that could be an example for other areas of the country. I travel around the Highlands and know that there are many areas in which joint working between agencies is effective. We should not be too critical of agencies that are trying to develop and sustain employment in rural communities.

My question applies to all four witnesses and takes us away from the issue of joint working. There are proposals on the right to buy tenanted farms. Mr Rideout will explain that existing crofters have an absolute right to buy at around 15 times their annual rent. What is the current thinking on the possibility of tenant farmers having the option to buy through a formula whereby they could acquire their farm at an agreed sum of money that might not be 15 times the annual rent, but that would give them the opportunity to acquire such farms?

The Convener: When you answer that question, it is important to bear in mind that the draft legislation is already on the table and a system of valuation has been set up. We do not want to fall out about that, gentlemen. Perhaps John Kinnaird will go first.

John Kinnaird: It is an important question, but as the convener said, the current draft bill on agricultural holdings is a complete change and the biggest step forward in agriculture tenancy holdings legislation in the past 50 years. It proposes freeing up much more land in the tenanted sector and allowing a lot of diversity, not just agriculture. That will help rural communities and the tenanted sector to thrive. Scottish agriculture depends on the tenanted sector, which is important.

The tenants' right to buy in the draft bill is a proposal. The Executive is looking for ideas rather than coming up with ideas and looking for comments. The right to buy should be available to fully secured tenants only, and it should be a pre-emptive right to buy, not an absolute right. When a farm is put up for sale and the landlord is a willing seller, the person who has farmed that land for three or four generations should have the option to purchase that land. They have invested a lot of time, money and effort in farming that holding and they should be given the option to buy it. It is not compulsory for them to buy it, but they should be given the first option or a pre-emptive right to buy.

When estates sell farms, they often offer them to the sitting tenant anyway. All that the bill would do would be to put that into legislation. However, the right to buy has to be pre-emptive, not absolute, and it should be for secured tenants only.

John Farquhar Munro: Would that be at market value and not at a discounted rate?

John Kinnaird: It would be at the market value with a sitting tenant. If a landlord is putting a tenanted farm up for sale, they are selling a farm with a tenant; they are not selling a farm without a tenant.

Jonathan Hall: I support what John Kinnaird said about the proposals in the draft agricultural holdings bill, which offer an immense opportunity, not for the tenanted sector or the owner-occupier sector, but for Scottish agriculture. The flexibility that has been lacking in the release and availability of land, and in what can be done with that land under an agricultural tenancy, will be attained. That must be good for rural development.

Our organisation is concerned that what might come out of any consultation on a pre-emptive right to buy might create an absolute right to buy. A tenant could therefore wake up one morning and demand that he be sold the land that he has farmed for some time. That is fundamentally wrong. We have the same difficulty with the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill. I am sure that all members of the Rural Development Committee are aware of that.

A lot of progress can be made towards creating an agricultural tenure system in Scotland, and parties can come together for mutual benefit and the benefit of rural Scotland. As John Kinnaird said, the tenancy system has worked well. Investment and risk are shared, both sides contribute and the benefits are increased as a result.

Ian Rideout: We have been approached by a number of small tenant farmers who would like to be considered as crofters, because they would have an individual right to buy. According to some of the discussions on the crofting law reform white paper, it is proposed that the individual right to buy should be restricted to the creation of new croft land, to try to get the land into crofting. We have concerns about that, which we have raised with SEERAD at various stages, because it would create different classes of crofter. There is a will for the small tenant farmers in Badenoch and Strathspey, whose activities to some extent are crofting orientated, to have the right to buy. They should have that right, or the boundaries of the crofting counties should be extended to include them, so that they could be redesignated as crofters.

The Convener: I hope that members will bear with me, but we will return to this issue later in our discussions on legislation. I would like to move on.

Mr Rumbles: Curiously enough, convener, I wanted to hear from David Henderson-Howat on this issue. The Forestry Commission's written submission states:

"Historically, there has undoubtedly been something of a

divide between forestry and farming in Scotland. This is in marked contrast to other countries with similar geography and has probably developed for a variety of reasons such as those associated with land tenure. For example, tenants have traditionally not had an interest in the trees on their holdings."

Will the proposed legislation that we will discuss later address that issue with regard to integrated rural development, and will it be a good thing?

David Henderson-Howat: The draft bill contains proposals to help tenants who want to plant trees and manage woodland on their land. The proposals are detailed, but that is the guts of them.

The Convener: Would the proposals prevent the situation in which tenants plant land but, 40 years later, are not given a licence to extract? That is one of my pet subjects, as you know. There is a growing situation in Scotland whereby large areas of land that were planted 40 or 50 years ago, and which are coming up to maturity, are landlocked and extraction is being prevented by councils putting weight restrictions on roads. It cannot be denied that lorries cause damage, but a major asset in the countryside is being compromised. I hope that it is not a stand-off situation, but undoubtedly the councils' position is a hindrance and has produced a barrier to the value-added effect of the assets. Would you address that point?

David Henderson-Howat: That is a separate issue, but it is a serious problem in some parts of the country where, not to put too fine a point on it, the roads are cart tracks with a layer of tar on them. We are encouraging the development of good working relationships between local authorities and forest owners to address the problems. There is a fundamental problem about cash, but there are ways and means of mitigating the roads problem through finding alternative routes and using other forest roads to compromise on the density of use of timber wagons.

The Convener: Does the Forestry Commission allow private forestry companies to access roads on Forestry Commission land?

David Henderson-Howat: Yes.

The Convener: We have two or three minutes left. We will take a short question from Jamie McGrigor.

Mr McGrigor: I have another question for David Henderson-Howat. I can identify two forestry villages in Argyll—Dalavich and Eredine—which were large villages, built in the 1940s, to house forestry workers. In those days, and until 25 or 30 years ago, most of the houses were inhabited by people who worked for the Forestry Commission. Now, none of them are, and the employment is centralised in an office south of Lochgilphead. All those jobs have gone. Why has that happened? Is

there any hope of bringing back a structure like the original Forestry Commission structure, in which people worked through each stage of forestry, and were actually employed in the forest?

David Henderson-Howat: I understand what you are saying. I used to work in Strathgryre forest, and I remember reading that in the 1950s it was forecast that 60 men would be employed in harvesting by now, but of course that was just before the development of the chainsaw. Following the development of the chainsaw, harvesting machinery was developed. The nature of jobs in the forest has changed through mechanisation and that poses new challenges for rural communities that have a lot of forest in their area.

I would like to leave committee members with one thought. The primary forestry industry of timber production is clearly important, but we must also consider the wider range of job opportunities that may exist—in tourism, for example. During the foot-and-mouth crisis, when the forests were closed for a short time as a precaution, our local staff were amazed at the number of people who rang up and said that they ran small businesses that depended on access to forests for wildlife viewing or whatever. Apart from the traditional forestry jobs, a huge number of jobs exists.

15:00

The Convener: That concludes this part of the meeting. I thank the witnesses for their time, which has been extremely useful. You are welcome to stay and listen to the rest of the meeting.

I have been remiss—I hope that members and others will forgive me—but earlier I should have welcomed and introduced Dr Frank Rennie, who is our adviser on the inquiry. This is the first time that he has been able to be with us. You are very welcome, Dr Rennie, and I am sure that we will get to know each other much better before this exercise is over.

I welcome the second panel of witnesses to the table. Adam Harrison is from WWF Scotland, Fiona Newcombe is from RSPB Scotland, John Mayhew is from the National Trust for Scotland and John Thomson is from Scottish Natural Heritage. Thank you for giving us your time.

As the witnesses know, we will not have oral submissions from you today, we will just have questions and answers. I will start by asking a question that was put to the previous panel of witnesses. What is the most important restraint on rural development?

Adam Harrison (WWF Scotland): I would not disagree with much that the previous panel said about integration. However, I would like to take a

step further and consider two other important elements—where decisions are made and who makes them. We have to set up systems to allow decisions about rural development to focus on the localities and the territory in the area in question. The system should be able to take account of the complexity of the pressures and needs in that area and respond to them. An essential part of creating such a system will be to change the sorts of people who make the decisions. Partnerships have been mentioned; we must have a more dialogue-based and partnership-based approach to making policy decisions.

The role of community planning should be brought to the committee's attention. The Executive has committed itself to considering policies in the context of specific areas—tied to local authority areas—and to considering active partnerships for developing those policies and for thinking about what public expenditure should achieve. As the outline proposals for the forthcoming local government bill say, policies will impact on rural development and on the full range of things that have been spoken about this afternoon. I presume that, in other meetings, the committee will have heard about all the issues that affect rural people.

Fiona Newcombe (RSPB Scotland): Thank you for inviting me along this afternoon.

I see two barriers to integrated rural development. The first is the need to take account of wildlife or environment issues in integrated rural development policies. An example of where that is not happening is in the less favoured areas support scheme, about which we heard earlier. The working group that the Executive set up includes only land management interests; it does not include environmental non-governmental organisations. The less favoured areas scheme is supposed to deliver environmental objectives as well as social and economic ones.

Secondly, I underline what Adam Harrison has said about the need for better decision making at the local level. The local biodiversity action plan process has been a good example of people getting together round the table and starting to get a better understanding of the issues and a sense of local ownership. We must give those people an opportunity to access policies; land management contracts could be a way of doing that.

John Mayhew (National Trust for Scotland): I have read the *Official Reports* of the committee's meetings in Galloway and Lochaber and I have read some of the written evidence that was submitted. It seems to me that the committee has heard positive messages of excellent examples of integrated rural development. However, it seems that the wheel has had to be reinvented on each occasion. There have been the LEADER projects

and the Dùthchas projects in particularly remote parts of the Highlands and Islands, with which I am more familiar. I have also read about the southern uplands partnership. In each of those cases, a partnership had to be formed, staff appointed, funding brought in and a system invented to bring all the different agencies round the table. The process is long and complicated, but it seems to bear results.

The barrier that I envisage coming out of that process relates to the fact that, although there are many good examples of local practice, there is no national model. I am concerned about the wheel being reinvented. There should be a national method of ensuring that local agencies can work on partnership projects to achieve the level of integration that the committee seeks.

The proposal on the table is about community planning—I would not want to disagree with Adam Harrison about that. Rather than inventing something new, we should make community planning, which is about to have statutory force, work. Although the local authority is rightly the local democratic focus for much decision making, it is by no means the only player in the housing, planning, transport development and land management issues that the committee has heard about. If community planning is the means—I think that it could be—of bringing together all the relevant agencies that represent all the different interests, including the local authority, that could make a difference in the future. I like to think that it will.

John Thomson (Scottish Natural Heritage): I endorse almost everything that has been said, particularly about the need to decentralise decision making and focus on place rather than on activity. That is crucial. A symbol of that might be to move away from having an all-Scotland rural development plan—with the exception of the special transitional programme area in the Highlands and Islands—towards regionalised rural development plans. That would be an important move.

A current challenge is to define targets for public agencies that require co-operation rather than just individual delivery. It is right that there is a big emphasis on the accountability of public bodies, as reflected in the setting of targets that relate to what are perceived as the core activities on which those public bodies must deliver. If we are saying that integrated rural development requires partnership and collaboration, we must find a way of setting objectives and targets that require and force that collaboration.

Processes such as community planning might be a means of doing that. If we can define, through the community planning process, objectives and targets that can be delivered only

through partnership—others might be delivered directly by individual agencies—performance could be measured, at least in part, against the delivery of those objectives. If we do not do that, there is a real danger that many bodies will face two conflicting pressures. One will be to work in partnership; the other will be to deliver targets that are the sole responsibility of that body.

Mr Rumbles: The SNH submission says:

“IRD also offers opportunities for greater community involvement, and community based development”.

I hope that you are aware of the evidence that we heard in Lochaber from Aidan McEoin from Rum, which is run by SNH, although not owned by it. I was struck by his comments about children who are brought up on Rum, who go away for their education, for example, but do not have the right to come back in future years. The evidence that he gave us seemed to suggest that there is an issue about how seriously SNH takes its role as a land manager on Rum. I know that most of the community is employed by SNH, but there are issues about the rights of dependants and families. Are you aware of the evidence that we heard last week, and if so, how would you rebut it?

John Thomson: I have to attach a caveat to what I say because I am not directly involved in the management of Rum and so I am not familiar with all the details. I picked up the gist of what was said last week. There is a real dilemma for anyone who owns an island such as Rum, because its capacity to support economically gainful activity is probably fairly limited. That should be noted at the outset.

In the past few years, we have seen a progressive move by SNH towards a recognition that its responsibilities as a landowner on Rum extend beyond its duty to run a top-quality nature reserve. As members will know, we have been talking about ways in which land can be freed up for housing for non-SNH employees, to provide them with a basis from which to run individual enterprises on the island, which would capitalise on its natural heritage qualities and interests. We have run up against certain barriers, such as the electricity generation capacity on the island—that can be overcome only by substantial investment, which we would find impossible to fund in the current financial circumstances. There are real difficulties, but we have moved a good way in the past few years in recognising that our responsibilities as a landowner on Rum extend beyond the traditional ones.

Mr Rumbles: I want to pursue that issue, because it is important. It has been put to me privately that Rum is very much a company island. That is an amazing situation for a governmental organisation to be in. You said that you have moved a long way in the past few years in

recognising your responsibilities to the people who live and work on the island. Can you give us an example of that?

John Thomson: There was a time when decisions about what happened on Rum were seen as internal management decisions made with relatively little reference to the people who lived on the island. I think that we can say that that has all changed—there is greater openness and debate about the future of the island.

Mr Rumbles: That is what I am trying to get at. How has it changed and what have you done?

John Thomson: As I said at the outset, I am not involved in the detailed management of the island, so I cannot give you specific examples. However, I know that there has been a lot of discussion of that sort.

Richard Lochhead: I have two questions. The first is for the WWF. You say that integrated development needs

“to recast sectoral and even crosscutting policy thinking within the context of area-based approaches to rural development.”

In plain English, does that mean community planning?

Adam Harrison: Community planning offers many possibilities, but it is difficult to speak in exact terms so early in the process. Certainly, the intentions behind the rhetoric on community planning—to consider what contributes to the well-being of communities in certain areas—are at the heart of integrated rural development. Community planning offers many possibilities because local authority partnerships and parts of the Executive are committed to it as a political process. If that commitment were established throughout the Executive, we would be in a good position to tackle many of the problems that rural communities face. Community planning is one of the best options.

15:15

Richard Lochhead: Perhaps you should put your submissions through a plain-English test in future.

Another point from your submission, which I am sympathetic towards, is the fact that public aid is not spread evenly among Scotland's farmers. The submission states:

“in Scotland, 12,000 of the 23,000 farmers received less than £2,500 whereas 27 received an average of £350,000.”

Are changes required to the way in which the cash is awarded? Would it be worth while, in the context of rural development, to take into account employment when the grants are distributed? I understand from previous evidence that there are

no links between the amount of cash that is given to farms through the common agricultural policy and the number of people whom they employ.

Adam Harrison: The criterion for what the public money should go on is connected largely to the production of food, which is why the distribution of the money has a distorted pattern. As the money is public, it should go towards the public good. In some cases, that is food, but the public might legitimately want to spend the money on other issues, such as employment and environmental benefits. We must set much more sophisticated and varied targets for what we want to achieve with the money and the money should follow those targets.

Modulation is one mechanism that would allow us to start to do that without changing European Union policy. The regulation that allows modulation would allow precisely what you ask for, which is to target money away from farms that are over-supported compared with the average, away from those that employ less labour than the average and—in an ideal world—away from those that produce higher than average profits. Modulation could be used to alter the priorities so that the production of food is not a priority and so that employment in remote rural areas is one. If modulation were used in the way in which the EU intended, public money could be redirected to areas that really need it and to areas in which the money could be used to give environmental benefits.

Mr McGrigor: I have a question for John Mayhew on his definition of integrated rural development, which seems to imply that monocultures are a bad thing. His submission states that we must have

“social and economic objectives without favouring one at the expense of others.”

Are you saying that monocultures, such as huge blocks of Sitka spruce or salmon farming in sea lochs, are barriers to integrated rural development?

Your submission also states that environmental initiatives that lack local support

“cannot be considered as integrated”.

Will you identify an environmental initiative that you consider lacks local support? Furthermore, I ask the witness from SNH what his procedure is for consultation with local people before designations are put into place.

John Mayhew: You have read something into our submission, but I will not argue with what you say. There is a place for salmon farming in some sea lochs and for productive timber. I agree that the larger the area of land that is given over to one purpose at the expense of another, the less

integrated it is likely to be. We try to consider all aspects of the heritage significance of our properties and their potential for public enjoyment and community development.

I was making a general point. I know that the definition of integrated rural development has exercised the committee, so I thought that I would have a stab at it. It is not far from the idea of sustainable development, but it has to further environmental, social and economic objectives. It is also about integrated delivery—we talked earlier about the mechanisms for how that could happen.

I did not have a particular project in mind in my submission. I included in my definition economic, social and environmental objectives. We have passed the time when an environmental organisation, whether the National Trust for Scotland or anybody else, could say that a piece of land was purely for the environment without considering economic or social objectives. We have also passed the time when any piece of land could be run purely for profit without thinking about the environment, because that public good is valuable to communities locally and nationally. That type of thinking has passed. I hope that we would all want to consider all three objectives, both on our land and in advising others.

The Convener: The second part of Jamie McGrigor's question was to John Thomson.

John Thomson: The procedures that we follow in designating land as a site of special scientific interest, which is primarily what you have in mind, although there are a range of designations, are laid down in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The act requires us to consult owners and occupiers of the land that has been identified as being of special interest and give them three months to respond to us. That consultation is essentially about the scientific interest of the site. People comment on other aspects and we try to take into account the other social or economic issues that they raise. Under the act, SNH has a duty to designate any area that is of the requisite scientific interest, irrespective of socioeconomic concerns. We try to take those concerns into account when we consider the future management of the area.

As a matter of good practice—rather than what is required by law—we try to consult informally and extensively before we embark on the formal designation process. It is unfortunate that in some of the recent cases that Jamie McGrigor has in mind the time that was available for such informal consultation was minimal. We were working to time scales that the Scottish Executive laid down and that relate to its responsibilities for meeting obligations under European directives. Nonetheless, we have always endeavoured to speak to people informally before we embark on

the formal designation process.

Mr McGrigor: Do you accept that in some cases your designations might interfere with local employment?

John Thomson: Yes. Inevitably, the conservation obligations that are associated with some designations could prevent certain types of development that could bring employment. On the other hand, we emphasise that all sorts of other economic opportunities can be associated with the environmental qualities for which an area is being designated. We do our best to work with people to identify and take advantage of such opportunities. If a development is seen as problematic for the environmental interests, we try to find ways of working with people to make it acceptable. Often we engage in extensive discussions about ways in which proposals may be modified, which may involve changes in design or relocation.

One of the great benefits of processes such as community planning is that it is possible for us, in discussion with other parties, to indicate at the outset the constraints that we see associated with designations that have been made in an area. We can then talk about working around and taking advantage of those to create a viable future for the community in question. It is important to engage in dialogue of that sort at an early stage. All our experience suggests that the worst problems with development in designated areas tend to arise if a proposal is well down the road before we become involved. By that stage, a great deal of effort may have been put into a proposal that is problematic from a natural heritage standpoint. If there had been earlier engagement and dialogue, we might between us have been able to find a way through that was satisfactory to all parties.

The Convener: I would like to draw you out further on this topic. Last week in Lochaber, it was put to us that, in the view of many people, one of the biggest barriers to meaningful integrated rural development is the fact that an increasing amount of Scotland is being made subject to fairly strict designations. What do you say to that? I ask that question as someone who was slightly involved with the proposed SSSI for the south-west of Scotland, which is the area that I come from. People whose land was affected by that designation had to sign a list of conditions that made it clear that economic development was a no-no. For that reason, there was considerable opposition to the proposal and the decision was put off for a year. In one or two instances, people managed to work their way round it. There is a growing feeling that SNH has an authoritarian side and is acting as a significant barrier to development.

John Thomson: I have a number of comments to make in response. First, you referred to a list

that apparently prohibits this, that or the other activity and to which people must put their names. That so-called potentially damaging operations list merely requires people to consult SNH if they propose to do some of the things that appear on it. In most cases, if people consult us, we say that we are perfectly happy for them to proceed with the proposed activity. The list does not prohibit activities in the way that has been suggested.

I know that many people are resistant to the idea that every time they want to change their management practices they should have to consult us. In practice, we usually find that, when we are designating a site, we can discuss the list with the landowner or land manager concerned. We can also issue in advance consents that indicate that we have no problem with the way in which they want to manage their land and that what they propose may be necessary in the interests of natural heritage. Such consents make it clear that we are happy for the landowner or land manager to proceed with their plans without reference to us in the future. I agree that the list of prohibitions can look stark and authoritarian, but in practice it is not.

Secondly, the fact of designation implies that an area has real public value. An area is designated because something about it is seen as important at national or international level—or, indeed, at both levels. That implies that people from outwith the area are interested in something there, would like to see it and would like it to be looked after. As I said, that creates an opportunity.

The challenge is to capitalise on that sort of opportunity. For individual enterprises, that means thinking about what could be done to capitalise on the fact that an area is regarded as of high environmental value. In the longer run—in the context of how public policy and the basis on which public funding is provided may evolve—if a wider community values the area for its existing natural heritage qualities, which are usually the result of past and present management, there is a responsibility on the wider community to help to fund that management in the future.

We are beginning to see that connection being made. A substantial amount of money has been allocated to the management of such areas, over many years, through the management agreements of SNH and its predecessor bodies. The natural care programme has now been established, which will increase that amount significantly. In the context of further reform of the CAP, there is a real opportunity to argue that more of the money that comes from Europe should be linked to delivering the management—agricultural and otherwise—of land that is regarded as of European importance for its conservation interest. In addition, as I said, we always try to be sensitive to local aspirations in

the way in which we respond to proposals for the management of land in designated areas.

15:30

Rhoda Grant: My questions lead on from the points that have been made, but concern ordinary issues, not issues to do with SSSIs or the like.

Quite often, people tell me that they find it difficult to deal with SNH, the RSPB and other agencies because they feel that those agencies will try to stop whatever kind of development they are looking for and that there seems to be no partnership working before plans are introduced.

In the case of environmental assessments, for example, the local community often knows more about what is in the environment than scientists who visit for a couple of days. It is often put to me that matters that are not relevant are brought up in those assessments and that matters that are quite important to the area are not. It strikes me that the local community will not offer information on the latter because it sees that that could create yet another barrier.

Another example is the siting of wind farms. It is almost taken as read that SNH will object to the creation of wind farms. I do not know how you get across the fact that that is not the case or, if it is the case, how agencies such as yours can bend to meet the needs of local communities and allow development.

John Thomson: I do not think that there is any alternative to local dialogue about that. Ideally, that would start at a relatively strategic level through processes such as community planning, then be extended to discussions with individuals, whether landowners, managers or members of the wider community. Since the creation of SNH, we have tried to be open about the information that we hold about areas and ensure that people have access to it.

There is a serious issue about the culture of the expert. Organisations that were set up in the late 1940s—as was one of SNH's predecessor bodies—were the product of an era in which people deferred to the expert and expected the expert, whether they were a doctor or a scientist, to tell them what to do. The climate of opinion today is very different. We all need to work with the grain and change our ways of working to reflect that change in social expectations. I recognise the point that you make, that people on the ground often understand more about local issues, in some respects, than the expert does.

You are looking for the marriage of scientific expertise and local know-how. In our thinking about matters such as agri-environment schemes, we have been keen to say that there needs to be a

substantial element of local involvement in the design of the schemes, both in identifying the objectives and priorities and in deciding how to achieve the objectives.

Our recent experience with goose management schemes in various parts of the country has demonstrated how well that can work. You specify some public objectives but work out with the local community exactly how the objectives are to be delivered in that area. We have found that process rewarding and satisfactory in a lot of ways, albeit quite time consuming. We would like to see much more of that happening. Through changes in legislation we would like to see a statutory context created in which it is easier to work in that way. As I said, the legislation under which we operate now is very much the product of an earlier era and takes a top-down approach.

Rhoda Grant: Are you suggesting a change in the legislation?

John Thomson: We are very happy with the proposals that the Executive set out in "The Nature of Scotland". We want to see those proposals—or something very like them—implemented as soon as possible. We are keen for that to happen, because we recognise that there is a need to modernise the legislation.

The Convener: I am aware that SNH is bearing the brunt of the questioning. I hope that the other witnesses feel free to contribute when they want to do so.

Richard Lochhead: I will refer to SNH's submission, but I will not ask for a response from SNH. I will give someone else a chance. I commend the SNH submission, as it highlights a couple of clear-cut barriers to rural integrated development, which is good. One such barrier that the submission mentions is

"the difficulty of reconciling financial administration systems in different public bodies".

It adds that the rules and procedures are different, especially when applying for funding. I ask the other three witnesses to comment on the point that the reason why things are difficult to co-ordinate and integrate is that there are now so many things to co-ordinate and integrate in rural Scotland.

I sense that, in trying to take our rural communities forward, we may be sinking into a quagmire of agencies and bodies and regulations from Europe, Edinburgh and Westminster. The challenge lies in how on earth we co-ordinate all that. Should we eliminate some of the layers and some of the agencies? One of the reasons why so many NGOs, agencies and quangos have grown over recent years, especially in rural Scotland, is that Government is seen as not delivering. Perhaps we should reinvest in government—for

example, in local government—if we want to deliver at a local level.

My question to the non-SNH witnesses is: do you see any potential for streamlining the delivery of policy and objectives in rural areas? Can we get rid of any agencies or public bodies?

John Mayhew: I will kick off, then my colleagues can add to my comments.

It is very difficult. In the committee's travels around the country it will have heard about many examples of all the different stakeholders that need to be involved. Our experience is that it is hard to involve all the stakeholders, but it is worth doing. Members should consider the good examples that have been brought to the committee, in written and oral evidence, of problems that have been overcome and successes that have taken place.

For our own part, although Fiona Newcombe and Adam Harrison and I represent individual organisations at the committee today, we all co-operate through an organisation, which members might have heard of, called Scottish Environment LINK. Often when a local initiative is taking place, not all 33 of the Scottish conservation NGOs are involved, but Scottish Environment LINK is asked to put forward a representative. We have a procedure to suggest who that might be. As long as that person is good at feeding back and follows certain protocols to ensure that they represent everybody's views, that works very well—and it means that one person is at the table rather than 33. I float the idea of an agency link or local community link. Local bodies could agree to send one representative to local partnerships rather than a representative of every body.

I think that we all support what John Thomson said about the proposals in "The Nature of Scotland". We have suggestions for improving it, but we are broadly in favour of that consultation document, which was published more than a year ago, and its proposals for improving the legislative framework in which SNH operates. We would like that legislation to be enacted in pretty much its present form as soon as possible.

Fiona Newcombe: I will speak mostly from the agricultural management point of view. We are keen on land management contracts as a way of reducing red tape and providing a one-stop shop in which farmers can do such tasks as gaining public support and managing designated areas. To make land management contracts work, we will need good local project officers who know the schemes, the rules and the regulations. Such an officer would be the one person whom a farmer can always approach for advice and approval of applications, for example. We would like that to be part of the Executive's move towards land

management contracts.

Adam Harrison: Life is complicated. Many decisions and trade-offs must be made. We need a new way of making those trade-offs that does not return to the model of conflict that the earlier panel talked about between the environment and development and, even in economic sectors, between achieving one economic aim through forestry and another through agriculture.

We must work out a way of making better decisions that addresses the reality of how people live and must make livelihoods. A key element in that is education on sustainable development right from the start—from children thinking about their lives in school all the way through to on-the-job training and continuing education. That would make people realise that many complicated decisions must be made and that there must be better ways of making them.

Richard Lochhead: My final point is on the role of local government in rural communities. If we are talking about democracy, and local communities mean local people, and at least local government is accountable, is not the plethora of unelected organisations a concern? Should we consider streamlining some of them? I will give an example off the top of my head. What do the three spokespeople think about scrapping SNH and repatriating its powers to local government or another body? Why do we accept the status quo?

The Convener: That woke everybody up.

John Mayhew: I will not talk about SNH in particular, but I think that economies of scale can be made and that some functions are better delivered nationally while others are better delivered locally. An overview of important wildlife and landscape sites and of Scotland's recreational resources must be taken nationally. It would make no sense to break up all the agencies and reinvent them locally. That would probably create a more expensive and more complex administration system, which we would not favour.

That is not to say that we would oppose the occasional change, as has happened in the past. Taking SNH's example, the merger of nature conservation, landscape, recreation and access that took place 10 years ago was broadly good. In England, arrangements are different. We have an open mind about the agency structures and how they could be organised.

I prefer to get on with work rather than to talk about it. An awful lot of time could be spent on discussing how structures could change and agencies could merge, but that would deflect from the job that agencies are trying to do. In general, I would say if it ain't broke, don't fix it, but some readjustment might be worth while in some cases.

Fiona Newcombe: In land management contracts, we are considering models for delivering specialist advice and support to project officers. We have mainly considered the general practitioner specialist model in the health service. I think that there is a strong role for SNH in that respect. How things are done on the ground must be discussed. Perhaps there can be rural chambers in local areas, as in the French system, and banking opportunities to provide integrated rural development. I see SNH as having a role in the future of land management contracts.

15:45

Adam Harrison: In this venue, I would not like to say that SNH should be scratched. From a European perspective, the better regulation task force carried out an interesting piece of work that looked at the amount of European environmental regulation on farming. It concluded that there was no more regulation than in any other equivalent northern European country. The perception that there was had much to do with how regulation had been delayed because of an unwillingness to gold-plate to implement regulations before time, causing them to stack up. That shows that we do not live in conditions that are substantially different from anywhere else that is trying to deal with such issues.

Organisations such as SNH and many others have a legitimate role as a conduit between our national strategy for the environment—if we had one—and what that means on the ground. The solution to making better decisions is not to have a single directorate of every body that makes a decision. Different people should be involved in the decision-making process and share power, and places where decisions are made should be vested with the power to implement those decisions. If money is put on the table, people will come that table, fully participate and reach a compromise that will meet the objectives of as many people as possible. However, we must invest processes with real power and put in money. People will not come to meetings simply to talk; they will come if there is money to spend.

I went to a community council meeting where I live. There was a budget of £400 on the table, which was last year's unspent £200 budget and this year's unspent £200 budget. The discussion about the £400 lasted for three hours and we still had not decided how to spend it at the end of the meeting. There is no reason why any right-minded person in a community will go to such meetings or engage in such processes unless they can make a difference.

The Convener: I welcome my colleague John Scott, who is a visiting member to the committee.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I declare an interest as a farmer.

I am interested in something that Mr Thomson said about compensation in respect of the future of integrated rural development and where sites are designated. He spoke about seeking more money from Europe to compensate people if they are not allowed to develop designated sites. Mr Thomson, do you envisage that money coming from existing common agricultural policy sources, or should there be new money from Europe?

John Thomson: I do not like the word compensation in that context. I understand why people use it—obviously, it had a foundation in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. We are talking about rewarding people for the positive management and stewardship of areas. That is important in relation to the wider public mind. Compensation always sounds like something for nothing, but we are talking about a positive payment for an activity that is valued by society, namely, managing those areas.

Enlargement of the European Union is now a prospect and, as Europe develops, there is a prospect that structural funds will increasingly move east. Another parliamentary committee is considering that issue. Countries such as the UK and Scotland in particular could potentially lose out. A strong argument that exists for keeping at least some of that European money in Scotland lies in the fact that there are areas that are identified as of European importance in Scotland that need to be looked after.

I would not like to predict which budget that would come out of, whether from a successor of some kind to the existing structural funds or from money that may be freed up from the common agricultural policy as a result of further reforms. I would not even like to make a suggestion on that. However, the main thing is that the money should be forthcoming from Europe in recognition of the role that those areas play in the quality of the life and environment of Europe as a whole.

Adam Harrison: WWF Scotland agrees entirely with that. The forward strategy for agriculture is trying to break down the perceived antagonisms between environmental and farming interests. We have to change the philosophy of how public money is spent. Spending on agri-environmental issues should not be about compensating for income forgone but about buying environmental benefits. We must have better mechanisms for getting the money in to buy those benefits, but at the core we must have a change in philosophy.

Mr McGrigor: I have a question for the lady from RSPB Scotland. We did not receive a written submission from the RSPB but we have received a petition from gamekeepers, which we will

consider later. The petition is headed "Saving Our Jobs & Your Countryside". Raptor numbers are at their highest level for a very long time. Is it not time that some form of control was considered in areas where legitimate field sports take place? Such sports are important to integrated rural development.

Do you accept that the RSPB's present policy is detrimental to jobs in the countryside? In the Langholm experiment, five gamekeepers lost their jobs, so five families in the area were done out of income. On a previously thriving grouse moor—it used to produce 1,800 grouse—there were no grouse and very few small birds. Hen harriers may have done well, but everything else, including employment, went down.

Fiona Newcombe: The RSPB has produced a parliamentary briefing. I will ensure that you get a copy of it later. I will ask my colleagues to get back to you on the points that you raise. I understand that raptor numbers have not yet recovered. Problems with countryside management over the past 100 years have affected their numbers. Raptors are still rare, especially if we consider their numbers across Europe.

The RSPB has worked closely with the moorland working group to come up with a number of recommendations for the Executive. None of those recommendations involve culling, but they involve things such as habitat management, which is what the RSPB would like to see—to help employment as well as raptor numbers. We believe that nature conservation delivers jobs. An example of that is our reserve at Abernethy in the Cairngorms. Before we took over, there were one and a half jobs there. Now our economic research shows that Abernethy provides 87 full-time equivalent jobs in the local area.

Mr McGrigor: You are a very large landowner. Do you allow any field sports on your land—land where field sports took place in the past?

Fiona Newcombe: I do not work on the reserves so I cannot answer that accurately. I will get my colleagues to come back to you on that.

John Thomson: I would like to pick up on the point made about Langholm. In a curious way, Langholm illustrates quite well some of the wider problems of a lack of integration. It is generally agreed that the reason for the problems in Langholm is the state of the habitat. A great deal of heather has been lost because of sheep numbers that are excessive in relation to the capacity of the habitat to support them. That has resulted in a much higher proportion of grass, which provides a suitable habitat for voles.

The research evidence suggests that the population of hen harriers is largely determined by the vole population. It is the state of the habitat

that has resulted in the high number of harriers. In places where that number has been high, the harriers have taken a large number of grouse, which has in turn contributed to undermining the economics of the grouse moor.

What I am trying to say is that everything is connected. If we want to combine the natural heritage and other interests, to have harriers as well as other bird species, to have driven grouse shooting and to have some sheep farming as well, we need to take a holistic view. We cannot address only individual bits of the system.

The Convener: We have a couple of minutes left, so I will do something that I do not usually have the luxury of doing.

Mr McGrigor: May I come back on that last point, convener?

The Convener: I suggest that we move on. There will be a further opportunity to discuss the Langholm experiment and others.

I would like to indulge myself in something that I do not normally get to do: to put a question myself. I am sorry, but it goes to SNH again. In the paper with which you kindly provided us, you started with four key points. The third one says:

"IRD also offers opportunities for greater community involvement, and community based development".

That is fine. In your fourth point, you continue:

"large scale pilot programmes should be set up to gain experience of implementation. National Parks are prime candidates for this."

Given that statement—with which I do not disagree—how do you justify the decision not to allow planning applications to be dealt with by the national park authority in the case of the Cairngorms national park, whereas you do allow them to be dealt with by the authority in the case of the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park?

John Thomson: The answer to that is easy on one level. It is of the essence that integrated rural development should be conceived and carried out at a relatively local level and with full local participation. Our extensive consultations in the two prospective national park areas identified that, although there was a general consensus in the area of Loch Lomond and the Trossachs that its park authority should have planning powers, there was no such consensus in the Cairngorms, where there was a mix of views. Some of the key players, including the local authorities, were very much against the transfer of planning powers.

Our professional judgment on the question of whether planning powers were essential to manage the Cairngorms area properly was that probably they were not, provided that the local

authorities worked with the park authority and took seriously their planning responsibilities, including their responsibilities in the guardianship of a national asset.

On that basis, we concluded that it was possible and, in our view, desirable to have different planning regimes in the two areas. The decision may be very much in deference to local opinion, but it was informed by some professional judgment about what was needed. Whether we got it right or wrong in the two cases, we would expect the more locally based approaches to result in greater variation in how things are arranged across the country. That is what it is all about.

Mr Rumbles: The constituency that I represent is part of the proposed Cairngorms national park. I attended a meeting of community councils yesterday, when we discussed this very issue, and my experience of that seems to contrast with Adam Harrison's experience of community councils.

I have read the responses very carefully, as you might imagine, given that the National Parks (Scotland) Bill was the first to go through this committee. Nevertheless, you cannot say that, on the one hand, there is no consensus on whether the board should have responsibility for planning, but that, on the other hand, planning was excluded in deference to local opinion. Local opinion is increasingly of the view that there should be an integrated system for local planning. It will be almost impossible to obtain world heritage site status for the Cairngorms if the new national park does not have responsibility for planning.

I remain unconvinced by SNH's recommendation that Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park should have responsibility for planning, but that the park board in the Cairngorms should not. SNH told me that the reason for that difference was that planning pressure is greatest in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, whereas planning pressure in the Cairngorms is not so great. When we establish a national park in the Cairngorms, there will be huge pressure on planning. I am surprised that what you are saying is not what SNH said previously.

16:00

John Thomson: I will relate that point back to my comments on our judgment about what was needed. No one would deny the existence of planning issues in the Cairngorms. However, the issues in the Cairngorms were, to a greater extent than in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, about land management and land use, which are not directly affected by the planning system or by the exercise of planning powers.

Members asked about deer management earlier, and there are significant deer management issues in the Cairngorms. The problem is how one reconciles deer management and sporting interests with not only natural heritage but forestry and other interests. Those issues are not touched by the planning system and we felt that, overall, the proportion of key issues that could be affected by the planning system in the Cairngorms was lower than in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs. It was a fine judgment.

You are quite right to say that opinion was balanced on the question of planning powers. However, to go back to the question that your colleague raised earlier, SNH has consistently said that local authorities are very important actors. Local authorities are democratically accountable local organisations and we must pay quite a lot of attention to their views. Indeed, we see them as key organisations in the future guardianship of the environment. Although I am on record as saying that in an ideal, environmentally sensitive world we would not need SNH, we are still some way away from that position.

Our consistent view has been that local authorities have a key role to play in ensuring that the environment is properly taken into account alongside other local interests. In the Cairngorms, we felt that the local authorities were resistant. They are key players and if their planning powers were to be removed in a way that they would greatly resent, there would be a real possibility that they would frustrate the objectives of the park in other ways. Perhaps we were unduly suspicious, but we were concerned about that.

I am interested in Mr Rumbles's comments about the way in which opinion is evolving. I am not as familiar with the situation in the Cairngorms as I am with the situation in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs.

Mr Rumbles: I do not want to leave the subject without heaping praise on you. People who attended that meeting of community councils in the Cairngorms wanted me to express their appreciation of the way in which SNH devolved, if you like, the facilitation process for the consultation down to the local level by getting involved with the community councils. When the draft designation order is published—which I assume is imminent—they would like SNH to offer them the same facility again.

Rhoda Grant: On that point, I cover the area of the Cairngorms national park in which there is resistance to the park board having planning powers. I am aware of the situation and how it could hamper the establishment of the national park if local authorities do not remain in control of planning. That view is held not only by the local authorities but by quite a large proportion of the

community in that area. I am glad that you have taken those views on board.

The Convener: With the benefit of hindsight, we should have had a panel of three and a whole day for SNH. Despite that, I thank all the witnesses for giving the committee their time. The evidence has been valuable and will go towards making up the final report, which we hope to publish in the autumn. Thank you for your participation.

I suspend the meeting for four minutes while we sort ourselves out.

16:04

Meeting suspended.

16:09

On resuming—

Subordinate Legislation

Less Favoured Area Support Scheme (Scotland) Regulations 2002 (SSI 2002/139)

The Convener: Item 2 on the agenda is four items of subordinate legislation. No member has intimated that they wish to speak on them.

I have only two points to make on the Less Favoured Area Support Scheme (Scotland) Regulations 2002. First, I understand that explanatory notes about the scheme, which would usually be sent out with the claim form, went out some time after most of the payments had been made. Secondly, 95 per cent of payments under the scheme have already been made.

The scheme previously encountered considerable difficulties. Indeed, the Minister for Environment and Rural Development had to go back to Europe to plead for timely payment to be made. That was achieved. The Subordinate Legislation Committee asked several questions on the regulations, which members have in their papers. Are members agreed that we have no recommendation to make to the Parliament?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I know that Rhoda Grant, who has just come in, asked questions on the scheme. Rhoda, are you content with the decision that we have made to make no recommendation on the regulations?

Rhoda Grant: Yes. I received answers to my questions.

Plant Health (Great Britain) Amendment (Scotland) Order 2002 (SSI 2002/164)

Import and Export Restrictions (Foot-and-Mouth Disease) (Scotland) (No 3) Amendment (No 2) Amendment Regulations 2002 (SSI 2002/169)

Artificial Insemination of Cattle (Animal Health) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2002 (SSI 2002/191)

The Convener: No member has indicated that they wish to speak on these instruments. Are members content that we have no recommendation to make to the Parliament on them?

Members indicated agreement.

Petitions

Scottish Agricultural College Auchincruive (PE480)

The Convener: Item three is petitions. Petition PE480, from Mr William Campbell, calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to review the current situation at the Scottish Agricultural College at Auchincruive as a matter of urgency. I do not think that I have to declare an interest, but I point out to members that I was educated—so they think—at that establishment.

Richard Lochhead: You were educated?

The Convener: I should say that I received further education at that establishment.

Members will be aware that the SAC's financial difficulties have led to suggestions that the Auchincruive campus in Ayrshire may be scaled down, with most courses being transferred to Aberdeen. The petitioner is concerned that such a course of action is not justified. The Public Petitions Committee took evidence from the petitioner on 26 March. Some members of this committee are members of the Public Petitions Committee and I know that other members of this committee attended the meeting on 26 March for that item. In addition, several members of the Rural Development Committee took part in a members' business debate on the subject on 21 March, so committee members are well aware of the issues and the current situation.

The SAC recently decided to appoint external consultants as part of the process of forming its business plan. I am sure that members will join me in welcoming that decision, which should assist in meeting the petitioner's concerns.

Members have received a copy of an e-mail that was sent today—I hope that everyone has seen it—on the subject of the petition, which points out two facts. The first is that the Minister for Environment and Rural Development intimated at the members' business debate that he would ask for a breathing space and for the SAC to get back to him. Secondly, I understand that tenders will go out any day now for an independent audit to be undertaken before any decision is made. I hope that members will view those as positive steps in the right direction.

Richard Lochhead: The petition raises an important subject, albeit the petition has been overtaken by events, because—thankfully—the Government has intervened following the members' debate that was secured by my colleague Adam Ingram. That intervention led to the binning of the plans that were proposed by the SAC management and a return to the drawing board, which we all must welcome. The committee

should also welcome the information that independent external consultants are to be appointed. Clearly, the original plans were botched by the SAC management and that led to a question mark being put over Auchincruive.

16:15

After the parliamentary debate, a lot of press coverage and comment was given to the fact that the SAC had placed a question mark over Craibstone and Aberdeen. Supporters of all three campuses question the response of the SAC and of Maitland Mackie, who is its chairman. We all want the excellent advice and research that is characteristic of the Scottish Agricultural College to be protected at all costs. Putting a question mark over the college at this stage is demoralising for Scotland's agricultural community, which is extremely concerned about what has happened.

In the light of that, the committee should take the issue seriously and monitor it closely. I am in favour of bringing the SAC management before the committee. We could also perhaps take evidence from the minister, who, after all, funds the college to the tune of £18 million. We should do that at some point over the next few months—we have until October—so that we can ask some searching questions about the management strategy. The committee should also place a question mark over the role of the Scottish Agricultural College's chairman, Maitland Mackie. The college's management has lost a lot of credibility through the debacle of recent weeks, which has upset many people.

No one in the college is averse to change. People accept that times move on and that there will perhaps be change. However, after Auchincruive was put on the back burner, the idea was suddenly put into the public domain that parts of Craibstone should be sold off for the sake of a retail park at Aberdeen airport. That did not go down well. We need a properly thought-out strategy from management.

In the light of what has happened, the committee should put a question mark over the college's management. We should take the issue seriously by bringing people before the committee to give evidence.

The Convener: Do you accept that the right time to take evidence will be after the audit has been published, so that we can take a look at all the details?

Richard Lochhead: I assume that there will be a big gap between the publication of the audit and the decision in October. We need to remember that we have the summer recess.

Mr Rumbles: The convener's suggestion is a positive step forward. All the developments have

been quite positive. I profoundly disagree with Richard Lochhead. It is not helpful to use terms such as "botched" plans, the "binning" of plans and "debacle". The issues are serious, so we should not use such language.

As I said in the debate, the Scottish Agricultural College's plans are concerned not only with Auchincruive but with the problems of the whole of the agricultural industry in Scotland. I was informed—and I believe this—that the restructuring plan that was produced was as a result of what everybody accepts are hugely difficult market conditions. After all, the SAC is the helpmate of Scottish agriculture and needs a robust plan for the future.

It is not helpful to the debate to blame identified individuals, as has just happened. I am pleased with the SAC chief executive's constructive e-mail, which states:

"we will hold a consultation process on the future of SAC with all stakeholders, including staff, students, funding agencies, corporate businesses, farmers, government departments, politicians, local authorities and enterprise companies."

The chief executive also states that the whole process will be reviewed. That is the way to proceed. We need to take an holistic view of how people across the country are affected.

The Convener: Does John Scott want to say anything?

John Scott: It is kind of the convener to let me speak here today. I welcome the comments that colleagues have made and the convener's positive contribution. I also welcome Professor McKelvey's e-mail, which I asked him to send to the committee after my meeting with him yesterday.

On 23 October, I wrote to Ross Finnie to ask for an independent inquiry into the situation at Auchincruive. It is amazing how the whole situation does not move at all and then suddenly moves very fast. I am pleased that there will now be an independent inquiry. In a letter to me today, Ross Finnie has confirmed that the independent audit will be carried out by one of the big five management consultants, who will be invited to tender for the review of SAC. That is very necessary.

It is crucial that the terms of reference of the review are absolutely right. I am sure that the committee will want to make suggestions to the minister about the terms of reference. As Mr Rumbles said, we must ask whether there should be two or three principal centres of education and where they should be sited. We must also ask where the students envisage their education being delivered and how the debt that currently burdens the SAC is to be restructured, reduced or eliminated.

The review provides an opportunity for the vision of the SAC to match the minister's vision for the integrated provision of education in Scotland's rural areas for the next century. I hope that that opportunity will be taken. The inquiry should also consider the possibility of other sources of funding for the sites. I know that Mr Rumbles objects to the idea of part of Craibstone being used for Aberdeen airport. I was unaware of that issue until he mentioned it.

Mr Rumbles: I did not mention that—Richard Lochhead did.

John Scott: I beg your pardon. All the options should be considered and the review should be wide ranging. Nothing should be sacred.

The Convener: I understand that you met the minister and others at Auchincruive campus yesterday.

John Scott: That is correct.

The Convener: Were you given an indication of what the remit of the review might be?

John Scott: No. Professor McKelvey asked me—rather embarrassingly—whether I would be happy with the proposed evaluation. I said that it was absolutely what is required.

Rhoda Grant: I, too, welcome the review. I was at the meeting of the Public Petitions Committee when the issue was discussed. The review is an exceptionally good idea and shows that people can respond to issues that are raised. I suggest that we note the petition in the meantime and—should we need to—reconsider the petition when the inquiry is completed.

Richard Lochhead: I want to respond to Mike Rumbles. I welcome the e-mail that we received today. Mike emphasised the need for a robust plan, but the point is that the minister thought that we did not have a robust plan, which is why he intervened—I welcome his intervention. That is why the original plan has been binned and we have gone back to the drawing board. I remind Mike that on 21 March, the minister said in the chamber:

"I regret deeply the handling of the issue"

and

"we are not in possession of all the necessary facts."—*[Official Report, 21 March 2002; c 10615.]*

The last time the minister was before the committee, which was at a meeting on the budget, he said that he had concerns about the SAC management's handling of the issue. The minister supported some of the comments that I made earlier.

Mr Rumbles: I referred to your intemperate language.

John Scott: There is an opportunity to get the matter right and to develop cross-party support, if the right plans are delivered. I hope that, this time round, the process will be utterly transparent and therefore justifiable and that, provided that the facts are laid out properly, the thought processes will be such that the conclusions that are arrived at will be ones that anybody would arrive at.

The Convener: One would like to think that the reactions that were provoked in Parliament by the SAC's actions will ensure that that will be the case.

Are members content with Rhoda Grant's proposal to note the petition and monitor the situation? Perhaps we should also write to the minister to ask him to keep us informed of developments that take place in the meantime.

John Farquhar Munro: We should mention John Scott's point about the audit's terms of reference.

The Convener: We could simply indicate that the committee wants the audit to be as thorough and robust as possible and express the hope that the remit will take that into account. As Richard Lochhead pointed out, the minister made it plain that he was pretty dissatisfied with the way in which the issue has been handled so far. Given what he said, and the feelings that were expressed at the recent members' debate and on other occasions, I cannot believe that the audit's remit will be other than thorough. However, I am happy to take on board suggestions from members about how we solidify the point that we want to make.

John Scott: Forgive me for butting in, convener. I believe that the audit must be as wide ranging as possible.

The Convener: I assure John Scott that this is not the first time a member has butted in. In our letter to the minister, we can ask for the audit to be as robust and wide ranging as possible. Are members content to accept option A in the paper, which calls on us to note and monitor the situation, and to move on?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I congratulate Mr Campbell on the role that he has played in bringing this issue to our attention from the word go. He has put a great deal of work into it. Mr Campbell is with us today, although—as I explained to him earlier—under standing orders he is not permitted to speak. However, as a good Ayrshire man, he accepted that quite happily. I thank him very much for coming.

Raptors (Licensed Culling) (PE187)

The Convener: Item 4 is consideration of petition PE187 from the Scottish Gamekeepers Association, which calls on the Parliament to allow the limited licensed culling of raptors under the terms of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 in areas where local populations have increased beyond normal levels. Members have received from the clerks various papers on the petition and a cover note that sets out the background and suggests options for proceeding.

I am sure that by now members will be aware of the work that the Transport and the Environment Committee has done on this petition, and will know that that committee has now formally closed consideration of it. We discussed considering the petition jointly with the Transport and the Environment Committee, but in the end that committee took the lead role on petition PE187 and the related petition PE8.

The petition has been with us for some time, and it is desirable that we take steps towards concluding consideration of it. How would members like to proceed?

Mr McGrigor: We should take the petition very seriously, especially in the light of our inquiry into integrated rural development. There is no doubt that legitimate field sports—in this case, we are dealing with shooting—provide a great deal of employment and income for rural Scotland. The proliferation of raptors is causing gamekeepers to find that their jobs are under threat. Areas that are managed well by gamekeepers are home to more types of wildlife than areas that are not so managed.

I have lived in Argyll for 30 years. When I first came to the area, there were many lapwings, curlews and small birds on the hillsides. Many people have remarked that today there are nothing like as many such birds. The general feeling is that the increase in the number of raptors is responsible for the decrease in numbers of other birds. We should support the petition, but I am not sure how we should proceed. Perhaps you can clarify the situation, convener.

The Convener: Three options are available to us. I assume that you are suggesting that we choose option C—to take more evidence on the petition, to add to the evidence that has already been taken by the Transport and the Environment Committee.

Mr McGrigor: I support our doing exactly that. Whether people are for or against shooting, there is no doubt that it brings many jobs and a great deal of money to rural Scotland. The current numbers of raptors appear to have reached a very high peak, which is probably the reason why many

species, including songbirds, are being decimated.

16:30

Mr Rumbles: I seek some information. The cover note says that the Transport and the Environment agreed to write to

“the Scottish Gamekeepers Association, the Scottish Executive and Scottish Natural Heritage to recommend that the SGA becomes a member of the moorland working group”.

Is the SGA now a member of that group?

Rhoda Grant: It has been invited to join.

Mr McGrigor: We have a letter from SNH that says that the SGA was invited to a meeting in March. However, I have no idea whether the meeting took place or what its outcome was.

Mr Rumbles: Do we know whether the SGA is a member of the moorland working group?

Mr McGrigor: I am afraid that I do not know that.

Rhoda Grant: We know that the association has been invited to join the group. Given that that has been a recent development, I suggest that we simply note the petition and keep an eye on what happens. I acknowledge Jamie McGrigor's comments and the evidence that we received earlier from SNH. However, the issue is far too complicated to be covered by one easy solution. If the SGA becomes part of the moorland forum and gets round the table with other groups, it can think about developing the issues in its petition and find out how the land is managed. After all, it was suggested earlier in the meeting that land management might be the cause of the problem. As a result, we should note the petition and wait and see how the matter develops. It is too soon for us to reopen an inquiry that the Transport and the Environment Committee has just completed.

Mr Rumbles: I would genuinely like to know whether the SGA is a member of the group and whether it is now working together with other organisations. Until we receive that information, we should defer consideration of the petition until a future meeting rather than pursue any of the options set out in the cover note.

The Convener: That future meeting might be some time away. However, I am not against your suggestion. The question whether the SGA has accepted the invitation to join the forum is a rather important one.

Richard Lochhead: I tend to agree with Rhoda Grant and Mike Rumbles. Although I recognise that legitimate field sports have their place, we should keep the whole matter in perspective. Another parliamentary committee has investigated the matter in a lot of detail. That said, I notice that

the moorland forum was set up in March, so perhaps we should find out what it has been doing. Perhaps, if the SGA is now part of the forum, the petition itself has been overtaken.

Mr McGrigor: The letter refers to a meeting in March to which SNH was going to invite the SGA. I have no idea whether the meeting took place.

Richard Lochhead: The SNH letter says:

"This Forum will succeed the smaller Moorland Working Group",

which suggests that it is a new body.

The Convener: I think that the moorland working group became the moorland forum. It just changed its name.

Richard Lochhead: Presumably that has evolved since the petition was submitted.

The Convener: Actually, quite a lot has evolved since the petition was submitted.

Richard Lochhead: Given that fact, I support Rhoda Grant's proposal, with the slight qualification that we receive an updated report as Mike Rumbles suggested.

The Convener: I cannot remember what Rhoda Grant's proposal was.

Rhoda Grant: I suggested that we should note the petition.

Richard Lochhead: It might also be worth while to invite the SGA to make a submission to the inquiry, as Jamie McGrigor suggested.

The Convener: Given the time that has elapsed since the petition was put before us, it would do no harm to find out the position of the moorland forum and the SGA's membership of it. Are members content to defer a decision until then?

Rhoda Grant: I have no problem with that.

The Convener: Right. I am sorry to say that we are deferring the petition yet again. However, the question is important.

As item 5 on the agenda is in private, I ask the public to leave the meeting at this point. I regret to say that that includes Linda Smith. I thank her very much and hope that she has enjoyed the meeting as much as we have.

16:33

Meeting continued in private until 16:39.

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