

TRANSPORT AND THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 8 September 1999
(Morning)

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TRANSPORT AND THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

2nd Meeting

CONVENER :

*Mr Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS :

*Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP)
*Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)
*Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
*Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
*Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP)
*Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
*Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) LD
*Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD)
*Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con)

*attended

WITNESS:

Sarah Boyack (The Minister for Transport and the Environment)

COMMITTEE CLERK:

Lynn Tullis

ASSISTANT CLERK:

David McGill

Scottish Parliament

Transport and the Environment Committee

Wednesday 8 September 1999

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:05*]

The Convener (Mr Andy Kerr): I welcome members and those in the public gallery—a mixture of the public, interested parties and the press—to the second meeting of the Transport and the Environment Committee. We have the pleasure of having the Minister for Transport and the Environment with us this morning.

Interests

The Convener: The first item of business is the declaration of interests. I invite Des McNulty to do so—he missed the opportunity to declare his interests at the first meeting.

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): The only relevant interest that I declare is that I am deputy chair and a board member of the Wise Group, which is a non-profit organisation that specialises in bringing long-term unemployed people back into the work force. It engages in environmental improvement work. If a clash of interests arises, I will notify the committee.

Evidence

The Convener: After that formal item of business, I welcome Sarah Boyack, the Minister for Transport and the Environment. We are glad to have her here today; at this formative stage of the committee's development, it is useful to have the views of the Executive. We have asked Sarah to outline the Executive's priorities for transport and the environment and to tell us the proposals that will be implemented. As we have before us a petition about the A77, I should be glad if the minister touched on the strategic roads review.

The Minister for Transport and the Environment (Sarah Boyack): I am pleased to have been invited before you so early in the work of the committee. I hope that we will establish a constructive relationship during the next few years.

I will talk through the key priorities of the Executive's programme for government and will refer to "Making it work together", which sets out our targets.

On transport, we are committed to the policies set out in the white paper that was published last

year, "Travel Choices for Scotland". The partnership agreement re-emphasises our commitment to delivering an integrated transport policy that will meet transport needs and protect the environment.

During the past year, a series of daughter documents followed the white paper. The documents addressed the appraisal of trunk road investment; consultation on regional partnerships; guidance on local transport strategies; freight, in the "Sustainable Distribution" paper; buses, in the "From Workhorse to Thoroughbred" paper; the national planning policy guidance on transport and planning; and consultation on road user charging.

The devolution settlement will give Scottish ministers extensive powers relating to transport. The Parliament will have legislative power over local transport, roads, buses and the operation of Caledonian MacBrayne and the northern isles ferries. We will be able to influence the passenger rail services by issuing directions on the Scottish franchise to the strategic rail authority and by the fact that we will have control of £208 million of franchise payments.

We will vigorously promote Scotland's interest in reserved matters. For example, we welcome the successful outcome on the cargo fifth freedoms at Prestwick.

Local authorities are best placed to develop local solutions to local problems, and we have tried to set up mechanisms to encourage that. The first round of the interim local transport strategies is now in place. That will be underpinned by the public transport fund, which is worth £90 million over three years. The first round awarded £29 million over three years to 13 local authorities. We have received 26 applications for the second round, which we will announce shortly.

We have put in place a framework for regional transport partnerships, following the consultation that we have had. The intention is to encourage better co-ordination of transport services and transport policies regionally, while allowing scope for initiative and innovation to suit local circumstances. I intend to make an announcement in Parliament in the autumn on the way forward for regional transport partnerships.

By December 2000, we intend to deliver a practical and effective Scottish national public transport timetable that will cover all bus, coach, rail, ferry and air services in Scotland and connections with UK services. We are drawing up an action plan to deliver through-ticketing throughout Scotland from March 2000. We are using our freight facilities grant and our investment in freight to deliver £18 million of investment in Scotland over three years. The key objective is to transfer freight from road to rail, to make it

possible for firms to transport their goods by rail, to free up some road space, and to allow us to address safety issues. We will also deliver a voluntary scheme that will provide free travel for blind people on bus and rail services by the end of this year.

We acknowledge that there are distinct issues in Scotland's rural areas, and we recognise the strength of feeling about motor fuel prices. Fuel and vehicle taxation is a reserved matter, but the Scottish Executive will ensure that Scottish interests are to the fore and we will liaise with UK ministers.

The Government has committed £14 million of new investment, over three years, to encouraging rural transport. I am keen to ensure that we focus that investment effectively. The investment includes £3.5 million for buses over the first two years, £0.6 million a year for community transport and £0.4 million for sustaining rural petrol stations. For 1999-2000 we have been able to set aside an extra £0.73 million, of which £150,000 will be allocated to community transport and £300,000 to rural petrol stations.

We will consider what else we can do. There is considerable scope within the Executive for bringing together thinking on rural transport, social inclusion and rural development, to maximise support for accessible rural services. I am keen that we should pull together across departments, as there is scope for us to do that.

The financial support that we are giving to Caledonian MacBrayne Ltd, to northern isles ferries and to Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd is at its highest-ever level. We are ensuring that such investment is appropriate.

Last but not least, we will introduce an integrated transport bill early next year to pull together the mechanisms that we require. The bill will contain a balanced package of measures to improve Scotland's transport services. It will focus on road user charging and on buses, but we are considering what other measures might be included if appropriate.

That represents a comprehensive and sustained programme for the future. We have no illusions about the task on which we are embarking. We must think about how we focus on a national level and how we enable at regional and local levels. We must focus on transport opportunities at each level, whether the issue is cycling, at the local level, or the integrated public transport timetable, at the national level. We have experienced unsustainable transport trends in Scotland as a result of decades of neglect. The Executive's challenge, and the Parliament's, is to begin a process that will deliver a transport system that is fit for the 21st century. That is an ambitious task,

and one on which we need to work together.

The planning element of my remit is also part of this committee's remit. We are considering responses to a wide-ranging consultation document, "Land Use Planning Under a Scottish Parliament". I intend to publish a summary of the responses to that paper shortly. The committee will be interested in that, as that issue will have to be addressed. Particular concerns about the planning system have arisen during the consultation process, which were reinforced when the "Pathfinders to the Parliament" document was produced earlier this year. Criticisms have been made of the delays in the system, which will provide a number of areas on which we must focus.

We are taking steps to speed up the planning system, to promote quality in planning and at ground level. The second annual report of the Planning Audit Unit is about to be published, which will allow the Executive to track what is happening locally. It will also allow local authorities to reflect on how they can improve standards and the effectiveness of the system.

10:15

We intend to make sure that the planning system develops and becomes more outward looking, so that it contributes to other policy-related initiatives. In particular, we will examine how the system can promote sustainable development and link into our broader environmental objectives.

We will take locational guidance on renewables by summer 2000. We will also review building standards to make sure that those standards relate to fuel and power conservation and will develop proposals to improve energy standards for new buildings by the end of 2000. We intend to make sure that the planning process relates more effectively to other area-based initiatives such as area regeneration and industrial development. Those measures form a comprehensive planning and building control package.

One of our key commitments is to establish Scotland's first national park at Loch Lomond and the Trossachs by summer 2001, which is an ambitious but achievable target. We are introducing that legislation because, although Scotland's landscape is among the UK's finest, we have never had a national park, while England and Wales have had such parks for 50 years. Now is the time. We need to introduce integrated management of a key number of areas of important natural and cultural heritage that are facing particular pressures that could be helped by the mechanism of a national park.

Scottish Natural Heritage has already consulted

widely at local and national level before providing the Government with advice to form a sound basis to progress the legislation. However, we recognise that people need to understand how such important issues will affect them, and the consultation that we have already undertaken will not be the only one. We intend to consult in the primary and secondary stages of the legislation.

It is important to recognise that national parks are about not just protecting valuable scenery, but managing such areas so that people who live there can be part of the process and can benefit from the areas' assets in a sustainable way. By doing that, we can bring social and economic benefits to communities while protecting and enhancing our natural and cultural heritage. We do not want to create museums in the countryside; we want working, vibrant national parks to manage those pressures, which is why we will be taking the extensive consultation process seriously in the run-up to the bill.

SNH has also suggested the possibility of marine national parks. The conservation of marine areas is important and marine special areas of conservation already exist. Our legislation will be targeted at a terrestrial concept, and at terrestrial law, which might not be appropriate for marine parks. It might be possible to give a national park the power to secure integrated management of a maritime area through the national park plan, rather than to give it specific maritime powers. The issue is worth reflecting on for the future; I thought that I would flag it up as an issue of interest for the committee.

One of our other key objectives is to modernise Scotland's drinking water and sewage treatment infrastructure. Scotland's public water authorities have a vital role in delivering improvements in environmental standards while keeping customer costs down, and they will invest £1.7 billion over the next three years to modernise our water and sewerage infrastructure. The infrastructure has suffered from many years of neglect and under-funding and the massive investment programme is reflected in two of our commitments in the programme of government.

First, by improving standards of urban waste water treatment systems by the end of 2000, we will dramatically reduce the impact of sewage discharges on rivers, seas and beaches in line with European Union obligations. Secondly, we have to raise the quality of Scotland's drinking water. The £1.7 billion investment programme also includes the costs of making inroads into the past under-investment in the drinking water network to improve drinking water quality to meet European standards.

We are establishing a new regulatory framework for the water industry because we need to ensure

that we supplement the ambitious programme of investment to raise environmental standards and enhance drinking water quality. It is vital to have an appropriate regulatory system, to ensure that the industry operates effectively. The new arrangements that come into play on 1 November will do that for us. We will have a new regulator, to bring together for the first time responsibility for both economic and customer service regulation, so that the customers will get the highest quality of standards and service at the best possible price. That is important for both domestic and business users of the water and sewerage systems.

Ministers will set environmental and water quality standards that water authorities must meet, but the new arrangements will allow proper medium-term planning by the authorities and will give customers greater certainty about future charge levels, which is a key element. Soon I intend to announce to Parliament the person we intend to appoint as our new water industry commissioner. The commissioner will be a professional regulator for the water authorities and will act in the interests of all customers.

The next key issue on which I want to focus is our national strategy for waste, which we will adopt by the end of this year. We are determined to tackle the problem of waste in Scotland. We must do that by a variety of measures: we must minimise our waste of natural resources; we must increase recycling where it will benefit the environment; and we cannot rely on the continued use of landfill—it is not sustainable, and we will have to meet obligations under European legislation, which we know will change. Our national waste strategy is being prepared by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency in the light of responses to consultations over the past year. I will ensure that it is published by the end of this year. I think that the committee will be very interested in discussing how we progress with the strategy.

Another commitment that I would like to highlight is the commitment to bring Scotland's 60 designated bathing beaches up to European standards. We are determined that bathing water at Scottish beaches will be clean for use by local people and tourists, and much of our £1.7 billion investment through the water authorities over the next three years will be used to tackle sewage discharges, which are a major cause of dirty bathing water.

However, it is important to recognise that that investment alone will not be sufficient. A key interest group with which the Executive has to work is the farming community, to tackle problems caused by pollution from farms. I have already had a meeting with the National Farmers Union of Scotland and with my colleague Ross Finnie, the

Minister for Rural Affairs. It is important that the message from the environment minister is backed up by the rural affairs minister, and that we consider not only what each department is interested in for itself, but how we can deal with issues that cut across the departments. We must have a dialogue with the farming community. This is not about us imposing rules on farmers—it is about dialogue and best practice; it is about farmers taking ownership of the problem, and it is about us all working together to tackle it.

Another key issue for the Scottish Executive is working with local authorities to reduce the risk to health from poor air quality. We know from medical research that there are links between air pollution and ill health. Air pollution causes premature death and can exacerbate existing health conditions such as asthma and heart disease. Some forms of pollution are carcinogenic and some are harmful to the natural and built environment. Road transport is one of the major sources of air pollution, especially in towns and cities; but air pollution comes also from a variety of industrial and domestic sources. We need to be aware of trans-boundary air pollution: some pollution in Scotland comes from continental Europe, and from England and Ireland.

The United Kingdom air policy strategy, which was published in March 1997, set health-based air quality objectives for eight major pollutants. We need to meet those objectives by 2005. A revised strategy for Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland was published in draft form on 25 August. It suggests tighter objectives for four of those pollutants, and introduces new objectives for three of them.

Delivering on air quality is not just about the Executive setting standards: we must work with local authorities, because they have a key role to play in achieving air quality objectives, and they now have a duty to review and assess air quality in their area and to take action if they think that objectives are unlikely to be met.

In general, we know that Scottish air is considerably cleaner than that in large English conurbations, but there are urban areas in Scotland where the air quality objectives—especially for nitrogen dioxide and particulates—will be very hard for us to achieve. We need to focus on that. Acid rain—another trans-boundary pollutant—is also a significant problem, especially in Dumfries and Galloway and the western Highlands. Over 80 per cent of the acidification in this country comes from outwith Scotland. We need to work through the European frameworks to address that problem.

In the partnership document, we have committed ourselves to introducing a new system for nature conservation. We have done that

because conservation is an integral part of enhancing and safeguarding Scotland's environment. That builds on our commitment to protect sites of special scientific interest. A new system of nature conservation should secure protection for the best examples of Scotland's natural heritage, and should involve local stakeholders—people who are involved in decisions affecting the areas where they live or work the land.

It is important to reform the system of sites of special scientific interest. We know that the system has attracted various criticisms related to its ability to provide effective protection and its perceived failure to afford communities a stake in managing the land to secure conservation interests. We will present detailed policy proposals for a new system of nature conservation, which will take account of the consultation paper, "People and Nature". We anticipate publishing a white paper that will set out how we intend to take that policy commitment forward later this year. I am sure that the committee will be interested in that, as we will be subjecting the bill to full pre-legislative scrutiny.

Another of our key objectives is to introduce measures on responsible access to land. We will be introducing legislation by spring 2000 that will give a guaranteed right of access, subject to a code of responsible behaviour. We acknowledge that the existing law is confusing and has failed to meet the increasing demands from the public for access, particularly to land near urban areas. We feel that if the new right is exercised responsibly, it will protect not only the privacy of those who live in the countryside, but legitimate land operations and conservation interests. Scottish Natural Heritage and Access Forum have been working on a draft code, which will be produced by the autumn. We intend to consult everybody on that and hold meaningful discussions before the draft bill is introduced.

The final issue in the partnership agreement that I want to flag up is sustainable development, which cuts across transport, planning and the environment and the Government's work as a whole. We have made it clear that we want to integrate the principles of environmentally and socially sustainable development into all Government policies. That means looking at economic, social and environmental issues. At Cabinet level, we have adopted sustainable development as a cross-cutting priority in the work of all departments. It will be my job to lead the work of the Scottish Executive through that process.

That is an important point on which to end. I have talked about the key issues in transport, planning and the environment, but for me,

sustainable development is the big idea that holds those issues together in my work and in the work of other ministers.

This may be a good point at which to stop and allow members of the committee to ask questions, or I can continue and go through the legislative programme.

The Convener: It might be better to cover the legislative programme now, so that we can get an idea of the full scope of the Executive's plans.

Sarah Boyack: The first point to bring to members' attention is the timetable for the integrated transport bill. As you will be aware from recent media reports, we are in the middle of the consultation process on road user charging. We will consider the responses to that when the consultation period finishes at the end of this month. We are also considering responses to the buses white paper, on which there might be further consultation. We expect to introduce a bill to Parliament in early 2000. That date might be useful for you in setting your agenda.

There are two points to bring to your attention regarding the legislative timetable for the national parks bill. First, that is primary legislation, so it will come to you earlier. We intend to produce a draft bill for consultation by late October, which is quite close. We intend to introduce the bill to Parliament in early 2000, probably some time in January or February.

10:30

We intend to provide the order for the first national park, in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, late in 2000. Our objective is still to have the park operational by summer 2001. That sounds a long time off, but it is an ambitious target in terms of the legislative programme. The consultation process is critical and, as I said, we must involve the stakeholders—the people in the communities. There are a variety of interests and we want to get things right.

The primary legislation will provide the general framework for national parks and the power for secondary legislation to set up individual parks. The secondary legislation will be in the form of affirmative orders.

The right of access legislative timetable should be contained within the proposed legislation on land reform. Again, proposals are out for consultation and comments are due in by 17 September. We will publish a draft bill in the autumn. We hope that the final version of the bill will come before the Scottish Parliament in the new year.

There is a whole range of secondary legislation, so it may be helpful if I provide details of that in

writing.

The Convener: Yes, I would prefer that.

Sarah Boyack: Secondary legislation is no less important and a raft of it will come through over the next couple of years. You may want to plug that into the programme for discussion, but it is important at the moment that we focus on the key elements of the legislative programme.

The Convener: Are you in a position to send us the detail of the secondary legislation now?

Sarah Boyack: I can give you the topics that we anticipate will come up. That will help you to set a timetable.

The Convener: Thank you for that wide-ranging presentation. Your constructive approach to the way in which we will work together is welcome. As you have set out the tasks that the Executive is taking on and the targets that it has set, we can carry out our role in examining what the Executive is doing. What you have said also helps us to devise our work programme, which is on the agenda today. Will you introduce the rest of your team? After that, I can invite the committee to ask questions.

Sarah Boyack: On my right is Sandy Cameron, who works on the environment aspect of my brief. On my left is John Martin, who works on transport and planning. On his left is Neil MacLennan, who is my private secretary. If you want to get in touch with me, it is best to go through Neil.

The Convener: We met Sandy and John during the two-day briefing session, at which we met a number of people—it is useful to refresh our memories.

Des McNulty: In your statement, minister, you mentioned a voluntary scheme for free travel for blind people, which is welcome. In the context of the planned changes in the bus sector, can the arrangements for introducing the scheme be combined with the quality partnerships and quality contracts, or is there a separate arrangement?

Sarah Boyack: The scheme is separate. We intend to introduce it by the end of the year. We have brought together the operators and the key interest groups, including the National League of the Blind and Disabled and other disability groups. I do not want to delay the implementation of the scheme by letting it get caught up in the legislation on integrated transport.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): I thank the minister for her excellent exposition; it was quite a tour de force.

The timetable on transport is pivotal. It is no good expecting people to catch the bus if they do not know when it leaves. Reliable and accessible information on that basic detail is vital.

We should encourage people to use trains. When we come to renegotiate the franchising, we should change the balance, which has been towards journey times rather than passenger numbers. We should consider how, for rail companies, it can be made more important to attract passengers than to arrive on time—passengers are sometimes seen as a barrier to arriving on time.

We have talked about considering energy conservation in relation to planning and building standards. Another aspect of building standards regulation is accessibility—making all new build barrier free.

Finally, we need to look at how we use the Parliament's purchasing power to encourage better waste management. For example, how much of the paper used in the Parliament is recycled?

Sarah Boyack: I could not agree more with your first point about timetabling for public transport services. Making that information available to people is part of the critical agenda; the integrated transport bill will look at that and bus quality partnerships. We want bus companies and local authorities to take forward partnerships that will give some certainty to timetabling and focus on information provided by the companies and the local authorities. The overground system in Glasgow, for example, is an innovative scheme where the bus company has provided its service timetable for the next 10 years. That means not only that the buses are more reliable for regular users, but that new patronage can be attracted to the bus network, which is critical.

Journey time on ScotRail has been a key objective. We know that improvements can be made. You are right, however, that the rail industry is growing. That brings its own challenges. The ScotRail 2000 programme, which comes in to play at the end of this month, will see a cascade of new trains to give ScotRail more capacity on key routes. That will, I hope, begin to tackle some of the congestion issues.

Our objective is to improve accessibility through the building regulations for domestic houses. We will bring that forward through regulations.

Every organisation must feel that the agenda on waste is relevant. I hope that the publication of the national waste strategy will allow businesses, councils and organisations—such as the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament—to reflect on how we can minimise our use of resources and how we can recycle. A range of organisations—including the Executive and the Parliament—must take on board those key issues.

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): I have a number of questions for you, minister. First, can I plead for

some simplicity in designations? Anyone who works in this field knows that it is inundated at the moment. We do not need to create yet another tier; we need to simplify the process and make it more understandable within the context of involving local people more.

I am often consulted about listed buildings with regard to building control. At the moment, we have a requirement to impose a high standard of refurbishment material, depending on the classification of the building. Invariably, that does not coincide with the requirements of effective insulation. We need to look at how we list buildings and how we then retain heat within them. Sometimes the regulations mean that refurbished buildings cannot be used economically. For example, there is a requirement for single-glazed windows.

How will the complaints procedure work with regard to passenger transport executives and the integrated public transport timetable? For example, British Airways—if I understood you correctly—will be part of the timetable because it will list all public transport services. Last week, BA cut—just like that—two rotations out of one route in the Highlands and Islands. There was no consultation with the local communities affected.

BA took a commercial decision but, with a national public transport timetable, the Executive or the Parliament could become the focus of complaints by the local community. I would be interested to know how that would work. More to the point, does the minister see the merits of passenger transport executives—whose principal role would be to consider matters such as complaints procedure—in areas such as the Highlands and Islands?

I took the point about vigorously supporting Scottish interests in reserved matters, and I appreciate the comments about fuel, which is a crucial issue for rural areas. How does the minister think the issue will be addressed in the context of the submission on the Executive's budget? Those of us who represent rural areas, and people right across Scotland, have a different perspective on the issue from the one that is being taken at the moment.

Sarah Boyack: I hear what you say about simplification and clarity. Successful designations need to meet those criteria, and we can reflect on that.

Listed buildings are not part of my brief. They are a matter for Historic Scotland and, I suppose, local authorities. No doubt Tavish Scott's question can be passed on to the relevant minister in committee.

On transport partnerships, it is important that customers and consumers have someone to

complain to and that their complaints are acted on. Transport companies consult effectively with user groups. There are avenues for individual members of the public to make complaints directly, through the rail users consultative committees and the traffic commissioner. I will bring forward proposals on the shape of regional transport partnerships in the autumn, when I respond to the consultation paper and set out the Executive's views.

Cathy Jamieson: I would like to pick up on some of the issues that have been raised, particularly transport in rural communities. I am glad that fuel pricing has been mentioned. One problem that people in rural communities face is a lack of certainty about the availability of bus services. The recent proposals to withdraw services from rural areas in Lanarkshire and Ayrshire will have a huge effect on communities there. People feel that there is no way for them to influence decisions.

Can the minister say a bit more about how people can become involved in the process? What will the consultation process involve, and what can we do to ensure that vital lifeline services are protected? This is a cross-cutting issue that affects access to health, education and other facilities.

I was interested to hear the minister mention community transport. Could she say a bit more about how she intends to develop that? I will leave it at that for the moment.

Sarah Boyack: Our general interest is to promote effective use of the money that we have provided for rural transport through the rural transport fund—there will be £14 million over the next three years—which will enable us to consider rural bus services, community transport and extending the life of rural petrol stations. Those are the three key elements for improving rural transport.

We are suggesting to local authorities that they identify key routes where rural bus services should be supported. We have tried to encourage them to use the rural transport fund to that end. A large number of new bus services in Scotland have been set up via the fund.

The other way in which we can assist rural transport is through the legislation on integrated transport. Bus quality partnerships and bus quality contracts are key mechanisms that will allow local authorities to sit down with local bus companies, discuss the appropriate level of services and identify key areas. They will be able to look to the long term and work together. At the moment, local authorities are providing examples of good practice and the rural transport fund is allowing them to do more to provide services. However, we hope that co-ordination and certainty about services will come through bus quality

partnerships and the option of bus quality contracts.

10:45

Cathy mentioned cross-cutting work, which is a key issue for the Scottish Executive and for agencies working together at a local level, such as health boards. It is also important for local authorities, which have to link their school budgets with their transport budgets in funding subsidised bus services. Local authorities are doing a lot of creative and innovative work in making the best use of the infrastructure that they must provide. I was most impressed with school services in a couple of authorities that I visited this summer—the school budgets and the transport budgets were linked to ensure the best use of efficient infrastructure.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): It is exciting to see the extent to which power has been devolved to the Parliament in terms of the environment and I welcome the broad thrust of the minister's presentation.

On farming, the minister said that dialogue and best practice were the best ways in which to control run-off from farms, which is the major pollutant of our rivers. I suggest that additional resources and a change in the way in which farming is supported in this country might be other ways forward, both through the European Parliament and through the Rural Affairs Committee. We should support agri-environment and organic schemes in Scotland to a much greater extent. Such schemes are seriously under-resourced and we lag behind England and Wales in that respect.

On sites of special scientific interest, I acknowledge that it may be necessary to rework the way in which we look at nature conservation in Scotland, an issue that falls within our powers. In the same breath, I should say that I am slightly worried about the fact that we heard mention of denotification of SSSIs. I want an assurance that that will be done in a clearly delineated way.

Will the Executive produce long-term plans for the development and—I hope—the extension of the rail network in Scotland? Finally, will the transport and the environment department and the education department undertake cross-cutting work at this stage on the education bill that is going through Parliament, or will that be left to a later date?

Sarah Boyack: First, although agri-environment schemes fall within Ross Finnie's brief, it is true to say that we are discussing cross-cutting issues and environment perspectives.

Robin Harper is right—we need to take a long-

term view of nature conservation, which is the objective behind the introduction of new ideas on SSSIs. The points that he raised—members may wish to raise other points—can be made during the consultation process and we can take them on board.

An exciting element of the Scottish Parliament is the extent to which we have an influence on rail services in Scotland and on the development of the rail network; I am keen to ensure that we use that influence to best effect. We can begin funding key investment in the rail network through the public transport fund, for which local authorities are working to submit bids. We will come back to discuss the long term. Improving the quality, frequency, range and location of rail services is an exciting opportunity for the Parliament.

The Convener: Thank you. Do you have any comments on the education bill?

Sarah Boyack: When bills are being drafted, ministers have the opportunity to make comments. Members can always make me aware of their ideas.

Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con): In the minister's summary of her department's work, she did not mention the strategic roads review, which has attracted a lot of interest over the past year. I will not press her for details at this stage, but will she say when she will be able to make an announcement? She will be aware that the projection of funding does not offer scope for much of the review to be implemented. Will she be able to announce increased funding?

As committee members, we hear a lot from the railway industry about extending the existing franchises. A lobby is developing that says that the key to encouraging maximum investment over the next two or three years is to let companies know whether they can expect their franchises to be extended. Again, the minister cannot answer in detail about decisions that are still to be made, but does the Government have an attitude, in principle, on renegotiating existing franchises for further periods?

Sarah Boyack: It will not surprise you to know that I cannot give a date today. I intend to announce the results of the strategic roads review to Parliament soon, as I said I would in answer to a question from you during the summer. The strategic roads review will consider the economy, safety, environmental impact, accessibility and integration. I will address all those issues when I report to Parliament.

I will not reveal our position on the rail franchises today. We are aware of the issue and are examining the opportunities. Negotiations are involved and it is not best practice to reveal objectives and tactics before negotiations begin.

That is something for the future; I do not want to comment on it today.

Mr Tosh: That is interesting enough, thank you.

Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): You mentioned the overground initiative, Sarah, which includes buses, integrated services and through-ticketing. I welcome any integrated transport initiative, but one of the downsides of the overground has been the withdrawal of some services. Under the deregulation rules, that can happen without notice. What safeguards does the minister suggest that we consider for the bus industry in the future?

Will the minister explain why the Government is considering road user charging? What measures are being taken to keep the Parliament informed about the issue?

The minister mentioned that she was cross-cutting with almost all other areas of the Government and that is very welcome. Robin referred to education; I want to ask about health. What cross-cutting measures has she discussed with the Minister for Health and Community Care to tackle poor air quality, a problem that she mentioned?

Sarah Boyack: In the legislation that we introduce on bus quality partnerships and contracts, we will try to get local authorities and public transport operators to identify key services and priorities. Local authorities will have the opportunity to develop partnerships, with contracts as a backstop. That will concentrate the minds of the bus companies and the bus operators.

We want people to try to work in partnership. We will set up a statutory mechanism for bus quality partnerships, which will create a more level playing field for the bus companies and enable the local authorities to engage the bus companies in a more focused, constructive debate. Local authorities will be able to examine through-ticketing and timetabling and the provision of services across the authority. The current approach is rather sporadic; I hope that the partnership approach will enable a proper discussion of what each side wants and can provide. We need to adopt an approach whereby the authorities can talk to the bus companies and, similarly, the bus companies can engage with the authorities.

Why are we consulting on road user charging? When I spoke about our transport policies, I tried to convey the range of mechanisms that exist—the regional transport partnerships, the local transport strategies and our national approach to transport. We are thinking about the range of mechanisms that we need in order to tackle our key transport problems, such as integration, air quality and environmental issues, and the social links with

transport. As part of that, we are hugely aware of the need to invest in transport and to tackle congestion. The figures for traffic congestion during the next 30 years show a 50 per cent increase in traffic. We cannot sustain that.

We must improve the quality of our public transport so that it is world-class. We also need to improve the quality of our roads. To do that we need more investment. Murray's question about the strategic roads review always concentrates minds. How much money do we have to invest in transport? Do we have enough?

One of our key reasons for consulting on road user charging is that we need more investment in transport. At the same time, we need to ensure that we tackle congestion. The days of predict and provide under the previous Administration—of building roads without thinking about how they fitted into a wider transport strategy—have gone. That is not to say that new roads are not part of the agenda; it is to say that they must be part of a wider approach to public transport investment. That is where road user charging fits in.

We must consider revenue investment and how we tackle the projected long-term increase in traffic growth. That is why we are considering three elements in the consultation paper. First, workplace parking levies would be an enabling power for local authorities; they would allow local authorities to raise money locally and to invest it locally in transport. Secondly, local authorities could present us with a package on congestion charging around our cities. The local authority would have to identify how the money was raised, identify the intended use, give a timetable and demonstrate that it had consulted local communities and local interests, such as the business community.

Both those options would take the form of enabling legislation so that local authorities could present us with packages and proposals. The authority would need to be clear about issues such as modal shift: to what extent would its package encourage people to move from the private car to the different modes of public transport? Local authorities would have to establish that with the whole range of local interest groups.

In the third element of consultation—on trunk road and motorway charging—the Scottish Executive would consider the same issues: traffic congestion, the use of the roads network and long-term impact. The key thing in our consultation paper is that we are asking people for their views on the three main elements. The approach to trunk road charging would be the same as at the local level. The Scottish Executive would develop and justify packages. It would identify key stretches of routes, identify how much money would be raised and where it would be spent, develop a timetable

and consult widely. We have suggested a number of options, such as traffic orders and local public inquiries.

It is important to stress that, before any decisions are taken on whether we should develop those key elements in legislation, there will be robust consultation involving local authorities, businesses, individuals and all the other relevant interest groups. The consultation period closes at the end of this month and I am keen to receive comments on the principles of what we are trying to do and ideas on how we might take proposals forward.

The Convener: Thank you, Sarah.

Sarah Boyack: There was also the health issue.

The Convener: Sorry.

Sarah Boyack: I mentioned the national air quality strategy. It is primarily for local authorities to identify local areas that are experiencing air quality problems and then to develop an action plan. That is the extent to which we need to cross-cut different areas of government at both a local and national level.

11:00

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): The work that you are doing is really exciting. Many people have not appreciated that we have a great opportunity to reshape the world around us.

I welcomed what you said about overlapping—you used the word cross-cutting—responsibility with other ministers. I am sure that you meant to mention economic issues, as well as social and health factors. In developing transport policy, I hope that the issues that are related to congestion in cities across Scotland will be recognised, including the problems of economic access for rural and semi-rural areas.

Fife, for example, has the third highest level of unemployment in Scotland. An illustration of the impediments that are faced by industry in Fife is that it cost the company that did the joinery work in the Parliament chamber more than £2,000 in road tolls alone to come into Edinburgh to do that work.

We have a responsibility to address jobs and unemployment as well. I hope that that will feature in the paper that you eventually present to the Parliament.

I welcome your statement about the water commissioner. In cases that I have dealt with the attitude has been, "See you in court." I hope that having a water commissioner will change that, and that the water commissioner will offer a kind of court of appeal.

My final question is on trans-European

networks. You talked about your work on Eurostar links. It was always stated—I believe as a legal commitment—that there would be a Eurostar link to Scotland, but that has not happened yet. What are your views on that?

Sarah Boyack: There is a lot to respond to there.

I agree that transport policy needs to relate to other areas of Government interest. That is why the strategic roads review includes economic and access issues.

In taking forward discussions on tackling congestion, I have been keen to meet the business community and find out its agenda for transport. It is important that we think across boundaries. When I talked about sustainable development, I was thinking of social, economic and environmental development. It is important that we achieve joined-up thinking.

Access and economic issues are important. Through our investment in rail, the public transport fund for bus and rail, and our investment in and maintenance of our roads network, we have to meet the needs of local business people.

It is our intention that a professional regulator will scrutinise the water authorities to high environmental standards, and will consider charging policies. The professional regulator will be there for the customers—for the people who use water services.

I regard trans-European networks as hugely important. I hope to take them forward with my colleagues in Europe. I decline to comment on Eurostar as it is currently the subject of court action with Strathclyde passenger transport executive.

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): You said that fuel and vehicle taxation were reserved matters, but that you would liaise with UK ministers. We are facing a 20p increase in the price of petrol at the pumps due to the doubling of the price of oil and the 6 per cent increase from the fuel duty escalator. What is your view on the fuel duty escalator? What representations have you made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer about a 6 per cent increase that is in addition to the 20p increase that will shortly come the way of Scottish motorists and the Scottish business community?

The second matter relates to your comments on congestion, which you said was one of the reasons for suggesting road tolls. I refer you to the parliamentary question that was answered on 24 August 1999. The Executive was asked what reduction in car journeys was estimated as a result of the proposed road toll schemes. The answer, and I paraphrase, was that it would depend on the

nature of the scheme that was implemented.

Is the minister suggesting that the Executive has embarked on the scheme with no target for the level of reduction that it wants to achieve and with no evidence as to whether tolling would achieve reduction at all? If so, are not road tolls simply a way of raising revenue for the Executive?

My third question relates to page 33 of the consultation document. Paragraph 5.10 indicates that charging on the trunk road network would most likely be done electronically. What is the likely cost of installing the electronic equipment, and who will pick up the tab—drivers of commercial vehicles, or private individuals?

Sarah Boyack: As part of the UK, we have a responsibility to meet our environmental commitments and the Kyoto targets. The use of fuel is a key issue.

As transport minister, my principal concern is to ensure that we can mitigate the effects of the fuel tax escalator, particularly in rural areas. We do that through the rural transport fund, by supporting rural petrol stations, and by ensuring that people in rural areas have choices. However, we recognise that, for many people in rural areas, the car is the key mode of transport.

The Office of Fair Trading is taking a keen interest in fuel costs in the Highlands, and we await a report on that. Keeping local petrol stations open so that people have access to petrol is one way of supporting rural motorists. Accessibility is an issue that we are bearing in mind when considering our long-term planning strategy. Government can play a constructive role in a number of ways.

Mr MacAskill: Has the minister made representations to the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding the increase in the fuel duty escalator in addition to the market force increase?

Sarah Boyack: We will consider what we can do about that, but I have not been consulted by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. During the past few months, we have consulted UK Government departments, but that has not been one of the issues that we have discussed. The money that comes in through the fuel duty escalator comes back to Scotland. It is spent on investment in health and in education.

We have to consider taxation. We have one of the lowest rates of income tax in Europe as well as the lowest rate of corporation tax. Taxation is a hugely complex issue and a reserved matter, but it is something in which the Scottish Executive takes an interest. We are particularly interested in how we can benefit rural areas through the work of the Scottish Parliament.

There were a couple of questions about the

benefits of congestion charging. I stress that the consultation paper concentrates on the principles. To make estimates about specific schemes, we would have to have access to the packages that deal with modal split, diversion issues and the areas in which there would be congestion charges or tolls. We are not yet at that stage.

We know what the big picture is and we expect a 50 per cent increase in traffic over the next 30 years. Legislation will enable local authorities that are experiencing severe congestion to do the calculations, to work out the costs and benefits to local people, and to do so in a transparent way. When they have done that, we will look at road traffic reduction targets, at congestion problems and modal split, and at diversion issues.

All those things are mentioned in the consultation paper, but the facts and figures can be developed only when the schemes are on the ground. The same would be true of any road charging scheme. The package must be in front of us before the specific impact of a scheme can be estimated. We will only be able to take forward individual schemes when we reach the stage of deciding what will go into legislation.

I want to make that point strongly, in relation to both local congestion charging and trunk road charging. The key estimates of costs and investigation of traffic diversion issues must be part of a package. In approving any scheme, Scottish ministers must be satisfied that those calculations have been done correctly. Ministers must also know from consultation that they will be able to win support for schemes. We are a long way from that stage and at the moment we are examining key principles.

I will move on to the question about electronic methods. We recognise that any form of trunk road charging or congestion charging that we consider must be efficient and fair. There is no point in introducing measures that will further clog up the road system. That is a key principle.

One of the reasons for the Hermiston Gait electronic testing project is examination of the technology. We know about smart card technology, but we need to see whether it works and we must look at the circumstances particular to Scotland. That is why during the summer I announced the test, which will allow us to examine the local congestion issue and the trunk road issue. Hermiston Gait is ideal for examination of both those issues.

We are examining the possibility of electronic charging, but there is also the possibility that a system of paper disks will be used. We are looking at the options. The consultation paper gives people the opportunity to say what they think of those ideas. We will only be able to assess costs

when we have done the testing. The equipment we are testing is new. Other European countries have paper-based systems, but we want to find out what would be appropriate for Scotland, and that is why we are doing the testing, Kenny.

The Convener: We have raised a wide range of issues with you, minister, though not strategic issues. They have been more specific. I would like some indication of what advice the Executive will give to authorities about mobile phone masts. There are, as you know, some concerns about the health implications of those masts in relation to low-emission radiation.

Are organisations steering us as to how individuals can fit into what is a technical planning process? That can affect people's personal daily lives in terms of where they live in relation to large developments. People sometimes find it very difficult to relate to the planning process and to represent themselves at planning inquiries, and so on.

Does the Executive have any views on those matters?

Sarah Boyack: The matter of telecommunications masts is something that the Scottish Executive is going to bring forward. You may be unaware that Calum MacDonald, my predecessor, was involved in a consultation process to examine how this issue should be dealt with and we will be carrying on that work. I intend to give local authorities the opportunity to have more control over the location of such masts, by talking to developers who are putting forward proposals. There will be a similar framework to that which has been established in England in the past few months.

I am keen to see success for the telecommunications industry, but I also want to acknowledge local concerns and to give local authorities the power to influence the location of those masts. In addition to giving more guidance to local authorities, it is my intention to introduce to Scotland a code of best practice for both the telecommunications operators and the local authorities. In that way each side will know where the other is coming from. We will also be able to give advice about planning agreements and encourage mast-sharing. We are examining a number of mechanisms that will, I hope, take account of local concerns and of the ideas that have come from local authorities in the light of our consultation.

Regarding the planning process, the Scottish Parliament has the opportunity to raise the profile of planning. I am keen to ensure that development plans are produced and that people know about and are consulted about the contents of those plans. There is already best practice, but I want to

work with local authorities to ensure that we improve the quality of consultation, and to ensure that local people are aware of when plans are being produced, which is a key issue.

11:15

Making more timely plans available will improve consultation, letting local people know the key stages and allowing them to get involved at the time that their involvement is critically important, when policies are being developed. I hope that the responses that I receive to the land use planning consultation paper that I talked about earlier will help that to happen.

The Convener: I realise that the minister has other business to deal with. With the agreement of the committee, I will bring this part of the proceedings to a close. As people have said, our discussion has been interesting and exciting and we have covered issues that will have an effect on people's lives. I thank the minister for coming along and I am sure that we will continue our constructive engagement in the future.

Sarah Boyack: Thanks very much for allowing me to speak to you so early in your deliberations. It has been a great opportunity to talk to you about the Executive's plans. It has been most interesting to hear what your concerns are and I will monitor your progress in the *Official Report* on the internet, where you can also monitor mine.

Statutory Instrument

The Convener: The next item on the agenda is consideration of statutory instrument SSI 1999/1, the Environmental Impact Assessment (Scotland) Regulations 1999, which was laid on 9 July and is subject to annulment until 9 October. The committee might decide that its contents are acceptable or it might want to seek further information and consider it on 22 September. Members have the report from the Subordinate Legislation Committee, which recommends that the attention of the Parliament should not be drawn to the instrument, and we understand that the European Committee will consider the item on 14 September.

Mr Tosh: We should lay down a marker to the Executive about how we want matters of this nature to be presented to us. We have been given a 112-page technical document, full of valuable information which is largely incomprehensible to the members of the committee, and an elegantly worded but opaque analysis of what the regulations mean. We are told that the regulations include more projects, but we are not told which ones; neither are we told what the scope of the regulations is or how the regulations differ from the previous ones. We are told that the new

regulations clarify the use of thresholds, but we are not told the way in which they do so. References, such as the one to scoping, are not clearly defined. I find the brief inadequate.

What is annoying is that I know that perfectly digestible information is available. When the legislation was laid in the recess, I obtained information from the Parliament's information centre and I am surprised that the straightforward information that was given to me has not been replicated in what was given to the committee.

The brief tells us that consultation took place, but we are not told who was consulted or what the findings were. We are then told that we have little choice but to approve the instrument. I am very reluctant to agree to make a decision on the instrument today. I ask for a rather more informative briefing and for better practice from the Executive. Lay people such as ourselves—none of us are specialists in the fields that the SSIs will cover—need practical guidance in a concise form. We will have to consider the instrument again in the light of a better effort from the people who give us the relevant advice.

The Convener: Thanks, Murray. A point well made.

Tavish Scott: I support what Murray said. If we are to scrutinise the instrument, we need a brief that helps us understand it. I wonder if members of the Subordinate Legislation Committee were given a brief or if they had to plough through the whole document without an informal briefing. It is important to lay down a marker to the Executive. We should request of the Executive that such documents are accompanied by a simple explanatory document.

The Convener: The Subordinate Legislation Committee had the same information as us, but they were examining the technical process, not the content.

Cathy Jamieson: I wish to support my colleagues in seeking more information. My understanding is that there would be time to consider this matter at a future meeting, and presumably there would be no difficulty in having a short brief. Last night, I got to page 54, marking a number of questions where I felt I needed more information, when I realised that perhaps that was not the best approach to take and that there might be a quicker way to proceed.

The Convener: Indeed, and congratulations on getting to page 54.

We have noted the comments that were made with regard to clarification and the desire to have better briefing summaries so that we can ask the right questions and take the right action. We have time at our next meeting on 22 September, so we

will ensure that the information is given to the committee as soon as possible.

Nora Radcliffe: Will we be reissued with the report in the next set of committee papers?

The Convener: No.

Mr Tosh: It might be appropriate for the author of the report to be available at the next meeting so that we can ask questions on his amended report.

The Convener: We can arrange that.

Public Petitions

The Convener: Next is agenda item 4, on public petitions. Petitions are a welcome aspect of the Parliament's work, and it is good that Parliament gets involved with the issues. This committee has a number of petitions to consider. For background information, the Petitions Committee met on 1 September to consider petitions received by the Parliament. At that meeting, four petitions were referred to this committee. Petition PE8, from the Scottish Homing Union, was referred to the Rural Affairs Committee for consideration.

We will go through the petitions and determine what action we shall take. First, we will consider petition PE2 from Ayrshire chamber of commerce and industry on the upgrade to motorway standard of the A77 between Fenwick and Newton Mearns. Do any matters arise from that?

Mr Tosh: You will not be surprised if I say that as a member who represents part of Ayrshire, I entirely agree with the petition. The petition is directed to the Parliament, but the petitioners must take into account that the Parliament does not have a budget and cannot act on the petition. We must, therefore, remit this petition to the Executive in the first instance, and ask it to take the petition into account in concluding its review of strategic roads. No other option is open to us at this stage.

Cathy Jamieson: I come from that part of the world, and I must declare an interest because I signed a motion supporting this issue in the Parliament. Can we do anything else at this stage, or do we need to follow the route that Murray suggested, and await the outcome of the strategic roads review?

The Convener: Bearing in mind the fact that according to the minister the roads review will be published soon, there would be little point pursuing the issue at this time. Of course, we can revisit the issue once the review has been published. That would allow us to pursue Murray's suggested course of action and forward the petition to the Executive, but also to retain the matter on our agenda for discussion after the review has been published.

Des McNulty: The process that is being

suggested for handling this matter is appropriate. However, I would like to raise one or two procedural issues relating to how these matters may be handled in future. Obviously, strategic roads development involves a number of competing projects. Do we want to create a situation in which every proposal comes with a petition? Is that an appropriate use of time and effort by ourselves and the petitioners?

The other issue concerns areas that do not naturally fit into our agenda. We have an agenda set out to deal with certain matters between now and Christmas and the Executive has set its own business agenda. Issues might arise that do not obviously fit in with both agendas, and the question is how we signal to people that their matter is or is not being dealt with. We need to make it clear to people what happens when they make proposals and we have to be able to say when the committee cannot progress a certain issue at a certain time. We need to decide how that issue should be handled.

Mr MacAskill: I was more sympathetic towards the point about noting the issue for revisiting. I do not see any merit in remitting the issue to the Executive, which will have its own position. We should indicate to Ayrshire chamber of commerce that the committee will revisit its petition when the trunk roads review is issued. We are not shelving the petition for years, but probably for a matter of months, even though we have not received a specific timetable from the minister. We should politely recognise the importance of the petition and indicate that we will consider those views when we come to discuss the strategic trunk road review as a whole.

Mr Tosh: I have no difficulty with Kenny's suggestion. The only action that we can take at the moment is to bring the contents of the petition to the Executive's attention. If we do not do that, we will be failing to follow through immediately on the issue. I realise that the Executive is already examining the matter, but we should tell ministers that the issue has been drawn to our attention, even though it is a matter for them. I am delighted that we will revisit the issue in the light of decisions that will be made by the Executive and by the Parliament, because I do not want to suggest to the petitioners that the committee is punting the issue into the middle distance.

Helen Eadie: The petition should be submitted to the Executive. Our responsibility as parliamentarians is to spread information as widely as we can. It is then down to MSPs to decide what weight to give to that information, because we have to bear in mind that every MSP will have issues pressing from the areas that he or she represents. As Des said, do we go back to those areas and whip up a frenzy of people submitting

petitions? People have put effort into this petition and I do not want the committee to sit on its contents. We need to share the information with other people so that they can make an informed decision about the matter.

The Convener: I think that we have a consensus on this matter. We will forward the petition to the Executive and revisit the issue when the strategic trunk roads review is published.

The next petition is petition PE3 from the Hospitalfield Area Residents' Association about the effect of commercial oil seed rape crushing on the health of that area's residents. Having read the association's well-structured briefing note, I think that the two focal points of the matter are the Scottish Environment Protection Agency's view and the view of the local authority. Should we take further advice from SEPA and the local authority on what led them to make the decisions that have since led to the company getting consent for its development and to the petition being presented to the committee? I am sure that other issues will be brought to my attention during our discussion, but is that a good way of progressing the matter?

Mr Tosh: I agree with your suggestion, convener. The residents' complaint mostly centres on the initial planning decision. However, because of our work load, we cannot realistically revisit every planning decision that people throughout Scotland do not agree with. We can examine whether the regulatory authorities are doing their work properly, which is an important distinction to draw.

The Convener: We will discuss our work load. If we take on too many issues we will not make progress on the areas that we have identified as priorities.

Helen Eadie: What Murray says is sound, but I wish to enter a caveat. You raised the issue of mobile phones, convener. That is a legitimate concern for us because it touches on health matters. In connection with the matter of oil seed rape, I would like this committee always to bear wider health issues in mind. Allowing things to go ahead in a planning or environmental context can sometimes have an impact on people's health in years to come.

The Convener: We can certainly seek the view of the Health and Community Care Committee on that matter, which will cross-cut into its activities—to use the cross-cutting term that we keep hearing about. We will see what its view is on the matter.

11:30

Mr MacAskill: Approaching SEPA and the local authority appears eminently sensible. We want issues not only to be raised, but to be seen on a

broader base. We should ask the local authority and SEPA to comment on how we can address the individual matter and the broader issue. I appreciate that our time and scope for action are limited, but if SEPA says that a matter is not isolated and is arising all over Scotland, we may care to take its advice on board and accelerate the issue up the agenda. We should ask the organisations you correctly targeted, convener, and invite them to comment on individual matters and on whether they think the committee should examine any further issues.

The Convener: Is that agreed? It is.

The next petition, PE7, is from Mr R H Guild and is

"on Edinburgh's transport and traffic".

I am sure that members have had an opportunity to read the notes.

When the minister spoke about the local transport strategy, I felt that there was a link with this petition and how the local authority consults.

The City of Edinburgh Council is forming and developing a local transport strategy, but I do not know what stage it is at. The local authority should be the main focus, in the first instance, for points about a local transport strategy.

Helen Eadie: I know that the City of Edinburgh Council, Scottish Borders Council, Fife Council, Stirling Council and Falkirk Council have been involved in a partnership and are engaged in exactly the sort of discussion that is mentioned in "Tackling Congestion". To say that there is no agreed way forward is not to do justice to the work that that organisation has been doing, which has been commendable.

I applaud Mr Guild's comments about rail links with Edinburgh airport. I am wholeheartedly, four square and 100 per cent behind them. While I understand his concerns, I think that his comments do not take account of the wider work going on in the south-east Scotland transport partnership.

The Convener: I will take those comments on board. Are we agreed about noting that petition?

Mr Tosh: I think that it would be appropriate for us to advise the City of Edinburgh Council formally that the concerns have been expressed to us.

The Convener: Thank you, Murray.

The last petition is PE8 and comes from the Scottish Homing Union. It is

"on the impact of the number of birds of prey on the sport of pigeon racing".

I can advise members that the Rural Affairs Committee deferred further decision on the

petition pending further research by SPICe which, for those in the public gallery, is the Parliament's information centre, and on the report by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and on raptor predation research—easy for me to say.

In short, research is going on as we speak, but it has not yet been published. It would perhaps be better to wait for that research to be published and then to revisit the petition. The clerks have circulated a second document, from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which gives some further detail on the issue.

Nora Radcliffe: I agree with what you say, but can we also approach the Scottish Homing Union to ask about any research that might have been done into how pigeons can be made less attractive to predators, so to speak?

The Convener: Before it produces a briefing, the information centre will listen to the opinions of all the organisations that want to comment, so I am sure that that will be taken on board.

Robin Harper: Is it appropriate to make any preliminary remarks on that topic at the moment?

The Convener: I would not have thought so, because we will end up going round and round. It would be better to proceed on the information that we get from SPICe and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Cathy Jamieson: I wanted to make a similar point. A lot of us have received a lot of representations on the matter, and it would be appropriate to deal with them later.

The Convener: At the end of this meeting, the clerk will confirm to the petitioners in writing what we have agreed to do with their petitions. I would like to thank those organisations for sending their petitions and for playing their part in the democratic process in the Scottish Parliament. As I said earlier, it is a welcome innovation.

Work Programme and Timetable

The Convener: Members will have understood, from Sarah's comments, the Executive's perspective on our work programme. We know the legislation that it is introducing. We also know the issues on which, even if there is no legislation, action is being taken, which is another important facet of the Executive's work.

Our first meeting, in June, was fairly extensive and we went through our areas of interest. It was followed by our two-day informal briefing session at which we heard presentations from a number of key organisations and people. We then had a fairly detailed discussion of the committee's priorities. I want your views on that, after which I will

commission the clerks to draw up a work programme for the committee. I would like to plan the next four months or so of committee work, bearing in mind the impact on our agenda of the legislation that Sarah told us about. In that way, we will not just discuss issues; we will deal with issues and get to the meat of what this committee is about.

The five issues that we discussed at our two-day briefing meeting were: mobile phone masts; fuel; landfill tax; the bus industry—in rural areas in particular; and small to medium enterprises and the environment. From those items we could select some for early action, getting the clerks to invite people to give advice to the committee and do further research that we can then develop. I want your views on what our agenda should be.

Helen Eadie: The bus industry should be one of our key priorities. Most members of the committee have, at one time or another, expressed concern about the fact that bus services in some areas are not running as we would like them to, whereas in other areas they may be expanding. Rural areas are left with particular problems. People may raise their eyebrows and say that Fife is not really rural, but 80 per cent of Fife is a rural area.

The minister talked about quality partnerships and, possibly, quality contracts. I would like us to consider the option of franchising bus services. I see franchising as allowing us to set standards and specifications that the quality partnership would not allow us to set.

I welcome what the minister said about mobile phone masts. We need to maintain a high profile on that issue, because there is concern across Scotland about the masts.

Janis Hughes: I would like to echo what Helen said. The bus issue affects us all—although I do not know about Tavish—and cuts across all areas. I was interested to hear what Sarah said about concessionary travel for the blind. We must widen that out and examine the whole issue of concessionary travel. The differences in provision in different regions will always be a difficult issue.

We also need to move on telecommunications, where we can get an outcome. It is an on-going issue and we will need to monitor the situation, but it is a matter that should be dealt with with a fair amount of urgency.

Cathy Jamieson: I agree that we should continue to watch developments in telecommunications masts. I was delighted to hear that the minister will present proposals on that issue. I also look forward to an answer to my written question on the matter, which I lodged some time ago.

I have a couple of suggestions about how we

might tackle the issue of buses. Rural transport and concessionary fares are critical. If we are to scrutinise the proposals properly, we need to begin to think about taking evidence from some of the user organisations, transport unions and service providers. That will give us an early indication of what the problems are so that we can avoid some of the pitfalls and ensure that we get a properly integrated transport system, which is what we all want.

Early on, I would like to see a suggested list of the people and organisations from whom we should take evidence. It may also be helpful for those of us who have not dealt with this matter to any great extent in the past to have a briefing on the operation of concessionary fares across Scotland and on the new proposals so that we can consider the issue in more detail.

The Convener: I am sure that we can do that.

Tavish Scott: I am comfortable with the proposal to consider the issue of buses, especially as there are aspects of the requirements set out by the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee—on access to buses for people with disabilities and mothers with young children—that have particular implications for rural Scotland. There are issues to do with the types of bus that can be used and whether they can get on rural roads. It would be important to consider those aspects as part of an inquiry.

I also want to put down a strong marker for the issue of fuel research. We need to examine certain bits of the package being promoted by the Executive, such as investment in fuel stations and infrastructure, and their effectiveness in helping rural areas. We also need to be as proactive as possible in encouraging the Office of Fair Trading to get on and do proper work on oil companies. That should be a matter of urgency.

Des McNulty: I am anxious that the debate on buses should not be confined to issues affecting rural areas, as there are a lot of bus transport issues in urban areas too, including the regulation and administration of subsidised services. The discussion needs to be broad and wide ranging.

There is a danger of this committee simply responding to what the Executive says. It is important that we work in parallel. On some subjects, particularly regulatory issues, it may be helpful to have briefings in anticipation of the Executive's proposals. For example, we should not wait for an announcement on the quality partnerships before we consider them. Other areas, such as the strategic roads review, can also be identified where such briefings may be helpful. I was particularly interested in the minister's statement on the regulatory framework for water, which we will need to get some kind of briefing on,

as an announcement is likely in the next three or four months.

I support the arguments in favour of the topics for consideration, but we should also be prepared to anticipate announcements—developments in the regulatory framework, in particular—so that the committee is up to speed on the issues and is able to contribute to the debate, rather than respond to decisions once they are made.

Mr MacAskill: It comes down to how we see the committee operating and what its role is. I think that the role is twofold: to scrutinise what the Executive is doing and to publicise what we think are the gaps. I echo what Helen, Janis and Cathy said about scrutiny.

The minister touched on bus partnerships. It is appropriate that we should be looking at that. My view is that partnership on its own is not sufficient and that we should look at contracts to tie people in, and at a variety of other factors that have been raised.

The minister talked about the Scottish Environment Protection Agency's waste recycling strategy and landfill tax. The two are interlinked; we cannot possibly deal with one without the other, given the finance that is available. All due credit to what has been done with the landfill tax income, but it is not nearly as much as could have been or should be done with the finance that is floating about.

There are two major gaps in terms of promotion. It may be that the minister has left this to her colleague in rural affairs, but we have heard nothing about GM foods. That matter is being discussed. If rural affairs is not dealing with it, we should be discussing the spectre of GM foods. I would be surprised if it has not left it to us, given that we have the power to stop the transportation of those goods, although it is debatable whether we have the power to stop people growing the crops.

Helen touched briefly on transportation links, which are fundamental to our economy. It is nothing less than a scandal that from this so-called hub of a financial services city in Europe there is only one flight to London. From Ireland, there are five flights to five German cities. There is something wrong. We must consider Scottish transportation links, including ferry services and the strategic rail authority's proposed Eurostar rail links at Rosyth—questions about which the minister, understandably, did not answer. Finally, our air links lag sadly behind the Republic of Ireland and, indeed, Iceland.

Nora Radcliffe: If we are zeroing in on buses and bus services, should we also look at types of buses—for example, gas buses, alternative fuel buses and low-floor buses? We could also liaise

with the Equal Opportunities Committee because it will be doing work on access for people with various forms of disability. Some of that work would benefit our discussion.

Robin Harper: Thank you, Kenny, for mentioning two of the things dearest to my heart. I would like to draw the committee's attention to the fact that I have re-submitted my motion on the planting of GM crops.

The UK and Scotland are far behind on notions of the reduction and recycling of industrial and household waste. That is something, along with the landfill tax, that we should include at the earliest opportunity—in the spirit of Des's announcement that we do not have to wait for an announcement from the Executive. I realise that we are in danger of overloading ourselves with work. It may be that the next thing we need to do is prioritise the issues that we have mentioned. I would like to see a start on the two that I have mentioned.

Helen Eadie: I hope that we will not address disability only in regard to the buses; I hope that we will address it as it affects all transport modes. We should also deal with an issue that is close to your heart, convener—waste.

Mr Tosh: I think that we are back where we started—having narrowed the topics down to something that we thought was halfway manageable, we have expanded them all over again. That is mostly Kenny MacAskill's fault, of course.

We have to be realistic about what we can manage. I take Des's point that we have to improve our understanding and get up to speed on the issues that are likely to come up. That is not shadowing the Executive—it is merely putting ourselves in a position to interpret and deal with its proposals.

I was interested in Tavish's plea for us to examine the impact of fuel prices on rural communities, especially islands. Recently I received representations from an islander who made the valid point that her petrol station, the only one on the island, ran at a loss and was being subsidised by another garage business. She said that she could not afford the upgrading that was required under regulations, and that if she withdrew the service the islanders would be totally dependent on imported fuel. She also suggested that there were safety issues surrounding the transportation of fuel to the island. There is scope for examining the regulations and proposals that the Government is putting forward in this area, to determine whether the rural petrol stations scheme goes far enough.

However, I hesitate to throw anything else into the balance. We need to examine what we have

come up with and identify three or four topics that we can realistically deal with, because we will have a very heavy work load once we start considering legislation. Sarah said that the first bill will come before us in mid autumn—that is not very far away.

The Convener: There is a hierarchy of demands on the committee, which we will address in a work plan and discuss at the committee. Today, the five issues that were discussed at the two-day briefing have been brought to the fore, along with some additional matters. My view is that we should deal with existing demands before programming in the other activities that have been suggested. Does that sound reasonable?

Robin Harper: I am happy with that. Given the urgency of the situation in our rural communities, Tavish's concerns should be addressed first. We can then move on.

The Convener: We will come back with a work plan as soon as possible, prior to the next meeting.

Invitations

The Convener: This last item on the agenda is just for information. I remind the committee of the invitation from Scottish Natural Heritage on behalf of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature: World Conservation Union to a working dinner on 21 October on environmental issues relevant to Scotland and a workshop on integrated planning on 22 October. Anyone who wishes to take up that offer can speak to me after the meeting or have a word with Lynn.

I would now like to close the meeting. I think that it has been very rewarding and that it has built on our first meeting and the two-day briefing session during the recess. We will now develop a work programme for the foreseeable future. We can then start to tackle the meat of the issue by inviting people along to grill them—or whatever we decide to do to the poor souls who appear before us. They can provide us with advice and up-to-date information on the issues that we have discussed.

Des McNulty: I welcome that. I suggest, convener, that if a substantive item or items can be placed on the agenda for our next meeting, the committee gives you authority to do so ahead of agreeing the work programme formally.

The Convener: Smashing. I thank members, the clerks and the people in the galleries. We will see you at our next meeting on 22 September.

Meeting closed at 11:54.

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