

# **TRANSPORT AND THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE**

Wednesday 29 March 2000  
*(Morning)*

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### TRANSPORT AND THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

6<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2000, Session 1

#### CONVENER

\*Mr Andy Kerr (East Kilbride) (Lab)

#### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) LD)

#### 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)

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD)

\*Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con)

\*attended

#### WITNESSES

Sarah Boyack (Minister for Transport and the Environment)

Adam Rennie (Scottish Executive Development Department)

#### CLERK TEAM LEADER

Lynn Tullis

#### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Walsh

#### LOCATION

The Hub



## Scottish Parliament

### Transport and the Environment Committee

*Wednesday 29 March 2000*

*(Morning)*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 11:02*]

**The Convener (Mr Andy Kerr):** I welcome committee members and members of the press and public to the sixth meeting of the Transport and the Environment Committee this year. I also welcome the Minister for Transport and the Environment, Sarah Boyack, and her colleagues Adam Rennie, Rab Watson and Neil MacLennan, who are here to discuss an affirmative Scottish statutory instrument.

Apologies have been received from Tavish Scott and Cathy Jamieson; both are involved in the work of the European Committee this morning and are elsewhere.

### Subordinate Legislation

**The Convener:** The first item of business is consideration of subordinate legislation special grant report No 3 on grant in aid of expenditure on rail services in the Strathclyde Passenger Transport area. We have circulated papers TE/00/6/1, TE/00/6/2 and TE/00/6/3, which are the report, the Executive cover note and a committee covering note for the report.

The procedure for handling this report will be the same as for the affirmative SSI that we considered at the previous meeting. As we discussed then, under rule 10.6 of standing orders the committee is required to consider a formal motion for approval and to report to the Parliament with its recommendation on whether the instrument is to be approved. I advise committee members that the Subordinate Legislation Committee considered this report at its meeting on 22 March and did not highlight any technical problems with it. I suggest that we allow some time for members to discuss the matter with the minister. We will then move on to motion S1M-669. It may be debated prior to a decision being made, which can be no later than 90 minutes after the motion has been moved.

I remind members that the committee has no power to amend the motion or the report. Our task is to recommend whether the report should be accepted in its entirety or should not be approved. I invite Sarah Boyack to make any appropriate introductory remarks.

**The Minister for Transport and the Environment (Sarah Boyack):** Convener, thank you for giving me the opportunity to present this important special grant report to your committee. Although it is the first time that such a report has been laid before the Scottish Parliament, this is the fourth report that has been prepared for Strathclyde Passenger Transport Executive since 1997.

Prior to devolution, this report would have been laid at Westminster, usually at the same time as the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions laid its report for the passenger transport executives in England. Now, this report is made by Scottish ministers under section 108A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 as amended by section 167 of the Local Government etc (Scotland) Act 1994. The section enables the Scottish Executive to provide SPTE with vital financial support for rail services in 2000-01, which were secured by SPTE under the terms of the ScotRail franchise agreement. The report means that the Scottish Executive can pay grant to the 12 councils that make up the Strathclyde Passenger Transport Authority—since the authority does not itself constitute a local authority—and at that point the councils make payments to SPTE and arrangements are put in place to enable the councils to mandate the Scottish Executive to make payments directly to SPTE.

That is the background. In general terms, this grant pays for the estimated shortfall between the ScotRail franchise to SPTE and the revenue generated by fares, together with any other sources of income. It covers the direct costs incurred by SPTE in administering its part of the ScotRail franchise, and the making right of a deficit borne by SPTE as a consequence of its bearing revenue risk in 1998-99.

The other principal source of SPTE's income that is taken into account when calculating the grant level are deeds of assumption, which repay to SPTE the outstanding written-down value of its past capital grants to the British Railways Board and Railtrack. Once we take all those factors into account, our estimate is that the grant that is due to SPTE is £79.12 million.

Last year's report awarded SPTE £83.3 million. The year-on-year reduction is principally a consequence of the declining cost to the ScotRail franchise, as agreed when that franchise was let in 1997. Another factor affecting the reduction in grant is the projected increase in revenue that SPTE has estimated for 2000-01. That amounts to an increase of about £4 million, which takes the revenue generated by the rail services up to £50.8 million. SPTE has to demonstrate value for money when estimating its direct costs, and we have allowed it approximately £1.67 million for costs in

2000-01.

I will take a couple of moments to outline the structure and content of the report, which members have in front of them. The report's principal function is to set out the purposes for which the grant is paid. I will set out the purposes of the annexes. The first annexe sets out the calculations that the Scottish Executive will make to ensure that SPTE receives the correct sums of money to pay for the costs of the franchise services. It should be emphasised that SPTE's final bills are subject to audit. The second annexe details the conditions surrounding the payments, including the provision of relevant information to the Scottish Executive and to auditors. Scottish ministers may withhold grant if SPTE has not used the grant for the intended purposes. The final annexe describes SPTE's role and the method used for the grant calculation.

In coming to a view on the amount that should be paid to SPTE, we have considered a number of factors, including a parallel process that is being undertaken by the DETR for the English passenger transport executives. There are common elements that reflect the GB-wide structures of the rail industry and which are comparable, for example how we estimate revenue from fares, direct costs by the PTEs and the deeds of assumption payments. That does not stop us using our discretion when arriving at agreed figures for the grant, but it helps us to do that from a more informed position.

We have also held detailed discussions with SPTE on the content of the report that I am submitting to you today. It is broadly content with the figures that I have outlined. By underwriting the costs of the ScotRail franchise, this special grant report has already allowed the company to invest in new trains, enhance the levels of service and focus on better customer care, safety and security in what we regard as a close and productive partnership with SPTE.

I am very pleased to be able to recommend the report to the committee. It will enable SPTE to deliver its existing commitments, to build on its achievements and to look for further improvements in the quality and reliability of the services that it supports. I hope that that has been a helpful introduction.

**The Convener:** Thank you—that was very helpful. Do members of the committee have any questions for the minister?

**Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con):** I have three questions. Would you like me to ask them all at once?

**The Convener:** I suggest that you go ahead with all three.

**Mr Tosh:** My first question is about capital spend in the system. It is clear that this is essentially a revenue item, but SPTE is also responsible for investment—for example, it attempts to introduce one new station per year, provided that there are sufficient resources for that. It is also working on crossrail in Glasgow. How does SPTE fund that kind of expenditure? Does the revenue allocation offer it a way of funding its capital works? If so, will it allow SPTE to make a start on projects such as crossrail?

**Adam Rennie (Scottish Executive Development Department):** Under the section 94 system, there is a separate capital expenditure allocation for SPTE that is outside the terms of this report. However, a great deal of capital expenditure on railways in the SPTE area is delivered by ScotRail and Railtrack. The significance of the £79 million allocated through this report is that it feeds through into the franchise and will, therefore, find its way into capital investment by ScotRail—in new electric trains, for instance—or by Railtrack, which is able to finance investment through the track access charges that ScotRail pays to use the railways. The privatised rail system works as something of a financial merry-go-round. Although we are talking about revenue funding from the Executive to SPTE, the money will flow through to places where some of it is deployed for capital expenditure.

**Mr Tosh:** I will come back to you on that.

Somewhere in the paperwork there was an expression that I was unable to find again when I came to formulate my second question. The report, or the assessment of it, said that the services that are funded will be broadly similar to last year's. What scope is there for growth? Is a resource element built in for any potential decision to action the Larkhall line?

**Sarah Boyack:** Resources for that would not come directly through this report. The main service enhancement that commuters will see as a result of this report is the new class 334 Juniper trains, which will come on stream this year—the 38 new three-car electric multiple units that SPTE is currently putting into commission.

**Mr Tosh:** I was wondering whether the revenue calculation assumed an increased subsidy payment to operate the Larkhall line.

**Sarah Boyack:** No. We are currently considering the business case that SPTE is making for that route.

**Mr Tosh:** My third question concerns the broader budgetary position. I appreciate that papers that we have been given to deal with later relate to last year's budget and to the Scottish Office rather than to the Scottish Executive, but they do not include a section on either SPTE

payments or ScotRail payments. As part of the budget round either this year or in successive years, will we be able to scrutinise that part of the department's expenditure, or is that outwith the scope of this committee? That is all the more significant given your indication that capital allocations to SPTE are made under section 94. This committee would like to think that it is part of the scrutiny and evaluation process for that.

**Adam Rennie:** As I think the minister mentioned, capital allocations are made under local government legislation, so strictly speaking they are local government expenditure rather than transport expenditure. Mr Tosh has highlighted a problem that affects the way in which the Executive views that expenditure—sometimes it appears in the transport block, but it has a life of its own in the local government system. We can look into the matter, if the minister is happy for us to do so.

**Sarah Boyack:** We can do that.

**Mr Tosh:** I would like to think that we should be scrutinising the transport element of local government funding, as well as challenge funding. Although local government transport funding is part of the local government set-up, it is germane to transport issues. Will the SPTE and ScotRail payments—which amount to more than £200 million a year—be considered by the Local Government Committee or by this committee? I am talking about the £80 million that will go to SPTE and the £100 million that will go to ScotRail, which are not included in our budget papers.

**The Convener:** I expect that we will comment on those figures, whether they are submitted just to this committee or to this committee and the Local Government Committee.

**Mr Tosh:** I do not think that they are likely to be included in the local government figures, and they do not appear in the budget papers that we will consider later today. I want to know whether this aspect of the department's budget is simply an Executive responsibility or whether the committee has the power to scrutinise it.

11:15

**Sarah Boyack:** By bringing forward this special report, we are raising the issue of funding for SPTE and ScotRail before the committee and giving you the opportunity to explore it.

**Mr Tosh:** That is very different from the procedure that we are following in scrutinising the rest of the budget.

**Sarah Boyack:** A couple of minutes ago, Adam Rennie said that we will investigate the point that you have raised. This morning, I want to focus on the report that is before us. You are raising a wider

accountancy issue.

**Mr Tosh:** I understand that. The trouble is that this is our chance to consider this budget, which will go off today in the form of an affirmative statutory instrument. We have no come-back on that. For future reference, if we want to be involved in scrutinising this very substantial part of the Executive's expenditure and in the process of examining support for the railways, that must be built into our budgetary calculations, along with the figures for the motorways and all the other aspects of transport that appear in the papers that are before us and that are part of this committee's work.

**The Convener:** As you know, Murray, we are going through all aspects of the departmental budget that relate to the minister's remit, so we will cover the area to which you have referred. There is also a difference in time scale between the contents of this report and the work that we will do on the forthcoming budget figures. The point that you are making is that you want to be reassured that we will have the opportunity to address the detailed issue to which you have referred. The minister has indicated that her view on that will be forthcoming. If we can leave it at that for now, I am sure that the minister will come back to us on your specific point.

**Members indicated agreement.**

**Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP):** I want to ask two questions, the first of which follows on from the point that Murray Tosh made about Larkhall. Am I right to assume that no funding for the Larkhall line is included in this aspect of the budget for 2000-01? If so, is it proposed that additional funding will be made available for the Larkhall line for 2000-01, or are we to assume that SPTE will not contribute to that project during this financial year?

Secondly, does the funding that has been made available include an element for in-fill electrification of lines within the SPTE area, or is that not on the agenda?

**Sarah Boyack:** What Adam Rennie said about the process by which service improvements are fed through the railway system and the role of Railtrack in identifying enhancements answers your second question.

I do not think that it would be fair to make any assumptions about the Larkhall scheme. Adam Rennie may be able to clarify that.

**Adam Rennie:** As the minister said, we are waiting for SPTE to submit the revised business case for the Larkhall line. In principle, it has secured support through the challenge funding exercise that was conducted a year or so ago. However, until we receive a revised business case

the project cannot go ahead. Mr MacAskill is right to say that there is nothing in this report specifically to cover that.

**Mr MacAskill:** Is the challenge funding money ring-fenced? Would it be available if the package could be put together?

**Adam Rennie:** Yes.

**The Convener:** If there are no other questions on the report, I invite the minister to move the motion.

**Sarah Boyack:** I move,

That the Transport and the Environment Committee in consideration of Special Grant Report No.3 - Special Grant Report on Grant in Aid of Expenditure on Rail Services in the Strathclyde Passenger Transport Area recommends that the Report be approved.

**The Convener:** Does the committee agree to approve the report?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** I thank the minister and her colleagues for attending the committee. I understand that you will attend our next meeting to discuss the National Parks (Scotland) Bill, which was introduced on Monday.

**Sarah Boyack:** The consultation exercise is now available from the Scottish Parliament information centre. Members will have the opportunity to consider those responses and the text of the bill before the meeting.

**The Convener:** Thank you.

## Budget

**The Convener:** The second agenda item is also a financial matter: a briefing paper on the procedures for considering the Executive budget for 2001-02.

As members will be aware, the publication of the Executive's annual departmental report, which will start the budget process each year, is due to take place on 31 March. We must consider and agree the procedural and practical arrangements for the committee's involvement in the budget process. Next week, we can have preliminary discussion on the details of the departmental report and request from the Executive any additional information that we need.

Are there any comments on the paper before we go through the substantive points for agreement?

**Mr Tosh:** I want to reinforce the point that I have already made this morning, convener: that we should investigate the Borders railway line, which is a worthwhile project, and consider the grant allocation to Strathclyde Passenger Transport Authority. There does not seem to be any way for us to examine the ScotRail payments, or to do anything other than ensure that the SPTA payments are being made. It may be that the SPTA payments are a matter for the Local Government Committee, as they come through a grant to local councils, but that does not apply to the payments made to ScotRail. We must consider the ScotRail payments, the SPTA payments and the challenge funding as well as any aspect of rail expenditure that goes through local councils. We may not be the lead committee on that, but we should be able to consider such things. Apart from that, everything seems to be okay.

**The Convener:** Remembering that this is an historical document—

**Mr Tosh:** I began by saying that.

**The Convener:** We have laid down markers that we would require further information on that.

Are there any other comments on the content of the report? First, I want to seek the committee's approval for the proposed time scale for the committee's consideration of the spending plans at stage 1. Secondly, I want ask the committee whether we should examine the Executive's spending plans in general terms. Are there any areas of particular focus or concern, such as that raised by Murray Tosh?

We need some idea of the scope of evidence taking on those matters. We must consider whether the committee should, in advance of the Easter recess, identify organisations and individuals from whom to take oral evidence on the basis of the discussions on the Executive's



departmental report, assuming that that is made available to us as we expect. We must also consider whether the committee should take evidence from the Minister for Transport and the Environment and relevant Executive officials. Finally, we must decide on the format of the committee's report to the Finance Committee.

Those are the decision areas that we must consider and agree upon.

**Mr Tosh:** We must consider the Executive spending plans in general terms as this is our first run through the process. I flagged up the railways as an issue of particular concern, because much is happening in that area, including the Westminster Transport Bill and the rail regulator's consideration of payments.

The other area that we might want to consider is water industry funding. The Executive is planning to introduce proposals to respond to some of the concerns about the inflexibility of the current capital funding regime. We might want to consider that and the balance of expenditure—water boards appear to be funding much capital expenditure from current revenue and there has been fairly heavyweight correspondence in the newspapers about that. Other members may have suggestions.

**Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab):** I am concerned about taking evidence prior to Easter. Would we be able to take evidence from the rail regulator, who is responsible for setting out the definitions of the east coast main line? The east coast main line runs from London to Edinburgh. We are arguing that it should run from London to Aberdeen, which would have an impact on spending plans. The franchise commitments follow on from the rail regulator's definition of certain areas.

**Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green):** It looks as though we are already committing ourselves to spending quite a lot of time on the Executive's financial plans. I am concerned that that might infringe on other matters that we might want to put on our timetable for next year. I am very reluctant to extend the amount of time that we commit to the Executive's budget.

**The Convener:** We are going to discuss the overall work plan. In the proposals for considering the budget, we have tried to ensure that we can meet other aspects of our remit. In many ways, two oral evidence sessions would be quite lean, but we need at least that. I doubt whether we could manage with any less.

I accept your point, Robin. We must take forward our own work programme. Like many committees, we are having difficulties with the way in which the work of the Executive is affecting those plans. We might have further discussion of our priorities later in the agenda.

I am comfortable with the process that is set out in annexe D. I also take on board Murray Tosh's point about discussing the matter in general terms.

**Lynn Tullis (Clerk Team Leader):** We can timetable some initial discussion for the meeting on 4 April, after the departmental report has been published.

**The Convener:** Are there any other comments? Are we agreed on that?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** Thank you.

## European Document

11:30

**The Convener:** Agenda item 3 is a European document that has been referred to us by the European Committee for our consideration. There is an accompanying committee paper entitled "EU launches European Car Free Day 2000". As members know, we are not obliged to do anything with the document other than consider it at this meeting.

The European Commission has designated 22 September as a car-free day. The UK has signed up to that initiative, which aims to encourage local authorities to organise a car-free day on that date. If the Transport and the Environment Committee responds favourably to the Commission's initiative, the European Committee proposes to contact the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to ascertain whether any Scottish local authorities could get involved.

I am happy to hear the committee's views on the matter. We have the option simply to note the document or we may pursue the matter further with COSLA. I am keen on the idea, which seems to be an interesting initiative. Logistically, we have some contact points to make known to the operators of local transport and to the local authorities.

**Robin Harper:** I supported the initiative twice in the chamber and I am delighted to see the paper in front of us. We should do everything we can to encourage local authorities to take up the initiative.

**Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab):** I agree. It is interesting that the European Committee passed the document on for us to take a view on it. We should discuss it with COSLA in the first instance, as local authorities would be involved. We should do everything we can to encourage them to take part in this excellent initiative.

**Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP):** Although the concept is admirable, and I support it, I would like to point out that that is a holiday weekend in this country. It may be difficult to say that people should not use their cars then.

**Helen Eadie:** I hate to be the person to pour cold water on the idea, as I have no problem with it in principle, but for many areas of Scotland it would not be practicable. In some areas—especially that which I represent—it is impossible to go anywhere without a car. The idea is fine for the cities, and I am full square behind it, but we need to bear in mind the fact that it may not be realistic for rural and semi-rural areas. It is an ideal—a goal to aim for; perhaps one day the rural

areas will have good public transport as well.

**The Convener:** You are absolutely right, Helen: it is a promotion of an idea in principle. Perhaps you should speak to COSLA about the point that you raise.

I am also concerned that if people choose to use alternative modes of transport, that should be successful for them. The worst thing would be for people to make the effort without the transport system being prepared for what could be a fairly busy day.

We should say that we support the initiative as being worth while, but that we need to know how we can deliver it. If there are problems, they will need to be resolved.

**Robin Harper:** Last year, in Europe, the initiative was tailored to each city. Some authorities simply created a little car-free area in the centre of the city. That was the idea: to create little areas that were completely car free, for people to enjoy wandering about in an open space where they would normally have been in danger of being flattened by buses, lorries or cars.

**Mr Tosh:** Would that not create difficulties for deliveries to shops in city centres?

**The Convener:** I am sure that matters such as that will be examined and planned for. I think that we are generally in favour of the idea. Although we recognise that some aspects need to be examined further, we would want to endorse the initiative and encourage the European Committee to pursue the matter with COSLA, the Executive and other appropriate bodies. Are we agreed?

**Members indicated agreement.**

## Concessionary Travel Inquiry

**The Convener:** Agenda item 4 is the concessionary travel inquiry. We should consider the possible terms of reference for our inquiry. As members know, the process has been fairly truncated. At the previous meeting of the committee, the minister said that she is unable to meet the committee's request that the Executive's research into concessionary travel consider the broader aspects and concessionary groups that we want to be included. Committee members all have a copy of the minister's written response.

Following discussion, we agreed that we would seek written evidence from a range of groups that are not covered by the Executive's proposed research. We have compiled a fairly long list of organisations. I would not want to reduce that list until the committee has offered me its views on the number and nature of organisations that it wants to include. There may be other organisations that we have not included, which members may want to include.

Today, I would like us to agree the proposed terms of reference, which are fairly narrowly defined, and from which concessionary groups we want to take evidence. We also need to agree the questions that the organisations will be asked to comment on, on what the issues should be, and on the timing of the various stages of the inquiry. Today's discussion will therefore focus on the mechanics of the process. Let us target the inquiry a bit more, to allow us to get on with the consultation process. We should also agree on how we will respond if the Executive reports over the summer recess.

Those are the issues that we should address this morning. Do members have any views on the matter?

**Helen Eadie:** The groups from which you propose to take evidence are good, and I support the proposals. If the Executive reports during the summer, perhaps we should think about convening a special meeting to consider it. I would be willing to attend such a meeting. The timing that is suggested seems plausible, and I support the proposal.

**Robin Harper:** I would like to add adults with learning disabilities to the list of groups that should be consulted.

**Helen Eadie:** Would that group not come under the heading of socially excluded people?

**Robin Harper:** We have had a lobby from them.

**The Convener:** Thanks very much. I take it that the committee is broadly comfortable with the terms of reference that are proposed in the document. Helen has suggested that a special

meeting be potentially convened to deal with the Executive's report. If that is necessary we will discuss whether it is appropriate to have that meeting in the recess. If the committee wants a meeting, we will have a meeting, but if the matter can be addressed by other means—electronic or otherwise—we will address it in that way. That will depend on the decision of committee members.

We have a fairly long list of organisations to contact. I hope that members are aware of the length of the list. The committee is comfortable with the specific questions and issues that have been outlined in the document. Are there any other comments?

**Robin Harper:** There could be concerns from ethnic minority organisations about asylum seekers.

**Linda Fabiani:** The Scottish Refugee Council is on the list for consultation.

**Robin Harper:** Sorry. I did not notice.

**Helen Eadie:** The only other organisation that I can think of is the Scottish Accessible Transport Alliance. I have attended a couple of its meetings, and it would be good to include it in our list.

**The Convener:** That is a fair comment. The Scottish Accessible Transport Alliance—SATA for the hard of spelling—will be included. As there are no other comments on the report, I take it that committee members are happy with the proposed approach.

## Petitions

**The Convener:** I refer members to petition PE51, from Friends of the Earth, on the release of genetically modified crops into the environment and to the covering note, paper TE/00/6/8. Members will recall that we sought the views of the Rural Affairs Committee and the Health and Community Care Committee on the petition. The Rural Affairs Committee deferred further consideration until advice had been received from the parliamentary solicitor and until the parliamentary debate on the subject had taken place. The Health and Community Care Committee also supported the holding of a debate on the subject. As members know, that debate took place last Thursday.

We have also received a written response from the Scottish Executive; a copy of that response is attached to TE/00/6/8. The paper suggests that we

"Consider the response of the Scottish Executive and Parliamentary Committees and what further action may be required."

The only outstanding aspect is the solicitor's report that was requested by the Rural Affairs Committee. It may be appropriate to wait until that report is available. That option is open to members.

**Robin Harper:** My motion, although modest—it suggested that the committees take evidence and report on the matter—was defeated in the chamber on Thursday. Does that mean that we are now prevented from taking evidence, or can we go ahead? My view is that we should, and can, go ahead but I wanted to check that that was the case.

**The Convener:** The committee is the committee and the chamber is the chamber.

**Robin Harper:** That is fine.

**Linda Fabiani:** I notice that the petition says

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

If the test sites have been agreed and the tests are going ahead, perhaps that part of the petition no longer applies.

**Mr Tosh:** That was my question too, but I will broaden it a bit. The background report seems to suggest that commercial planting is much less a British matter than a European matter. If the trials have, in effect, been commissioned by the London Government, what is our role? It is not clear whether we have any powers in terms of the petition; clarification on that would be useful.

**The Convener:** Okay. We will get clarification on those issues and await the report from the Rural Affairs Committee.

**Mr MacAskill:** I support Robin Harper. Matters may have moved on, but it could still be argued that it is the duty of the committee to look into such matters. If there is concern in Aberdeenshire, and elsewhere in Scotland, about the possible impact of crop trial testing, we should investigate that concern. We should make space on our agenda to take evidence from the appropriate bodies, whether that means the Government in London or outside agencies such as Friends of the Earth and others who have an interest in or special knowledge of the matter. We should set aside space to take evidence on the merits or demerits of crop testing.

**The Convener:** We are due to discuss our work programme later. It is right that discussion of this matter should take place. I have no difficulty with what is being said, but we must agree our course of action on the petition that is before us. Questions have been raised about points (1) and (2) on the petition. We also await the further report from the Rural Affairs Committee.

**Helen Eadie:** I have no problem with our going ahead with an inquiry. We have a duty to scrutinise, but whether we have competence to legislate on this is another matter. The Parliament has the right to express a view and we have a responsibility to the people whom we represent to be satisfied that everything possible is being done to ensure that safety is paramount. That has always been our message. I would like us to fit this into our work programme. Given the seriousness of the issue, it merits an inquiry of equal depth to our telecommunications inquiry.

**Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD):** I endorse that. Such an inquiry would perhaps go some way towards addressing point (2) in the petition, which calls for "a mechanism in Scotland". We are a mechanism for having a close look at such issues.

11:45

**The Convener:** Are there any further comments? No.

We will seek the clarifications that have been requested on petition PE51 and, during our discussion of our work programme, we will consider the priority of any investigation that we decide to undertake.

Petition PE60, from the Scottish Green party, calls on the Parliament to hold a debate on GM crops and foods. Again, we sought the views of the Rural Affairs Committee and the Health and Community Care Committee and, as members know, both committees supported the call for a debate.

Is any further response required on PE60?

**Robin Harper:** If we go ahead with the

previous—

**The Convener:** Yes. If we go ahead with that, we do not need to progress this one. Thank you.

The next petition, PE91, is from Mr Frank Harvey and calls for the restoration of Scottish water authorities to local authority control. The Public Petitions Committee referred the petition to us and requested only that we note it. In other words, no further consideration is required unless we think it necessary. Are members content that we note the petition, as requested, or do we want to take further action?

**Mr MacAskill:** I am happy to note the petition, but I subscribe to the point that Murray Tosh raised earlier. Perhaps we could say in response that the committee is looking into the water situation. It may be more polite to say that we are taking cognisance of the matter, to some extent, and to leave it at that. We would not have to elaborate on that, but I would be happier to say that we are doing something, as opposed to saying simply, "Thanks for your letter, Mr Harvey."

**The Convener:** Once we have discussed, and agreed the parameters of, our work programme we will be better able to give a fuller response. There is no problem with that.

**Helen Eadie:** I support that. I do not want to get too political, but the first statement on the petition contains inaccuracies and the facts ought to be clarified. For the record, we have just done away with a major quango in housing, and we have done away with half the quangos in the health service trusts.

**Mr Tosh:** There were two political points there.

**The Convener:** We have a proposed investigation into water, so the petition will be addressed in the course of our work. I hope that Mr Harvey will be satisfied with that response.

Petition PE108 is also from Mr Harvey; it concerns the safety of children using public transport during school activities. Again, the Public Petitions Committee referred the petition to us, requesting only that we note it. Are members content to do that, or is further action required?

**Mr MacAskill:** Why do we not copy the petition to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents?

**The Convener:** Yes—why not? That is an action point. Well done, Kenny.

**Helen Eadie:** I am a member of the Public Petitions Committee; we deal with several petitions from Mr Harvey at every meeting. Other members may not be aware that any one member of the public can present a petition to the Public Petitions Committee; the Parliament might want to think about that. I am not saying that an individual

should not have that right, but it is something to reflect upon.

**The Convener:** Okay. Thank you for that. We will take the action that Kenny MacAskill suggested.

Our final petition, again from Mr Harvey, is PE112, on the Government's

"planned sell-off of Britain's air-traffic control system."

As our covering note points out, that matter is reserved to Westminster. Again, the Public Petitions Committee referred the petition to us, requesting only that we note it.

**Mr Tosh:** Perhaps Mr Harvey should be advised that his petition concerns a reserved matter that he may wish to raise with his MP.

**Helen Eadie:** I had a meeting with air traffic control people, during which two issues arose that I think should be noted, in particular by members who represent the Highlands. First, the committee ought to be aware that there is no air traffic control command in the area north of Pitlochry. Secondly, alternative methods such as forming an independent publicly owned company were never researched or discussed by any of the parliamentarians. The air traffic control people gave us an example of such a company being established in Canada.

I mention that for members to note and reflect upon. We may simply note the petition today, but wish to revisit the concerns that it raises later.

**Robin Harper:** Yes.

**The Convener:** There is much in that debate. As with all such matters, there are arguments for and against.

If we want to investigate the matter, it is within our power to do so; the question is whether that should be a priority. Further, the petition is based on an article in *The Mirror* that perhaps does not paint the full picture. It would be difficult for us to go into the matter in any great detail other than simply noting the petition and advising the petitioner that it is a matter for Westminster.

**Members indicated agreement.**

## Invitations

**The Convener:** I refer members to a letter that we received from Scottish and Southern Energy plc, which invites us to visit the hydro control centre at Clunie near Pitlochry and to hear a presentation on the electricity network in Scotland and the development of renewables.

In light of how we have handled such invitations previously, we may wish to defer consideration of the invitation until we have identified our briefing requirements and the work that we may do on renewables. We will discuss that under agenda item 7; that may well be an appropriate way of dealing with the matter.

We hold all such invitations on file. If the subject to which they relate becomes appropriate to our work programme, we contact members again regarding the invitation.

We have also received a letter from Briggs Marine Environmental Services Ltd, which is accompanied by a discussion paper for the committee on the subject of oil pollution in Scotland. As members know, I recently attended the launch of an oil care campaign. Briggs Marine, which is a fairly cutting-edge Scottish company, also attended that launch and had a good story to tell. I said that I would ensure that its material was circulated to the committee, so that members were made aware of its work. Members can follow that up, in terms of their own involvement.

**Mr Tosh:** We could ask Tavish Scott why he has not already been to see Briggs Marine.

**The Convener:** Indeed. A visit is also planned to the logistics centre fairly soon—on 5 April—in which some members have indicated an interest. I hope to be there.

Finally, do members agree that we should discuss our approach to questioning the minister on the National Parks (Scotland) Bill, as introduced, at a private session before our meeting on 4 April? If we agree that now, and agree that our initial discussion on the departmental budget should also be taken in private, we can let members of the public know the time of the public part of that meeting. Are we agreed?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** Thank you.

I thank members of the press and the public for their attendance today and advise them that we have agreed to take the final agenda item—consideration of our future work programme—in private.

11:52

*Meeting continued in private until 12:12.*

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