

TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 15 January 2008

Session 3

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 15 January 2008

Col.

DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE.....	355
FORTH CROSSING.....	356
WORK PROGRAMME	380

TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2008, Session 3

CONVENER

*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)

*Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD)

*Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP)

*David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP)

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con)

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Frances Duffy (Transport Scotland)

John Swinney (Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Alastair Macfie

ASSISTANT CLERK

Clare O'Neill

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee

Tuesday 15 January 2008

[THE CONVENER opened the meeting at 14:01]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Patrick Harvie): Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to this meeting of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee. I wish those returning a happy new year. I remind everyone to keep mobile phones and pagers switched off, not just on silent. We have a few Bob the Builder types in the public gallery, but I remind everyone that interruptions from the public seats are not welcome.

There are three items on the agenda for today's meeting. Item 1 is to decide whether to take in private item 3, which is consideration of our work programme. When we discuss our work programme as a whole, we often do so in private. Given that we are dealing with a late addition to the programme, I wonder whether we need to take the item in private. What are members' views on the issue?

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I would be happy to take the item in public.

The Convener: Are there any objections to that suggestion?

Members: No.

The Convener: We will take the item in public.

Forth Crossing

14:02

The Convener: Item 2 is a discussion of the replacement Forth crossing. I welcome John Swinney, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, along with his team. I invite the cabinet secretary to introduce his colleagues and to make an opening statement.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): I introduce Frances Duffy, the director of Transport Scotland with responsibility for strategy, who has been at the centre of the development of the Government's approach to the replacement Forth crossing, and David Anderson, also from Transport Scotland, who has been closely involved with the project.

It is a pleasure for me to be here to continue our discussion of the replacement Forth crossing. As the convener knows, I made an extensive statement to Parliament on 19 December setting out our decision on the form of the Forth crossing and presenting the facts that underpinned it. Given that I put a formidable amount of detail on the public record on that occasion, I have decided in the interests of time not to make an introductory statement. I am happy to take questions from members.

The Convener: I will kick off by reflecting on the public exhibition that began on 20 August. Members of the public had only until 7 September to comment on the options that were available. Why was such a tight timescale set for the public consultation? Did members of the public have sufficient opportunity to comment on and give full consideration to all the options?

John Swinney: I stress that this was a public exhibition, not a public consultation. It was intended to set out to members of the public the different options that the Government was considering. Having visited the exhibition at North Queensferry, I consider that it did so in an effective and straightforward fashion.

An immense amount of work has been undertaken over the past 18 months or so to develop a variety of reports that have examined the case for a replacement Forth crossing. The previous and the present Administrations have made that information publicly available on websites. During the 18-month period, an extensive amount of information has been put into the public domain. The members of the public to whom I spoke personally at the exhibition seemed to be enthusiastic to see the options that were presented and to take part in the exhibition. Obviously, we will have to go through further

statutory processes that will involve extensive consultation on the formulation of the Forth replacement crossing. The Government will carry out those processes in due course.

The Convener: So the purpose of the exhibition was not to gather views but merely to explain the options as you saw them.

John Swinney: That is correct.

The Convener: Has anything been done, or will anything be done, with the comments that were received?

John Swinney: I can give the committee further information on the comments. We received 756 responses. Of the respondents, 75 per cent expressed a preference on the type or location of the crossing. Of those, 27 per cent favoured a bridge and 48 per cent favoured a tunnel. As the figure suggests, 25 per cent of respondents did not state a preference. We gathered the information because members of the public were asked to express any points that they had and to give feedback, having observed the exhibition.

The Convener: Given the discrepancy between the short timescale within which members of the public were invited to express a view and the longer timescale that is normally allowed for Government consultations, did the Government consider having a normal consultation period of three months or thereabouts?

John Swinney: The issue has been under examination for a considerable time, as my first answer suggested. When the Government came into office in May, ministers were briefed that further work would come to us relatively quickly on the development of the options for the replacement Forth crossing. Ministers received the options in June and reflected on them to Parliament in late June. On whether it was necessary to undertake further public consultation, I judged that the issues had been pretty well rehearsed in the public domain and that the important point was that members of the public had the opportunity to observe the possibilities for the replacement crossing, with the Government listening to some of that feedback. However, ultimately, the process was driven by the development of a research base on all the questions that had to be addressed in considering the most appropriate type of crossing to construct.

The Convener: Am I right in thinking that the work will be authorised under the Transport and Works (Scotland) Act 2007? If so, can you give us a timetable and a commitment to hold a public inquiry under that legislation?

John Swinney: The legislative route has not been absolutely confirmed. The project could be progressed in a number of ways. It could be done

through an order under the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984, which empowers ministers to construct new trunk roads and permits any order that ministers make under that act to include provisions for the construction of bridges over or tunnels under navigable waters. Alternatively, we could make provision under the Transport and Works (Scotland) Act 2007, but that act is restricted to the authorisation of rail, tram, guided transport and inland waterway projects, so it would be difficult for us to use it to authorise a new bridge or tunnel crossing of the Forth.

There is an alternative legislative route that the Government will explore which, obviously, would need to be the subject of discussion with Parliament and, I imagine, the committee, which I would be happy to have. We might introduce what could be considered to be a hybrid bill. Such a bill would be promoted by the Government in the public interest but would affect the private interests of some individuals and organisations more than others. Exploring that will ensure that we have a proper and comprehensive assessment of how to proceed with the Forth replacement crossing.

I hope that that gives some background to the issues that are being considered in relation to the legislative route to be followed. I would be happy to report to the committee with further information once our understanding of all the implications of the options is more advanced.

The Convener: Can you say anything about the impact of those options on the two issues that I mentioned—the timetable and the role of a public inquiry?

John Swinney: Issues that relate to a public inquiry will be considered. I gave Parliament the clear assurance, which I reiterate, that ministers want to have as much discussion and examination as possible of all the implications and to involve as many parties as possible in considering the replacement crossing. The Government will go to considerable lengths to ensure that there is adequate dialogue with all those who might be affected.

As you will be aware, there is quite a lead-in time between now and the start of construction, which we envisage in 2011. We will look to conduct further scrutiny that is required in the planning process in that time, to guarantee that we can start construction on that timescale. Not achieving that would have implications for the project's development and the ability to withstand some of the dangers to the Scottish economy, such as any of the possibilities that the Forth Estuary Transport Authority has highlighted, which include closing the bridge to heavy goods vehicles as early as 2013. We are anxious to be in a position to begin construction in 2011 and we have adequate opportunity to undertake the proper planning scrutiny.

The Convener: Before construction, what will be the timescale for legislation?

John Swinney: The timescale for legislation would have to be completed well before construction. We have a window that allows us to follow the legislative and consultative process that is required to enable us to commence construction in 2011.

The Convener: Can you be more specific?

John Swinney: I cannot give a detailed timetable today, but I would be delighted to give the committee that information. Without having settled on the legislative route that we will take, which I have told Parliament will be set out in the spring, I would be putting the cart before the horse.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I will return to the exhibition. Many people felt that a tunnel was a good option, but I am aware of the cabinet secretary's statement about the cost of that. I am interested in the use of tunnels, perhaps in other circumstances. Were there other reasons why a tunnel would not be a good option for the Forth replacement crossing?

John Swinney: In addition to cost, there were several reasons, which centred on several propositions. First, the tunnel option did not score well on its environmental impact, because it was hard to see how it could be implemented without significant disruption to the natural environment in the Forth estuary. I appreciate that all the Government's propositions have an environmental impact, but the tunnel option did not score well on that.

Secondly, the location of a tunnel would have meant increased emissions, because most vehicles that would access it would travel further to it than they would on the route that we have selected.

Thirdly, the application of a multimodal option to a tunnel would have been a much more substantial undertaking than the application of the multimodal option to the cable-stayed bridge for which we have opted. It would have required either the boring of an additional tunnel or a further component or segment of an immersed-tube tunnel.

Fourthly, there was the consideration that we listened to carefully from different interested parties, particularly in the freight industry, about the transportation of hazardous materials. The Government judged that we have to ensure a reliable method of transportation for those goods, bearing in mind their significance to the Scottish economy.

Those are four of the considerations, additional to cost, that the Government had to take into account.

14:15

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): I would like to return to what you were saying about the timetable prior to construction. Does the inclusion of the project in the national planning framework give it greater speed and certainty? Will you talk a little more about that process?

John Swinney: Designating projects as national developments in the national planning framework is to say, in principle and subject of course to the decisions of Parliament, that we judge a handful of projects—in this case, two handfuls of projects—to be of national significance. In this case, such a designation means that, when it comes to the detailed consideration of options for the project, any public inquiry will debate not whether we need a Forth replacement crossing but the impact of the selected route on other considerations. At that point, the full planning process is involved in the scrutiny.

If, for example, the selected route affected an area of environmental sensitivity, the road network or housing developments, that would be a legitimate issue to be considered in a public inquiry. However, the question whether it is a good idea to have a replacement crossing would be off the agenda—subject, of course, to the national planning framework being approved by Parliament.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I would like to ask more about timescales before moving on to the next question. Your statement to the Parliament on the new crossing was generally well received. You spoke about work starting in 2011. Given the situation with the existing bridge, which we will come to shortly, is there any possibility of an earlier start date and earlier legislation to allow that to happen?

John Swinney: To be honest, the sequence of events that we have to go through is such that I find it hard to imagine that we could deliver on an earlier timescale than the one that we have set out. Indeed, people might think that we are already being—in the best civil service language—courageous about the timescale.

We have a realistic timescale to consider the legislative, procurement, design and specification issues that are involved in what is a very big and complex project. We settled on the preferred option in December, after only seven months in office. We could not have done that any more quickly, bearing in mind the consideration that we have had to give to the issue and the considerable research that has been undertaken as part of the strategic environmental assessment.

We start off from where we are. I think that it is realistic to believe that we will be in a position to start construction in 2011. A lot of work has to go

in between now and then to make that happen, but I am confident that it is a realistic timescale.

Cathy Peattie: The committee has visited the existing bridge, and there has been discussion, including last week, about high-sided vehicles not using the bridge after about 2012 or 2013. Do you see that as a major issue? It is difficult to predict when high-sided vehicles will not be able to use the existing bridge.

John Swinney: It is reasonable and responsible of the Government to listen to FETA's advice, which suggests the possibility—it may be no more than that, but FETA's research shows that the possibility is well founded—that the bridge may have to be closed to heavy goods vehicles in 2013. Different views have been expressed on whether that will happen. I note that the FETA chairman commented in *The Courier* the other day that it might not be as early as 2013. However, in its advice to the Government, FETA's standing position is that the likely first stage will have to happen in 2013.

Obviously, when Government ministers are in receipt of such information, we have two choices: we can bring forward measures to tackle the issue, such as our proposals for a replacement crossing, or we can resign ourselves to the crossing being closed to high-sided vehicles and, subsequently, light vehicles. If we were to make the second choice, we would be without a crossing before we knew it. A Government that recognises the significance of the Forth crossing to the connectivity of communities and individuals in Scotland and to the health of the Scottish economy has only one choice—the first choice.

In my judgment, we are moving as fast as we can. The earliest credible starting point of construction is 2011. That gives us the best opportunity of avoiding any wider consequences, although we may not be able to avoid closure of the bridge to heavy goods vehicles in 2013.

Cathy Peattie: What steps has the Scottish Government taken to ensure that the procurement and construction of the Forth replacement crossing do not suffer from cost overruns and delays?

John Swinney: In my statement to Parliament, I said that the strongest and clearest lesson that I have learned about any major transport or other infrastructure project in the brief time that I have been in government is that governance arrangements have to be crystal clear before a project gets under way. If a project gets under way with any uncertainty as to its direction or where the responsibility or power lies, it will be a difficult project.

We are putting in place a governance structure that gives absolute clarity on where the

responsibility lies. We are in the process of commissioning a tender for the design and preparation of the construction operation—the construction contract will be a separate tender. We now have a preferred bidder and, once the contract is settled—which I understand will be next week—we will establish a team of Transport Scotland officials and consultants we have recruited to provide the extra resources that we require for the task. The team will be led by a Transport Scotland director. It is clear that the Transport Scotland director, who is a representative of the promoter, is at the helm of the project. The director is answerable to an operating board in which ministers will take a very close interest. Indeed, ministers will take a very close interest in the development of the project.

Essentially, we are putting in place a management structure that will bring together our professional advisers in Transport Scotland and the consultants whom we have recruited, who have significant expertise in bridge construction. We will bring them together under the leadership of a Transport Scotland director who will be answerable to a board in which ministers have a clear interest. The line of command and communication could not be clearer.

Obviously, we must ensure that the structure puts in place very robust mechanisms that will guarantee that costs are kept under control. After all, we are dealing with formidable sums of public money. We have to ensure that the controls are in place to manage cost. That is a priority of the management structure and the governance structure that the Government is putting in place.

Cathy Peattie: Has a decision been made on the future of the existing Forth road bridge? If not, can you explain how the Scottish Government has managed accurately to calculate the transport, economic and environmental impacts of the Forth replacement crossing?

John Swinney: On the first point, we have come to no conclusions about the future of the existing Forth road bridge, because we do not know what condition it will be in. A great deal of work is being undertaken, under the leadership of FETA, to dry out the cables and see what effect that has. We will probably begin to see the pattern of the impact of that work emerge in 2010 or 2011. That will be a major factor in the future of the existing bridge.

Essentially, we will assess the other characteristics of the Forth crossing by assuming that we are constructing a new, replacement crossing and that there will not be an existing crossing, so that is out of the equation. We have to make realistic assumptions about the volume of traffic, emissions and the environmental impact. That factor has weighed heavily in the

Government's thinking on the centrality of a multimodal crossing. We recognise the challenges that are posed to the environment by increased emissions and the challenge that results from traffic volumes, so we must put in place credible alternatives to allow members of the public to change their mode of transport. That is why having a multimodal crossing is a central part of the proposal that the Government has put forward on the new crossing.

The Convener: I will pursue the point about the future of the existing crossing. Does the Government accept the conclusion drawn by FETA last year that the existing crossing is repairable and that the replacement of the main cables is achievable? There are obviously issues to resolve in relation to traffic flow—the use of contraflow and closing some lanes at some times would cause some problems—but there is not a technical problem that means that we have an unfixable bridge.

John Swinney: The issue hinges on the question of risk. The bridge may well be repairable, and FETA has advanced the basis on which it can be repaired. I respect that and we are working closely with FETA on those issues.

The question for me is this: what if that does not happen? What if it is not possible? What is the economic cost to Scotland of there not being a reliable crossing for vehicles across the Forth? What other opportunities would we miss out on to change the basis of traffic flows and volumes of traffic across the Forth bridge? I mentioned such an opportunity in my answer to Cathy Peattie, in relation to the multimodal shift on a new crossing.

It is a matter of assessing the risk that is involved. It is my judgment and the judgment of the Government that not to take action of the sort that has been outlined would be to take an unnecessary risk with the Scottish economy, which it would be unwise to take.

The Convener: The alternative risk is that in 2010 or 2011 we get reports back that the bridge is fine, that dehumidification is working and that the bridge will not have to close, even to HGVs, but the next year you start constructing an additional bridge at the cost of several billion pounds.

John Swinney: The Government must always make a judgment on what is the most sensible and pragmatic approach. Given the information that we have received on the issue in the reports from FETA and the view of both the current and the previous Administrations that uncertainty over the bridge creates a danger of interruption to the flow of activity in the Scottish economy, it is my judgment that action is required. That is why the Government has taken the steps that it has. We

will plan accordingly, and we will monitor and maintain a close interest in the performance of the bridge rehabilitation works that are undertaken by FETA.

14:30

The Convener: I have a final question on the future of the existing bridge. As problems with short-term traffic flow while work is done to replace the cables—should that prove possible—are the only real practical barrier to carrying out that work, is it not unsafe to base assumptions about the environmental impact of the new bridge on the assumption that the old one will no longer exist? Once the new bridge is up and running, the practical barrier to replacing the cables on the existing one evaporates.

John Swinney: I suppose so, but the problem is that we might not be in that situation. The Government has to plan on the basis that we might not be in that situation.

The Convener: Perhaps I was unclear. If the Government pursues the policy decision that you have already made—to build a new bridge—the practical barrier to replacing the cables will go once the new bridge is up and running. We know that there is not a technical barrier to replacing the cables on the existing bridge, but the practical barrier of closing lanes and using contraflow will no longer apply. The assumption, which you said a few moments ago you are building in, that the new crossing will be the only road crossing, will no longer hold. Your assumption is therefore not safe.

John Swinney: I think that it is a safe assumption. If I did not put in place the provisions that we have put in place, I would be taking an unnecessary risk with the connectivity of the Scottish economy. I honestly do not think that I would win many friends in Scotland if I took a risk of that magnitude.

The Convener: If you put in place the provisions that you are talking about and if you pursue the policy of what is being described as a replacement crossing, we still end up with two crossings, so the assumptions about how you calculate the environmental impact are incorrect.

John Swinney: They are not. We must undertake those assumptions on the basis that we do not have a reliable existing crossing. I cannot see how we can approach the matter in any other fashion. Nobody can say to me today that the Forth bridge, as it is now, is fine. Nobody can give me that guarantee. Therefore, I have to plan on the basis that the bridge will not be available at some stage in the future—hence the assumptions that underpin the replacement crossing.

If we find that the existing bridge can be refurbished and that there is a continuing use for it, we will proceed with the discussions to which Cathy Peattie referred earlier, to determine what the future use could be. There are many things that the bridge could be used for, particularly in encouraging significant modal shift, if it can be refurbished—but that is a question that nobody can answer for me today, so we have to take pragmatic steps forward and plan on the current basis.

Cathy Peattie: You are saying that you have an open mind on the matter. My constituency borders on the new Kincardine bridge. My understanding is that when the new bridge opens, the old bridge will be refurbished, so there will be two bridges. I reckon that that would make a lot of sense in that area. I have to declare an interest: I am a fan of the Forth road bridge. I think that it is a beautiful bridge. It would be a real irony if it went. It could be that we will have the new bridge and the existing Forth road bridge.

John Swinney: I am afraid that I cannot give a definitive reply, as I do not know what the future of the existing bridge will be. If there is a continuing use to which the current Forth road bridge can be applied, the Government will take sensible decisions in relation to that use. One of the suggestions that I have made to you today is on the obvious opportunity to expand the multimodal shift that the Government wishes to take place in connectivity between Fife and the Lothians.

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): The benefit to cost ratio of the Forth replacement crossing is reported to be a whopping 4.57. In other words, there are potential benefits of up to £19.3 billion. What assumptions were made when that figure was calculated? You have already dealt with one of them. Over what period was the benefit to cost ratio calculated?

John Swinney: I suspect that I will need assistance with some of the technicalities. The central assumption has been that we are constructing a replacement crossing. That will have underpinned the assessment of economic contribution that the crossing can make to the Scottish economy—and the assessment of economic loss if we do not undertake a replacement crossing. I ask Frances Duffy to give the specifics on the wider question about the timescale over which the benefit to cost ratio is calculated.

Frances Duffy (Transport Scotland): It would be on the normal 60-year appraisal that we do for a transport project.

Charlie Gordon: The central assumption is that the existing Forth road bridge might not exist. That is one of the assumptions that has driven the—on

paper, very impressive—benefit to cost ratio. I am bound to ask what retaining the present Forth bridge does to the figure.

John Swinney: I do not think that that calculation will have been made, because it has not been the assumption upon which we have predicated our judgment. At the start of any construction project, certain assumptions must be made about what one is planning for. The Government was not planning an additional crossing of the Forth; it was planning a replacement crossing because we are on the receiving end of information from FETA that suggests that there is vulnerability on the longevity of the bridge. We make those assumptions, and we construct a benefit to cost ratio. A multiplicity of scenarios could be applied to vary those conditions, but the central assumption—whether we are building a replacement crossing or an additional crossing—cannot be varied.

Charlie Gordon: I do not think that there is a multiplicity of scenarios. There are two scenarios. You have a detailed figure that is based on one. Is it not self-evident that parliamentarians, the public and the press will probably wonder why you do not just ask your boffins to revisit that figure in relation to the other? If the current Forth road bridge keeps going, what does it do to that impressive benefit to cost ratio of 4.57? I know that in practical terms—what the Government actually decides—it might not change anything politically but, if you do not mind my saying so, it is a bit disingenuous to pretend that that question does not immediately spring to mind.

John Swinney: It does, in the sense that if the Government were saying, “We must build an additional crossing of the Forth,” your argument would hold good. I would concede that. But we are not proposing to build an additional crossing; we are proposing to build a replacement crossing, because we have received information—as did our predecessors—that indicates potential question marks about the future of the existing crossing. We can calculate a benefit to cost ratio only on the proposition that we are putting forward, which is for a replacement crossing.

Charlie Gordon: I would be willing to lay you odds that your senior officials have, in their spare time—if they have any—probably done that sum, because they are curious to see what it comes out as. In the interests of transparency, you should officially instruct that work. You should bear it in mind that, politically, I am supporting your objectives, so I am not pursuing this issue to be unhelpful to you—I just think that that question will not go away.

Frances Duffy: To take that forward, we would need to have a clear indication of what the cost would be of any work done, and that has not been done.

Charlie Gordon: I gather that your officials are saying that they would want to be paid a big fee for something that they have probably done in a Sunday afternoon at home anyway.

John Swinney: I think that the central point that Frances Duffy was making, which complements what I said, is this: what proposition about what the existing bridge needs is being made? Does it mean that the bridge must be closed for three years so that we can refurbish it? Does it mean that there must be one-way traffic on the bridge for six years? I appreciate where Charlie Gordon is coming from on the central question about the crossing, but we could spend more than one Sunday afternoon jiggling possible scenarios of what might be required to refurbish the bridge. While we did that we would be missing an opportunity to acknowledge that we have a serious problem and we would be missing an opportunity to pursue the replacement crossing, which will tackle the problem about which the Government has been advised.

Charlie Gordon: I will move on, but you have left a big stick lying around for your opponents to beat you with.

John Swinney: I assume that you are not one of the people wielding a big stick.

Charlie Gordon: No—there are plenty of other big boys.

What role do you envisage for the Parliament and this committee in scrutinising the progress of the planning and construction of the bridge?

John Swinney: The committee and the Parliament will be involved in legislative preparations for the bridge. Whatever route we decide to take, the committee and the Parliament will be fully involved in the process. Aside from that, I am prepared to continue regular dialogue with the committee about progress on the project, which will be the most significant construction project to take place in Scotland in a generation—that puts it into a category of its own.

This is obviously a matter for the committee, but if the committee judges that it wants to be updated every six months or annually—whatever timescale the committee thinks appropriate—by the project's director and senior officials involved, I would be delighted to facilitate such hearings, because I recognise the project's significance. If the project team understood that there was a requirement to face the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee every six months, to report key information about progress on the bridge, minds might be focused on avoiding the difficulties in managing construction projects that we experienced in the past.

Charlie Gordon: At the very least, we could ask the project team to keep the receipts.

Whether you take the special roads order route or the hybrid bill route, is a six-monthly report to this committee the extent of parliamentary involvement that you have in mind?

John Swinney: I am in the committee's hands on that, Mr Gordon. There will be legislative involvement and a great deal of work will go on between now and 2011, before construction starts. In a sense, that is the most critical phase of the preparation of the bridge project. There will be the legislative process and the preparation of the design and all that goes with that. We need to monitor and manage that phase carefully. However the committee wants to scrutinise the process, I will be happy to facilitate scrutiny. The legislative process is the preserve of the committee and ministers are very much the servants of the process.

Charlie Gordon: You talked about a hybrid bill or a special roads order. In response to Alison McInnes's question you were expansive about how the project fits into the national planning framework. Did you consider getting consent for the new bridge through the town planning process?

John Swinney: No. The two clear options are an order under the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984 and a hybrid bill, which strike me as—

Charlie Gordon: Could the bridge be built under town planning legislation?

John Swinney: I do not think so. The project has too many elements and characteristics—

Charlie Gordon: I know that civil servants do not like local town planning, but is that absolutely the case from a legal point of view?

John Swinney: On the basis of the advice that I have had, the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984 or a hybrid bill strike me as the two credible routes, bearing in mind that we are constructing not just a bridge, but a bridge and ancillary infrastructure to connect to the wider transport network.

14:45

Charlie Gordon: It is really a trunk road, which is what the present bridge is, although it is sometimes convenient to argue that it is not.

The Convener: Perhaps we will resolve that another time.

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP): I have a question on the other interested parties. We have talked about how the Parliament and the committee would be kept updated, but a number of my constituents have been in touch to say that they would like to be kept informed. As you say, it is the largest building project for a generation. There will be direct implications for them—from

the project build and once the project is complete. Can you reassure the affected communities that the Government will interact with them?

John Swinney: I accept that not everybody is pleased with the Government's decision—there are particular localities that are not at all pleased with it. I regret that, but it is inevitable that we will not be able to please everybody on such an issue. It is important that we take particular account of the impact of the replacement crossing on the localities that will be affected by it. I give the assurance that I gave Parliament in December: that the Government will be anxious to maintain a dialogue with individuals in those localities.

Although the involvement of stakeholders will be primarily through local authorities, a tremendous amount of consultation will be required on the delineation of routes, their impact on the environment, and other conditions and circumstances in each locality. The Government will be attentive to ensuring that we take proper account of all of that in our preparations.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): How does the Scottish Government intend to fund the construction of the replacement Forth crossing?

John Swinney: I said in my statement to Parliament in December that the Government would introduce its proposals for the funding of the replacement Forth crossing later in 2008. A number of opportunities are available to us. As I made clear to Parliament, the Government does not support tolling, so we will be looking for a financial vehicle that does not involve recourse to tolling.

David Stewart: I appreciate that you have not yet fully informed Parliament of how you will fund the bridge, but perhaps you could answer a couple of questions in a general, discursive way. Have you thought at this stage about discussing a bond issue with Westminster, or about using what is available in European regional development funding?

John Swinney: I am a little bit sceptical about the availability of European regional development funding. If such funding were to come along, I would be delighted to receive it, but that is unlikely. In relation to other funding vehicles, just before Christmas I set out the Government's proposals on the Scottish futures trust, and there are other funding vehicles the Government can consider. We are interested in bonds. There are issues about the mechanism and operation of such vehicles. They will form part of the options that I bring to Parliament later in the year.

David Stewart: Am I right in thinking that a bond issue would require the agreement of Westminster?

John Swinney: There are discussions on such questions. The Government will explore all avenues to ensure that we have the capability to take forward the mechanism that is robust and reliable. Our proposal on the futures trust gives us a strong base to take that forward.

David Stewart: My final question is about your expectation of the role of the private sector in financing and operating the bridge. As you know, there would be public-private partnership opportunities. The other option is the build-operate-transfer model. I understand that the Vasco da Gama bridge in Lisbon was built at no cost to the public purse through using that mechanism. Have you had any discussions or thoughts about those options, particularly the latter one?

John Swinney: As I said, we could take forward various mechanisms, but the Government has a clear policy position on how to implement its public investment priorities. We are not fans of PPP; that is fairly well understood. The futures trust ideas that we have brought forward are a response to the concept of PPP and the private finance initiative. A number of options are under consideration and I am only too happy to come back to Parliament with them in due course.

David Stewart: Do you also consider the build-operate-transfer model to be out of the question? I know about your policy on PPP, but have you had a look at the build-operate-transfer model, which has worked successfully in other European countries?

John Swinney: I will not be prescriptive about the models the Government examines, but we are not fans of PPP and PFI and our approaches will be set within that context.

Alison McInnes: You said that you would be delighted if European regional development funding came along. My experience is that it never just comes along and that significant lobbying is needed. What discussions have you or your officials had on that matter?

John Swinney: Discussions on all questions of European funding continue. We must be realistic, in that the European funding environment in relation to this country is different from what it was two, five, 10 or 20 years ago. We will explore all options during the financial assessment and we will bring the conclusions of that review to Parliament.

Alison McInnes: I am reassured by that; thank you.

Rob Gibson: I would like to consider the financial implications for other transport infrastructure projects. Because of the massive expenditure on the replacement Forth crossing,

there could be displacement effects on projects such as railway developments or the improvements and upgrading of the A9, to name but two. What account has the Government's budget taken of that?

John Swinney: The Government has set out its spending review proposals for 2008 to 2011—the period for which we have responsibility and financial information. Within that, we have started to put in place the resources to support the development of the replacement Forth crossing project; it features in the spending review proposals that I announced to Parliament on 14 November, which I hope will be supported by all parties in Parliament.

For the period 2011 onwards, we are talking about a major undertaking. The objective of the Government's approach to public investment will be to lever as many resources as we possibly can into the Government's public works programme. We do that habitually and we will aim to do it for the replacement Forth crossing.

You asked about the implications for other transport projects. The new crossing is a significant undertaking, but our budgets for rail and road improvements are more significant than they were. The Government will work to ensure that we deliver on a range of projects across the country.

Rob Gibson: We understand the estimates that have been made up to 2011, and that many projects will be started and then carried on, much like the replacement Forth bridge itself. Can we have some early guidance on how you see that panning out? The project is important to the development of the economy of the whole country, so we need to have a clear picture.

John Swinney: Of course. The construction of the bridge will take place over three, if not four, spending review periods. That is the length of the project. Our proposals are set in that context. There is also the wider communication of the whole transport programme, which—obviously—includes the Forth replacement crossing.

Alex Johnstone: In June 2007, the estimated cost of the Forth replacement crossing was £1.7 billion at 2006 prices. In December 2007, you announced that the estimate had been increased to £4.22 billion at 2016 prices—approximately two and a half times the June estimate. According to Gordon Brown, hyperinflation is a thing of the past. That does not appear to be the case in bridge-building projects. Other than simple inflation, what costs were built into the increase?

John Swinney: I did not catch the first figure that you quoted, Mr Johnstone.

Alex Johnstone: It was £1.7 billion at 2006 prices.

John Swinney: The conversion of 2006 prices to 2016 prices has a significant impact. One of the factors in the 2006 price is that it was cited exclusive of VAT. Also, the figure would not have included the Government's commitment to the multimodal provisions in the new crossing. As a consequence of those factors, we now have the revised cost estimate.

I point out to Mr Johnstone as delicately and courteously as I can that the price range in my statement in December was £3.2 billion to £4.2 billion. The range is as great as he suggests, but a more modest proposition is contained within it.

Alex Johnstone: The subject of my next question has been raised by one or two people with access to the rudimentary facts on similar projects across the world. For example, a bridge is being built in Hong Kong that is roughly similar in scale to the replacement Forth crossing, but which has a cost estimate of £338 million at 2008 prices. I have also been told that the huge viaduct over the Tarn in France—it is 2.4 km long and also of cable-stay construction—cost £272 million at 2004 prices. Is it not surprising—even given the range that we are discussing—that the estimated cost of a new Forth crossing using cable-stay technology is so great? Should not the bridge cost us less?

John Swinney: I would love the bridge to cost us less—nothing would make me cheerier—but the components of the financial assessments in the estimates that we have in front of us were tested exhaustively. I appreciate that comparisons on cost can be made with other propositions across the world, but a realistic comparison would be to look at the projects in the sphere in which we are operating. We are talking about a new bridge with significant road and junction connections into the motorway network to the north and south of the crossing. In addition, we have significant investment in a multimodal shift option as part of the bridge works. We are looking at a comprehensive proposition.

As is obvious, I am determined to ensure that the project's costs are kept to the absolute minimum, but our estimates of the outturn prices are realistic. We will scrutinise all the costs as they develop over the years ahead, and the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, like other parliamentary committees, will have the opportunity to do so too.

15:00

Alison McInnes: I welcome your recognition that the bridge will include multimodal options at not insignificant expense—I think that you have said that the public transport lanes will add around £580 million to costs. Will you tell us a little more about what you propose? Will there be bus lanes,

or do you intend the bridge to include provision for light rail? I understand that you have already ruled out provision for heavy rail. Has the Scottish Government calculated the cost benefit ratio of the public transport lanes? If so, how does that ratio compare with those for other public transport projects?

John Swinney: I confirm on record that we have ruled out the heavy rail options because we are confident that, as a result of our investment in the Stirling-Alloa-Kinross rail link and in the signalling improvements on the existing Forth rail crossing in particular—those improvements will be made in due course—we have a strong platform for increasing heavy rail capacity on the existing Forth bridge. The heavy rail options are the only options that have been ruled out.

There are three multimodal possibilities: bus lanes or guided busways, light rail and an extension of the tram system. The Government will examine each option and consult wider interests, as each option would obviously have an impact on the wider public transport network and infrastructure.

I am afraid that I cannot give you distinctive figures for the benefit cost ratios of the options. Things will depend on the detail of the option that we progress, but I will certainly provide the committee with the relevant information once the specifications are in place.

Alison McInnes: That would be helpful.

You said that you would talk with wider stakeholders. Have you already initiated discussions with TIE, the City of Edinburgh Council and the south east of Scotland transport partnership, particularly on linking the crossing with other provision for public transport modes? The earlier that is done, the better.

John Swinney: We are involved in on-going discussions with the City of Edinburgh Council, TIE and the regional transport partnership in the Edinburgh area, and we will continue those discussions in order to determine how we can most appropriately integrate the options into the public transport system. We have a fantastic opportunity, which the Government is determined to seize, to take a big step forward in respect of a multimodal shift. We have taken a decision in principle to go down that route, and we will look for the most effective and efficient way of linking the crossing into the transport network.

Obviously, there are practical issues to do with extending the tram network. The distance from the outskirts of the proposed tram network in Edinburgh to the Forth crossing and beyond is slightly longer than one would normally assume for a tram network, but we will fully explore such issues in developing the multimodal options.

Alison McInnes: Finally, what opportunities for traffic management in general have you considered in addition to those that are presented by the multimodal options? Have you considered any innovative solutions? Have you considered tidal flows of traffic and having three lanes of traffic going one way at the peak flow times and then reversing that? Are there opportunities to explore such options?

John Swinney: There certainly are opportunities to do so and to identify which arrangements would make the greatest impact. The Government is planning a replacement crossing with two lanes and a hard shoulder, which should ensure more stable and sustainable flows of traffic in comparison with the significant delays that there can often be as a result of minor incidents on the existing Forth bridge. We will examine such options as part of the process by which we will bring forward a detailed proposition.

The Convener: Before we move on, I say to members that we have been trying to do something about the noise outside the committee room, but so far nothing has happened. Meanwhile, members who are having trouble hearing the proceedings may want to know that the speakers on their console are switched on.

Cabinet secretary, on 19 December 2007, in a statement to Parliament, you said that construction of the Forth replacement crossing

“will reduce the carbon dioxide emissions compared with the base case of continuing to rely on the existing bridge.”—[*Official Report*, 19 December 2007; c 4551.]

Why, and by how much?

John Swinney: Why? As I have just said to Alison McInnes, if we plan for a bridge with a hard shoulder, we will manage more effectively the all-too-frequent disruptions to traffic flow. That is one element of the why. The other element is that we will be able to bring forward multimodal options for the bridge, which will give us the opportunity to change traffic flows and patterns across the bridge.

The Convener: Do you want to say anything about how much emissions will reduce by?

John Swinney: I am not sure that I have the information to hand. I am happy to provide it in writing to the committee.

The Convener: That would be useful.

I want to explore both elements of your answer to the why question. The problem with the assumption that improving traffic flow reduces carbon emissions is that although traffic may not be sitting in a queue for so much of the time during the busy parts of the day, if more traffic flows across the bridge, emissions will increase. The

same criticism applies to the multimodal element of your answer. I am not saying that there is a problem with having greater public transport capacity, but if that happens at the same time as increased capacity for private cars, we will see increases in both rather than modal shift.

John Swinney: There are three components, or strands, to my optimism on emissions. Strand one is our view of the project, which is that it is about crossing the Forth. If we increase capacity on the rail bridge—which we have every opportunity to do because of the investment in the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine rail line and signalling—we provide an opportunity for more people to travel across the Forth estuary without recourse to using the car.

Strand two is our decision that the new crossing should have a multimodal structure. Our priority is to give individuals options in utilising the crossing.

In addressing strand three, I say—with respect, convener—that you underestimate the impact on individuals of the interruptions to traffic flow that follow on from the minor and, at times, major bumps on the Forth road bridge. I travel across the bridge almost daily to and from my home. Despite the best efforts of agencies to try to clear things up quickly, the slightest bump can cause endless delays on the bridge.

You say that the problem is only at peak times of the day. However, I think that one can safely say that for six hours of the day—or possibly longer—slow-moving or stationary traffic make the bridge a hothouse of emissions, and when there is a bump, it is worse than that. There are two intense periods of travel in the morning and in the evening. If we can deliver a more efficient throughput of vehicles because of the introduction of a hard shoulder, traffic flow will be eased. We will also have to put in place credible multimodal alternatives, including increased rail capacity. I am optimistic that we can deliver some of the progress on emission levels that we are anxious to see.

The Convener: I am sure that when you made the statement to the effect that carbon emissions will be reduced, your officials will have gone into quite specific detail and calculated the impact not only on traffic crossing the bridge but on any increase in total traffic flows across the bridge, given that they will account for emissions not just on the bridge part of a journey but on the whole of a journey that might not have been made otherwise. Perhaps you could address that when you give us those figures.

John Swinney: I would be delighted to do that. That work has been done, and I apologise that I do not have it in front of me today. I will ensure that it is sent to the committee. The work has been done to substantiate the statement that I made to Parliament in December.

The Convener: Not counting lanes that will be dedicated to public transport, what will be the total road capacity across the Forth compared with existing capacity?

John Swinney: As a consequence of the decision that we have taken, we aim to maintain transport links across the Forth for all modes to at least the level of service that was offered in 2006. That is the standard that is being applied.

The Convener: Do you mean for all modes in total, or for each mode separately?

John Swinney: That will be for all modes in total. Part of that is about encouraging modal shift to ensure that we are able to deliver on that commitment. I understand where you are going with the question, and we have compensated for a potential increase in car use by significantly enhancing the public transport alternatives.

The Convener: You are saying that compensating for increased car use would amount to lower emissions. Surely if there is an increase in car use, we are looking at higher emissions, even if there is also increased public transport capacity.

John Swinney: That is by no means a certainty.

The Convener: Are you saying that an increase in the amount of road traffic crossing the Forth would not lead to higher emissions?

John Swinney: You are not taking into account what I said about the increase in public transport use.

The Convener: You are saying that increased public transport use and increased road traffic would not lead to increased emissions, but I would say that they would both lead to increased emissions.

John Swinney: It depends on the mode of transport that we decide to select for the modal shift—it must do, convener.

The Convener: I am sorry, but I want to be clear about this. If we are looking at a scenario in which road traffic levels increase and public transport levels increase, how can emissions possibly reduce?

John Swinney: You are assuming that the increase in public transport use will lead to an increase in emissions, which is an assumption that does not underpin the approach that the Government is taking through examining opportunities for light rail and tram systems.

The Convener: Public transport does not have negative levels of emissions—the level of emissions involved is lower than the level for private cars, but it still leads to additional emissions. If there is increased private car use as well as increased public transport use, surely we are looking at increased emissions.

John Swinney: You need to bear in mind what I have said about the level of service offered on the bridge in 2006. If cars are stationary on the bridge for prolonged periods, producing emissions but going nowhere, that is damaging to the environment. The investment that we are making in a bridge with the facility to include multimodal transport opportunities and a hard shoulder gives us the opportunity to improve the efficiency of the journey across the Forth estuary. As a consequence, that action is not damaging in terms of emissions.

The Convener: For several years, the Government has accepted the principle that increased road traffic capacity will—by and large, and all things being equal—lead to that capacity filling up and to an increase in emissions. Does the Scottish Government still accept that principle?

John Swinney: Yes. That is why we have taken steps to increase the proposed bridge's efficiency. Having lots of stationary cars on the Forth bridge while a minor accident is cleared up, because there is no hard shoulder, is not good for emissions. By taking combined measures to increase heavy rail and multimodal capacity and ensure that car journeys across the new Forth bridge will be more efficient because there will be a hard shoulder and journeys will not have to be interrupted in the way that they currently are, the Government is striking a balance that allows us to deliver a more efficient crossing.

15:15

The Convener: I will bring in other members, but in future we might explore the balance between the efficiency of a car journey and the number of car journeys.

Rob Gibson: I will pursue that issue. First, cabinet secretary, you said that the bridge will probably be delivered after perhaps four spending reviews. We might expect improvements in car fuels by then. There might be hydrogen cars, which have low emissions. That is something to look forward to.

Secondly, it would be interesting to know what you think about how we might reduce emissions by ensuring that more than one person travels per car.

John Swinney: I have set out options that the Government is considering to improve the crossing's efficiency. There are many opportunities to make such improvements. Our proposal strikes a sensible balance between different modes of transport that are available. By making formidable investment in other modes of transport, we provide the opportunity for people to transfer.

Rob Gibson: In 10 years' time compressed-air, hydrogen and other fuels might have altered the picture entirely.

John Swinney: That might well be.

The Convener: And then warp travel—who knows?

Charlie Gordon: Beam me up, Scotty.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The final report into a replacement Forth crossing considered complementary measures that could be introduced before a crossing is completed, which potentially would have a beneficial impact. Is the Government considering what can be done to improve the situation through park-and-ride facilities and heavy rail?

John Swinney: When the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine rail link opens we will be able to divert slow and significantly long coal trains from the Forth railway bridge, which will open up capacity on the bridge and make a huge difference. As I said, signalling improvements are being undertaken to facilitate that.

The Government is investing in a new railway station at Gogar, as part of links to Edinburgh airport, and in the opening up of a new connection to Glasgow, which will improve connectivity across the central belt.

The Government is hugely supportive of park-and-ride facilities. Every facility that has opened has been an outstanding success. Ferrytoll, which is north of the Forth road bridge, has been a tremendous success, as have been the facilities at Ingliston and at Heriot-Watt University. Mr Stevenson started work on the building site of the new park-and-ride facility at Straiton—he did so literally; he doubles as a heavy digger driver every so often. We are supporting a number of ventures in different places around the Forth estuary.

If we open up new opportunities for rail journeys across the Forth, a key challenge for us is to ensure that there are adequate parking opportunities in Fife, through park-and-ride services. The Government is turning its attention to the issue, as part of its planning with different agencies.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Concern has been expressed about the proposed access road to the replacement bridge to the north of the estuary, which would run through a site of special scientific interest. How do you respond to those environmental concerns?

John Swinney: To be honest, there is no part of the proposal that does not have some environmental impact. We must address that and find ways of mitigating any potential damage. I return to my first answer to Alison McInnes. It is all

very well to decide in principle that we will have a national planning framework and that the crossing will be a national designated development, but when we drill down into the practical delineation of that development, we may find that it cannot simply be given the go-ahead, because its implications for the natural environment are too serious. We must plan to take all those factors into account, consider them properly and observe the proper protections. All those issues will be at the heart of how we consider developments in connection with the Forth crossing's route.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: One concern, which had an impact on public opinion at the exhibitions, is that if we choose a bridge rather than a tunnel, the route might still have to close because of adverse weather. That is one reason why people were quite strongly in favour of a tunnel. Will you give reassurances that designs can be improved on to prevent such closures?

John Swinney: Much design work has been undertaken on bridges since the existing Forth crossing was constructed in the 1960s, so lessons have been learned in a variety of respects. At its most elementary, the cable-stayed bridge can provide wind shielding to allow a more reliable crossing and to withstand the wind conditions that can prevail on a stretch of water. That will be an implicit part of the design that we produce for a cable-stayed bridge.

The Convener: I thank the cabinet secretary and his officials for their time. I particularly welcome the comments about continuing involvement with the committee. In one format or another, the committee will want to maintain an interest in the issue. When the cabinet secretary returns to his desk, he might also find that a freedom of information request has been e-mailed to him even in the past hour to welcome him back.

John Swinney: The flow of freedom of information requests is never interrupted in this world. I reiterate my willingness to provide whatever advice and guidance the committee would like on the project's development. I am happy to provide that in the way that the committee requests.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

I suspend the meeting briefly to allow the witnesses to leave.

15:23

Meeting suspended.

15:25

On resuming—

Work Programme

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is on our work programme. Members recently had the opportunity to suggest issues to add to our work programme for the coming months. Paper TIC/S3/08/1/2 lists the various suggestions that members have come up with, which I will run through quickly. The suggested issues are the costs of public transport, in light of recent increases; the development of air routes to and from Scotland; the role, responsibility and performance of Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd; school travel plan co-ordinators; the rail service from Glasgow and Edinburgh to Inverness; the development of high-speed rail links to England; and options for introducing direct rail links to Europe via the Channel tunnel.

I will kick off with my views and then open out the discussion. The final two issues, on rail links to England and the continent, are hugely important, but they are potentially bigger issues than we will have time to consider in the gap in our work programme that we want to fill. Although I advocate strongly that the Scottish Parliament should have a role in developing the case for such rail links in the longer term, there is no clear, simple and specific piece of work that we can do on that in the short term.

We recently considered the development of air routes in our examination of the Government's budget and we will have further opportunity to debate the issue in the Parliament, so I am not sure that a specific, discrete inquiry by the committee would add anything. My preference is to consider either school travel plan co-ordinators or public transport costs, given the recent increases. I am sure that members from other parts of the country will have similar experiences but, in the peak period, Glasgow to Edinburgh commuters are now asked to pay getting on for £18. A case can be made for examining the impact of rail and bus fares on the Government's aspiration to get meaningful modal shift.

Those are my initial thoughts. I open up the discussion to members.

David Stewart: The first question is how much time we have available. The clerks can advise us on that. Our choice depends on how we want to use the available gap. We might be able to do more than one inquiry by having a restricted time for the submission of written evidence only and a short period of oral evidence from witnesses. That way, we would get in more of the committee's preferences. Each member has their feelings about which inquiries we should follow through.

You would expect me to talk about the air route development fund, convener—I know your views on that, but it is a relevant subject. The business community is heavily behind the reintroduction of the fund. To stress a point that I have made on several occasions, I am still not clear about the reasons for the removal of the fund, as my understanding is that the arguments about state aid do not apply uniformly to all airports throughout Scotland. If the Government wants to make a change, it is perfectly entitled to do so, but I do not think that the state aid issue is the real reason for the change. It would be useful to flesh out that issue.

The fund has climate change implications—I know your view on that, convener—but there are also important issues about the development of tourism and inward investment, which are linked. The issue is not only about the Highlands and Islands—it affects airports the length and breadth of the country. An inquiry into the fund would be relevant, because the issue has arisen as a result of a change of policy that I do not think was in the Scottish National Party manifesto before the election, although I am sure that Mr Gibson and Shirley-Anne Somerville will keep me right if I am wrong about that.

The Convener: To answer your first point, paragraph 1 in the paper states that we have an opportunity to do a piece of work that covers two or three evidence sessions and to produce a report with recommendations.

15:30

Rob Gibson: Given the context of our work this year, which will focus heavily on climate change, and recognising how the development of transport projects has been very much restricted to the centre of Scotland in the past eight years, we need to strike out and examine the problems that are faced on the longer-distance routes. That would be a materially useful piece of work at the moment. Some of the changes could take two or three three-year periods to achieve—perhaps nine or 10 years. It would be a good idea to get a wider understanding of the importance of those routes to the economy.

Anything that we do regarding the petition about railway lines north of Inverness is predicated on developments south of there. The Government has a commitment to reducing the time that it takes to travel between Inverness and the centre of Scotland. It would be useful for the committee to show that we understand the importance of rail development and to deal with the question of what fares should be charged in that context. It would be better to consider the vital nature of railways for the whole of Scotland, rather than the situation in the centre of Scotland, where services are

overprovided—if I might say that—and are multiplying before our eyes. Although I have concerns about people having to pay any amount of money to travel between Glasgow and Edinburgh, it ain't nothing compared with the length of the journey, the poor quality of the vehicles and the time that it takes to travel in major parts of the country that contribute considerably to the economy and, indeed, to our sanity. There is a whole area of things there that I feel would be well worth your consideration, ladies and gentlemen.

The Convener: If we were to consider those issues, I would be entirely supportive of considering the whole country. I gave the one example of a journey earlier only because it was the one that I have made most recently.

Alex Johnstone: When I looked down the list of suggestions in the work programme paper, I thought that some of them were very good, in particular the one about the cost of public transport. I have picked up from some people that they feel that the cost of public transport is different in different parts of Scotland. I would like to know more about that.

The last three items on the list relate to rail services between cities in Scotland and routes leading outside Scotland. They gave me the idea that it might be useful for the committee to do something a little more long sighted, particularly at this stage of the session. We could look a bit further into the future and invite people from civic society and industry to tell us what their aspirations are for rail services in the long term. Many political parties have proposals—some more practical than others—for huge developments in the rail system, inside and beyond Scotland. Perhaps we need to do something to scale and prioritise those aspirations and to judge what might be possible or less possible in years to come.

The Convener: Are you suggesting that as something more substantial for us to do in next year's work programme?

Alex Johnstone: I do not take the view that it needs to be all that substantial. The opportunity is there for us to invite people to come in and talk about what they see as the long-term future of rail travel, and we could use that to colour the attitudes of political parties and individuals as we go forward towards another election in a little over three years' time.

Alison McInnes: I do not disagree with what Alex Johnstone says about the importance of doing such a piece of work. However, I would like that work to be constrained to two or three evidence-taking sessions. We did not consider that for this year's work programme, so we should perhaps think about it for the future. All the

suggestions are worth while, but I particularly favour our looking into the costs of public transport, especially if we widen it out to include bus fares, as I know, anecdotally, that bus journeys in the north-east cost much more than similar lengths of journey do in urban areas. I am also interested in school travel plan co-ordinators. Both of those would be short, focused pieces of work, and we could deliver some advice in our report that could be taken on right away. Some of the other things would depend on budgetary issues and so on.

Cathy Peattie: I am keen that we choose a piece of work that we can actually do in a couple of weeks rather than having a talking shop for a couple of meetings just to fill a space. Sorry—I do not mean to be unkind, but when a committee of the Parliament sends out a request for information and evidence, people have expectations. They do not want to have just another opportunity to give evidence if it will not go anywhere. I agree with Alison McInnes that we should take on something that we can actually do.

We need to consider seriously not just the cost of public transport but the whole issue of public transport in relation to modal shift—the fact that trains do not come, or three coaches come when dozens of folk are waiting, or trains do not turn up for hours at a time, or people cannot get a bus in particular areas. We need to include public transport in our work programme in a serious way. I do not think that we can consider it in two or three weeks. I feel strongly about that.

We should promote public transport, but we need an opportunity to listen to what people are saying and we need to consider what needs to be done to change systems and make progress. That relates also to our discussion about the budget and how it might affect public transport. It might be that we can put down a marker and come back to consider the topic.

I am interested in the school travel plan co-ordinators. It would make sense to look into that topic now and consider how to change attitudes for the future, given that people have established ways of doing things. We can consider the topic in a short amount of time and make some recommendations.

Let us do something meaningful and consider a topic on which we can make some recommendations and changes. We should put down markers that we will come back and do bigger pieces of work rather than try to do them in two or three meetings just to tick a box.

Charlie Gordon: I do not disagree with any of the suggested topics on the list. The question is whether we can fit in any of them in a piece of—if you will—quick and dirty work.

I support David Stewart's view on what I call the son of the air route development fund. I still have high hopes that my party can amend the Government's budget in that direction. I have a personal interest in rail links to the Channel tunnel—I will ask a parliamentary question about that later this week. However, I accept that the topic is complex and that considering it would probably take too long for the slot that we have available.

It is fine if people want to consider the cost of public transport, but we should not just hear examples of individual journeys. We would have to consider the principal issues and benchmark the average cost per mile travelled, or whatever, against the cost of travel generally, including the cost of car travel.

The Convener: Absolutely.

Charlie Gordon: I know for a fact that motorists do not do accurate calculations when they calculate the cost of their car travel. They fool themselves and convince themselves that the car is always cheaper. On the other hand, because of the way in which the railway industry is structured, people pay over the odds for many journeys. They pay more than the true economic cost of their rail use because of the way in which we separate track charges from charges for using the train.

I tend to favour our considering the cost of travel rather than the cost of using public transport, but unless we are focused and look in the right places, we would probably run out of time.

The Convener: I certainly agree with your point about the comparative cost of different modes of transport. If we are looking to understand why people make certain decisions and what their incentives are, we need to make that comparison. Again, though, that reinforces the point that that is probably a more major piece of work.

There seems to be a lot of open-mindedness to the idea of a more substantial piece of work on public transport, including the future generally for rail travel in Scotland, bearing in mind the need to consider all parts of Scotland and not just the areas that are already well served. However, perhaps that is something more substantial for next year's work programme.

If we are thinking about doing something short—however dirty or otherwise it might be, Charlie—we are probably talking about having two or three meetings to consider something much more discrete. Several members have mentioned the school travel plan co-ordinators. Is there anything else from the list in the committee paper that people would prefer us to take as our topic?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Perhaps we can look into what Alex Johnstone described in the longer

term and, over two or three meetings, consider the cost of public transport, if the terms of reference are kept very specific. I do not see the two issues as an either/or decision. We can have a wider, long-term debate about the future of rail—and if members want to broaden it out to all public transport that is fair enough—but there is scope for us to do something on the cost of public transport. It would be advantageous for the committee to look into that, as a lot of the population have great concerns about it.

The Convener: Is that the general view?

Alison McInnes: I would prefer us to consider school travel plan co-ordinators. That would cover both health and the impact on congestion, and we would probably come up with a report that people could use. I do not doubt that there is benefit in considering the problems of the costs of travel, but we are not in control of those—they are not something that we can influence directly right away. That would be a longer-term piece of work.

The Convener: I suggested that we consider that issue because, although there are elements of the costs of all the different modes of transport that the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government can do nothing about, there are elements of them that we can do something about. I was interested in discussing the balance that can be struck and which of those mechanisms we are using.

Cathy Peattie: If we are going to consider public transport costs—whether of trains or whatever—we need time to do a bigger piece of work. I like the idea of looking at the school travel plan co-ordinators. It also makes sense for us to consider the development of air routes to and from Scotland, given that we are going to debate climate change legislation and are gathering information on climate change.

Those are things that we need to do and that we can do in two or three meetings. I am arguing that we should not do any of the other things until we can make time to do them properly.

The Convener: Two topics seem to be getting support. It is suggested that we do something short and focused on rail travel in general or on the prices of public transport in general—I am not sure which of those members support. The other topic concerns school travel. Can I see a show of hands? Who supports a discussion of school travel? Thank you. Who supports a discussion of rail/public transport? Thank you. We are probably going to have to thrash out a fairly specific remit for our consideration of the issues based on the discussion that we have had. Steve Farrell suggests that we give a nod towards either something aspirational or something that is about costs. It seems to me that a proper examination of

the costs of public transport is hugely important but probably requires a lot more work than we are going to have time for. Is that agreed?

Rob Gibson: I agree because of the time constraint. However, it should be possible for us to get some of the institutes of motoring to appear before the committee to tell us the costs of running motor cars, as was suggested. We do not have a proper estimate of that. It would be important to put that information into the balance when we are talking about aspirations for public transport, to make the situation quite clear.

The Convener: Okay. Is that enough to be going on with?

Charlie Gordon: I think that I might agree with Rob Gibson on that, but only because my brain hurts.

The Convener: That is usually the reason.

Charlie Gordon: I bet that the clerk is sorry that he asked.

Rob Gibson: I bet that he is.

The Convener: I think that we have enough to be going on with. I thank members for their attendance. Does the committee agree to delegate to me and to the clerks the tasks of identifying relevant witnesses and of updating the committee's work programme on the website to take account of our discussion?

Members indicated agreement.

Alex Johnstone: You are the man.

Meeting closed at 15:45.

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