

TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 18 March 2008

Session 3

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TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE

6th 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:

Stephen Boyd (Scottish Trades Union Congress)

John Docherty (Unite)

Phil McGarry (National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers)

Roderick McLeod (Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland)

Paul Moloney (Nautilus UK)

Marjory Rodger (Confederation of Passenger Transport UK)

Peter Williams (First ScotRail)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Alastair Macfie

ASSISTANT CLERK

Clare O'Neill

LOCATION

Committee Rooms 2 and 4

Scottish Parliament

Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee

Tuesday 18 March 2008

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:00*]

Ferry Services Inquiry

The Convener (Patrick Harvie): Good afternoon everybody and welcome to the sixth meeting in 2008 of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee. I remind everybody present that mobile devices should be switched off.

This is the second of seven evidence sessions in our inquiry into ferry services in Scotland. Today, we will hear from the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland. We had hoped to hear from Passengers' View Scotland on the same panel, but unfortunately we have received late apologies. We will invite Passengers' View Scotland to make its views known to the committee in writing following the meeting. After that, we will hear from the relevant trade unions and, finally, from the Confederation of Passenger Transport and First ScotRail.

I reiterate the points that I made at our meeting in Oban. The inquiry focuses on issues including ferry routes, frequencies, timetabling, capacity and integration with other modes of public transport. Those issues are of interest to people in many parts of Scotland, and I urge anybody with an interest in them to send us their views in writing or to visit the committee's website, where views can be left. That call for views to be expressed closes at the end of the month.

We begin with a session on the passengers' perspective on ferry services. I welcome Roderick McLeod, from the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland.

Roderick McLeod (Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland): Thank you for inviting me. I am the acting convener of the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland, which I will abbreviate as MACS, if you do not mind.

The Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland was set up under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001. Its main role was to provide advice to Scottish ministers about improvements to transport for disabled people. MACS's mission statement is brief, so I will read it out:

"MACS believes in a Scotland where anyone with a mobility problem can go when and where everyone else can and have the information and opportunities to do so."

We are looking for a flat Scotland in the sense of a level playing field, as the expression is.

MACS has been in existence for nearly six years but, sorrowfully, this is probably the last occasion on which MACS will appear in the Parliament. It has been decided by the Scottish Government that the committee's work should cease and be transferred to the other organisation, formerly the Public Transport Users Committee, which is now known as Passengers' View Scotland. That is the body for which James King would have spoken. The proposal is that the work that was done in the past in offering advice to ministers about transport for disabled people will be taken over by the rather more general group. MACS members have great concerns about the effect of that change on disabled people's opportunities to travel. However, I understand that that is not a matter for this afternoon's meeting.

The Convener: Thank you. I am sure that members are aware of the issues around that. Perhaps we will have an opportunity to discuss the matter in another format.

Can you explain a little about the role of MACS in relation to ferry users? What dialogue has taken place to date?

Roderick McLeod: From its outset, MACS had a view of transport that was modal dependent; we had a buses group, a trains group and a ferries group. I am proud to say that I chaired the ferries group in the early days. I live in Orkney, where I am a councillor, so my interest in ferries is more than a little and not just because of my MACS interest. MACS took a strong interest in ferries from the beginning.

The committee will understand that issues such as the design of ferries and ferry buildings are reserved to the United Kingdom Government, so most of the work is done by the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, which is related to the Department for Transport. We work closely with DPTAC. During the past couple of years, I and one of my colleagues have been involved with a working group, which has been writing a guidance document entitled "Designing and Operating Passenger Vessels and Passenger Shore Infrastructure: Guidance on Meeting the Needs of Persons with Reduced Mobility". The expression "persons with reduced mobility" covers anyone for whom getting about is—for any reason—more difficult than it is for most of us.

The DPTAC guidance is in its final draft and consultation is going on. The document is about 150 pages long, and four pages are devoted to getting on and off ferries. In my view, the guidance is significantly biased towards large ferries, which are common in the Channel and are the main concern of most people on DPTAC. That group of

ferries includes the ferries operated by NorthLink Ferries and the larger ferries in the CalMac Ferries fleet, as well as the Superfast ferry that runs to Zeebrugge, for example.

The difficulty is that DPTAC chose to concentrate on the design of good ferries and terminals, which disabled people can get around, and played down the importance of the link between the two. MACS thinks that getting from the land on to the boat is often the hardest part of the journey, but the importance of that interface was discounted because of the dominance of big ferries, which are common in England. In Scotland we have a huge variety of ferries, including very small ones. Our ferry to North Ronaldsay goes from a conventional pier—the sort of little pier that members will remember. When a person gets off the boat they must climb up steps to reach the pier and if they want to take their car it must be lifted off in a net. The ferry to Graemsay, which is one of the Orkney Isles, has the same problem: there is no convenient method of getting on and off for anyone who has a mobility difficulty.

The DPTAC guidance is sorely lacking in advice on the matter. It is an important job for Government to provide advice and guidance to people who design ferry services, and such advice would be of great value. MACS expressed its view that there was a deficiency in the document, but DPTAC pressed ahead with it. However, DPTAC agreed that if MACS were to publish additional guidance on boarding and disembarking from small ferries, it would include in its guidance a pointer towards the MACS advice.

Getting on and off smaller ferries is the big difficulty in Scotland. Getting on to the NorthLink ferry in Kirkwall, which I know well, is so smooth a process that the other night when someone asked a lady who was sitting in the waiting room, “Are you going on the ferry, Madam?”, she replied, “I thought I was on the ferry.” The interface between land and ferry is like walking across a corridor, which is brilliant. That is not the case for smaller ferries and it is unfortunate that there is little evidence that anything is being done about that or that guidance is being provided.

The Convener: You talked about vessel and terminal design. How much input has MACS had to more day-to-day issues such as timetabling and changes to ferry services?

Roderick McLeod: MACS provides strategic guidance rather than getting involved with detailed, day-to-day issues. We receive submissions from disabled people regarding their dissatisfaction. Two types of comment are characteristic. First, people complain about the complication of timetables. They have difficulty in understanding the complex diagrams that CalMac, for example, produces. I know that there are many

complications—for example, on school days a ferry might have to leave half an hour earlier, so there might be a little cross against the scheduled time to show that, but that might not apply on Thursdays, and so on. We have been working on—and producing guidance on—the provision of information for travellers and would-be travellers about such things.

The second issue, which runs right through the work of MACS and through our experience with ferry operators, is staff understanding of the needs of disabled people. That understanding is patchy, although some companies have put a lot of effort into training staff to understand those needs, which aids in getting round some of the physical restrictions. There is a tendency to assume that needs can be met by making physical changes in concrete and steel. However, good staff can make a huge difference, and having concrete and steel in the right places does not necessarily solve the problem from the customer's point of view.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): Have you raised the issue of staff awareness of the needs of people with disabilities with the ferry operators?

Roderick McLeod: We have worked with NorthLink, whose managing director is very enthusiastic about having disabled passengers on his boats, and active in promoting that—in fact, one of the MACS meetings took place on a NorthLink ferry. I am not here to advertise NorthLink, but the director has tried hard and when the person at the top of an organisation tries hard, that makes a difference. We have worked frequently with CalMac representatives and explained the sort of things that they need to know. On the other hand, some of what we have seen when we have taken trips on ferries has been far from ideal.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): How does your organisation intend to link in to the ferry service consultation structures that operate under the auspices of the regional transport partnerships?

Roderick McLeod: As I explained, we have considered that, but it is no longer relevant if MACS does not exist. That is a question for James King. We are aware of the new consultation arrangements, which have been quite a long while in coming—they were being discussed in the earliest days, when I was first a member of MACS six years ago—and we tend to work with such groups. We also work with the RTPs, insofar as we are able to.

We are a committee with a maximum of 15 members—we currently have 10—and a minimal secretariat. Operating with a lot of different groups is difficult, so we have tended to find some of the bigger groups and to work with them. We have

provided written guidance to all RTPs, local authorities and shipping companies on the two areas that I mentioned: quality of information presentation and the information that is necessary for staff training. We have a guidance book about the basis of staff training for people who work on the front line in transport services.

Rob Gibson: What response did you get from the RTPs to your submissions?

Roderick McLeod: The response was patchy. We have not done the round of visiting the RTPs, as was our intent, to talk to them about the issues. Some have responded, but a lot of our letters have gone unanswered; that is true of other organisations, too. When we were developing the training guidance, many transport providers—certainly tens of different providers—worked with us. That was worth while—there is no point in doing something that goes against the views of people who are trying to operate the service.

A key role of MACS has been to offer balanced advice to ministers. We are not a pressure group for disabled people, although our mission statement and our vision make it sound as if we are. We try to tell the minister that we would love certain things to happen, but we are realists and we know that operators have financial constraints.

Rob Gibson: Has your organisation had any input to the design of the pilot road equivalent tariff scheme that will begin in October? Do you have any views on those proposals?

Roderick McLeod: The committee has not had any input on that scheme. When a new scheme is introduced, such as the removal of bridge tolls, we try to identify the benefits and disbenefits for disabled users. There were issues regarding the complexities of whether tolls on bridges should be removed for people with blue badges and so on, and the implications of that.

14:15

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP): You spoke about some of the work that you have been doing on ferry accessibility and the associated infrastructure. Will you break down the detail slightly by giving us descriptions of existing infrastructure and the barriers that prevent good practice from being implemented?

Roderick McLeod: Thank you for that question—you have given me the opportunity to say what I really wanted to say. I hope that the convener will be firm with me if I get too carried away. Very large ferries appear to be serviced very well, so I will ignore them. There is no problem there because the amount of money rolling around to operate very large ferries means that, by now, all or most of the terminals have

been upgraded to standards whereby the slope of the walkway is of acceptable tolerance for people with walking difficulties and wheelchair users.

The difficulties arise with the smaller ferries. The very smallest ones, which I mentioned, sometimes require people to get on and off via steps. You can imagine that that is very difficult for somebody who is in a wheelchair, bearing in mind that the steps are covered with seawater and sometimes seaweed. In exposed locations such as Orkney, it is likely that a gale will be blowing, too. It is also dark at 4 o'clock in the afternoon when people get off the ferry. A number of factors do not make access easy.

A big group of ferries that has not yet been dealt with are the middle-sized ferries, which are connected to the shore by one of two systems. The first is a linkspan, which is tide dependent, and moves up and down to provide a reasonable slope so that cars can drive on and off. A solution for people with mobility difficulties is to take them on to the ferries by the linkspan. The system is very common; every ferry in Orkney that does not have foot access by steps uses a linkspan. There is no guidance in the book on linkspan health and safety issues, which can be serious if large lorries are reversing off ferries and people are walking on to them.

In my locality, the matter has been dealt with by having a clear company policy that nobody walks anywhere near the ferry while vehicles are moving. The policy should be included in the guidance, but that does not necessarily happen. I know of other operators who are a bit slacker about access in such circumstances and assume that people will look after themselves. However, that policy alone does not solve the problem. Because of the road surface and where the linkspan joins the boat, it is common to have quite big gaps as a result of hinges and holes in the deck that things are fixed to. Getting over those can be quite problematic, particularly for people who have walking difficulties or who use an aid such as a walking stick, or for those who have visual difficulties. Those surfaces were made for rolling cars on and off, not for human beings, and are therefore unsatisfactory.

The next type of ferry, which is still quite common, is called a hard-ramp ferry. Hard ramps are used in Orkney and Shetland, and for the smaller ferries in the Western Isles. A hard-ramp ferry uses a landing craft-type vessel, which comes up to the hard ramp and then lowers a ramp off the back of the ferry on to the hard ramp. The difficulty is that for technical marine reasons, the ramp has to be much steeper than is acceptable for somebody who walks with a stick or any sort of aid, or who uses a wheelchair. I think that the ratio of the ramp has to be roughly 1:4,

because of how the boat is designed. If the ramp were not that steep, the boat could not come alongside and make use of it. The steepness is a design principle of that style of boat.

The trouble is that a disabled person is faced with a massive slope of rough concrete with water and seaweed slopping around on it, down which they have to go without a handrail or any assistance whatsoever. Foot passengers or passengers in wheelchairs who attempt to board vessels in that way might be all right once they are on the vessel, but they will still be challenged by getting on board.

I went to the ferry terminal on Skye to go to Raasay last summer and took a photograph, which I am happy to supply to the committee, of the huge concrete slope that goes down quite steeply. It would let you understand what I have described. If somebody were to stand on that slope in a decent wind, they would need to have a strong person on either side to hold them up and stop them slipping.

The two types of ferries that we are concerned about are those that are accessible only by a linkspan or by ramp. For the bigger ferries of that type, a conventional gangway for passengers is usually provided; CalMac often does that. Passengers who are fit can get up and down conventional gangways but, as you know, such gangways are affected by the tide and the tidal movements in some of our ports are very high. At certain states of the tide, therefore, the climb up the gangway is very steep. That is great for those of us who are good at getting up ladders and such like, but it is not much fun for people who have walking difficulties. Until we can devise and give advice on methods that do not require the use of conventional gangways and which use technology instead, as is the case on some ferries, it will always be difficult for certain people to get on and off ferries.

The DPTAC guidance that I mentioned earlier refers to staff being available to assist people. However, we must remember that some of the smaller operations typically have two staff members on the ferry. The guidance also mentions terminal buildings, but lots of our ferries have no terminal building. The first responsibility of those two members of staff is the safety of the vessel. Vessels are not necessarily tied up—if a hard ramp is being used, the vessel is held against the ramp using the power of the engine. That means that someone has to stay on the bridge to operate the boat. It would be unrealistic to expect the other person on board to check the cars coming on and offer assistance to passengers who need it.

I do not believe that enough work has been done to provide ferry operators with proper

guidance on what they need to provide when they put on a new ferry. I do not believe that the new guidance answers those questions.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: When Dave Stewart and I were down in Dunoon recently, we were given examples of how timetables and frequencies impact on people with mobility difficulties who are trying to access other services—whether it is the health service or another service that they need to access on the mainland. Have any issues been brought to your attention about people having difficulty accessing services because mobility difficulties have not been considered?

Roderick McLeod: In a place such as Orkney, the health service is dominated by ferry timetables. A real effort is made there. I am sure that that is true in some parts of the Western Isles, too; in places where everybody who moves does so on a ferry, there is much greater interest in the issue. However, there is a lack of joined-up services.

Orkney has looked at fixed links. One of the huge advantages of having a fixed link—apart from the fact that an inquiry into ferries would not be necessary—is that people can get to and from services, including medical services, without having to worry about whether there is a ferry. In Orkney, several of our islands are served by only one ferry a day, so it is very difficult to get to a doctor's appointment on the mainland. I am sorry—I think that all the bigger islands have two ferries a day. If there are only two ferries a day, a hospital appointment can create a lot of difficulty. For surgical treatment, the patient has to be at the hospital at 7.30 in the morning, but the boat does not get in until 10.30 so they have to go the night before. The timetable causes complications, but people are realistic. The pressures on timetabling, certainly in the Orkney context, are much wider than just for disabled people.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Is disability taken into account when it comes to timetabling, or does that happen only when such a great proportion of the population are affected that those who are responsible cannot help but take it into account?

Roderick McLeod: I do not think that it is taken into account. In Orkney, because of community planning and the attempt to join up health services and local authority services, the health board has taken a much greater interest in the matter. When medical services are being provided across many islands, there are huge advantages if they can be joined up with the transport system.

Cathy Peattie: Given what you said about the smaller ferries, do operators tend to meet only the minimum legislative requirements in respect of accessibility issues?

Roderick McLeod: Yes, there is a problem in that regard. The initial legislation was the Disability Discrimination Act 1995; ferries typically last for 30 or more years, so it will be a long time before many of them are dealt with.

The number of disabled people who go on to ferries but are not car passengers is probably small, but that is not an excuse. At Rosyth, there is a scheme whereby passengers are taken on board the ferry in a wheelchair-friendly minibus that is provided by the operator. All passengers go via the same route. That is an alternative solution, which we used briefly for one of the NorthLink ferries. I propose that we use it for some small ferries, but we must be realistic about the cost to a small operator, with a ferry that takes 10 passengers a day, of providing a vehicle at each end—or taking it back and forth—to assist people in getting on and off. You are right to say that there is a tradition of not moving the issue forward.

What I find more worrying is that, when an attempt is made to move things forward, it is not always done satisfactorily. In 2004, a group of us visited some of the CalMac ferries. We went to Armadale, where a new passenger walkway was being installed. I looked at the walkway in horror, and took photographs of it. It was being built with a slope of 1:3. I do not know whether you have ever tried carrying a case, pushing a pushchair and walking down a slope of 1:3 in the rain, but it is very difficult. I was absolutely horrified. That walkway was being funded from public money. Since then, and as a result of that incident, MACS has achieved an arrangement whereby any facility that is funded by the Scottish Government through its ports and harbours fund has to employ the services of a registered access consultant in the design of the infrastructure.

The walkway at Armadale was altered as a result of intervention by MACS. It is improved, but in respect of any regulation it is still far too steep. However, it is not a building but an external slope, so it does not come under building control and no one could stop it being built. On the other hand, it is a slope that is unrealistic in respect of real people, with the result that people go on the car deck as they did previously. That seems to me to be a funny way of solving the problem.

Cathy Peattie: It is another situation in which consulting people with disabilities might have come in handy.

Roderick McLeod: Absolutely.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): What is your view on the Dunoon situation, where there is a £10 million linkspan? That would have been excellent for disabled access, but unfortunately the boat design from CalMac is not sufficient to access the linkspan. I believe that the

situation at Rothesay is the other way round, and that we have the boat but not the linkspan. Where is the joined-up thinking there?

Roderick McLeod: Absolutely.

The guidance that I mentioned was written not only by DPTAC, but by the ship operators and the ports operators—the big people who run shipping lines and so on. They did not want to get into the issue of linking up. I wonder whether the difficulty arises because of such sensitivities, and the fact that a number of different organisations are involved. In the case of CalMac, there are two companies—the vessel-owning company and the operator. There is the owner of the pier, who may not be the operator of the pier; the operator may not be the shipping company, because the pier may be operated by an intermediary on behalf of the local authority, private body or trust that owns it. The lack of joining up is a real problem in that area.

The DPTAC guidance took the line, “Let’s not go there. We don’t want to get involved in all these things. If we make guidance, there could be legal wrangling and things like that.” I disagree completely. The guidance must be clear. The only substantial bit of guidance—in the little section that I described to the committee—is that, in designing facilities, it is important that port operators and ship operators work together.

Cathy Peattie: How easy is it for people with mobility problems to complete multimodal journeys, for example by ferry and then by bus or train? Whether people are travelling to use the health service or simply trying to get to another part of the country, what changes should or could be made to make their journey easier?

Roderick McLeod: Disability is high on my agenda, but health and safety is even higher. Maritime and Coastguard Agency regulations require that people cannot stay in vehicles on ferry crossings of greater than half an hour. The difficulty with that is that, for example, a community minibus can take somebody to a ferry, on to a ferry and off at the other end, but during the journey—if it is longer than half an hour—that person has to come out of the minibus.

We would like the system to be joined up to provide an opportunity for either community or statutory demand-responsive transport. Such transport could be linked to the ferry, to enable it to go on board with the person concerned. However, health and safety is higher up the tree of responsibilities than disability.

14:30

We can take someone to the edge of the pier in the most super-duper vehicle available, but

somehow we must get them out of that vehicle—possibly in a wheelchair—to get them on to the boat. That is difficult. The steep slope that I described to you is dangerous for staff; it is a health and safety problem for a member of staff to wheel a substantial wheelchair user down such a slope. People refuse to do that work, and I understand why—it is not safe. We must have a better mechanism.

The other element of a joined-up system is the provision of a reasonable space in which people can wait during the inevitable delays between boarding and unloading of road transport, in particular, and the departure and arrival of ferries. I hope that such issues will be taken into consideration. We are keen on the whole-journey approach and on integrating buses, taxis, trains, demand-responsive transport and ferries. MACS has worked on integrated transport.

Cathy Peattie: The link with buses and trains is vital. Has MACS considered the fact that often people with disabilities travel not on their own but with their family? I have heard that in some places families are split up, because people with disabilities have to go in one direction and other family members have to go in another. How can we change that situation?

Roderick McLeod: It is a difficult issue. It is messy and untidy for walkways to be used by the mobile public when the access method for wheelchair users is the car deck. We would like to move away from that system as much as possible. MACS is realistic about the fact that that cannot always be achieved, but we have heard stupid stories about families being divided unnecessarily.

Cabin access is important on ferries on which people stay overnight. It is great that all the new boats that have been introduced have the statutory number of accessible cabins, but I can imagine a situation in which a disabled child and their parents are unable to sleep together in the same cabin, or in which only one parent can stay with the child. That is not practical. People who have a feel for the spread of the issue need to be involved in making design decisions.

One of my specialist areas is the transport of small children, which is a distinct issue. I worry that that issue will get lost in the consideration of more general matters. I am not criticising James King and his committee, who do a useful and worthwhile job. However, will they consider the details of carrying small children who are disabled and need to get treatment? Only this morning, I spoke to a member of the social work staff of Orkney Islands Council about the difficulty that she had encountered in bringing a severely disabled child into Kirkwall on the ferry. The complexities of that issue are scarcely large.

Cathy Peattie: Perhaps this is a discussion for another place, but I am concerned that some of MACS's expertise may be lost.

The Convener: Because we have taken evidence from you as a panel of one, we have gone through our questions a little faster than would normally be the case. Before I end this part of the meeting, would you like to raise any issues on which we have not touched?

Roderick McLeod: I have made an informal initial submission, which will be formalised and submitted to the committee by MACS. I have talked a great deal about linkage, but members who use ferries will understand that the quality of many of our ferries is way below any acceptable standard. Steep steps are one of the biggest problems. They are very common and present incredible difficulties not only for wheelchair users and those who cannot walk, but for anyone whose mobility is at all challenged. We are looking to get lifts, but those are difficult to install on small ferries. Typically, ferries last for 30 years, so it will be a long while before the whole stock is converted to an acceptable standard.

The Convener: I thank the witness for his time. If this is the last time that MACS speaks to us as MACS, perhaps you could convey our thanks to your colleagues as well.

Roderick McLeod: Thank you.

The Convener: We will suspend briefly to allow the changeover of witnesses.

14:35

Meeting suspended.

14:36

On resuming—

The Convener: We resume with panel 2, and I welcome colleagues from the trade unions. We have with us: Phil McGarry from the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers; Paul Moloney from Nautilus UK; Stan Crooke from the Transport Salaried Staffs Association; John Docherty from Unite; and Stephen Boyd from the Scottish Trades Union Congress.

Would the panel members like to say anything by way of an introduction before we begin the questions?

Stephen Boyd (Scottish Trades Union Congress): First, I thank the committee for its indulgence in inviting such a large panel of witnesses. Since CalMac became a key issue for trade unions, we have sought to work closely in partnership with the four trade unions that have members on the ferry services, so it is important

that all of us are represented today. We thank you for that.

In our written submission, which I know has been circulated to committee members, we draw your attention to the fact that we will provide a further, more comprehensive submission before the deadline of 31 March. In that, we will cover in more detail some of the issues to which scant attention is paid in our first written submission but which are of interest to committee members. Those include road equivalent tariff; European issues, such as changes to the regulatory framework at the European level and some of the ferry systems in other countries; and the consequences of tendering. Some anecdotal evidence is beginning to feed through, and we hope to draw that out more fully in our next written submission.

The Convener: When we have sought views from communities of ferry users, we have heard the view expressed strongly that ferry services are sometimes provided to suit the needs of operators rather than passengers. The STUC's written evidence argues that the ferry workforce and island communities are effectively one. How do you reconcile those views?

Stephen Boyd: That is a common issue throughout all essential public services. We often hear trade unions described as a producer interest in the delivery of health or education services, which completely ignores the fact that trade union members are users of the same services. That is true for ferry services, too.

Since we began our work on CalMac—forgive me: I am guilty of referring to CalMac when I really should be talking about Scotland's ferry services, but the tendering of CalMac's ferry services has been the key issue for us—we have been careful never to talk about the current ferry services as being perfect. We completely understand that there is scope for improving them, and we are always keen to engage in discussions. Engaging the workforce is crucial to ensuring that the services are improved effectively. Changes that are imposed on a workforce are never likely to be as effective as those that are undertaken in partnership with a workforce.

I read the *Official Report* of the committee's previous meeting, and we concur with a lot of the points that were made. If services are extended and capacity grows, from a selfish point of view that means more jobs and opportunities for our members. It also means that the communities in which our members live and work will be sustained for the future. I do not agree with the proposition that we are opposed to the community interest in any way, shape or form.

Paul Moloney (Nautilus UK): My union has a long history of arguing for seafarers in general and, of course, people working on the ferries in Scotland to have the best skill levels. We have tried to do everything that we can to enhance those skill levels. For example, we participate in the Merchant Navy Training Board. We have tried to frame arguments to protect those skills from the worst excesses of the global marketplace in which seafarers find themselves. Our approach is very much in the interests of ferry users.

The Convener: What impact might the working time directive have on the provision of ferry services and what should be done to take account of it?

Stephen Boyd: I read the evidence from the previous meeting on the train today. That was the first time that we had seen the working time directive raised as an issue. I will ask one of my colleagues, who is slightly more expert on the issue, to answer your question.

John Docherty (Unite): I work on ferry services and I am an islander. I am fully aware of the implications of the working time directive for the smaller ferries that serve the smaller islands, where there is a requirement for a longer day, but perhaps with gaps. I work with CalMac, which comes entirely under the rules for the maritime sector, in which people calculate their hours of rest rather than their hours of work. The directive has not had a huge impact on us to date, although it is a tool that has to be looked at when we are considering either extending timetables or setting up new timetables. The flexibility involved in the hours of rest directive is different from that around the 48-hour week. I imagine that a swing towards later sailings will have a bigger impact, which will mean that we will have to employ more crew to maintain the extended timetables that will be required for some routes. We do not have a problem as such, but I understand that the smaller ferries will have problems.

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): We have also heard that where a vessel is based has implications for ferry crews. Do the witnesses want to comment on that?

Stephen Boyd: I know that John Docherty spent the past two weeks moving ferries about the west coast, so he is probably best placed to answer that question.

John Docherty: Most ferries are island based, for the reason that, if the weather and harbours permit, the ferry will be at the island that it serves in case of medical emergencies and so on. That is perhaps becoming less relevant, given modern helicopter evacuation procedures. Nevertheless, for weather reasons, sometimes ferry services are the only option. In the case of Mull and Iona, the

ferry cannot be berthed on Iona, but it still needs to be available to take the doctor over before they decide that a helicopter is needed. Some of the islands do not have a doctor. Although it is handier for us to be on the island that the ferry serves for hours of rest reasons—it may save an hour in getting the ferry from start to finish—where the ferry berths is not really that important. The transit times to the islands that the ferries serve are all built into the timetable.

With smaller ferries, on which there is a local crew, it is irrelevant where the ferry is berthed, because the crews are island based.

Alison McInnes: I want to follow that up by asking about the quality of life for the crew who operate on longer services. We heard some evidence last week that the crews had to be based on the mainland three nights a week and that it might be better if that was flipped—if the crew came from the island, it would be better to berth the ship at the island.

John Docherty: I take it that you are talking primarily about the inter-island services, rather than the Oban to Barra routes and so on. You will find that most of the crews on the smaller ferries are local. I do not know whether what you suggest would be required for the bigger ferries. Although a big percentage of islanders work on the larger ferries, those ferries are mainly berthed at mainland ports for the sake of crew turnover and shift changes.

14:45

Alison McInnes: Although Stephen Boyd acknowledged the fact that the STUC's written submission is just an interim submission, in it the STUC raises concerns that the redeployment of vessels or changes to services could impact on seafarers' working and living arrangements. Can you explain a bit more the impact you think that such changes might cause? How would you like that impact to be minimised?

Stephen Boyd: Such questions are probably best handled by the people who deliver the services.

John Docherty: The crews concerned are on a two-week tour of duty and will stay on board. Although they stay locally, I imagine that most of them will stay on board for weather watches or early morning starts. The workforce is quite fluid—it is not as if there is a certain group of islanders in the major fleet who work on a certain ferry and are there every night. Although the crew may stay in Stornoway, they may be on an Islay service just because of the way in which the rostering and manning requirements work out. The fact that the ships are flexible and can go on any route benefits all the communities of the Western Isles. The local

knowledge is not kept in one area but can be spread throughout the fleet.

Alison McInnes: Mr Boyd, do you have agreements in place in respect of negotiations and consultations over any redeployments, or do they happen on an ad hoc basis?

Stephen Boyd: The STUC would not be involved in that; that would be for the unions on the ground.

John Docherty: On local agreements and rostering, especially when the extension of timetables is involved, our company gets involved at trade union level just to double check that changes have no impact on the hours of work schedules and do not lead to people working an excessive number of hours. We have an input on timetable changes; there is a mechanism in place within the company to enable that to happen.

Alison McInnes: So there are no improvements to the process that you would like to be made.

John Docherty: It works well at present. The biggest problem arises when, with a bit more flexibility, we could do more runs. There could be a lack of flexibility because of the current restrictions and penalties.

Rob Gibson: Would you care to make any remarks about deck officers being moved from one route to another? Those officers have specialist knowledge about particular ports, so should that practice be encouraged or not on the services that run at the moment?

Paul Moloney: We have a partnership-at-work agreement with CalMac. That means that, on issues relating to timetabling and flexibility, our union is consulted and will have a view. In general, we encourage flexibility. Our members who work on Caledonian MacBrayne routes and the other ferry routes that operate from Scotland are all trained to standards of training, certification and watchkeeping 95 level, which means that their skills are transferable. Having said that, it is perhaps common sense—and certainly good business practice—to build up a degree of local expertise. We want that expertise to be built up and maintained. Nevertheless, in general, our members are trained to be able to operate on any route; indeed, they are trained to serve in deep sea if necessary.

Rob Gibson: We are interested in working out how certain ferry services run. For example, there can be many cancellations during the winter period at Ardrrossan. Is it important that the Arran ferry crew are able to deal with the difficulties that the harbour at Ardrrossan presents?

John Docherty: As my colleagues said, the training and flexibility of the workforce are important. If we have only two or three men who

can work a route and they leave, are off sick or whatever, we could end up with nobody to work that route. Therefore, it is highly important that the workforce is fluid. There are occasions when ports are inaccessible because of the weather. That applies to all ports, and it is only right to expect that on the ground of safety. We would be silly to get ourselves tied down with a certain number of men working one route.

Cathy Peattie: The STUC's written evidence expresses clear opposition to the provision of ferry services by private operators and the introduction of competition. Why do you oppose those things?

Stephen Boyd: We have never had a proper rationale for the tendering of Scotland's ferry services, beyond compliance with European Union law. We have always said that we can understand why the Scottish Executive felt the need to tender. We disagreed, but we could understand why it thought that infracting EU law would lead to detrimental consequences for ferry services. However, the fact is that it tendered under regulations whose purpose would not be met by tendering the ferry services in that way.

The purpose of EU competition law is to introduce competition in order to increase efficiencies, save the taxpayer money and—one would hope—improve services. It was clear that the services were not going to be improved and that, far from saving the taxpayer money, the exercise would cost the taxpayer substantial amounts of money. In those circumstances, we thought that introducing competition was potentially hugely detrimental not only to the people whom we represent, but to the people who use the services each and every day.

Cathy Peattie: What about the use of private operators?

Stephen Boyd: We were always hard pushed to see which private operators were going to tender for the services. That was borne out at the end of the process, when CalMac was the sole bidder.

In the circumstances, it is difficult for a private operator to come in and make a profit without attacking the wages and terms and conditions of the people whom we represent. Not just in ferry services, but throughout essential public services, people can argue that tendering or contracting out has improved efficiency, but when we look underneath that, it essentially means that the people who deliver the services are paid less. Their wages and conditions are attacked.

The use of private operators does not improve anything. It does not improve services for the people who use the ferries and it certainly does not improve our members' employment prospects. It also attacks the long-term capacity to deliver the services. We can already see the consequences

of tendering in relation to training for the longer term. We have a rapidly ageing workforce. About 70 per cent of deck hands and nearly the same percentage of engine hands are over 40. We need to get younger people into the industry. Tendering the services on a six-yearly basis, with the uncertainty that that introduces, works against changing the age profile in the industry.

Paul Moloney: We are heavily engaged in the debate in Europe about protected maritime skills. Our view has always been that the tendering process that CalMac had to go through conflicted with statements that were made in Europe that nations need to do everything they can to enhance and protect the maritime skills base.

We did not believe that the CalMac services should be put out to tender. As a general principle, if there is to be competition, let us have quality competition. Unfortunately, in the maritime industry, too many people—often ship owners—make clear and loud pleas that we have a global marketplace and that competition can only take place on the global stage, as if we were competing with Chinese ferry operators, for example. Hence, employment contracts are registered offshore. There is no need for that. There was no evidence that the process would lead to competition on quality, such as competition to employ the best-skilled workforce.

In our industry, competition is always a downward spiral, because ship owners look at deep-sea container companies, for example, and say, "We're in the same position." If it was possible for competition to take place within regional rules and regulations that protect the skills base, that might be a different matter. Having said that, my union firmly believes that the CalMac service is a lifeline service. There are other places in Europe where such services do not go out to tender. We believe that the same should apply here.

Cathy Peattie: I have a question on road equivalent tariff, on which I understand Stephen Boyd has said that the STUC will provide a written submission. Were the unions involved in the development of the RET pilot? What impact might the pilot have on the provision of ferry services?

Stephen Boyd: In principle, we are not against developments that reduce fares for ferry users. We see that as being generally a good thing. Sorry, but is the question whether we were consulted on the pilot?

Cathy Peattie: Yes. Were any of the unions around the table consulted on the RET pilot?

Stephen Boyd: I am not aware of any consultation. I know that there are fears over capacity issues, on which John Docherty might want to elaborate.

John Docherty: Any move to lower the cost of ferry services for everyone is most welcome, but we face overcapacity issues even now. We cannot cope with the tourist trade on some routes in the summer. Although the road equivalent tariff is welcome, things will only get worse unless we start thinking about increasing capacity.

We also suggest that the company should keep some sort of register of the numbers of folk that are turned away. At the moment, when people phone up to make a booking, they are simply told, "I am sorry but the boat is full". How often does that happen? The company should keep records so that we could say that on the affected routes we need one ship of a certain size, or even two ships. That does not seem to happen at the moment.

Cathy Peattie: Convener, I think that it is important that we ask the Scottish Government to ensure that the trade unions are involved in the RET consultation. As John Docherty said, the proposal has implications for the service's stakeholders.

In earlier evidence, we heard about disability awareness among staff. Has there been an opportunity for staff to participate in disability awareness training? If so, is that working? If it is not working, what are the issues?

John Docherty: The company training in which I have been involved has been basically on customer care. A very small section of that was on the mobility impaired. Certainly, the newer vessels include vastly improved facilities and have better infrastructure for getting on board from piers. However, I take on board the point that Mr McLeod made earlier that the smaller and older ferries and slipways are just not geared for that type of operation.

Cathy Peattie: Would it be helpful if staff had an opportunity to consider what else they could do to ensure that they have enough time to be able to help support people with disabilities?

John Docherty: Yes. Certainly, the issue could be included within the training infrastructure.

David Stewart: What is preventing greater innovation in ferry services in Scotland, such as the development of faster ferries and more routes? There is a clear demand for such development. If the trade union movement was starting with a blank canvas, what elements would it include in the mix?

Stephen Boyd: The tender specification does not allow sufficient scope for innovation. In designing that type of contract, it is very difficult to safeguard lifeline ferry services while providing scope for innovation. Those two things can be difficult to reconcile. Such difficulties are well-

known. Sorry, is the question about specific improvements?

David Stewart: Yes. We would welcome any suggestions from the trade union movement on specific improvements that could be made.

Paul Moloney: I am not sure that I can suggest a specific improvement, but I can give a view on why people are reluctant to innovate and to invest in new routes. The Scottish ferry operators operate within the context of the United Kingdom, where they see other developments in the ferry sector. I firmly believe that operators are worried about the competition that exists. To be a quality operator in the ferry sector, operators need a long-term business plan and to be prepared to make investments on which they will not make a return for a significant number of years.

15:00

Irish Ferries, which operates between Ireland, the UK and France, was suddenly able to reduce its cost base by sacking UK seafarers—including some Scots—and replacing them with seafarers who were not trained to the same standards as we are used to. Operators are concerned that such competition is creeping into the ferry sector and is a disincentive to innovation, development and growth. Any operator that is prepared to invest in training, skills and other developments can look over its shoulder and see that others can enter the market for a short time from a much lower cost base, take some of that operator's profits and then disappear. That is a huge disincentive to development and growth.

Such issues are being examined in Europe and it would be useful for us all to consider them. If there is to be competition—it is not inappropriate on some routes—it must be on quality and innovation rather than purely on cost.

David Stewart: I was going to ask for your view on the tendering situation, but you have partly covered that in answering questions from my colleague Cathy Peattie. One great worry in the industry is cherry picking, which means creaming off profits from more lucrative routes, whereas the bulk of routes—as you probably know better than me—are social routes that can operate only with subsidy. As you will know, academics have suggested potential solutions, such as exclusivity clauses, light public service obligations or setting fares at a fairly specified low level, so that competition would not be possible. What are your views on that? I am quite keen on using PSOs in the aviation industry but, by and large, they have not been used in the Scottish ferry system.

Stephen Boyd: First and foremost, we supported tendering the Clyde and Hebrides services as a bundle. I am aware of no academic

proposals to tender those services in another way. Three main pieces of academic literature pertained to the earlier consultation exercise on the tender specification. The first was from Professor Neil Kay, who talked about the services being delivered as any other essential public service is and being regulated by an independent regulator. Dr Paul Bennett from the University of Edinburgh questioned the whole basis for tendering the services and was keen to maintain the bundle's integrity. Jeanette Findlay's research, which the STUC commissioned, was on the costs of tendering and showed that tendering would deliver no benefit to the public purse.

If new academic proposals have been made, it is incumbent on us to study them closely and to give a mature view on them. However, I have never seen a proposal to separate the bundled services or to allow competition on some routes but not on others in such a way that the integrity of all the services would be maintained. If there are new proposals, we are keen to see them.

David Stewart: Do the trade unions have a view on the use of public service obligations for ferry services? We are where we are with the tender, which has about six years to run.

Stephen Boyd: If a PSO maintained the current services, allowed scope for innovation that might improve those services and safeguarded our members' terms and conditions, we would be keen to study any proposals. We are aware that PSOs have been beneficial in your region and have been important in delivering services from Inverness airport. We are open to their use.

Our big issue is the tendering of the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services. As things stand, the tender will be implemented in five years' time on a similar basis to that which was used in 2007.

We regard the six-yearly process as hugely detrimental to the industry because it introduces an element of insecurity that works against long-term planning and training. We would be keen to study any proposals that might improve the situation for our members.

Paul Moloney: An opportunity was missed when the tendering took place: it would have saved everybody a lot of money if bids had been required to be based on contracts of employment registered in the UK. The fact that the contracts were eventually registered offshore was detrimental to our members, although the vast majority of our members have been used to offshore contracts. However, we have to take into account the lost national insurance contributions to central Government in the UK. Once offshore contracts were allowed, a good deal for the public purse was not possible. UK-registered contracts could easily have been insisted on, as could the

application of the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations—an offshore contract cannot comply with TUPE. If people can compete and bid on the same basis, that is fine. However, the process showed that that was not possible.

David Stewart: That is a useful point, and the committee might pick up on it in future.

Shirley-Anne Somerville and I were in Dunoon last week. As we know, feelings run high in the area about the future of ferry services. I do not want to enter the debate one way or t'other, but I would like to hear the witnesses' views. There is a feeling that we may well lose the CalMac car service and be left with only a passenger service. Obviously, I cannot become the Brahan seer and suggest how the situation should be resolved. However, the local community feels strongly that both types of service are essential. As trade unionists, how do you feel about the developments on this route?

Stephen Boyd: Most of our activity has focused on the main Clyde and Hebrides bundle; we have never focused on the Gourock to Dunoon route as we perhaps should have. I will say only this: if the car service is to be removed from the CalMac Gourock to Dunoon service, it will leave Western Ferries with a private sector monopoly. I struggle to understand how that will be in the long-term interests of the community.

Rob Gibson: The STUC's written evidence shows that the relatively short life of ferry service contracts could impact on long-term capital investment in vessels, ports and harbours, and we have touched on those issues. Do you have evidence to support your claim? How could the problems be overcome?

Stephen Boyd: We have no evidence yet of impact, but we are obviously in the very early stages of the process. We will not be able to provide evidence until we are into the later stages of this particular contract or perhaps into the next one.

A number of principal-agent and moral hazard problems are integral to the whole process. Six-year tendering does not provide sufficient incentive for operators to maintain vessels as it would have been incumbent on CalMac to do. We are not sure where long-term responsibility lies for investment in capacity—in the vessels and in the infrastructure that supports the vessels.

Rob Gibson: We will have to follow those points up with some of the owners.

Paul Moloney: It is not the easiest thing in the world to produce detailed evidence in a first submission. However, we can look at the successful ferry operators in the UK and in Europe

in general. The successful ones are those with long-term investment strategies and long-term plans for the replacement of their vessels. They have business plans that are not for five or six years but for 20 years. We should consider that evidence. It is difficult for an operator to plan an effective ferry service when it could lose the contract after six years. I suggest that what makes a successful ferry company is a long-term vision rather than a short-term chase for profit.

Rob Gibson: The STUC's written evidence states that the tendering of the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services has hindered integration between ferries and other modes of transport. Do you have evidence to support that statement? What could be done to improve the situation? I am talking about integrating ferries with trains and buses or whatever.

Stephen Boyd: As part of the tender process, we met CalMac to discuss the implications of its bid for our members. We would have undertaken a similar process with other bidders if any had emerged. During that meeting, concern was expressed on both sides about the effect of the penalties regime on integration. The issue is how the contract should be designed. To safeguard services, we must specify the penalties that will be incurred when those services are not delivered. Unfortunately, the consequence of that can be that the penalties regime is so restrictive that it works against integration with other services. John Docherty may have experience of that.

John Docherty: A few concessions have been made on issues on which the company had concerns. Rather than go fully for public transport connections, the company raised concerns about essential services—the example that was used was that of a bread van that is coming up to Oban to get a ferry but which is held up because of a road traffic accident. Under the restrictions, a ferry would not be able to wait for essential services. I am led to believe that a concession was given in that regard. On the issue of penalties, we can never account for the weather, particularly on the longer routes from islands such as the Uists or Harris. The trains have penalties, too, so they cannot wait long either. The situation definitely restricts flexibility. However, I can understand why trains cannot wait too long.

Rob Gibson: There are two types of penalties, because there are two contracts—one for ScotRail and one for CalMac. Is there any way of trying to get the two systems to work together? There is evidence that ferries can wait a little, whereas trains can wait for only a limited time before the paths are taken up on the routes that they follow.

Stephen Boyd: I am tempted to say that the delivery of the ScotRail franchise back into the public sector would provide a unified and publicly

owned transport network in Scotland, which would be bound to assist. As things stand, it is difficult to reconcile the issues, when we have different operators working to different contracts, with different regulators.

Rob Gibson: I wonder how easy it would be to get investment to ensure that we have capacity in the railway. That shows the difficulty of what we are talking about—thank you for the answer.

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): I want to pursue that. When Rob Gibson and I were in Brodick yesterday, issues were raised about the train connecting with the ferry and vice versa. As representatives of workers in the transport industry and, in some cases, as workers in that industry, are you saying that the contractual obligations in the ScotRail franchise or the CalMac contract have taken away the commonsense operational integration whereby somebody on the ground takes responsibility for holding back a ferry if a train is going to be 10 minutes late? It is common sense to do that so that a trainload of passengers does not miss the ferry, or vice versa. Is that now a thing of the past because a fear of sanction has arisen, so that somebody higher up the food chain will say that the person took an operational decision that wrong-footed the company in relation to its contractual obligations?

John Docherty: Absolutely.

Charlie Gordon: So what used to happen is a thing of the past.

15:15

John Docherty: Yes. There are a few exceptions such as blue-light incidents. We will have more of an idea in the summer when things start getting busier; after all, we are still in the early part of the year. However, we on the ground fear that management will start asking the ship's operators why they are running late.

Charlie Gordon: I realise that it is a novel pressure for those on the ferries, but those in the railway industry have lived with it for a bit longer.

John Docherty: I would say so.

Phil McGarry (National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers): Delays will be addressed only through cohesive planning by operators to ensure flexibility in train and ferry connections. The fact that every delay costs money will ensure that operators get things, particularly the trains, moving.

I simply do not think that there is any co-ordination. As Charlie Gordon has said, we can discuss the principle of providing a public service to the public, irrespective of the mode of travel that people choose. However, the fact is that, because

train operating companies are duty-bound by their contractual obligations to run trains on time, the principle has disappeared. If the trains do not run on time, someone has to pay. If a delay is caused by crewing problems, the train operating company has to pay; if it is caused by a fault in the infrastructure, Network Rail has to pay. Because each train delay costs, at a rough guesstimate, about £40 a minute, the trains leave at the time scheduled on the timetable, and there is none of the co-ordination that you would expect from a public service.

Charlie Gordon: It might be argued that ultimately the taxpayer pays those fines. The irony is that, although the travelling taxpayer is asking for this discretion, they are not being given it.

The Convener: Forgive me for pursuing this point, but does the same phenomenon arise with bus services? Is there any flexibility there?

Phil McGarry: I cannot comment on bus services in Scotland.

Stephen Boyd: We do not have any bus workers' representatives with us today but, from my very limited understanding, I think that the big difference is that the bus industry is not regulated in the same way that the rail industry is. I struggle to see how the same penalties could apply under that structure.

John Docherty: Interestingly, the timetables for the bus and train services that meet the major ferry services into Oban from Mull, the Uists and so on are near enough identical. Perhaps I am being too logical but, if the train is scheduled to leave at 12 o'clock, why schedule the bus to leave at 5 past 12? Surely if the schedule for such a long route is so tight, it would be better for the buses and trains to stagger their departures to give passengers some flexibility. Of course, it does not help if a passenger still has to wait, but it seems pointless to have buses and trains screaming down to and back up from Glasgow at much the same time if it means that the passengers who missed the midday connection have to wait until 6 in the evening for the next bus or train.

David Stewart: Would it be useful for Transport Scotland to have responsibility for ferries as well as for road and rail and to have a stronger integration function? As far as I understand it, it has no responsibility for ferry services at the moment. It also seems more sensible to have a single integration body.

Stephen Boyd: The answer is yes. I found it strange that, when Transport Scotland assumed responsibility for various areas, responsibility for ferries remained with the Government. The rationale behind such a move was never articulated and, even to this day, I cannot understand it.

Phil McGarry: I do not want to give anyone a history lesson, but politicians are certainly well aware of the policy objectives behind having a fully integrated transport system. If the answer lies with Transport Scotland, the transport partners need to get together, plan effectively and co-ordinate timetables to ensure that this public service is delivered by the public and for the public.

David Stewart: Last week at CalMac headquarters, I was interested to discover that there are different winters and summers for ferry, bus and rail services. Do we need a man for all seasons for transport?

The Convener: If the timing of winter becomes subject to Scottish Parliament intervention, we might well see some petitions on that matter.

Finally, do our witnesses wish to highlight any issues that we might not have covered?

Stephen Boyd: During trade union week in January, we held an event at which we discussed with the committee clerks and a number of members—whom we thank for attending—the possibility of holding a consultation event or two on various areas of service delivery that would focus on workers rather than on the public or on user groups. Is there still scope for such an event? We are certainly keen to do anything that we can to help you to pull that together.

The Convener: I must ask you to let us consider that a little more. We will get back to you in writing in the near future.

Stephen Boyd: I have one final comment. We believe that tendering these services will have a huge impact on other issues that the committee is considering such as timetabling, new routes and innovation. We encourage the committee in its report to ask the Scottish Government to revisit the tendering issue. Indeed, we would certainly be keen to assist the Government in building a case to take back to Europe.

Phil McGarry: In response to a point made by Mr Stewart, I should mention that we have not yet engaged with our people on the effect of the withdrawal of car services on the Dunoon to Gourock ferry. We will do so, and our union will submit its views either collectively or separately before 31 March.

David Stewart: I should say that no decision has been made on the issue. I was simply expressing my personal worries.

Phil McGarry: But it is better to be proactive than reactive.

David Stewart: Indeed.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for their evidence. There will be a five-minute break before the next panel.

15:21

Meeting suspended.

15:27

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our final panel of witnesses: Marjory Rodger, who is from the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK; and Peter Williams, who is from First ScotRail. I invite the witnesses to make brief introductory remarks.

Marjory Rodger (Confederation of Passenger Transport UK): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to come to the meeting. I will be unusually quiet this afternoon, because I do not have a lot to say on the subject. As the trade association, the CPT cannot get involved in commercial businesses, so the decisions that individual operators take are not in the CPT's remit. However, I canvassed members for their views, which are represented in our submission to the committee. All members support integration of services and good, effective transport information across modes. First ScotRail and all the bus operators pay for Traveline Scotland, which provides information on ferries and internal air routes—a new development has made it possible to receive journey planner information, including ferry times, on a BlackBerry. We are involved in proactive initiatives for residents and tourists, which are important, and we would encourage any action that would speed up such work.

The Convener: I am sure that members will get out their BlackBerrys to plan their forthcoming visit to Shetland.

Peter Williams (First ScotRail): Thank you for inviting me to contribute to the committee's inquiry. I am commercial director for First ScotRail and my responsibilities include train planning, marketing and customer service.

As we are a transport operator in a regulated industry, our responsibility is to meet the requirements of our franchise agreement. In that respect, we must comply with various service level commitments, including commitments that relate to transport integration—that includes ferries, of course. We do that by liaising regularly with other transport operators, regional transport partnerships, local authorities, Transport Scotland and many other partners. We keep in touch with our passengers' needs through regular meet-the-manager sessions and customer forums. The customer forums are chaired by Passenger Focus, the national rail passenger watchdog. To help us to achieve our overall objectives, we employ staff who have specific responsibility for integration and external relations. Over the past year, we have spent more than £50,000 promoting integrated transport schemes.

It is worth noting that we work in an interdependent industry, in which close working relationships with Network Rail and other transport operators are an essential ingredient of success. A recent example of our success is the retiming of some of our Wemyss Bay departures to allow people to make Rothesay ferry connections. CalMac reciprocated by reinstating a Friday night sailing to Craignure, thereby forming a connection with our evening train out of Glasgow. We also recently introduced through-ticketing to Orkney and Shetland. That shows that there is strong co-operation throughout the industry to achieve integration of transport with ferries.

15:30

The Convener: Thanks very much. Will you give a bit of background on the process of developing bus and rail timetables? How is that work done? What do operators do to ensure that they take account of integration with other modes of transport?

Marjory Rodger: Setting up a bus service is relatively easy. An operator can register their timetable with the traffic commissioner for Scotland. The operator must give 14 days' notice to allow for consultation with the local authority. Once the timetable has reached the traffic commissioner, it takes 56 days before it is accepted. That makes a total of 72 days. Once an operator has started a new service, it cannot cancel it and must run it for 90 days before it can vary it. I give all that timescale information to illustrate the fact that we cannot simply change services overnight to provide better integration.

Next you will ask me how much pre-consultation takes place before registration. Because of Competition Commission and Office of Fair Trading restrictions, operators cannot talk to each other directly, although they can hold discussions through the local authority, as long as the proposal in question is seen to be in the public interest, which it will be. Quite a difficult mechanism is involved.

I was amused to hear a member of the previous panel say that buses are not regulated. Yes, they are. We cannot just say, "Oh yeah, that makes good sense—we will make the change next week." The timescales are quite lengthy. I have often heard people say that the last bus left two minutes before the last train arrived. It has proved difficult to dovetail timetables, but the ScotRail franchise includes a commitment on that, which we are all working towards meeting.

As far as the bus industry is concerned, we are working with Transport Scotland to provide a smart card system on buses. As soon as that is available, the next thing will be all-modes through-

ticketing. That is definitely in the pipeline and would have been in place by now, had it not been for the difficulties with the smart card programme. We wanted to have it up and running for the year of homecoming, but it has taken a lot longer. Through-ticketing will certainly be here in time for the Commonwealth games and hopefully long before then.

Peter Williams: Our starting point is our franchise agreement and the service level commitments that we must work to, which are the foundation stone for all the services that we provide. As I said, the franchise agreement includes various commitments on the integration of services with ferry transport. By and large, the requirement on us is to make all reasonable endeavours to ensure integration with ferry services. That evolves in a number of ways. We liaise regularly with the regional transport partnerships. I meet them twice a year to talk through our planned timetable changes, which allows them to bring up any issues or opportunities that they would like us to take on board. Likewise, we liaise regularly with local authorities and Transport Scotland. Every four weeks, we meet Transport Scotland at a transport integration group that it chairs. The subject matter of those meetings is integration, including ferry integration.

If we want to make changes to our services, we must integrate them through the national rail timetable processes, which in turn integrate with the European timetable processes. In the rail industry, there are many constraints and processes that we must work within. As I said, it is very much an interdependent industry.

During the course of the year, there are basically two windows of opportunity for making changes to our services. The first is when the winter timetable, which is also known as the primary timetable, comes out in the run-up to Christmas and the second is when the subsidiary timetable comes out, which is generally in May or June. Before we make changes to our timetables, we liaise with the ferry operators to find out what changes they might be making to their timetables and vice versa, so that we can ensure that integration is maintained, as far as is possible within the constraints of our interdependent operating practices.

The Convener: As we discussed with the previous panel, timetables and reality have a nasty habit of not always marrying up. What are your reflections on the reality of holding services beyond their timetabled departure times if a ferry is a few minutes late? Can trains be held? In your experience, how big a problem is that? What can be done to alleviate it?

Peter Williams: In practice, we have not found that that is a big on-going problem. The regional

transport partnerships and Transport Scotland are not tasking us on the matter. If it were a big on-going problem, we would do something about it. In stark contrast to what has been said previously, the main issues relating to holding trains are operational—they are nothing other than that. I can certainly give examples of when we hold trains to ensure that they connect with ferries, and vice versa. I have demonstrated that we also work on a longer-term basis to iron out failings in connections where that is needed.

The Convener: So would you argue that First ScotRail already has enough day-to-day flexibility to hold a train for a few minutes if a ferry is coming in a bit late?

Peter Williams: We hold trains where we can. There are problems from time to time, but not on-going problems. Relationships exist between the ferry operators and our control department, which is responsible for the day-to-day management of our services and short-term alterations to them. Sometimes there are difficulties and trains cannot be held—for example, we are occasionally asked to hold trains that are going out of Stranraer, but connections will be missed in Glasgow if those trains run late. Those trains then go on to strengthen other services in the peak period. It is obvious that if we want to operate an efficient system, we do not want to have rolling stock that could be used sitting around all day long at a buffer. During the peak period, we use rolling stock to strengthen services. Likewise, if a particular path that we have scheduled for a train is missed, it can end up behind a slower-running coal train, which will have a big knock-on impact on a range of services and will affect a range of customers. The interdependency of the rail system must be borne in mind. However, we do what we can on a pragmatic basis.

The Convener: Can you give us in writing any statistical information on instances when day-to-day—even minute-to-minute—decisions have been made to change the departure times of trains to take account of such things or instances when it has not been possible to do that?

Peter Williams: Yes. I can go away and get together information on that.

The Convener: That would be helpful.

Charlie Gordon: I want to press Mr Williams briefly on operational arrangements. You have said that there is not an on-going problem with holding trains, but yesterday, inhabitants of Arran told Rob Gibson and me that holding trains at Ardrossan is a frequent problem. Let us take that as an example. Are you telling us that the operational arrangements are such that a ScotRail member of staff in Ardrossan would phone ScotRail's control department and seek authority

to hold a train because they had been told that the ferry was going to be late?

Peter Williams: That is right.

Charlie Gordon: Thank you.

Alison McInnes: Good afternoon. Can you explain why major public transport operators such as FirstGroup and Stagecoach have shown no interest in bidding to run Scottish ferry services when those services have been put out to tender?

Marjory Rodger: I am afraid that I would have to ask FirstGroup and Stagecoach about that. That had not occurred to me. The word “monopolies” comes to mind, but I would have to ask them. I am sorry.

Peter Williams: I work for First ScotRail and I cannot speak on behalf of FirstGroup about that.

The Convener: Perhaps we could pursue the question in writing.

Alison McInnes: We might take up the issue somewhere else.

Were bus and rail operators included in discussions on road equivalent tariffs? Are bus operators and First ScotRail geared up to cope with any increases in ferry passengers that might arise from such tariffs?

Marjory Rodger: We were not involved in the consultation on RETs, and we have concerns about them. There is the precedent of the national concession scheme. We were told that the maximum take-up of that scheme would be 880,000—I am referring to MORI research for the Scottish Executive—but the take-up was 1.1 million. We are worried about RETs, and we have not been consulted on them.

Peter Williams: I am not aware that we have been consulted on RETs. Capacity in the rail industry cannot be switched on overnight. If an issue arose, it would take a while before it could be fixed.

David Stewart: I have a brief supplementary question to Marjory Rodger. In your submission, you mentioned that there were some customer relations issues on the Gourock to Dunoon ferry. Can you enlighten the committee on that, or would it be better to explain it in writing?

Marjory Rodger: We will explain that in writing—the issue came from a couple of small operators.

Rob Gibson: Will you clarify whether you would actually welcome more passengers? [*Laughter.*]

Marjory Rodger: Yes, of course. We are in for growing the market in all ways, but equally we want to be geared up so that we can provide for those passengers.

Peter Williams: We have grown passenger numbers by 19 per cent since we took over the franchise—that is your answer.

Rob Gibson: But RETs will affect only those routes that relate to ferries. Would you be geared up there?

Peter Williams: Sorry, could you repeat the question?

Rob Gibson: Would you be geared up to deal with increased numbers on the ferries, which would mean more people on the rail routes that link to the ferry terminals?

Peter Williams: As I said earlier, we cannot switch on capacity overnight. That would always be an issue. We have a fleet of rolling stock, which we deploy as efficiently as we can. If dramatic changes happen, we cannot accommodate them immediately.

Rob Gibson: It would be interesting to know your average capacity on routes that meet ferry terminals at Gourock and Ardrossan, for example. Can you find that out for us?

Peter Williams: Yes, I certainly can.

Alison McInnes: The CPT has mentioned a working group involving Citylink, CalMac and ScotRail, which is lobbying for improved facilities at Oban. Can you give us more information about that?

Marjory Rodger: That is the concern for passenger growth—ensuring effective interchange and making it simple for the passenger. There is also the concern that we are bringing in more low-floor buses yet some of the temporary ramps do not allow us to use them. That affects the local West Coast Motors buses more than the Citylink coaches, which are higher. There are operational issues, and it is a question of pointing them out. None is major, but all need to be taken into account and addressed.

Peter Williams: We are involved in the development group at Oban. Analysis is under way to see how we can improve the integration of the transport modes and the physical interchange as well. We are involved in that.

Alison McInnes: Is there a timescale for that?

Peter Williams: It is being run by the council. Off the top of my head, I am not aware of the precise timescale.

Cathy Peattie: You have probably partly answered this question, but will you say what First ScotRail has done to improve connectivity between trains and ferries, for instance by providing through-ticketing and information?

Peter Williams: We have continued to expand through-ticketing on an on-going basis—

The Convener: Mr Williams, I am sorry to interrupt. We will suspend the meeting for a moment; I think that we have a technical problem.

15:43

Meeting suspended.

15:53

On resuming—

The Convener: I thank everyone for their patience. We are now in committee room 4 and Cathy Peattie will resume her line of questioning.

Cathy Peattie: What has First ScotRail done to improve the connectivity between trains and ferries, for example by providing through-tickets and information?

Peter Williams: We have continued to increase the number of through-tickets that we provide. As I mentioned in my introduction, we recently worked with Rapsons, the coach operator, and NorthLink Ferries on the Scrabster to Stromness service. That is an example of how we are working with other operators. Sometimes it is rail and ferry, and sometimes it is rail, bus and ferry.

Cathy Peattie: What are the barriers to further integration between rail and ferries in Scotland? I am thinking of the terms of the First ScotRail contract or the single-track Highland rail infrastructure, for example. How might such barriers be overcome?

Peter Williams: We work closely with the regional transport partnerships and, at this point in time, we have no burning issues with our current level of service that we have not managed to address. We ensure that we comply with our service-level commitment to spread out services during the day. For example, if we have to integrate with ferry services, there will be a morning service, a midday service and an evening service.

Additional requirements would be identified by the regional transport partnerships, in conjunction with local authorities and Transport Scotland. We would work with those bodies to consider solutions, which might involve additional rolling stock or crews or, in some instances, infrastructure.

Alison McInnes: You gave interesting examples of good practice. How do you prioritise improvements? Is that through discussions with the RTPs or with the public?

Peter Williams: Demands tend to come from RTPs but are sometimes made by Transport

Scotland, through the transport integration group. Our presumption is that we will introduce through-ticketing, which provides a benefit and is convenient for our passengers. We are a commercial business, so we have a vested interest in growing passenger volumes.

We are mindful that there must be sufficient demand for through-ticketing, because everything that we do has a cost, although it is not necessarily financial; it might be the time that it takes a person to do the work when they could be doing other work on integration—as I said, we have integration specialists. However, our presumption is to introduce through-ticketing, because there is a clear benefit of doing so in the vast majority of instances.

Charlie Gordon: My question is for the witness from CPT. What factors prevent people from using buses to access ferry services and how might the use of buses to access ferries be increased?

Marjory Rodger: We must make it simple for passengers. We must provide viable choices and give people information in advance—that is important in the context of tourism in the islands. The linking up of the VisitScotland and Traveline Scotland websites is one measure in that regard, and there can be physical measures on the ground.

I have had no feedback on the matter. Passenger numbers on long-distance coach journeys with Scottish Citylink Coaches and Megabus, for example, are growing. That is only partly due to concessionary travel; there is more and more evidence of growth in the number of fare payers. People are not reporting difficulties.

Charlie Gordon: What progress is being made towards involving ferries in schemes that promote integrated ticketing? You said that we should wait for smart cards, but you went on to say that we might have to wait a while for smart cards.

Marjory Rodger: The first smart card pilot went live in Shetland in November and covered bus and ferry travel. Shetland was chosen because the network is subsidised, so there are no commercially sensitive data. People were trying to get an experimental initiative off the ground, so it was felt to be easier not to include commercially sensitive data. Shetland was like a closed network. The system worked and it has been working ever since.

The roll-out of smart cards has started. Stagecoach in Fife has introduced cards and Stagecoach Bluebird is going ahead with them, partly because the supplier that Stagecoach chose was the first to reach the interoperable standard. Many small operators have been equipped, so the programme is going ahead. However, we are a

year and a half behind. I should not have said 2014—

Charlie Gordon: The timescale has slipped since we moved to another committee room.

Marjory Rodger: No, I brought it forward. I meant that I should not have said that it would take until 2014 for smart cards to be brought in.

Charlie Gordon: Oh, I see. That is good. Even when you give me good news I accuse you of giving me bad news. Have commercial sensitivities around data been overcome?

Marjory Rodger: Yes. That was a big exercise for the suppliers, because there is a huge volume of data. Many problems cropped up and extra software and linkage were needed, with the Royal Bank of Scotland and LogicaCMG doing the back-office system—the HOPS, or host operating or processing system. Difficulties to do with hot-listed cards had to be dealt with. The vast amount of data caused difficulties.

Charlie Gordon: Logica is a name that is not unknown to members of the Scottish Parliament.

16:00

The Convener: I have a quick supplementary on that issue. To what extent is it necessary to get all operators on board before integrated ticketing can move forward? Is that a barrier, or will significant operators be able to move forward by reaching individual agreements?

Marjory Rodger: I understand that the national through-ticketing proposal will be out for consultation relatively soon, so I do not see any barrier. We are all into growing markets and achieving modal shift. Through-ticketing is an attractive way of doing that.

Charlie Gordon: You touched on bus interchange infrastructure in Oban just a few minutes ago. Is there a general need to improve such interchanges at ferry ports? If so, what needs to be done and who should do it?

Marjory Rodger: I would rather come back to you in writing on that. I will ask the operators that are closely involved for specific examples.

Charlie Gordon: Do you have any views on any aspect of the existing ferry network and services or any suggestions on how they might be improved?

Marjory Rodger: I have nothing further to add to what we stated in our submission.

Rob Gibson: Perhaps when you come back to us with information on bus interchanges, you can tell us how the interchange at Scrabster is working.

The Convener: Do members have any final questions?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We asked First ScotRail to provide information on whether services can be held back to allow for integration, but we have not given a similar opportunity to Marjory Rodger. Can she provide any information on holding back bus services so that we can see whether there are any comparisons between bus and rail?

Marjory Rodger: Thank you for the opportunity.

It is easier to hold back local bus services, such as those that are operated by West Coast Motors in Oban and district, because the people involved use mobiles and know each other, so they can be more pragmatic. If a service runs more than five minutes late, the operator is in breach and could be pulled up before the traffic commissioner, but proof that the service was waiting for a ferry connection would be an acceptable reason for delay.

It is harder for longer-distance coach services to be held back. Long-distance coaches that have a straight run—as opposed to interchanging with other services at, say, Perth—can, and do, wait for ferry services. Again, the people involved use radios and mobiles.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Could we be provided with any statistics on that, or is the information more anecdotal?

Marjory Rodger: It is more anecdotal, but I can certainly ask the operators involved.

The Convener: Members have no further questions. Before we close, do either of our witnesses want to raise any issues that we have not touched on?

Peter Williams: We talked about smart ticketing for bus services. I should mention that there is no mandate for that for rail services in Scotland. Smart ticketing is being introduced throughout the UK by the DfT, which is making it a requirement of any new franchises that are let. Our franchise predates that policy, but we regard smart ticketing as the future of ticketing within the transport industry. The technology is quite revolutionary and will open up all sorts of possibilities. Therefore, it is worth making the point that we are actively investigating a smart card pilot on the Edinburgh to Glasgow flow so that we can explore how we can best use the technology to improve integration with bus and other forms of transport.

Marjory Rodger: The plusbus schemes are proof that we are all agreed on the principle. They are available at every rail station and allow passengers to buy a bus ticket add-on. We are all agreed on the principle; we just need to get the right platform to do it on.

The Convener: I thank both our witnesses for their time and for answering our questions. I will suspend the meeting briefly to allow the witnesses to leave. I thank them again for their forbearance with our technical problems.

16:04

Meeting suspended.

16:05

On resuming—

Subordinate Legislation

Road Works (Inspection Fees) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2008 (SSI 2008/43)

Water and Sewerage Services Undertaking (Lending by the Scottish Ministers) Order 2008 (SSI 2008/44)

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is subordinate legislation. I refer members to papers TIC/S3/08/6/3 and TIC/S3/08/6/4, which deal with the two Scottish statutory instruments that we are to consider.

The Subordinate Legislation Committee had no comments to make on SSI 2008/43. That committee sought clarification from the Government on SSI 2008/44 and it was content with the response. No comments have been received from members on the instruments and no motions to annul have been lodged.

Do members have any comments? Are we agreed that we do not wish to make any recommendation on the instruments?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Petition

Railway Infrastructure and Services (Inverness, Thurso and Wick) (PE894)

16:06

The Convener: Item 3 concerns PE894, on the provision of rail services between Inverness, Thurso and Wick. We have received a response from ministers, which has been provided to members. I invite comments.

David Stewart: I draw the committee's attention to the fact that I have written to Transport Scotland on behalf of some constituents in the area and have asked to be kept up to date with any developments.

The Convener: Thanks for mentioning that to members.

Rob Gibson: I am pretty sure that I have also written to various people on behalf of constituents in the Highlands and Islands. I am concerned that the minister's argument relies on the "Room for Growth" study, which was published by Highlands and Islands Enterprise. There is now sufficient evidence of disquiet about the curious procedures used by the Halcrow consultants in their production of the poor benefit to cost ratio. I do not know whether there is a predetermined agenda, but when you look at how the documents were drawn up, it shows that the cost benefit ratio of only one option out of the three that could have been considered was looked at.

The first option was to retain the Lairg loop intact and cut across at Dornoch. The second option was to retain only the Tain to Lairg section of the Lairg loop and cut across at Dornoch. The third option was to have none of the Lairg loop served by train and cut across at Dornoch. The cost benefit ratio was calculated only on option 1. It is clear that if one tries to make a shorter route to the north, far fewer people on the loop section will be able to use the train. The question is, why was only one option considered? It has been commented on before, but the Highlands and Islands transport partnership has somehow accepted that strange approach.

It is a fact that the Halcrow study took no account of the fuller social and socioeconomic benefits from changes to rail services of this kind, such as reducing peripherality to the north mainland and Orkney, or making a positive contribution to the Highland Caithness economy as Dounreay is run down. Only in the past couple of years have such potential benefits come into focus.

Because the minister's remarks were based on the "Room for Growth" study, they do not give an up-to-date picture of what people are thinking. I suggest that there is good reason to think that if a proper cost benefit analysis were made, the cost benefit ratio could be increased to 1 or above. The Borders railway ratio is 1.21; the Lairg loop ratio is noted as being 0.2. It is important that we seek information about achieving that. It is obvious that the reason why the Caithness community and others put money into the MVA Consultancy study was to try to do some of that work. That study has not been taken on board by the minister, HITRANS or HIE because of their previous stance and the evidence already gathered.

It is interesting to compare the Lairg loop with other routes, to which notional figures were attached when they reopened. For example, trains on the Edinburgh to Bathgate line, which was reopened in 1986, carry four times as many passengers as the estimate. With work to reopen the Bathgate to Airdrie missing link continuing, there will be yet more passengers. Although previous estimates suggested that use of an adjacent rail line would be negligible, Prestwick international airport rail station now carries more than 30 per cent of all surface arrivals and departures to and from the airport, and there are other examples like that.

We are talking about a benefit to cost ratio for an option that does not meet the requirements of the line today. I suggest that we cannot really accept what the minister says in his letter as being the final word. We should make further representation to him based on the arguments that I have been trying to draw out about different options reaching potentially different outcomes, and on the evidence from the reopening of other rail lines, the use of which has been far greater than was estimated at the time of their production.

The Convener: I have two concerns. First, if we make further representation to the minister, we will get the same response. It seems to me that the Government has made a decision and the way in which we question that decision must get to the core of how cost benefit ratios are calculated in general. My second concern is about whether this is a general or a specific question. As an individual member and a party representative, I have views on different projects around the country—that will not be news to members—and on whether the cost benefit ratios include factors such as social harm, as well as social benefits, and the financial and economic costs of climate change in the long term.

At some point in our future work programme, we should consider the general issue of cost benefit ratios and how such calculations are made. There would be space within that to consider some

specific examples, but I would be a bit concerned about considering this specific example in isolation rather than in the wider context of how the costs and benefits of transport projects are calculated throughout the country.

Are there any other views?

David Stewart: I am happy to support Rob Gibson's suggestion that we ask the minister to re-examine the issue in the light of the points that he made.

Cathy Peattie: I agree. We need to ask the minister to look at the issue again. Rob Gibson has raised some very interesting issues and we should have them addressed.

Charlie Gordon: I do not want to divide the committee between what Rob Gibson and the convener have just said, although what the convener has just said might be of more general use to the committee in its future work.

Rob Gibson mentioned the original cost benefit ratio for the Borders rail link, but Transport Scotland looked at the project again because it is taking over as the promoter of the link. It found some errors in the original calculation and the cost has been revised upwards. That raised some interesting issues about methodology and the consistency of benefit to cost ratios. I wonder what the outcome would be if Transport Scotland were to re-examine all the options that Rob Gibson mentioned.

Although I am sympathetic to Rob Gibson's argument, I take the convener's point that we are likely to receive a rebuff from the minister and to be told that he has already answered us and is giving us the same answer. If we make an approach that is linked to the general issue of benefit to cost ratios, we will still have an opportunity for Rob Gibson's points to be pressed home, but within a wider context that might stand us in good stead for the future. Does that make sense?

The Convener: That would give us more opportunity to control the process by which we engage with the Government rather than our sending a letter, getting a response, sending another letter and getting another response. We could undertake some work on how the calculations are made, whether they are robust and whether the committee should just accept them when ministers come and explain their decisions. On occasion, the committee has noted such calculations and has not questioned them and it would seem strange to take a very different attitude to a specific example. We should work out what is going on with the general approach.

16:15

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The two are not mutually exclusive. If specific concerns are being raised about this, we can perhaps raise them with the minister. I understand what you are saying about the possibility of our getting the same response back, but if there are detailed points that we want to raise on the issue, it is important that they are raised. Because it is a public petition, I feel that we should take the matter as far as we can. You raise an interesting point about the process in general, which it might be useful for us to come back to, but I do not see why that would preclude our writing another letter to the minister.

Rob Gibson: In this instance, it would be bad for it to be inferred that the Halcrow study that was completed in 2006 is the last word on the subject. I have raised enough evidence just now to suggest that other options could be considered. I do not think that it is unreasonable to ask the minister to do that. He could tell us that he had considered all the other options, and his opinion would not be based on the Halcrow report, which did not look at them. There is enough doubt in this particular case for us to consider some of the other options and ask the minister whether it would be possible to pursue any of them.

I agree that the way in which the cost benefit ratio is worked out is pretty important. We know that appraisals under the Scottish transport appraisal guidance do not include environmental issues, and we know that the way in which the cost benefit ratio is worked out needs to be altered to meet the requirements of the climate change era. We are dealing with a railway that requires some of that to be taken into account, especially given the distance that is covered.

Finally, the minister's letter says that he is considering

"improving journey times and connections, reducing emissions and improving quality, accessibility and affordability."

It is utterly contradictory for him to say that the Halcrow study and the "Room for Growth" report are the last word, yet he is doing those things—because he ain't.

The Convener: I found it interesting that those issues, which were identified in the transport strategy, have been given strong emphasis in the minister's letter but less emphasis in evidence that has been given to us by the minister on other issues. However, that is perhaps not a matter for here.

There seems to be a clear willingness to keep the petition open. If members have specific points to be included in one further letter to the minister, they should communicate with the clerks in the next few days to ensure that whatever points we

want to put to the minister are captured. The minister should have the opportunity to take account of all the points that we want to raise with him. Whatever reply we get from him, any future consideration of the matter might have to be pursued face to face with the minister, through questions in the chamber or via other routes, depending on what sort of response we get. Is that acceptable?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: I put on record my thanks to all the Parliament staff who dealt with the problems with the previous committee room. It is appreciated that people managed to get the matter sorted out quickly. Our next meeting is on Tuesday 15 April—we will have a bit of a break until after the recess.

Meeting closed at 16:19.

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