TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 16 December 2008

Session 3

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TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE
25th 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)
*Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
*Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP)
Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con)
David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

David Anderson (Transport Scotland)
Claire Keggie (Transport Scotland)
Malcolm Reed (Transport Scotland)
Stewart Stevenson (Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Alastair Macfie

ASSISTANT CLERK

Clare O'Neill

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee

Tuesday 16 December 2008

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 13:30*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Patrick Harvie): Good afternoon, everybody, and welcome to the 25th and final meeting this year of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee. I record apologies from Cathy Peattie, and I ask members and everybody else present to ensure that all mobile devices are switched off.

Agenda item 1 is a proposal to take in private agenda items 4 and 5. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Strategic Transport Projects Review

13:31

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is an evidence session with the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change, Stewart Stevenson, on the strategic transport projects review, which sets out the Scottish Government's strategic investments in the transport network until 2022. I welcome the minister and his officials: Lawrence Shackman, the Forth replacement crossing project manager from Transport Scotland, and David Anderson, head of transport, economics, analysis and research at Transport Scotland.

We have a packed programme today, so we will launch straight into questions, with a relatively easy opener. The STPR identifies a number of specific projects. Have Transport Scotland's consultants prioritised those according to cost and benefit, or are you able to do so now?

Stewart Stevenson (Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change): The interventions are numbered from 1 to 29, but that gives no indication of priorities. As was clearly indicated, we have made the new Forth crossing a priority. In addition, we are prioritising a range of railway interventions that will proceed in parallel. However, in general terms, given that this is a long-term study, each successive comprehensive spending review will inform timing and sequencing. Of course, as is always the case with major civil engineering projects, they will also be influenced by the market's ability to respond to what Government seeks to do.

The Convener: When we debated the STPR in the chamber last week, members commented on the lack of a sense of priorities among the different projects. Does it not strike you that there will be raised eyebrows around the country because people who are interested in specific projects will see them on the list but have no idea whether they will happen?

Stewart Stevenson: Oh, no; they will all happen.

The Convener: People will ask when.

Stewart Stevenson: They will happen within the term of the review. We have said that the review covers up to 20 years out. The 29 interventions, which are the Government's strategic objectives, were drawn from a very wide range of interventions that were potentially available right across Scotland. The 29 interventions therefore represent the Government's priorities.

The Convener: So there is no intention to produce a list of the projects in order of priority so that people can have a sense of which ones will come along in which order.

Stewart Stevenson: The order is not important; what is important is that we proceed with the 29 priority projects that we wish to undertake at a strategic national level. We considered many other projects that are not in the 29 interventions.

The Convener: So the order in which the interventions will happen is not important.

Stewart Stevenson: The order in which they will happen will be influenced by what happens in the future. Comprehensive spending reviews, the ability of civil engineering to respond to our needs and the preparatory work that is required will determine, as we understand more detail of each project, when and how we can proceed with them and implement them.

The Convener: I am a little confused by your comment that the order of the projects is not important. To whom is it not important?

Stewart Stevenson: Each project is important to the communities that benefit from it. Their relative importance in respect of the sequence in which they are done is a matter of another order, which will be influenced by the availability of finance in comprehensive spending reviews, by the available capability in the civil engineering industry to respond and by the speed at which we are able to develop the detail of the projects.

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): Can you produce for us a list, which I think should be available, of the projects ranked by their cost benefit ratio?

Stewart Stevenson: The costs are provided in the STPR, so if you wish the projects to be ranked by cost, that is a straightforward thing to do.

Des McNulty: By cost benefit ratio.

Stewart Stevenson: We could give you a view on that if you wish, but it would in no way inform you of the order in which the projects will be undertaken, because the order will not be determined on that simple basis. However, if you wish us to provide the committee with such information, we can of course do that. I caution the committee that the interventions that we are talking about are not interventions that will necessarily happen at one point. Those interventions contain within them a significant number of projects. The cost benefit analyses are at this stage preliminary, but they have clearly played a part in determining which of the 29 interventions we have included to bring forward. If the committee wishes us to provide it with such information, I am sure that we can do that.

The Convener: I appreciate that. Can I clarify whether you are saying that you will, if the committee wishes, produce the cost benefit ratio or that you will publish it? Has it already been produced?

Stewart Stevenson: You will find that the reports that we have produced contain such things. We can extract that information from the reports and provide it to you. We will not be providing you with new information.

Des McNulty: It would be helpful to have such a list. Can you tell me what the top five projects are in respect of the benefit to cost ratio?

Stewart Stevenson: If you do not mind, the important issue is the projects that require to be done. We will provide the list, as I have said we will.

Des McNulty: That should surely be a fairly straightforward question to answer.

Stewart Stevenson: It is and we shall answer it.

Des McNulty: Can you not answer it now?

Stewart Stevenson: I will not answer it now because I want, as you have requested, to produce the cost benefit analysis for the 29 projects. I come back to the point that we have not determined the order in which we will do the projects on the basis of cost benefit analysis. If you are trying to lead me to make that the basis on which we make our decision—

Des McNulty: I made no inference. I simply asked you to give us a list of the benefit to cost ratio for the 29 projects and, as a supplementary question, I asked you to tell us which five projects come out of that mechanism, which you have in place—the well understood Scottish transport appraisal guidance system—with the best benefit to cost ratio. That should be a fairly straightforward question.

Stewart Stevenson: As I am sure that you are aware, STAG assessments have not been done on all the interventions.

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): You said that one of the influencing factors in determining which project is first would be the preparatory work that you do, as that would help to inform when a project was delivered. How will you prioritise that preparatory work?

Stewart Stevenson: Our immediate priorities, which we have made clear, include the Forth replacement crossing, which will dominate the work on the road network. We are engaged in substantial preparatory work on that project, as evidenced by the fact that Mr Shackman, who is the Transport Scotland project manager for it, is sitting on my left. We have indicated that we set a high priority on the Edinburgh to Glasgow rail

improvement programme—EGIP—on which we are already working. We have already started work on a range of projects.

Alison McInnes: We know that you have prioritised the Forth crossing and the Edinburgh to Glasgow rail link. Beyond that, how will you prioritise the preparatory work that you need to do to determine which of the projects you will take forward?

Stewart Stevenson: We have to engage with the regional transport partnerships and councils to develop the details of our interventions. On the road network, we have already said that our future programme is dominated by the Forth crossing, which will take a large proportion of our work to 2016. In the next few years, we will engage to determine what we have to do on the other projects. Engagement and consultation with the RTPs is an essential prerequisite to answering the question that you asked.

The Convener: I will allow a final brief supplementary from Des McNulty.

Des McNulty: I have a point of clarification and then a supplementary.

Minister, you said that there were projects that had not been STAG appraised. Which are they? I thought that they had all been appraised.

Stewart Stevenson: They have been STAG appraised to different levels of detail. Some of them were appraised only to STAG 1.

Des McNulty: When you give us the list of the benefit cost ratios, it would be useful if you could identify at which STAG level the projects are appraised.

Stewart Stevenson: I will clarify the matter so that we do not have to return to it: the 29 priorities are not projects; they are interventions that have a range of projects within them. Some are sufficiently large that it would be proper to say that they have a series of programmes within them, each of which has projects within it. You must be aware that we can give you an answer—which will simply extract the information that you request from the strategic transport projects review—at whatever level of detail is appropriate. If the level of detail that we provide is different from what you want, we will be happy to provide more if that is appropriate and necessary.

Des McNulty: I appreciate that it is a 20-year list of priorities but, within that list, there must be a five-year programme. Anyone who has had any involvement in major infrastructure or transport projects is engaged in an immediate set of tasks—things that they are building now—and has plans for five years pretty well established and in place. What other work will be done between now and 2014, apart from the Forth road bridge, the Edinburgh to Glasgow rail electrification and the projects that have previously been announced?

Stewart Stevenson: If the member is asking for what work we are already undertaking preparation that will inform what is done in that period, we can provide that as part of the answers to the questions that the committee has given us.

Des McNulty: Those are fairly obvious questions and we expect the answers today.

The Convener: Des, you will have to make that the last question.

Des McNulty: The point is that the minister says that he will write to us. I did not come here for answers on a postcard.

The Convener: I appreciate the difficulty of extracting answers, but there is a limit to the number of times that we can ask the question.

Stewart Stevenson: I will make a brief comment. I have said—and repeat again—that, on the roads network, the substantial project that the Forth crossing represents will clearly engage the majority of our efforts up to 2016. On railways, we have spelled out a considerable number of interventions over the same period. I am perfectly happy to confirm that in our answers and extract the detail from the report that is already in front of the committee to ensure that we short circuit the process and that the committee can see the answers to its questions on that period.

13:45

The Convener: Members have explored the issue to a reasonably full extent, but your initial answer was that there is no order of priorities. However, you have prioritised two projects: the Forth crossing—I am unclear about whether the word “replacement” has been dropped—and the electrification of the Edinburgh to Glasgow railway line. You said explicitly that those projects are higher priorities than the others because you have made timescale and funding commitments on them. Do you intend to make funding or timescale commitments on any of the other projects during the term of this Government?

Stewart Stevenson: Consideration of the next comprehensive spending review will start within the term of this Government, which will provide us with insight into the funding that will be available for the period 2011 to 2014. It is clear that as we bring forward projects that will extend beyond the next election—the Forth replacement crossing is clearly one such example—we are making commitments that will bind future Administrations, whatever their character. The nature of transport is such that that is a pretty normal thing to do. If one is wise, however, one does not commit all the money that is likely to be available until one has a

pretty clear idea of the total sums of money that will be available. In the context of the reduction in our funding of £1 billion over the next few years, such caution is wise.

The Convener: Given that the Government has decided to commit to two projects on the list, it is pretty clear that we do not know whether the other projects on the list will go ahead.

Stewart Stevenson: They will all go ahead.

The Convener: How do you know?

Stewart Stevenson: I say that all the interventions will go ahead but, as I cannot tell you what funding will be available in the comprehensive spending review period 2017 to 2020—for the sake of argument—I cannot tell you the pace at which they will be undertaken and—

The Convener: Surely you also cannot tell me whether any future Government will have a different set of priorities.

Stewart Stevenson: In planning on a long-term basis—I think that this is the first time that planning has been done on quite such a long-term basis—it is proper and reasonable to give a view on what the Government wishes to achieve as regards strategic transport projects. The convener is perfectly correct to say that it is always possible for such commitments to be changed, as happened when Sarah Boyack made her announcement to cancel a number of the previous Government's commitments, not long into that Administration's term.

Today we are dealing with the commitment on which this Government should be judged—our set of 29 interventions, which we believe represent Scotland's future needs. We believe that those interventions should be delivered, and I and the Government will put our force and energy into ensuring that that happens.

The Convener: So it is always possible for the list of projects to be changed. The present list represents the projects that the current Government wishes to see happen.

Stewart Stevenson: Correct.

The Convener: The term "wish list" might be understood.

Stewart Stevenson: I absolutely do not accept that it is anything other than our firm intention, commitment and belief that the 29 proposed projects, which have been arrived at analytically through a process of the most intensive research on the operation of our present transport infrastructure network to identify future needs, represent the investments that need to be made to ensure the future economic health of Scotland and the effective operation of our infrastructure.

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP): I want to ask about the cost of the STPR exercise, which has resulted in the publication of a hefty set of documents. Do you think that the exercise represents value for money, given the amount of time that has been spent on it, the amount of paper that has been used up and the fact that it has given us a list of investment priorities that are already well known?

Stewart Stevenson: I certainly would have preferred not to produce the document on paper, but that is a minor matter in the grand scheme of things. If we want to get the best bang for the public buck, we need a rigorous analysis of what is required.

The review has worked successively down from the national transport strategy, which derived from the previous Administration's work. It inputs the current Government's objectives, examines the performance of the whole network, considers a range of modes of operation and looks at how transport relates to the Government's economic objectives to improve Scotland's economy. Such intense analytical work is necessary if we are to avoid wasting money on interventions that do not contribute to the Government's objectives and to Scotland's economic health.

We have not finalised the overall cost of the exercise—some invoices have still to be dealt with. The review has been a substantial piece of work but, in the long term, it is likely to pay for itself many times over by ensuring that we are focused on the right priorities.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Was the consultation process to deliver the review satisfactory, given the level of interest in the list of 29 projects that you have published?

Stewart Stevenson: The consultation was substantial. We held stakeholder meetings with a wide range of bodies, especially when working up the processes by which we determined the shape of the programme. The process of engagement with regional transport partnerships and councils will continue now that the Government has accepted the STPR's recommendations and adopted the 29 proposed interventions as the Government's way forward.

Engagement has taken place for a considerable time. Getting right the basis on which decisions should be made leads naturally to the interventions. As ministers, we avoided becoming involved in the consideration of projects or direct interventions until the whole decision-making process had been thoroughly examined and understood.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That leads to what happens next. Consultation work took place as the projects review was finalised. What do you plan to

do with the results and with the entire publication? Do you plan to produce action plans or to change the national transport strategy? How can external interest groups feed in their thoughts on the review?

Stewart Stevenson: The key development at the moment is the eight-week consultation on strategic environmental assessment, which we are required to undertake. What emerges from that might influence the STPR's shape, although the environmental assessment that was done for the review was robust—it is the major part of the review.

The main way in which we will develop the position is through the engagement that we expect to have with transport authorities throughout Scotland. We will of course engage with Network Rail and the railway network franchisee. When I met Network Rail yesterday, we discussed the review and high-speed rail, which the committee will discuss later this afternoon.

The Convener: We will move on to the projects that have been committed to. The business case for the Forth replacement crossing—I will still use that title—was based on the assumption that the current Forth road bridge would not be available for use in future years. Ministers have said that repeatedly and on the record to the committee. What impact has the decision to keep the existing bridge had on the business case for the new bridge?

Stewart Stevenson: Let us move right back to the top level. Having an effective lower Forth crossing is vital for the economy of Fife. That is pretty universally accepted and has been at the core of what we have sought to do.

Information on the existing Forth crossing—the building of which started in 1958; the bridge opened in 1964—continues to come in and further work will be done. It is clear that the deterioration of the road crossing is less rapid than was previously thought, but it continues to deteriorate. It is quite evident that deterioration has taken place. The main factor that will influence the speed at which deterioration takes place is the weight of traffic that crosses the bridge. It remains the case that, within a period of time—the exact period will depend on further work—there will come a point at which, for the existing load of traffic, the bridge would have to be closed. In that context, a replacement crossing must be put in place. It remains a replacement crossing in that it will take the cars, taxis and heavy goods vehicles that cross the existing bridge that was opened in 1964.

However, two factors have changed the situation. First, we believe that the deterioration of the existing crossing is of a character—particularly if we reduce the weight on the bridge—that will enable us to leave bus services, cyclists and pedestrians using that bridge. In addition, preliminary engineering advice tells us that it is possible—this has been done elsewhere—to put guided busways, trams or light rail on the existing bridge. That advice was absolutely key to our consideration of what facilities need to be provided on the replacement crossing. Our original intention had been to include the provision of an extra carriageway for guided busway, light rail or tram on the replacement bridge, but it is now clear that we can provide those facilities on the existing bridge.

A two-crossing strategy also gives us a fall-back position. In addition to reducing the cost—something that we were keen to do if we could—we now have a more flexible arrangement in having two crossings on the lower Forth. That will give us considerable insurance in relation to the continuing deterioration of the 1964 crossing.

The business case has become slightly less good, but it remains positive. The number is in excess of 1, so we will get a return on our money. In any event, the bottom line is that, if we do not have an effective crossing, the economy of Fife will suffer severely.

The Convener: Minister, I refer you to various statements by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth to previous meetings of the committee. Earlier this year, the cabinet secretary said:

"we will assess the other characteristics of the Forth crossing by assuming that we are constructing a new, replacement crossing and that there will not be an existing crossing … We must undertake those assumptions on the basis that we do not have a reliable existing crossing. … I have to plan on the basis that the bridge will not be available at some stage in the future".—[*Official Report, Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee*, 15 January 2008; c 362-4.]

Today, you have stated as a fact that the existing bridge will need to close to certain types of traffic, although that was expressed as a possibility in previous meetings. The situation seems a little unclear. You are now saying that the existing bridge is good to carry public transport for the long term and will become the public transport mode across the Forth.

The question was asked previously whether the business case and the cost benefit ratio were calculated on the assumption that the bridge could last, as well as on the assumption that it could not. That seems to me to be an even more urgent question, before £2 billion is spent on an additional bridge.

14:00

Stewart Stevenson: The situation in relation to the existing crossing continues to develop, but it is

clear that a bridge that was designed to have a life of 120 years is suffering considerably after some 44 years, and that without interventions it is unlikely to reach 120 years. It is worth saying that the bridge is carrying traffic somewhat in excess of what was envisaged in the original design brief.

As our knowledge increases, we see the shape of the future of the bridge more clearly, but not perfectly. We are clear that the bridge is approaching the point at which it will be unable to carry its existing traffic. There is little realistic prospect that anything will emerge that runs counter to that. However, as our knowledge increases, we can expect to see the point at which it would be necessary, with existing loads, to close the bridge. That point has moved back, which is good news. At one point, it was thought that heavy goods vehicles would need to come off the bridge before 2016, which is the target date for completion of the new crossing, but it seems that that is no longer the case.

What is beyond doubt is that, in the long term, the existing bridge cannot continue to carry the loads that it carries at present.

The Convener: In the past, we have been told that the new bridge will not increase the total road capacity over the Forth. Is that still the case under the new proposal?

Stewart Stevenson: The number of carriageways on the new bridge is the same as on the existing bridge. The number of carriageways on the approach road is the same as with the existing bridge. To all intents and purposes, the capacity of the new bridge is broadly similar to that of the existing bridge.

I said "broadly similar", but for clarity, and so that I do not mislead you, I point out that the new bridge will be much more wind-resistant and therefore less susceptible to being shut when there are high winds, so there will be an advantage in overall capacity in those terms. There will also be a hard shoulder, and there is the possibility of exploiting that not simply as a refuge for broken-down vehicles but for future expansion. However, as implemented at the outset, the new bridge will have the same number of carriageways as the existing bridge, so it will provide a broadly similar capacity.

The Convener: A similar capacity.

Stewart Stevenson: Yes. Given that the buses will remain on the existing crossing—

The Convener: Except in high winds, I take it.

Stewart Stevenson: That is likely to be true, yes. That is correct.

The Convener: Where will the buses go in high winds? Will an additional lane be allocated on the new bridge when high winds close the existing bridge?

Stewart Stevenson: That could be considered. At this stage, it would be unreasonable for me to give you an exact answer on that, but on the relatively few occasions when the existing bridge has to be shut, the opportunity exists for buses to be integrated with the traffic on the replacement crossing.

The Convener: I am not sure that it is unreasonable to ask for precise answers to such questions now. However, I will bring in Des McNulty to ask a supplementary question before I come back.

Des McNulty: I will ask for one piece of clarification, then I will ask my supplementary. If I get you right, you are saying that, buses aside, the new bridge will only be able to take the exact amount of vehicular traffic that the current bridge takes. There will be no net benefit in terms of traffic, other than perhaps for some bus traffic.

Stewart Stevenson: Correct, although there is potential to use the hard shoulders in certain circumstances. In one of our other interventions, we are considering intelligent management systems and asking how and under what circumstances we might use hard shoulders on motorways. The same could apply to the replacement crossing.

Des McNulty: I want to probe you about the existing bridge. One problem that I have is that you have come up with a way forward with your proposal, but I am not sure that we have anything like enough information about the engineering factors associated with the existing bridge or, indeed, about some of the engineering issues with the new bridge. On the existing bridge, we have information in a report to the Forth Estuary Transport Authority that the dehumidification process appears to be working, although my understanding is that only a relatively small number of cables were examined. In addition, there is considerable concern about the anchorage housing for the cables for the existing bridge and whether there is significant corrosion.

My understanding is that the investigation that is under way might shed some light on those matters and allow greater definition of what you have just asserted. Do we not need to know for certain what the engineering problems are with the existing bridge and what the prognosis is for sorting them out before we start to make quite heroic assumptions about the potential implications of the policy solution that you are proposing?

Stewart Stevenson: We know several things, but there are several things on which we require further information. We know that the condition of the bridge has deteriorated to the point where we

are close to having to take traffic off it. That is relatively well understood, partly because the amount of traffic on the bridge greatly exceeds the original design parameters from the 1950s. Deterioration of the cables has taken place, so there is a loss of physical strength and the ability to carry weight that derives from it. There are encouraging signs that the rate of deterioration may be slowing down.

Mr McNulty makes a point about the anchorages, which is perfectly correct. I understand that the anchorages have not been examined yet, not least because it is quite difficult to find a non-destructive way of examining them.

It is clear that, were we to wait for a point of certainty—which we may never reach, given the difficulties of examining the anchorages—before taking decisions on crossings on the Forth, we would, without very much doubt, find ourselves without a lower Forth crossing for a period of time. That is simply untenable for the economy of Fife. It would be heroic to roll the dice with pretty strong odds that Fife would be without a bridge, given our understanding of the state of the bridge, albeit that the information is, of course, as yet incomplete. There is an equal probability of further bad news. Any good news will be limited to the rate of deterioration being less than we thought it might be. There is little doubt that deterioration of the existing crossing is a fact of life.

Des McNulty: I think that we should spare the hyperbole. If the whole approach is predicated on the fact—as it was in the first instance—that the bridge will last only a relatively short period of time and therefore a replacement bridge will be needed, that is a relatively straightforward proposition. However, your proposition is different: you are now saying that the existing bridge can continue to be used for a significant period in a new guise as a public transport bridge, but you are making that assertion on the basis of an inadequate engineering assessment of the current problems with the bridge cables and no analysis of the anchorage of the bridge cables. That is a pretty poor evidence base on which to propose a solution, particularly one that costs £2.3 billion, which is a significant sum of money.

We are not arguing about the principle of having an operational bridge to Fife—I take that as axiomatic—but asking whether you have the information that you require to tell you that your proposition is the best operational solution. Have you looked at the option of rebuilding the existing bridge to the standard that is proposed for the new bridge? I have to say—

The Convener: I think that we have got the gist of the question.

Des McNulty: Today's announcement that repairs to the expansion joints will be deferred for five or six years is a further cause for concern. The proper engineering information is needed to justify the proposition. I am saying not that your proposition is wrong, but that you have not given us anywhere near enough information to justify it.

Stewart Stevenson: On the question whether the existing bridge can be repaired, the answer is probably. However, if we are to achieve that, the bridge will need to be closed for a period of four to seven years, which will be an enormous economic hit for Fife. The engineering advice is that the bridge cannot be repaired by single-carriageway working given existing traffic volumes and the present state of the bridge, and without taking account of further deterioration.

If I understood him correctly, implicit in Mr McNulty's line of questioning is his acceptance of deterioration in the bridge. He put the questions to probe whether we understand fully the nature and timescale of the deterioration. I have said clearly that there is a range of possibilities and probabilities for that deterioration. I reiterate that we are very close indeed to the point when the existing traffic cannot be carried safely on the existing bridge.

The Convener: Mr McNulty has one final short supplementary.

Des McNulty: Are you aware of the study that Jacobs Babtie undertook in 2005, which advised the then Minister for Transport that running trams on the existing bridge would not be possible without a major reconstruction of the deck and its supports?

Stewart Stevenson: One of the key things that I asked for before concluding that the existing bridge could be used for light rail in the way that I have described was an engineering input. Light rail has been used on this design of bridge elsewhere. I am assured that it can be done.

The Convener: Before we move on to other lines of questioning, I will tie up a couple of issues. You spoke of a range of possibilities for the existing bridge. What if the news is bad? Where would public transport go?

Stewart Stevenson: There are several options. In setting them out, I am not describing what will happen. We will have two crossings. If buses were unable to use the existing crossing, there would be several options. Of course, one could put buses on the new crossing, which has potential for hard-shoulder running if required for volume purposes. It would also be possible—because I have accepted that it is possible—to repair the existing bridge during the time that the buses use the other bridge, if the economics said that it was the right thing to do.

The Convener: But you said that those repairs would close the bridge for seven years.

Stewart Stevenson: Correct. I make it clear that I said four to seven years.

The Convener: In that four to seven-year period, buses would run on the hard shoulder. Is that right?

Stewart Stevenson: That is one option that would be available to us.

The Convener: Would dedicating the hard shoulder in that way, for four to seven years, be a realistic option?

Stewart Stevenson: It is being examined. Using the hard shoulder for a range of traffic is being considered more generally for our motorway network. It would be an option. The other very clear option would be to integrate buses with other traffic on the replacement crossing.

14:15

The Convener: The main reason for the additional bridge's reduced price tag is that the multimodal element has been removed from it. Previously, we heard clear commitments from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth and from you that the multimodal element of the new bridge was central to Government thinking. When was the decision taken to abandon that central element of your thinking?

Stewart Stevenson: We have not abandoned it. We have put the multimodal element on the existing crossing, because that is the most economically appropriate way to proceed. In addition—

The Convener: No, I am asking about the thinking around the new bridge. It was said on the record on a number of occasions that the multimodality of the new bridge was central to Government thinking. When was that dropped?

Stewart Stevenson: Once we became aware that the existing bridge was deteriorating more slowly than previously thought, and—this is the important "and"—once I received advice that it was possible to use the existing bridge for all the multimodal facilities that we previously thought we had to provide on the new bridge, it became possible to revisit the position.

We have not revisited the strategy, which remains to provide public transport multimodal capability across the Forth, at the lower Forth point. It is the implementation of the strategy that has changed, in that we now understand better the capabilities and the life prospects of the existing crossing. The tactics and the implementation, not the strategy, have changed, the benefit of which is a substantial cost reduction and an improvement in the multimodal capability, because no longer will it simply be the bridge crossing that provides multimodal capability—a significant part of the road networks north and south of the existing crossing will provide greater speed, less congestion and a more reliable and effective public transport connection. It is a better and cheaper solution.

The Convener: I am still concerned about some of the apparent contradictions—they seem like contradictions to me—between saying that you are now much clearer and surer about the expected lifespan of the existing bridge and saying, as you did just a few minutes ago, that you are still completely unsure of how long the bridge will last and what type of traffic it can carry.

My question, however, was about when the decision was made to drop the multimodal element of the additional bridge.

Stewart Stevenson: The idea of considering that came up some time ago, but we could not be certain that we could pursue it until we—

The Convener: When did you become certain? When did you make the decision that the multimodal element of the additional bridge would be dropped?

Stewart Stevenson: In the autumn, when we completed our studies.

The Convener: It would be helpful if you could provide us with a clear answer—in writing, if necessary.

Stewart Stevenson: In order to be absolutely clear on the limitations, the idea has been around for some time. Ministers asked for various aspects of the idea to be explored. Certain things had to be in place before that was possible, then consideration had to be given to whether the decision—

The Convener: You understand my concern, do you not, minister?

Stewart Stevenson: I just wish to be clear—

The Convener: Order. You understand my concern, minister—

Stewart Stevenson: No, I do not, actually.

The Convener: For months we have been told that the multimodal element of the additional bridge—not of the crossing strategy—was central to Government thinking. Are you telling us that the idea of dropping that element has been around for some time?

Stewart Stevenson: The certainty that that idea could be pursued depended in particular on the question—which has been mentioned—whether the bridge could carry light rail. That was one of

the fundamental questions, and unless the answer could be established, the idea, which has been around for some time, could not be pursued.

In any event, I am not saying that there has not been a change in the approach: it is clear that there has been, and it is a natural and necessary response to an evolving and changing situation. It is a tribute to the project team that we are getting innovative ideas that actually improve on where we started from and that reduce the price, which will be widely welcomed.

The Convener: I accept that the Government is entitled to change its view, but I would be concerned if the Government were telling us that one view was central to its thinking while contemplating another.

Stewart Stevenson: We have retained absolutely—and, I argue, improved on—the commitment to the functionality that we have always wanted to deliver. It is entirely proper for us to seek both the biggest bang for the public buck and a more flexible solution that gives us insurance policies in a range of scenarios. We have taken the right decisions, based on those considerations.

The Convener: Let us hope that the wind allows you to maintain the functionality to which you refer.

Alison McInnes: You have not really retained functionality. You have taken quite a gamble and downgraded the role of public transport. You could have given public transport a key role in the project from the outset, making it central to the new bridge for 100 or 120 years and ensuring that it had a key access route across the Forth. Instead, we have heard from you already this afternoon that there may be more bad news and that buses may have to move to the new bridge. If we put trams on the old bridge and there are further problems, they cannot readily be moved to the new bridge. It seems that your decision is based on a gamble.

Stewart Stevenson: We have upgraded, not downgraded, the facilities that will be provided. By using the existing bridge, we will provide substantially more capacity for buses. On the roads approaching the new crossing, buses will mix with other traffic. Separating them off much earlier will enhance, increase and upgrade the public transport option.

What would be necessary before we put trams on the existing bridge? We would have to be certain that the bridge genuinely had a long-term life. I return to the fundamental point—by having two crossings, we will create the space to close one crossing to repair it, in a variety of ways, without the disruption that would be created if there were only one crossing. We may be able to repair the existing crossing by closing a single carriageway, depending on how the engineering calculations stack up and what weight is carried on the other carriageway—it may not be necessary to close the whole crossing. However, that is a matter for another day, when further work has been done.

It is correct to say that, if trams go on the existing bridge, shutting it will disrupt the tram facility substantially, because it will not be possible to take the trams around to the new bridge, where there are no tramlines. That is precisely why we will need to undertake work to ensure that the bridge is fit for light rail, trams or tram-trains in the long term when we come to consider them. It is important for us to make use of the opportunity that will be created by greater understanding of the existing bridge. The strategy that we have adopted also creates a substantial financial opportunity.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We have talked quite a bit about using the current bridge as a dedicated public transport corridor. Can you state categorically that it will be for the exclusive use of public transport, cyclists and pedestrians?

Stewart Stevenson: Yes.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We are looking not only at the bridge but at the approach road. You have already mentioned some items relating to that. Can you detail how the scheme that you now propose will improve not only what exists at the moment but some of the initial proposals for the replacement crossing?

Stewart Stevenson: At the initial stage, we had before us a range of options for the road networks both north and south of the bridge. In the next couple of months, we will engage with the communities that are affected. A key advantage of our proposal, particularly on the south side, is that road connections with the M9 will run not simply in the direction of Edinburgh but west. Although we have sought to reuse as much of the road infrastructure as possible, a substantial amount of road building will be needed on both sides of the bridge.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: In light of the suggestion that capacity for cars on the new bridge might be the same as that on the existing bridge, there has been some discussion about whether there will be queues for and congestion on the new bridge, particularly at peak times. Is it realistic to expect that the current bridge will be available only to buses and cyclists? I suppose that we are seeking a categorical reassurance that the current bridge will be for public transport only.

Stewart Stevenson: The existing bridge must be only for public transport because, whatever the engineering prognosis turns out to be, the key to its future is to reduce the weight on it. Of course,

the other advantage of putting bus services on the bridge is that that particular flow of traffic is relatively predictable and can, to some extent, be controlled. As a result, one can manage the weight on the bridge at any one time. We feel that those factors are necessary to allow us to continue to use the existing bridge safely. In any event, we have always pointed out that we are not seeking to add capacity to the Forth crossing. Our strategy, instead, is to build a replacement bridge.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: There has also been some discussion about whether trams could use the current bridge. Do you think that the difficulties of putting trams on the replacement crossing highlight the inflexibility of tram systems and the fact that they are not necessarily a panacea for all problems in the Lothians?

Stewart Stevenson: There is a variety of views on trams. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth has said on a number of occasions that he is not intrinsically opposed to trams, and I think that trams are an appropriate intervention in the right circumstances. The fact that we integrated tramline 1A into our surface access strategy for Edinburgh airport shows that we as a Government are very interested in seeing its success. Of course, not everyone who is currently suffering because of some of the difficulties of building a tram network will feel quite the same way about that. Trams have been successful in many cities, not only in England but throughout the world, and we will watch with considerable interest what happens with the facility that is being provided by the City of Edinburgh Council. After all, it is the council's project, not mine.

The Convener: I do not expect to see you at the launch, then, minister.

Stewart Stevenson: I hope to travel on the first tram, convener.

The Convener: I will remind you of that.

Stewart Stevenson: When he was city treasurer, my great-uncle was responsible for the trams. I would just be following a family tradition.

The Convener: I see that Des McNulty wants to ask a supplementary. Des, it will have to be one and it will have to be short.

Des McNulty: I hope only that the minister does not suffer the fate of William Huskisson, who in 1830 was knocked down on his own railway.

I am seeking some information, on which you can get back to us. First, given the specification that you have suggested for the new bridge, we will need a detailed analysis of how you will manage road traffic congestion, particularly with regard to cars and public transport. We will also need to know about any associated proposals for physical infrastructure—for example, access roads—and your targets in that respect.

Secondly, will you provide a breakdown of the costs of the major projects that will be required to keep the current bridge open, including strengthening the suspended span deck truss, replacing bearings on the approach viaduct, augmenting and replacing the main cables and dealing with anchorages, and link that into an assessment of the maintenance and running costs of the existing bridge and the maintenance and running cost projections for the new bridge?

Thirdly, why is it now proposed that the replacement of the main expansion joints—which was deemed urgent and was due to take place in 2010—will be delayed until 2016? We have to bear in mind the fact that the safety of the public is paramount.

Finally, I would like an analysis of the cost of rebuilding the existing bridge to the specification that you are suggesting for the new bridge.

14:30

Stewart Stevenson: I am happy to pass the member's questions on the bridge to FETA, whose responsibility it is to provide the figures. I am only the postbox.

The member asks about anchorages. No view has been taken on that subject, because there is no understanding as yet that intervention is required. We do not know one way or the other.

Des McNulty: No, but you have asserted—

The Convener: I am afraid that there is no time to explore this in detail.

Des McNulty: The minister has asserted that the current bridge will exist for 80 years, so he must substantiate—

The Convener: I appreciate the importance of the point that you are making, but you have, in effect, read out a long list of written questions.

Minister, we look forward to a detailed written response on many of those issues, but would you like to add anything now?

Stewart Stevenson: As engineering studies of the bridge continue, we will continue to gain knowledge of the interventions required.

Alison McInnes: You must have done some calculations in order to decide that the capital saving in relation to the new bridge was worth while. You must have balanced the cost of operating and maintaining two bridges against the capital expenditure required for repairing the existing bridge.

I have some general questions on funding. When did you first approach the Treasury to discuss reprofiling the Scottish Government's capital budgets, and what further dialogue have you had with the Treasury on that?

Stewart Stevenson: I do not have the exact date for our approach to the Treasury, but it was within the past month. However, the Treasury's support—or non-support—does not influence anything other than the timescale. We are not asking for money; we are simply asking to draw money forward to an earlier point in the spending cycle.

I have just been passed a note: we wrote to the Treasury on 27 November. I repeat that the issue here is simply the timetable, and not what will be done.

Alison McInnes: You do not really need a plan B for building the Forth replacement bridge, but—

Stewart Stevenson: Financially we do not.

Alison McInnes: Whether or not it was approved, what impact would reprofiling have on future Administrations' ability to invest in infrastructure?

Stewart Stevenson: We have asked the Treasury for the ability to do what it is doing itself for its capital spending on infrastructure—that is, drawing from expenditure that had been intended to be made later, and making that expenditure sooner. Drawing that money would clearly reduce the ability to invest in projects in future. However, if the sums of money that we are talking about do not change, and if the projects do not change, I guess that future Administrations will not be materially inhibited or encouraged. The same projects will be done with the same money; the only thing that will be different is the timetable over which the projects will be carried out.

Alison McInnes: Who will bear the costs of any overruns on the project?

Stewart Stevenson: We are looking for a fixed-price contract and we have every belief that we will have one, so the contractor will bear those costs.

In contract negotiations, there are always discussions about whether risks will be left with the contractor or with the Government. For example, in the M74 contract, a small, quantified amount of risk is left with the Government. In exchange for that, the cost of the project is reduced.

We are looking for a fixed-price contract, but I do not want to mislead you into believing that that might not leave some risk with the Government, if that was our choice.

Alison McInnes: Will you explain why the Scottish Futures Trust was rejected as a funding mechanism for the new bridge?

Stewart Stevenson: The Scottish Futures Trust was not the appropriate mechanism for a single, £1.7 billion borrowing project. The Scottish Futures Trust is about delivering, through aggregation, to smaller projects the advantages that exist for larger projects. If we aggregate projects when raising money instead of capturing them in a single funding vehicle such as the private finance initiative, we spread risk and reduce the risk pricing that is associated with funding, to the benefit of projects.

The SFT also gives smaller projects the benefit of skills aggregation. That happens naturally in a big project, in which there is aggregation when project offices and skill sets are established. All the borrowing is also in one chunk. We are talking about very different kinds of project.

As with any borrowing vehicle, the Scottish Futures Trust can support only a proportion of what we are doing. We will always continue to have a substantial proportion of infrastructure investment coming directly from public funds.

Alison McInnes: Which of the 29 projects in the STPR have you identified as appropriate for the SFT mechanism?

Stewart Stevenson: As I think I said earlier, the funding of the 29 interventions—there are a large number of projects, not just 29—will depend on consideration of the finance that is available to successive Administrations over many years through many comprehensive spending review periods. Administrations will consider which part of a project they will fund by using direct public funds, by borrowing through the Scottish Futures Trust or by using any other mechanism that they choose.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Des McNulty mentioned the FETA discussions on the potential delays to repair work. Public safety is obviously paramount for the Government and FETA but, now that FETA has more information about the replacement crossing, is it correct for it to consider whether any repair work can be delayed until the new bridge is opened, thus saving both itself and the Government money and ensuring that it makes best use of the available public funds?

Stewart Stevenson: FETA has responsibility for, expertise on and detailed knowledge of the existing bridge. If it believes that it can move the work to 2016—it is worth noting that there are savings associated with delaying the work until after the opening of the new bridge—the bottom line is whether it is safe to do that. FETA believes that it is, so it is appropriate for it to take a view on when the work should be done. I will certainly not

second guess or outthink it; it is for FETA to work out what maintenance is needed and to discuss its requirements with Government.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Finally, can you confirm again that there will be no tolling on the replacement crossing?

Stewart Stevenson: There will be no tolling; there will be no shadow tolling.

The Convener: We have been offered on-going engagement with the project management. Can I take it that, if we pursue that in writing, we can establish a schedule for liaising with you and your officials on the project management?

Stewart Stevenson: I am sure that that would be mutually helpful. Obviously, I would be aware of it as it took place. It is our earnest desire to ensure that the committee has oversight of what is going on at whatever level it regards as appropriate.

The Convener: Des McNulty has a question. Is it very brief?

Des McNulty: Yes. Minister, on funding arrangements, you said in response to Alison McInnes that you wanted to bring forward money and spread the costs of the new bridge over a longer period. What do you think would be the sensible maximum percentage of transport spending to spend on the bridge project in any year? On current projections, how much would that leave for other projects? A parallel example might be the Glasgow southern general—

The Convener: We have the question, so can we leave the example? We have only a brief time left.

Des McNulty: I do not think that we are that pushed, to be honest.

Stewart Stevenson: The Government's annual capital spending programme is about £3.2 billion to £3.5 billion. That gives a sense of the proportion of our capital spending that the replacement crossing occupies. It is clearly a substantial sum, and we have asked for assistance in drawing from future funds to ensure that we can maintain the timetables that we and others wish to see for other projects. However, it does not in any sense whatsoever change the projects that we would do; it simply enables us to do them in a more timely fashion. It does not mean that there would be no more money or inhibit our ability to do projects.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Good afternoon, minister. The rest of Scotland expects, of course, to gain things from the proposals in the strategy. I hope that we will hear answers about some of those things. Can you explain why the on-going costs of maintaining Scotland's rail infrastructure were included as an investment in the STPR, but the costs for the on-going maintenance of Scotland's trunk road network were not?

Stewart Stevenson: Maintaining the rail network is, of course, about upgrading parts of it that are clapped out—to use a technical term. By the same token, we are making a number of broadly similar interventions in the road network. Of course, not all Scotland's roads are the Government's responsibility; mileage-wise, they are overwhelmingly local government's responsibility.

Rob Gibson: I referred to trunk roads.

Stewart Stevenson: Yes. I was simply making that point. The overwhelming majority of traffic is on the trunk roads, so that requires us to make interventions. In particular, we will seek to include in our strategy interventions that focus on safety, because people would expect that. We have contracts in place, of course, for roads—in fact, we do not own part of the M74. Things are done in a range of ways. Essentially, when we put money into the rail infrastructure, we create new infrastructure. That is probably the key point to make in response to Rob Gibson's question.

Rob Gibson: Thank you for that. On the clapped-out railway system to which you referred, can you explain why you have included the electrification of the lines to Perth, Inverness and Aberdeen in the STPR when that will not be delivered in the STPR period?

Stewart Stevenson: It is important that we set a strategic context. In the national planning framework, we set the aspiration of electrifying all Scotland's railways by 2030. Clearly, such an intervention influences in a variety of ways what we do in the short term on, for example, signalling upgrades. Signalling is a huge issue, not least because signalling standards will change over the years to come. Much of our signalling infrastructure, particularly in the far north, is approaching the end of its life.

I return to your previous question, the answer to which has just been given to me. This is about what we term the colour of money. Maintaining the rail infrastructure is about capital spending; maintaining the roads is about revenue spending. That is the strict accounting answer as to why the two are dealt with differently in the STPR. I should, of course, have twigged that myself.

14:45

Rob Gibson: I understand what you are talking about, but I am interested in what is included and what is not, in terms of railways. Your explanation about signalling and so on was interesting.

In September 2007 I asked you about the timescale for the delivery of the upgrades on the railway from Perth to Inverness and from Aberdeen to Inverness, and referred to a 25-year period. At the time, you said:

"We want to make early progress with that work. The timescale will certainly be substantially less than the 25 years."—[*Official Report*, *Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee*, 11 September 2007; c 37.]

Given the lines' significance in the national planning framework, to which you have referred, can you give us any indication of the timescales for those major rail upgrades?

Stewart Stevenson: To some extent, we remain in the hands of others. Part of the discussion that I had yesterday with the chief executive of Network Rail, Mr Iain Coucher, centred on what funding would be available from the regulatory asset base, which is the primary funding mechanism. The next control period will be 2009 to 2014, and we are approaching the end of the discussions on what the funding profile will look like. There has been discussion between the Office of Rail Regulation and Network Rail, with input from us and the Department for Transport.

There is still a bit of a gap in some of the numbers. Of course, it will depend in part on credit ratings for Network Rail, which is a body that neither the DFT nor the Scottish Government can instruct what to do. It is distant from Government and off balance sheet—that is an important point to bear in mind.

However, the improvement of services to Inverness and Aberdeen is not a single project; a whole range of interventions are planned. For example, a more distant intervention in relation to the line up to Aberdeen is the twin tracking of the railway at Montrose, where there is approximately two miles of single track. There is a clear pinchpoint on the route there, and that twin tracking is in the plan—albeit at the end. Signalling interventions will come much sooner. Some parts of the route are being examined, and across Scotland's rail network we are establishing where the speed limits are inappropriate and no intervention is needed other than a change to the plate that says what the speed limit is. A number of interventions of that character can be made very quickly.

We are already starting to make improvements, some of which can be effected simply through timetabling. Nevertheless, some interventions, such as that at Montrose, will come at the far end of the plan and, at this stage, we cannot give an exact date for that.

Rob Gibson: That will be only a small piece of dualling, whereas 60 per cent of the line between Glasgow and Inverness is single track—and therefore a much more major issue. Could dualling of the Glasgow to Inverness line be brought forward, or will it come at the end of the plan? Will signalling come first and dualling come second, or what?

Stewart Stevenson: Addressing signalling gives the quickest win for the lowest amount of money, albeit that there is a significant shortage of signalling engineers, which is a difficulty. There is scope for additional passing loops, in particular to achieve dynamic passing so that trains do not have to stop to make way for other trains. That will make a significant contribution.

As much as anything, simply working on the timetables can make a real difference. The context for that is that we want to see increased use of the railways, especially by freight, which is a further factor. There will be additional freight services on the line up to Inverness starting, I think, next week—certainly, this month. Therefore, extra traffic will be using the line, and we need to take that into account as well. We can achieve significant changes without huge interventions.

It is worth saying that although we are talking about dualling only two miles of track at Montrose, another bridge across the basin will be needed, so those two miles will not be easy to dual. The dualling on the line to Inverness will be rather more straightforward.

Rob Gibson: I appreciate the information about the increase in freight. I am sure that we will come back to the issue in our inquiry into the potential benefits of high-speed rail services.

The Convener: For future reference, I would prefer officials to sit at the table rather than pass notes to the minister if he requires information or support.

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): Will the minister expand on the rationale for rejecting the Glasgow crossrail scheme in his strategy?

Stewart Stevenson: On the contrary, our objective is to ensure that we have rail services that cross Glasgow.

During the next few weeks we will discuss with Strathclyde partnership for transport capacity at Glasgow Queen Street and Glasgow Central stations. We think that the capacity of the upper and lower levels of both stations will be fully utilised during the lifetime of the STPR. SPT takes a different view, for whatever reason—it might simply be that SPT is not using the same timescale. I am anxious to sort out the issue, because if SPT is correct, its approach to supporting services that can go through Glasgow from the north-east to the south-west, which our interventions deliver, might potentially be cheaper.

However, I have considered the issue since I talked to the convener of SPT and I suspect that our view, which is that capacity at the two existing stations is inadequate, is likely to be correct—I hope it will be otherwise.

Charlie Gordon: I am not aware that great emphasis was placed on that issue in the background documents to the STPR. In table E3 in annex 3 of report 3, you say that Glasgow crossrail has been rejected because

"it does not make best use of the rail network",

and that proposed improvements to the rail network, in particular between Edinburgh and Glasgow, will

"negate much of the potential benefit of Glasgow Crossrail".

Will you talk about that?

Stewart Stevenson: You have correctly quoted from the report, but we are looking to enable services that cross Glasgow. Crossrail is a very specific proposal, of course. I am happy to explore whether our view on constraints to do with station capacity in future is well founded; if it is not well founded we will revisit the matter. It is about achieving services that cross Glasgow, by whatever means and whatever the label.

Charlie Gordon: I know that you are anxious to do something about connections to the Loch Ryan ports, but you have focused exclusively on improvements to the A75 and you have not considered rail services to Stranraer. Under your strategy, if I want to go by rail from Ayr or Stranraer to Edinburgh, Rosyth or wherever, will I have to change in Glasgow? You talk about services that will "cross Glasgow"; do you mean through services, or will people have to change trains and platforms at Glasgow Central station?

Stewart Stevenson: Under our strategy, it might be at another station that is neither Central nor Queen Street.

We are investing not just in the A75 but in the A77, because we acknowledge the ports' importance to the economy not just of Scotland but of Northern Ireland. The majority of supermarkets in Northern Ireland are provisioned through that ferry route.

You ask whether your journey will involve changing trains in Glasgow. I suppose that, ultimately, that will depend on where you want to go. You ask whether trains will run all the way through, and that will depend on timetabling and the options that exist. However, if we create the physical capability and the demand exists, I will of course want trains to run all the way through.

Charlie Gordon: So you have in mind a superior scheme to SPT's proposal.

Stewart Stevenson: We have a scheme that recognises what we understand to be the constraints at the two main railway stations in Glasgow, but I say openly and straightforwardly that Councillor Alistair Watson told me his definite view that the stations had the capacity, and we will sit down to discuss that. I know that SPT's approach is analytical and unemotional, and we have sought to take the same approach. If we find that assumptions on one or the other side of the table are incompatible, we will seek to work out why and to respond, because we share the objective of creating the ability for trains to run through Glasgow.

Charlie Gordon: There is no sign in the latest draft of the national planning framework that you are reconsidering SPT's version of crossrail or thinking more about how you would achieve similar benefits by other means. That tends to make all that a gleam in the eye.

Stewart Stevenson: The STPR contains the substantial intervention of the west of Scotland strategic rail enhancements. The national planning framework is a planning document and not a transport document; it is about clearing the way for planning difficulties.

Charlie Gordon: If you are thinking about a super-duper crossrail station in the centre of Glasgow, that is a big planning issue.

Stewart Stevenson: My official reminds me that the west of Scotland strategic rail enhancements are in NPF 2.

Charlie Gordon: So as far as you are concerned, your superior version of crossrail is in the national planning framework.

Stewart Stevenson: I will not rise to the bait of saying what is superior or inferior, because that would perhaps mislead.

Charlie Gordon: Anyway, the national planning framework says that you will reconsider both versions of the scheme.

Stewart Stevenson: The national planning framework is about high-level strategic planning and area planning, so the scheme is not material to the framework either way.

Prima facie, a difference of view exists about the capacity of the two main railway stations in Glasgow. I am always prepared to listen to SPT, which has substantial expertise and experience. I wish to explore why that difference of view exists and to ensure that we end up with the same view. I cannot say which view that will be. Our preliminary look at the issue suggests that the difference arises simply from our taking different time horizons. If so, that will colour the discussion that we have with SPT in the middle of January.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): In recent weeks, some north-east politicians have accused the minister of allowing the Aberdeen crossrail project to wither on the vine. The failure to mention the project in the strategic transport projects review has caused that accusation to resurface. Does its exclusion from the review mean that it has no prospect of being implemented, or do the review's terms still offer the prospect of developing enhanced local rail services in the Aberdeen area?

Stewart Stevenson: We are already making substantial changes in that area. For example, the timetable change on Sunday increased from three to eight the number of morning peak-hour rail services from Inverurie to Aberdeen. Through-rail services between Montrose and Inverurie are substantial, with an increased number of evening services. We have clearly signalled our intention to look seriously at reopening Kintore railway station as an additional stop in what is a rapidly growing part of Aberdeen's outer commuter ring. We are seeking firmly to improve rail services to and through Aberdeen.

15:00

Alex Johnstone: Would it be fair to say that the restrictive nature of the strategic transport projects review is such that one would not have expected station developments to be included? It is a strategic, rather than local, plan.

Stewart Stevenson: The proposals for additional stations in Aberdeen are certainly of local significance, so it is right that they should be pursued by the north-east of Scotland transport partnership. At this stage, the proposals show a negative return on investment and suggest the prospect that they will damage patronage for rail services overall. Because passengers appear to be very sensitive to time, the addition of new stops that would increase journey times by about three minutes would reduce the number of people who are prepared to use the railways. However, the incremental approach that we have adopted—which we are able to do without major capital investment at this stage, although investment will be made in the line between Aberdeen and Inverness in particular—will enable us to build up patronage. I am sure that that will build the case for further interventions later.

We have also made a substantial set of changes in the timetable. The new timetable provides for the opening of a Laurencekirk station to the south of Aberdeen, which will provide services all the way through to Inverurie. We are making substantial changes in the operation of the railways: those changes start to flesh out the long-expressed desire for better commuter services into and out of Aberdeen.

Alex Johnstone: Would it be fair to say, in that case, that there is scope for progress on local rail services around Aberdeen?

Stewart Stevenson: Yes.

Rob Gibson: To return to the A9, will the minister clarify the phasing of the proposed dualling of the road and the costs that are associated with each phase?

Stewart Stevenson: In the early stages, we will increase the amount of dualling at the southern end of the road. In phase 2, we aim to dual the road between Perth and Inverness.

The first phase will include grade-separated junctions from the Keir roundabout to south of the Broxden roundabout, completion of the dual carriageway between Perth and Blair Atholl, grade separation at the Inveralmond and Broxden roundabouts and—for safety reasons and to reduce driver frustration—a number of two-plus-one sections to create overtaking opportunities the length of the A9.

The A9's economic importance justifies the need to dual the road over the longer term. The road has local safety issues, on which we will continue to operate. Overall, the A9 is substantially safer—both on its dual carriageway and single carriageway sections—than the average trunk road in Scotland, but there is a strong economic case for dualling the road as well as a focused need to address safety issues at particular points.

Rob Gibson: I take it that some of those developments will be at the Inverness end of the A9, given that the safety of the road between, for example, Kingussie and Aviemore is also suspect.

Stewart Stevenson: Most of the safety issues are at junctions. For example, we are doing additional work at Slochd, which is a bit further north than the part of the road to which Rob Gibson just referred. We will also invest in the A96 to A9, which runs between the road from Inverness to Nairn and the road south from Inverness to Perth, because Inverness has one of the most rapidly growing economies in Scotland. A connected issue is the prospect of a new railway stations at Dalcross and support for the UHI Millennium Institute campus. At both ends of the A9, we are looking to make interventions relatively soon. In the longer term, we are honouring our commitment to dual the A9.

Rob Gibson: How confident are you that the full dualling of the A9 can be completed for a maximum of £4 billion, as reported in the STPR?

Stewart Stevenson: That is the best estimate that we can come up with at this stage—detailed design is still to be done. Ultimately, we will know what the final price is when a contractor signs a contract. We are in times when we can probably

expect more effective pricing for some years to come because of diminution of demand in other sectors. That is a good basis for pricing the project.

In recent years—in both the previous Administration's time in office and ours—civil engineering contractors and the Governments that negotiate with them have been getting much closer to the mark on pricing. They have agreed effective fixed-price contracts, so the exposure of the public purse has been much diminished compared with what happened 10 or 20 years ago.

Alison McInnes: I will take a moment to discuss what is not in the STPR. In particular, a couple of projects in the north-east have been ditched—a grade-separated junction at Laurencekirk on the A90 and the dualling of the A90 north of Ellon to Peterhead.

On Laurencekirk, why did you not take the opportunity to respond to the concerns of road users in the area? Why is it proper to propose road safety improvements on the A9, about which we heard in your response to Mr Gibson, but not on the A90?

On the A90 north of Ellon, I remind you of your response to the previous Government's announcement on the dualling of the Balmedie to Tipperty part of the A90 a couple of years ago. On your website, you stated:

"it is extremely regrettable that the Scottish Government has not taken the opportunity to extend the dualling of the A90 north of Ellon as part of the same programme … It is high time that the Liberal-Labour Scottish Government provided a transport infrastructure to serve the North-east of Scotland."

When did you change your mind on that?

Stewart Stevenson: It is perhaps worth reminding the member that it is she who wishes to take £800 million a year out of our budget and it is the SNP Administration that is progressing the dualling of the road between Balmedie and Tipperty.

Let me say a little about the Laurencekirk junction on the A90—by the way, that road is included in the roads on which there will be safety interventions. On the basis of the available information, it appears that the problem might be at the relatively close St Cyrus junction, which is within three miles of the Laurencekirk junction, to the north.

When one of Alison McInnes's political colleagues was Minister for Transport, he made an intervention at the Laurencekirk junction by changing its design in a relatively simple way, reducing the speed limit and introducing speed cameras. It is clear that that intervention has very substantially improved the safety record of that point on the A90, albeit that a number of other junctions quite close to the Laurencekirk junction have been the source of safety issues. However, I repeat that the A90 is on the radar for safety interventions.

Alison McInnes: You are right to say that there is concern about a series of junctions. As far as the community and I are concerned, the junctions remain extremely hazardous, particularly as they have crossing traffic rather than traffic turning on to the A90. I urge you to reconsider the matter and to bring forward improvements to those junctions as a matter of urgency.

Stewart Stevenson: I am extremely familiar with the Laurencekirk junction. I drove through it most recently on Sunday. I have made a point of leaving at the junction and then making the crossing—I do not usually do that—to ensure that I understand it as a driver. It is on the radar, but I repeat that we have to target our safety interventions where the need is greatest. Since 2005, the 50mph limit, the speed cameras and the warning signs that come up if people exceed the speed limit as they approach the junction have delivered a substantial step change in what happens there. Prior to that, there were certainly a number of serious and fatal accidents at that junction. It is not off the agenda; it is there to be looked at in respect of safety interventions, but when we prioritise our investments we need to consider a range of junctions where there is crossing traffic on the A90, which is a trunk road rather than a motorway.

The Convener: Des McNulty and Alex Johnstone's supplementaries will have to be brief.

Des McNulty: Do you see the fastlink scheme being part of the strategic review, or could it be brought forward in advance of the timescales for those projects? I know that your colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing is particularly keen on linking up the Southern general hospital with Glasgow city centre and I am keen on linking up the Golden Jubilee hospital.

My other question is on the A82. You said that interventions should be most speedy where safety need is greatest. Everyone would acknowledge that the A82 is probably the road with the highest proportion of serious accidents. Can you unpack the targeted programme of measures to improve the A82 between Glasgow and Oban and explain briefly why it has been treated differently from the A9?

Stewart Stevenson: The A82 is an early target for safety-related intervention. I return to the point that the case for the A9 is an economic one. Engineering must play a role in improving the quality of the road at some places on the A82,

which I have also driven along. The carriageway is narrower than one would usually expect; if I remember correctly, it is less than 7.3m wide. On some sections of the road there is no opportunity for drivers to escape the road if they see a developing situation ahead, because there is rock on one side and railway on the other. On some stretches there is a loch on one side. Those sections create difficulties for competent drivers who are driving according to the conditions, because there is no verge if they want to go off the road—there is no such option. We clearly need to make engineering interventions.

By the way, in respect of safety, it is clear that the figures for people being killed and seriously injured on the A82 are substantially higher per kilometre than the Scottish average. We recognise that, which is why we are focusing on a range of safety interventions that will make a difference.

Des McNulty: Can you address the timescale issues?

Stewart Stevenson: The work at Pulpit Rock and the Crianlarich bypass are not in the STPR because they are in advance of the STPR projects. We are also considering interventions further north.

Des McNulty: What about the fastlink scheme?

The Convener: Alex Johnstone has a supplementary.

Stewart Stevenson: Do you wish me to answer Des McNulty's question?

The Convener: We are very tight for time, Des.

Des McNulty: The minister can write to me about fastlink.

The Convener: That is fine.

Alex Johnstone: I have a brief follow-up to Alison McInnes's questions on the junction at Laurencekirk. I wrote to the minister some months ago to ask whether it would be possible to meet him and discuss the issues concerning that junction. He replied that at that time it was inopportune. Would the minister meet a delegation from Laurencekirk to explain needs in respect of the junction sometime in the new year?

Stewart Stevenson: I think Alex Johnstone knows my office's phone number. I would be happy to make the necessary arrangements.

Alex Johnstone: I will take up that offer.

Stewart Stevenson: I can see that you have stretched the convener's tolerance.

Rob Gibson: Turning to climate change, can you explain how the CO_2 reduction of between 100,000 tonnes and 150,000 tonnes resulting from the STPR projects was calculated?

Stewart Stevenson: The STPR runs to about 3,800 pages. The biggest part of that, which consists of three large documents that are four or five inches thick, is the strategic environmental assessment. You will find much of the answer in there.

The more obvious question is this: why will the STPR make a positive contribution to the reduction of CO_2 emissions? The answer, of course, is that it will do so because of our significant focus on rail and other public transport interventions. A number of the road interventions will also have positive CO_2 benefits. I have made it clear from the outset that against a backdrop of projected increases in motor traffic of one sort or another, the STPR had to produce a carbon benefit. It is not, however, the only source on which we will need to rely to reduce CO_2 emissions and carbon dioxide equivalent gases from transport; we will also need interventions that are outwith the STPR.

15:15

Rob Gibson: We have discussed with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth the use of the carbon accounting tool. Has a prototype of that tool been applied to the CO_2 calculation?

Stewart Stevenson: We are the first country in the world to start to develop such a tool. The prototype will probably not be available until the middle of next year. We have not used it, but we have considered the nature of the proposed interventions. Carbon accounting is a much broader and more all-encompassing process that will, in its full form, examine secondary and tertiary effects—not just primary ones. In the STPR, we have considered primarily the primary effects.

Rob Gibson: I know that some people's eyes glaze over during discussion of such detail, but we are talking about an issue that is of far greater magnitude than money, because interventions that we make now will make a big difference in the future, if we can get them right. Can you give us any inkling of the key assumptions behind the calculation that the STPR will result in a reduction of between 100,000 and 150,000 tonnes in CO_2 emissions? Over what timescale are those savings expected?

Stewart Stevenson: Mr Anderson will deal with that, if he can find the answer.

Rob Gibson: I am sorry that I have not had time to read the large documents yet; I hope that someone has.

Des McNulty: Happy Christmas.

David Anderson (Transport Scotland): I and my colleagues have read it, I am afraid.

Rob Gibson's point about the assessment and the figure of 100,000 to 150,000 tonnes is related to the transport model for Scotland and our use of the best tool that we have, which is a mechanism for calculating CO_2 emissions and carbon dioxide equivalents. We have used the best model that one can use. One of the challenges when using that model is that, notwithstanding that some of the interventions are extremely big, they make a remarkably small difference at national level in terms of CO_2 emissions. We have used the best available tool to come up with the aggregation.

The second question was about timescales. The aggregation assumes that all 29 schemes will be fully implemented. Quite honestly, if one were to do the calculation on any other basis, one would be starting to play so many different tunes that it would become meaningless.

Rob Gibson: So we are talking about an overall figure, the timescale for which extends until the end of the STPR.

Stewart Stevenson: Correct.

Rob Gibson: What impact will the expansion of Glasgow and Edinburgh airports, which the national planning framework identifies as national developments, have on the predicted reductions in Scotland's transport greenhouse gas emissions?

Stewart Stevenson: The national planning framework—which is, of course, a different document—focuses on improving the surface transport connections to Edinburgh and Glasgow airports. It is interesting that while Edinburgh airport has among the highest proportions of passengers arriving at an airport by public transport, is also one of the fastest-growing airports, which justifies our belief that the provision of good public transport as the preferred mode of travel to airports need not inhibit airports' economic success.

Will the airports expand over the national planning framework period to 2030? We must protect their ability to do so. The next subject that the committee will discuss—high-speed rail—will fundamentally change the structure, nature and volume of flying from Scotland's central belt airports. However, in planning terms, we cannot afford not to protect the possibility of additional runways at Edinburgh and Glasgow even though the character of flying will change significantly.

Rob Gibson: I understand that. Basically, from what Mr Anderson said, you are telling us that the improvement of the roads to the airports was taken into account in calculating the 100,000 to 150,000 tonnes.

Stewart Stevenson: That is correct.

The Convener: We had been given to understand that the strategic transport projects review would be put through some embryonic form of the carbon assessment tool.

Stewart Stevenson: Yes, it shall be.

The Convener: The answer that you gave a few moments ago did not give much detail about that.

Stewart Stevenson: As the tool becomes available, we will seek to create a balance sheet of all our interventions across all policy areas. That will take a significant amount of time. It is a prototype tool and, at the early stages, we will need to assess rigorously whether it gives us the kind of information that will inform policy making adequately. I suspect that it will continue to be refined over quite a long time, but other jurisdictions are showing considerable interest in what we are doing. That interest will be welcome, particularly if those other jurisdictions start to pick up some of our early work, because what they do will inform us and help us continue to refine our balance sheet. The review is a major set of interventions for the Government and I expect the carbon assessment tool to be used to refine our understanding of the impact of what we propose.

The Convener: So the carbon balance sheet for transport will consider the projects or interventions in the STPR and may, presumably, come up with a figure that is different from 100,000 to 150,000 tonnes.

Stewart Stevenson: Assessing the carbon balance of transport involves a great deal more than simply considering the STPR. We need to look at the current state of transport's contribution to CO_2 equivalent gases and consider what the projections are, separate from the STPR, for the growth or otherwise in various kinds of traffic on our roads, such as goods traffic and private car traffic. All of that has to be part of the carbon balance sheet, as well as the change that is effected by projects that we initiate. Even if we did nothing that is in the STPR, transport would remain one of the significant emitters of carbon dioxide equivalent gases, and we need to understand and measure the effects of that so that we can formulate policies that can deal with it.

The Convener: I am just trying to understand the methodology—which we may be able to get at page 2,400 and whatever—that has been used to derive the 100,000 to 150,000 tonnes. In comparison with the methodology that is being developed, which we have not yet seen, that figure must be a rule of thumb.

David Anderson: It is actually a small number—

The Convener: Yes, 100,000 tonnes is a small number.

David Anderson: I point you to page 18 of report 4. The figure is arrived at using the best tool

that we have at present—the methodology that we and the DFT use to calculate carbon emissions. That very much forms the basis of our work, and we try to use it at a national level, which is the challenge. Coming up with carbon benefits and carbon accounting on individual schemes is slightly more straightforward than aggregating it up to a national benefit.

Stewart Stevenson: To state the obvious, what drives our seeking to develop a new way of accounting is a recognition of the need to have a better-founded understanding.

The Convener: Understood. On the figure of 100,000 tonnes, it was reported by at least one media source that that had been stated as a 100,000 tonnes cut per year. Are you saying that it is a cut of 100,000 to 150,000 tonnes over the lifetime of the STPR?

Stewart Stevenson: No. It is per year, but that rate of reduction will be achieved only after the completion of all 29 interventions. In other words, it is not every year between now and the end of the STPR. Clearly, we need to complete the projects to get the benefit, but when all the interventions that we have described are complete, the estimate we currently have is 100,000 to 150,000 tonnes per year at that point.

The Convener: Right. So it is a reduction of 100,000 to 150,000 tonnes on the annual carbon emissions account rather than 100,000 down one year, another 100,000 down the next year and another 100,000 down the following year.

Stewart Stevenson: Correct. I would be cautious about using the word “account”, because of the way in which it is used in the Climate Change (Scotland) Bill.

The Convener: Okay; so if all the projects and interventions are put in place, we are talking about something like 1 per cent of the transport emissions for Scotland.

Stewart Stevenson: Correct.

The Convener: Which is pretty much in line with the 1 per cent a year reduction in recent years, apart from last year.

Stewart Stevenson: This is an additional reduction over any other interventions. The convener is correct to point to the scale. That is precisely why I made the point that we cannot rely on the STPR for all the reductions that we require in transport. We will require other interventions.

The Convener: Do you think that those out there in wider civic Scotland who are excited by the idea of an ambitious programme on climate change might have expected the STPR to make a more substantial contribution?

Stewart Stevenson: My clear instruction to those who have been working on the STPR was that it must make a positive contribution to the climate change agenda. While that has resulted in what is not, in percentage terms, for transport, a huge contribution, it is probably one of the first of such programmes that makes a contribution on anything like this scale. I am pleased that we have this 100,000 to 150,000 tonnes per year reduction.

The Convener: Does that express the urgency that is required on climate change?

Stewart Stevenson: I return to what I said earlier. We have to have other interventions that are not STPR driven. Those interventions will be of importance to the climate change agenda.

The Convener: We look forward to those.

How and when does the Scottish Government intend to respond to the Audit Scotland report on the ScotRail franchise, which was debated in the chamber last week?

Stewart Stevenson: I shall be appearing in front of the Public Audit Committee, to which the report was sent, and will spell out the details of our response. Although there are issues for action for the Government, we have been told that the franchise is performing extremely well and that the extension of the franchise has delivered a significant benefit to public transport in Scotland. I am delighted that Audit Scotland has come to that view.

The Convener: Has the Government learned any lessons from the process by which the extension decision was reached? Given the public and political response to the process, if there were another round of letting a franchise extension, would the Government do things differently?

Stewart Stevenson: The public response has been largely supportive. People see the benefits. The political response might be otherwise. We will take account of the motion that was passed by Parliament last week that suggests that the previous Administration was probably incorrect in 2004 in failing to incorporate criteria by which any extension should be granted. I am sure that that will be one of the key issues that we will take account of in the refranchising next time, and the contract that will flow from it. In that respect, Audit Scotland has identified issues that we should take account of in the new agreement, after refranchising.

The Convener: I thank the minister and his officials for taking the time to answer questions on the STPR. We will take a five-minute break.

15:30

Meeting suspended.

15:35

On resuming—

High-speed Rail Services Inquiry

The Convener: Item 3 is our inquiry into the potential benefits of high-speed rail services. We will take evidence from Stewart Stevenson, Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change—long time no see, minister, and thank you for joining us—Malcolm Reed, chief executive of Transport Scotland; and Claire Keggie, head of rail policy at Transport Scotland. I welcome the officials to the meeting.

We will kick off with a fairly general question. Does the Scottish Government support the development of a high-speed rail network for the United Kingdom and, if so, why?

Stewart Stevenson: Yes, we support that, because we believe that it would have substantial economic benefits and key climate change advantages.

The Convener: It has "key climate change advantages". Perhaps members will ask you to expand on that. What discussions has the Scottish Government had—either you or your officials—with counterparts in the UK Government about the issues that might need to be addressed in the development of a high-speed rail project? How will any future dialogue be progressed?

Stewart Stevenson: I am pleased to say that, within a few days of coming into office at the Department for Transport, Lord Adonis arranged to speak to me. It is clear that there is, perhaps for the first time, a sense of common purpose on the development of high-speed rail. He will come to Scotland for discussions with me in January, I think—the dates have yet to be fixed. He has already told me that he is taking a keen interest in the deliberations of the committee and I think that he plans to make an appropriate contact during his visit. Discussions of substance are at a very early stage at ministerial level, but now that we have a shared sense of the need to create further high-speed rail within the UK and for that to benefit Scotland, we have a way forward. I will ask Malcolm Reed to tell you about the discussions between officials.

Malcolm Reed (Transport Scotland): We have regular contact with the DFT—my colleague Claire Keggie manages that on a day-to-day basis. In common with a DFT counterpart, I have observer status on the Greengauge21 public interest group. We are well aware of what the Greengauge21 campaign is proposing in relation to high-speed rail. Across the piece, we are well advised about what is happening south of the border. I echo the minister's comment that it is early days and quite a lot of dialogue is still to be had.

The Convener: Minister, you said that there was a shared sense that further high-speed rail is required. Many of the witnesses who support the development of high-speed rail spoke about the need for a shared vision to be spelt out clearly by both Governments. They expressed concern that that simply was not the case, or had not been the case until now. Do you agree with that assessment? Is the position likely to change in the near future?

Stewart Stevenson: I think that the vision has been clear. It really is not for me to speak on behalf of the DFT or the Administration at Westminster, but I think that they would acknowledge that their key rail issue has been easing the commute into London and other major cities in England and Wales. That has been the focus of their interest and their rail engagement. Faced with a number of challenges, they have also sought to manage costs tightly, and only recently has there been a change in emphasis with regard to the value of making investments in railways. The comments from witnesses that you mention are probably not unrealistic—a shared sense of vision has not been developed.

In a strict sense, I do not have responsibility for the rail tracks or for cross-border services. When the opportunity has existed, we have made clear our desire for faster rail links between central Scotland and London, involving a reduction in journey times to around the three-hour mark, which is the tipping point for getting real modal shift in people's journey plans to the south.

Other things can be done. Yesterday, the first Virgin train left Glasgow for London on a service that is a bit faster but, more fundamentally, has been rescheduled to get people to London in time for the business day. I hope that a range of interventions will continue to be made in the meantime but, in the long term, I want to develop a sense of shared vision. I will discuss that with Andrew Adonis, and I have a reasonable expectation that we will be able achieve it.

The Convener: You mention the three-hour mark as an aspiration. A number of witnesses have said that the three-hour mark is a theoretical tipping point, as journeys that are shorter than three hours are more likely to attract a modal shift from aviation. We have heard that, with improvement of the existing west coast line, the current journey time of a little over four hours could be reduced to three hours and 45 minutes. If that was achieved, as it might be, would there not be concern among users of suburban rail routes and stations around Scotland about the commitment of a substantial amount of money—people have suggested £20 billion or £30 billion—

and of a substantial amount of time in order to shave 45 minutes off the route to London, while other services might be crying out for such an investment?

Stewart Stevenson: You are right to identify that tension. I would add to that the need to ensure that we have good facilities for freight services. By getting more freight on to our railways, we can make substantial changes to the carbon agenda. Although we need to try to persuade people to make fewer journeys in certain respects, we do not necessarily have to reduce the amount of freight; we have to ensure that it moves in a way that is more efficient and effective. The railway is the way to do that.

I referred earlier to my routine meeting yesterday with Iain Coucher, the chief executive of Network Rail. Network Rail's early thoughts are that, in order to deliver, we need to build a different and separate railway, rather than improving the current railway system, because there would otherwise be operational conflicts between suburban needs—and, for that matter, goods traffic needs—and the needs of a high-speed network.

In financial terms, you are right that there is a tension relating to whether making investments in high-speed rail will come at the cost of making investments in the commute, opening new stations and so on. That fundamental discussion needs to be held. High-speed rail is probably still a little further up the Scottish agenda than it is in England and Wales, but we will meet Lord Adonis and find out what he thinks.

15:45

It is worth making the general point that, as far as funding is concerned, Network Rail is seeking to be less dependent on Government and more dependent on the market. Although that will allow it to get the capital needed for investments, it still very much falls to Government to provide—through support for the rail operating companies and hence payments to meet track access charges—the revenue that eventually repays that capital investment. Such an approach does not get the issue entirely out of the in-tray of whatever Government might be power, but it might show that Network Rail has the financial capacity to make these major investments which, I should add, will happen over quite a long period of time.

Charlie Gordon: The minister has already made much mention of discussions with Network Rail. Have the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland had any more formal involvement with Network Rail's new lines programme?

Claire Keggie (Transport Scotland): I have been attending meetings of the new lines study group on behalf of Transport Scotland. Only a couple of meetings have taken place and Network Rail is still at a very early stage of the process, but we are engaging in it.

Charlie Gordon: Earlier, the committee examined the minister and his officials about the strategic transport projects review. Was any consideration given to high-speed rail development in that process?

Stewart Stevenson: For me, the issue is ultra vires as it concerns cross-border services. However, we are starting to engage in parallel.

Because of the difference of priorities up to now, the subject has not received a particularly warm welcome. However, now that we have reached the end of consideration of the strategic transport projects review, the climate has changed materially. I hope that that will be sustained.

Charlie Gordon: I should remind the minister that he has responsibility over some cross-border services—the ScotRail sleepers, for example.

Stewart Stevenson: Okay.

Charlie Gordon: Moving on, I will not read out the original question that we were given, because it has been drawn to my attention that high-speed rail is referred to in the new version of the national planning framework. Indeed, it is worth highlighting paragraph 121 of that document, which mentions the possibility of making a rail journey from Inverness to Marseille in the course of a day—now there is a suggestion for a committee visit; of course, we should take our sandwiches. However, the last sentence of paragraph 121 says:

> "The Scottish Government will pursue discussions with the UK Government on the development of a high-speed rail link to reduce journey times between Central Scotland and London to under 3 hours and provide direct rail services to the Continent."

In our discussions in the previous item, it was a moot point whether certain things had been made explicit in the new version of the national planning framework. However, I am very encouraged to find this reference to high-speed rail. Presumably, you are at one with the committee in genuinely trying to find ways to push forward this concept.

Stewart Stevenson: Very much so. In fact, I believe that our diary shows that, over the coming months, either I or my officials will speak on this subject at two or three conferences.

We have raised the issue in a series of different forums. For example, I mentioned it at this year's annual dinner of the Rail Freight Group in London; I have raised it with Deutsche Bahn which, as the owner of English Welsh & Scottish Railway and Chiltern Railways, is interested in the matter; and I have also spoken to the all-party parliamentary rail group at Westminster. There has been a series of

engagements on this subject and our assessment of the committee's work is that we see things pretty much as the committee appears to. It is not for me to anticipate the committee's conclusions, but I would be somewhat surprised if you do not come out with a ringing endorsement of the idea that high-speed rail should form part of our way forward. If that was the case, the Government would be very pleased and would draw on the committee's useful work.

Charlie Gordon: The minister anticipated my supplementary question. After today's evidence session, the committee will turn its attention to the contents of its report. Could the committee's work add value and dovetail effectively with the direction in which, according to the national planning framework, the Government appears to be going?

Stewart Stevenson: I am not privy to what the committee is going to put into its report, but I would be surprised if it does not add value. I repeat what I said in my conversation with Andrew Adonis, who is also taking a close interest in the committee's work. The committee's report will not simply inform the Administration in Edinburgh; there is every chance that it will inform the Westminster Administration. It is not for me to guide the committee in any way, but I hope that, when you are drawing up your report, you will be conscious of the widespread interest that goes beyond this Parliament and Government.

Rob Gibson: I will pursue the idea that we need to be a little bit more specific with our proposals. Should the development of high-speed rail feature in the next Scottish high-level output specification?

Stewart Stevenson: We have already started work on the next HLOS for the strategic control period from 2014 to 2019. The strategic transport projects review will feed into that.

We should certainly think about high-speed rail. The HLOS is essentially about funding. I suspect—although it is not for me to overanticipate at this stage—that, in the period to 2019, we will still be some way short of making the substantial capital investments that will materially influence the HLOS. I would dearly love it to be otherwise, by the way, but substantial planning issues will be associated with it. We would be entirely content if there was something about high-speed rail in the HLOS.

Of course, we contribute to the HLOS, as does the DFT. Last time round, our contribution contained three tiers of work to identify flexibility and give us room for manoeuvre, or a pot of money, if you like, that we could spend in smaller amounts as it became available. Of course, when we were working on the HLOS that went out last year, we were looking at the period until 2014. I would welcome it if planning for high-speed rail could be brought forward to enable capital sums to be spent.

Improvements in the south of England would benefit us, but improvements in Scotland would be even better. I hope that there is a shared sense of purpose between the Westminster and Scottish Administrations. We can look across the Irish Sea to see the successful working partnership to improve the railway between Belfast and Dublin, although that is not a high-speed railway. We should be able to achieve the same sense of common purpose.

Rob Gibson: Is there any possibility of putting the high-speed railway line in the Scottish Government's list of priorities for transport investment?

Stewart Stevenson: The bottom line is that we need to have a plan, even if it is a high-level plan. Will the line be on the east or west coast? Will it stop at Leeds, as certain people have suggested?

Rob Gibson: On the way south?

Stewart Stevenson: Indeed, on the way south.

That is exactly the point. I genuinely believe that we have a range of practical issues to sort out. Is high-speed rail to be an improvement of existing lines, or a new line? That fundamental issue must be sorted out quite early in the process. At this stage, I am not sufficiently well informed to have a view; I may have a view instinctively, but I certainly do not have a reasoned answer to the question. However, I can see some of the reasons why Network Rail is steering politicians towards having a new railway. There may be a slight danger of getting ahead of ourselves and making decisions before we have sufficient information to ensure that they are robust enough to take forward. Ultimately, we must always make decisions with imperfect and incomplete information but, at the moment, the amount of information that we have is well short of allowing us to make decisions.

Rob Gibson: We heard evidence that the cost and disruption of the west coast main line upgrade could not be countenanced on the east coast, and many witnesses strongly recommended building a new line. In the strategic transport review, you refer to improvements to the line between Carstairs and Glasgow that might help that process. You say that a plan is needed, but do you not think that we need to have an idea of what the route should be? The speeding up of the line between Glasgow and Edinburgh will take care of a local issue, but the need to get from Glasgow to the south in a reasonable time, without adding on time by going through Edinburgh, seems to point to a route from a central point between the two termini, possibly at Carstairs. Would it not be

useful for us to firm up that plan, if it appears that that is the best way of getting a new railway built?

Stewart Stevenson: I would certainly want any high-speed rail link to connect our two major central belt cities to the south, by whatever means. Carstairs is a logical place to do that, in terms of the existing rail network—we certainly need to have a plan.

You mentioned the impact of works on the rail network. One of the challenges that Network Rail faces—it has heard this from the Office of Rail Regulation and others, as well as from me—is to move to true seven-day working that does not involve shutting the railway. If we have two-way signalling on a lot of the rail network, trains can be run on the wrong track. Many other railway authorities in Europe are able to keep lines open through single-line working. There are huge opportunities for Network Rail to change the way in which it does engineering to cause that to happen. In addition, there should be more working at night, where that is consistent with not causing unacceptable nuisance to neighbours. Much of the work that we are talking about is not in urban settings but between cities.

The Office of Rail Regulation has suggested that, in the next control period, Network Rail must achieve a 21 per cent efficiency saving on its present operation by adopting good practice from elsewhere in Europe. Even if it does so, it will still be 30 per cent behind broadly comparable railway networks elsewhere in Europe on efficiency. A range of steps can be taken to enable us to develop new railways or upgrade existing railways in a less disruptive way. That is part of the refrain from this minister and Administration and, increasingly, from the Westminster Administration. We do not see matters differently in that respect.

Rob Gibson: In Scotland we have a lot of experience of running trains both ways on single tracks, especially on 60 per cent of the line from Glasgow to Inverness and beyond, so we may be able to help Network Rail quite a bit in that regard. However, I want to get a firmer idea of the early development of the Scottish section. Giving us a steer on how to get that in place might help our inquiry considerably because it would at least give us a start.

16:00

Malcolm Reed: We are all aware of the example of the two sections missing each other on the American transcontinental railway. We have to be clear that what we propose connects with what eventually emerges on the DFT side of the border. The minister referred earlier to the difference of emphasis and perspective. We must understand that the DFT will look at the issue in a slightly different context. It will look at a network that suits the whole of England, whereas we will naturally concentrate on the connection south. It would be good to have certainty, but we cannot reach it in isolation from the DFT.

Rob Gibson: It would be fine if, similar to the driving in of the golden spike in the Rockies in Canada, the golden spike was driven in at Craigellachie on Speyside, which would mean a slightly extended but nevertheless welcome high-speed rail service.

Alison McInnes: The committee has heard a lot of evidence that the development of a high-speed rail network would bring significant benefit to businesses in Scotland. You touched on that in your first answer. Would you elaborate on what you think the economic benefits to Scotland would be?

Stewart Stevenson: Work that we have done between Edinburgh and Glasgow shows that reducing journey time has a significant economic value. We think that shaving a minute off the Edinburgh to Glasgow route gives an economic benefit of £60 million. That is a high-density route and there are agglomeration benefits from making Glasgow and Edinburgh essentially one community for economic and travel purposes. The model is different, of course, for connecting Edinburgh and Glasgow to London. Nonetheless, it seems clear to us, in advance of doing rigorous analysis, that the same kind of benefits will apply for that route.

If we get down to the magic three-hour figure for the journey time to London, we will unambiguously have a surface transport system that fundamentally changes people's decision about whether to fly or go by train. Choosing the train will have a huge carbon benefit, but it also happens to be cheaper and safer for people to travel by train. There is therefore a range of ways in which business can derive economic benefits from a high-speed rail network.

I would argue, as I am sure others in the room would, that one can work in the train environment. One can sit with a laptop computer at a table or have a meeting around it, provided that it is not one that requires privacy. Flying in an aircraft simply does not give us that kind of opportunity. There will therefore be business benefits at that level as well. Moreover, remaining roughly at sea level when travelling by train means that we do not suffer from the mild effects of anoxia or from dehydration, as we can when travelling in an aircraft. One ends the day rather fitter when travelling by train than when travelling by aircraft.

Alison McInnes: There are comprehensive benefits, then, Mr Stevenson. You touched on the benefits of high-speed rail and of encouraging

modal shift to it by getting the timing right. What are your views on the development of high-speed rail as an alternative to airport expansion?

Stewart Stevenson: We must protect the ability of airports to expand. However, it is clear that, if we have high-speed rail and a journey time of three hours to London, the rational choice will be to travel by rail. If I remember correctly, it was an Alastair Dalton article in today's or yesterday's *Scotsman* that made city centre to city centre comparisons for rail and aviation travel to London. It was suggested that the journey time for aviation is three and a quarter to three and a half hours. My personal experience would suggest that it is probably longer than that, but that is what he came up with. It is clear that the advantage will shift fundamentally to high-speed rail, and people will then want to use the railways.

There is also the psychological barrier of pricing to overcome. People think that flying is cheaper than rail, but it is not. If someone is prepared to book the same time ahead for their rail journey as for their air journey, they find that rail is competitive. We must ensure that that remains the case. As rail benefits from economies of scale—as more people use it and there are more trains on the network—we must contain prices and ensure that there is no economic disbenefit to travelling by rail compared with travelling by air. If we do that, I suspect that rail will be the winner.

The Convener: One of our panels of witnesses focused on the business arguments in favour of high-speed rail, including increased connectivity. In effect, the argument was to have more of everything rather than just an alternative to aviation. I will leave aside pricing, as the business traveller does not always have the option of booking far in advance and may pay hundreds of pounds for a rail ticket if they choose to go first class at short notice, but what is the guarantee that if we invest decades and a substantial amount of money in high-speed rail we will see fewer flights rather than just more of everything?

Stewart Stevenson: The convener asks for a guarantee that cannot be given. In business in particular, people respond to a rational analysis of the opportunities and choices. That is part of what we do. As a minister, I seek to make the appropriate travel choices to the extent that I can, recording what I do and bearing in mind the balance between my need to discharge ministerial responsibilities and my climate change duties. People will increasingly do the same.

No rational person would go through the hassle of getting to an airport in one transport mode, perhaps finding somewhere to park, going through security and check-in facilities, stooging around waiting for the plane—with the uncertainties with aircraft schedules, which are dramatically less reliable than train schedules—getting on the plane, being seated for an hour to an hour and a half, and going through the same hassle at the other end, when the alternative is, if they work in the city centre, to walk down to Waverley station, get on a train, perhaps have lunch on the way down, arrive refreshed and walk or get the tube to their destination. It really is a no-brainer. If we take away the current time advantage that aviation has, I do not see how any rational person will do anything other than travel by train, provided that we give them the schedule and the services on the train that they need.

The Convener: My brain works that way already. Even given the existing services and prices, I far prefer to take the train than go through the rigmarole that you described, but many people disagree. Unless we are willing to squeeze aviation, what is the guarantee that we will have less aviation? Surely the danger is that, as our panel of witnesses from the business community suggested, we will have more of everything—which those witnesses were more than happy with.

Stewart Stevenson: Fundamentally, we will squeeze aviation if we provide high-speed rail. Any rational person will make the appropriate decision. For my part—I have done a quick calculation—since becoming a minister I have made 30 times more rail journeys than flights. As people engage and consider the economy and the efficient use of their time, the rational business traveller will use the train.

The Convener: An individual who is making a choice between two transport modes might well think in that way, but if aviation capacity and rail capacity grow and rail times are reduced, surely there is a danger that there will be increased use of both modes, which would lead not to a carbon saving but to a continued increase in emissions.

Stewart Stevenson: I would be surprised if anyone wanted to increase their flying if there were a substantially better transport option that took less time and was more effective—which would be rail. I do not think that senior management in major companies would allow their staff to do anything other than travel by rail if it were the better option—the one that would get the business done more effectively. By the same token, I think that leisure travellers will make use of the railways. There are all sorts of incentives that are working quite satisfactorily. For example, kids travel free at off-peak times if they are with their parents—that is terrific—and I know from personal experience that the over-55s discounts have been extended throughout Scotland. There are huge incentives that people are picking up in huge numbers. The incentive of a three-hour rail

journey to the south would very substantially change the transport choices that people make.

There are now very few flights between London and Paris, between Paris and Lyon, and between Paris and Marseilles. Why? Because the TGV has fundamentally changed the travel choices that people make. I would be astonished if we did not see the same modal shift if high-speed rail were expanded in Great Britain.

The Convener: I will ask one more question in this area before we move on. I am trying to elicit a response to the evidence that we have heard. The witnesses whose objective in supporting high-speed rail is increased business connectivity—not the replacement of one mode with another—were enthusiastic about high-speed rail. The witnesses whose objective is explicitly to take oil out of transport were cooler about, although not hostile to, high-speed rail. Their arguments seemed to be much more evenly balanced. You will recognise that those two objectives might result in different attitudes towards high-speed rail. Which is the more important objective?

Stewart Stevenson: Those are both important objectives.

The Convener: That is an easy answer. Which is the more important?

Stewart Stevenson: I will develop my answer, convener, if I may.

Transport is the biggest user of oil by a country mile. It is clear that any new rail network would be powered by electricity. With 60GW of tidal energy sitting off the north coast of Scotland, there are huge opportunities.

The issue that one should consider in connection with high-speed rail is the energy efficiency of a particular implementation. If, for the sake of argument, we went for 400mph trains, which would make the journey in one hour rather than three hours, the energy required to propel a train at that speed would rise dramatically. However, as I understand it, there is a sweet spot in terms of energy consumption at around the speed that is needed to make the journey in three hours. The journey would be speeded up, but not to the point at which we would hit the square law regarding the amount of energy that is required to propel a train. As a train's speed is increased, the energy requirement increases—you will be well aware of that.

I will not make a distinction between the two objectives as I think they are both important. High-speed rail gives us the opportunity to address both, which is one of the key reasons why we should promote it.

The Convener: Okay. Let us move on.

16:15

Alex Johnstone: You mentioned connections with Westminster. Will you confirm that you have had preliminary discussions with Theresa Villiers, the shadow transport minister, and with the shadow secretary of state for Scotland?

Stewart Stevenson: Theresa Villiers called on us a couple of months ago. I am pleased by the engagement of a range of political parties at Westminster on the subject that we are considering.

Alex Johnstone: Thank you. What financial commitment is the Scottish Government ready to make towards the development of a UK high-speed rail network?

Stewart Stevenson: As I said, the budgets and the responsibilities—with the exception of the sleeper service—are currently matters for the DFT. Like some members of the committee, I would welcome moves to enable us to integrate infrastructure and the operation of the railway system more tightly. Of course, if we got the budgets that went with such an approach, we would be able to take initiatives. Malcolm Reed made the point well: we cannot develop a railway that crosses the boundary between two Administrations without there being co-operation between both Administrations.

We are given a fixed pot of money under the current arrangements—I would change the arrangements, but that is a matter for another discussion—so, in a sense, the issue does not matter because the money must come from that pot, albeit that we expect Network Rail increasingly to raise private money from the market.

Alex Johnstone: If we progress towards a high-speed rail service, what support or direction will the Scottish Government provide to Network Rail to ensure that improvements to Scotland's conventional rail network maximise the benefits of high-speed rail developments for people who live not just in the central belt, but throughout Scotland?

Stewart Stevenson: We are particularly interested—even in the current environment—in ensuring that people can get to Edinburgh or Glasgow to catch the first train to London. Timetable changes to services from Perth and elsewhere have enabled people to catch earlier trains.

By the same token, if we had high-speed rail we would want to ensure that people whose journey did not start with the high-speed service could make the transition in a way that would enable them to have a whole business day in London or to get back to Edinburgh for a business afternoon,

if that was what they needed. That is a challenge. It is not just about getting new metal on the ground and new trains on the metal.

Alex Johnstone: Does the Scottish Government intend to update "Scotland's Railways", which was a supplement to the national transport strategy, to reflect growing support for high-speed rail development?

Malcolm Reed: Your question takes us back to a previous discussion. As part of the next franchise we will almost certainly want to consult on the content of "Scotland's Railways" and we will expect high-speed services to be mentioned during the consultation.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: What type of technology should use the high-speed lines? The committee has received submissions in support of magnetic levitation.

Stewart Stevenson: As minister, I am technology blind; the important point is what the technology delivers rather than what the technology is. There have been successful implementations of maglev, but there has also been a drawing back from completion of the maglev network in Shanghai, in China. Advocates of maglev think that through innovative funding they can provide options that might relieve central Government of funding difficulties that might otherwise be encountered.

Although I am technology blind, I am interested in ensuring that the choice of a radically different technology does not create difficulties for interchange. That is the challenge for a range of technologies that are not based on the traditional model of iron wheels on iron rails. We certainly do not discount maglev. Ministers have had several meetings about maglev and we are fully engaged in keeping track of what is going on and of the opportunities.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will you ensure that trade unions have early and continuous involvement in developing any high-speed rail projects?

Stewart Stevenson: I make a point of meeting the trade unions fairly regularly. I most recently met the Scottish Trades Union Congress and the relevant unions to discuss a range of rail industry issues two weeks ago. I expect high-speed rail to form part of discussions in the future. I think that I am correct in saying that, three meetings ago, we briefly discussed high-speed rail, but it was not as high up the agenda south of the border then as it is now, so greater opportunities now exist.

The unions are enthusiastic about anything that will increase opportunities for the railway. Unions and staff have been significant players in ensuring that Scotland's railways have been successful in recent years.

Charlie Gordon: We have received evidence, and we have the paragraph that I quoted from the new national planning framework, about the possibility of not just high-speed rail services from central Scotland to London, but onward rail travel on the high-speed line to the continent. Do any impediments to that exist?

Stewart Stevenson: There are some impediments to international rail journeys in Europe. At its behest, I have had discussions with Deutsche Bahn, which is experiencing difficulties moving freight trains from its Daventry depot to Spain, where it has interests. The European rules say clearly that operators of international services should have access through countries, but the practical implementation of that might not be at the level that we want.

Of course, international high-speed rail services operate from London, and we would certainly like to have such services from Scotland. If I remember correctly, international goods trains run from Daventry to Poland and to Germany—perhaps Poland is an aspiration; I do not quite remember. Such traffic is beginning to happen and we encourage it.

The relocation of the high speed 1 terminal, so that it is adjacent to where trains from Scotland arrive in London, at least makes the swap from the traditional train to the high-speed train somewhat simpler today than it was before the new terminal opened. It also brings closer the point at which we could run the service all the way through. However, at the moment if a traveller wants to stay on one train, they must take a high-speed train that stops at London or a traditional train that travels the whole journey. Perhaps sleeper services will offer the first opportunity.

Charlie Gordon: Does through-running to the continent still face security impediments? Some years ago, the UK authorities took the view that domestic and international passengers could not be mixed, although that happens on the continent quite a bit. What is the current operational scene?

Stewart Stevenson: I cannot give you an informed answer, but it is clearly possible: one terminal at Manchester airport satisfactorily mixes domestic and international travellers in one departure lounge. The system photographs domestic travellers and compares them with their photographs as they depart. I experienced that a couple of years ago. However, I am not briefed to give an informed answer on whether that would apply to railways and I do not think that my officials have an answer—I am sorry.

Charlie Gordon: I thought that Malcolm Reed was about to try to give one.

Stewart Stevenson: Perhaps he is.

Malcolm Reed: I am sorry; I do not have any more up-to-date information, but we can ask our colleagues at the DFT and get an answer for you.

Stewart Stevenson: It is a crackerjack question.

The Convener: It is perhaps unfortunate that we did not manage to get a UK minister to give evidence to the committee, but we have the option of discussing issues in writing after we complete the inquiry.

Des McNulty: The upgrade of the west coast main line has been completed at a cost of £9 billion. Are there any lessons to be learned from that process that can be expressed quickly, or would a letter be required?

Stewart Stevenson: There will be a range of lessons to be learned. To be blunt about it, most of them will be for Network Rail and its contractors. We are not the ones who did the project. However, I think that the member is asking me whether we can learn things about the limits to what can be achieved and what it is practical to do within certain timescales. We will certainly seek to learn those lessons.

I do not think that there has yet been a post-implementation review, which might produce a document from which we might learn, but I would be surprised if something that informs us is not produced at some stage, whatever it is called. I am not sure that we have any more substantial information with which to write to you at present, Mr McNulty, unless you insist that we go and look.

Des McNulty: I suppose that there are two sets of issues: one is about the technical implementation of the project, the other is about framing the intentions of the project and identifying suitable financial frameworks for it. The second is probably the more relevant area to pursue within the Scottish Government. It would certainly be interesting to hear in due course what lessons have been learned in that context.

Stewart Stevenson: That is a fair comment. I know that you were absent from the meeting briefly; it might have been while you were out of the room that I made some observations about some things that we are seized of and have been discussing with Network Rail, such as the seven-day railway or 24-hour railway. You might read in the *Official Report* some things that touch on your question.

The Convener: Thank you for your time in both of the evidence sessions that we have had with you today. I also thank your officials. You mentioned that a high-speed railway might be a good place to hold meetings. As we are reaching the end of a session of almost three hours, we would be arriving at King's Cross about now. I just ask that you put in a bid for big tables on the trains.

Agenda item 4 is an opportunity for members to consider the evidence that we have heard in our inquiry. We have already agreed to discuss items 4 and 5 in private.

16:28

Meeting continued in private until 17:15.

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