TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 6 January 2009

Session 3

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TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE
1st Meeting 2009, 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:

Dr Scott Arthur (Heriot-Watt University)
Dr Iain Docherty (University of Glasgow)
Professor David Gray (Robert Gordon University)
Phil Matthews (Sustainable Development Commission Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Alastair Macfie

ASSISTANT CLERK

Clare O'Neill

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee

Tuesday 6 January 2009

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

National Planning Framework

The Convener (Patrick Harvie): Good afternoon, everybody. I welcome you all to the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee's first meeting this year and I wish everybody a happy new year. I remind members and everybody else that all mobile phones and other mobile devices should be switched off.

We have just one agenda item: the proposed national planning framework 2. As members know, Parliament has 60 days to consider the framework, which was laid on 12 December last year. As a secondary committee, we will consider the framework today and at a second evidence session next week, on 13 January, when we will hear from non-governmental organisations, regional transport partnerships and the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change. We will then consider whether to make comments in a report to the Local Government and Communities Committee, which is the lead committee on NPF 2.

I welcome our panel of witnesses: Dr Iain Docherty, who is a senior lecturer at the University of Glasgow's department of management; Professor David Gray, who is from the Robert Gordon University's centre for transport policy; Dr Scott Arthur, who is a senior lecturer at Heriot-Watt University's school of the built environment; and Phil Matthews, who is the senior policy adviser at the Sustainable Development Commission Scotland. I thank you all for joining us and welcome you to the meeting.

I begin with a general question. Do the transport infrastructure provisions of the NPF assist the Government to achieve its stated goal—its so-called central purpose—of supporting sustainable economic growth? I invite the witnesses to kick off in whatever order they feel comfortable with—but somebody had better start.

Professor David Gray (Robert Gordon University): The short answer is yes. The NPF strategy is closely integrated with the strategic transport projects review and the national transport strategy. In that regard, the documents are well integrated. Much thought has been put into how the strategic transport projects review will support the planning framework. The question is not how good the strategy is but how much money is available to fund it and whether it can deliver.

The Convener: Will you speak more specifically about the NPF?

Professor Gray: As I said, the documents are closely integrated. The strategic transport projects review has been developed explicitly to support sustainable economic growth, and that purpose will be achieved if the review is implemented in full. My key concern is the extent to which we can afford to implement the strategy in full. If we cannot afford to do that, the difficult choices that might need to be made might compromise the planning framework.

Dr Iain Docherty (University of Glasgow): I agree with Professor Gray. The proposed national planning framework and the STPR are excellent documents. The United Kingdom Government and other Administrations throughout Europe are already showing lots of interest in both of them and the processes that are behind them, because they are seen as the best in class.

The transport infrastructure proposals in both documents are probably better than we expected at the outset of the process. Such large long-term plans tend to start off with great ideas and high-flying rhetoric but to disappoint in the final document. That does not apply to the two documents, which are well argued and well balanced.

I am particularly pleased by the emphasis on the railway network and its importance for strategic transport between Scotland's major population centres. That is welcome and overdue. Investment in measures such as electrification and reduced journey times rather than in large-scale road expansion is welcome for the environment and for sustainable economic growth.

It is worth saying that the road proposals that both documents contain are quite modest on the capacity enhancement front: they are mostly about safety improvements, although there are one or two schemes that are designed to relieve particular bottlenecks where we know there are economic problems, which is precisely what the economic evidence suggests we should do. In general terms, the plans are excellent, but—as David Gray said—the challenge lies in implementing them and moving them from glossy documents to new schemes on the ground.

The Convener: Dr Arthur?

Dr Scott Arthur (Heriot-Watt University): Your question relates to transportation, which is not my specific field.

The Convener: It relates to transport infrastructure.

Dr Arthur: In a wider sense? Okay. My field covers the drainage of urban areas, from roof surfaces through pipe networks to urban water courses. The proposed NPF covers all the main points—and flooding in particular, which is quite high on the public agenda just now. With regard to deficiencies, there is too much focus on capacity and not enough on water quality impacts and water courses, but that is just my reading of the document. I was slightly disappointed to see that the work in Glasgow is so far down the list of priorities, but I guess that that is based on cost benefit analysis of the projects, whereas I am considering them from an urban drainage perspective.

The Convener: What is the SDC's point of view?

Phil Matthews (Sustainable Development Commission Scotland): We welcome the proposed national planning framework 2, as it is stronger than the previous one on sustainability and sustainable economic growth. It is also stronger in a number of ways than the discussion draft. The general thrust of the text in the document addresses many of the key sustainable development challenges—economic, social and environmental—for Scotland but, as we set out in our written submission, our fundamental concern relates to the apparent lack of alignment among the national developments that are outlined in the appendices of the NPF, some aspects of the STPR and the Government's aspirations to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

The Convener: The SDC has raised concerns in the past about the formulation of the concept of sustainable economic growth as the Government's central purpose, and it has challenged whether the Government has accurately defined what that means. Would you say that that concern still exists in the selection of national developments or in other aspects of the national planning framework document?

Phil Matthews: We said that sustainable economic growth can be compatible with sustainable development but that there are clear tensions that need to be resolved. There are tensions between the focus on economic growth and social and environmental aspirations, which is a primary concern.

The text of the NPF acknowledges a variety of sustainable development issues such as regeneration, energy, climate change and the need to change to a greener infrastructure, but we still have concerns from the detail in the document that a number of the national developments will not contribute to what we would view as a sustainable Scotland.

The national developments will have economic and—in some cases—social benefits, which are welcome. Some will have environmental benefits, which are also welcome. Our particular concern is that the document will lock us into a higher-carbon future, which will mean that in other aspects of policy we will have to make even more radical cuts in emissions than would otherwise be the case.

The Convener: I will move on, but I see that Rob Gibson has a question.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I wonder whether we can correct the notion that the 12 projects are listed in descending order of importance. As I understand it, they are not—Dr Arthur remarked that the Glasgow strategic drainage scheme is number 11, but that does not mean that it is 11th in priority.

Dr Arthur: I stand corrected—thank you.

Rob Gibson: It is an important point.

The Convener: We can discuss any questions about the relative importance that ministers attach to the projects when the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change appears before the committee at the next meeting.

What are the panel members' views on the level and type of consultation that the Government has undertaken in the development of NPF 2? There are two elements to that: the first relates to the consultation that took place on the earlier draft; and the second relates to the changes that have been made to include some of the national developments, which would not have been subject to consultation as they were not included in the earlier draft.

Phil Matthews: We were involved in the consultation process on the draft NPF: we made a submission and we took part in one of the workshops that the Government held. I do not have any particular comment on the consultation process.

One positive change to the draft is that carbon has been included as a factor against which all the national developments will be appraised. That is a welcome step forward.

Dr Docherty: I was a member of the stakeholder panel that the Scottish Government put together to develop the national planning framework, so I have a little inside knowledge of the consultation with other professional stakeholders. My experience on that group was that consultation with local authorities, NGOs and other interested bodies throughout the country was quite strong. That reflects the fact that the planning directorate in the Government has a long tradition of working in partnership with other organisations.

I was well aware, as were others, that there was a strong demand from many individuals and organisations to increase substantially the list of national developments—I think that at one point around 20 or 30 developments were proposed. One of the key strengths of the final document is that the demand to lengthen the list has been resisted. Too often, strategic documents are diluted by the fact that everything that anybody argues for ends up in the final document. The fact that the NPF includes only a dozen developments is positive; it reflects the fact that the Government is concentrating on developments that will genuinely have a national impact and which should appear in the national planning framework as top-level investments. Too often, such plans do not do that; they have too long a list of interventions and, as a result, the important priorities are missed.

The Convener: Are there any other views on the consultation?

Professor Gray: I have nothing to add.

The Convener: Before I invite members to ask supplementary questions, I want to mention some of the written evidence that we have received. We received an evaluation of the consultation process, which states:

"three of the six … objectives stated in the participation statement were not met … and there was poor representation of the general public during the process."

The comments that we have heard so far have focused on the participation of professionals in one sense or another. When the legislation for the national planning framework was considered by the Parliament, one issue that was raised on a number of occasions was the impact on members of the public, who might feel that they do not have as much opportunity to participate in the system if they are not consulted on the NPF. Do the witnesses have any specific views on whether members of the public were adequately involved in the consultation? Is anybody able to counter the assertion to which I referred?

Dr Docherty: I do not have any direct experience of the consultation with the public. This issue reflects the wider debates that we have had since devolution about the kind, scope and size of consultation that the Scottish Government carries out. Perhaps some of the formal consultation mechanisms, such as for the NPF and strategic environmental assessments, crowd out other consultation activity, simply because the legislative and statutory demands of those processes are so onerous. The opportunities exist for individuals, members of the public, NGOs and other organisations to comment at all stages of the process—they are well exercised by the Government—but whether they work in practice is a different question.

Some of the evidence that the committee will have read in relation to this consultation exercise and similar consultations in transport and planning-related fields over the past 10 years or so reflects the idea of consultation fatigue. There are so many consultations that the machinery of Government and, sometimes, the machinery of civic society find it hard to focus on the consultations that are most important. Inevitably, the people who feel that they miss out, perhaps because they cannot find their way through the maze of the consultation architecture, are the ones who express opinions like the one that the convener outlined.

The Convener: Did you want to come in, Mr Matthews?

Phil Matthews: No. I have not been involved particularly closely in the consultation process, so I would not like to comment on it specifically. However, I agree with the general point that Iain Docherty made.

The Convener: Rob Gibson, Alison McInnes and Cathy Peattie have supplementaries.

14:15

Rob Gibson: In the submission from Building Alternatives, Clare Symonds used some rather strong language about the consultation process, which she said fell

"woefully short of best practice."

Frankly, I find it extremely hard to measure practice in the consultation against previous practice, and I wish to demur from such comments.

Could we encourage the people who do such consultations to analyse information from a wider group of people? The small group that was spoken to is not representative of the range of people who were involved in the process, so I do not think that the remarks that have been made are fair. Can the panel suggest how to get past the community councils, which have a particular transport perspective? The general public may respond to e-mails, but how do we get through to more people? Would it suit people to hold meetings at 10 o'clock on a Sunday night rather than during the working week? Can the panellists make any practical suggestions?

Dr Docherty: Not easily. The Government and the previous Executive have been asking the academic community in Scotland and further afield to come up with an answer to precisely that question for several years, if not decades. It is extremely difficult. I have some experience, although not in recent years, of carrying out the consultation appraisal work that has been mentioned.

One of the biggest problems that any organisation, including the Government, faces in creating any kind of plan is the fact that representative organisations tend to be labels for particularly active people who, by definition, tend to have particularly strong views on specific local projects. Part of the skill of good governance both at central Government level and in other organisations is in having the ability to see through, if not past, the objectives and statements of such organisations, which might not be representative. For many years, Governments—not just in Scotland but in the United Kingdom and further afield—have struggled to build consultation processes that are genuinely public and that bring in a wide variety of voices. It is not unique to Scotland that we are still struggling with that problem.

Professor Gray: Wearing one of my other hats, I have an interest in rural local governance. When it comes to rural development, we tend to categorise people as doers, doubters or the disengaged. In any consultation exercise, one will hear from doers and doubters but not from the disengaged, who tend to be the silent majority. The difficulty is how to reach those people who represent the views of the masses but who, in general, cannot be bothered or are not interested or engaged in specific issues. That is the challenge. Reaching those people could be done, but it would probably cost quite a lot of money.

The Convener: Are there any further comments?

Rob Gibson: The panel seems to agree that we should take up Dr Docherty's points about finding ways for Government and others to consult better. Indeed, the process has already begun. Telling people that their performance has been woeful is not a way of solving the problem.

The Convener: We have received the written evidence that we have received. Our purpose today is to hear from the witnesses who are before us.

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): I want to explore something that Dr Docherty said and to find out what the other panellists think. He congratulated the Government on designating only 12 projects as national developments. The Government has made it clear that it wants to increase wealth throughout Scotland and that it wants the whole country to flourish. Map 10, which is on page 64 of proposed national planning framework 2, shows all the designated national developments. If you take out some electricity grid reinforcements, you see that there are virtually no national developments above the central belt. I appreciate that you do not want to have a plethora of national projects, but does the document miss anything out?

Dr Docherty: You suggest taking out the improvements to the electricity infrastructure, but increasing Scotland's renewable electricity generation potential and the potential to export that energy is probably one of the most important steps that we can take, as it will not only help to make Scotland a greener and more prosperous place but enable the benefits of that wealth to be spread to the areas of the country where a lot of the energy will be generated and captured, which tend to be the marine and rural environments of the far north. Although the electricity infrastructure might be only one of the 12 projects and might be only a few lines on the map, it is very significant.

The list of 12 interventions is appropriate and is one of the strengths of the framework, because in many ways the framework is saying that a lot of Scotland's strategic infrastructure is old and life expired, and rather than focus on shiny new pieces of kit, which is what many people reading such plans seek, there should be a focus on matters such as the Glasgow metropolitan drainage scheme and the west of Scotland railway improvements, so that we make the best use of the existing infrastructure. The correct first port of call of any sustainable development strategy is to examine our existing infrastructure and consider how we can direct our economic development strategies towards making best use of it, because that is where the sunk investment is, in both financial and carbon terms. Although everybody would have a slightly different list, because we all have our own preferences, the 12 schemes represent a reasonable set of priorities.

Professor Gray: I know from talking to my colleagues in the north-east of Scotland that there tends to be a degree of irritation that it is assumed that the central belt will be the driving force of the Scottish economy. What about North Sea oil and the global expertise in energy recovery and new energy that that facilitates? Alison McInnes has given me an open goal to kick a ball into, and I am happy to oblige.

I echo Iain Docherty's comments on the 12 schemes: everyone might have a different list, but overall the strategy is fairly sound.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): Dr Docherty rightly said that over the past few years, consultation has been an issue, but NPF 2 refers to participation. To me, participation means having a blank sheet of paper in considering the way forward and involving the disengaged. There seems to be concern about that, but if we are serious about participation we need to consider such an approach. However, if NPF 2 is about consultation with the great and the good and the planners, we should say so. Although there is a lot of good stuff in NPF 2, it seems to me that it has not been about participation; it appears to have

been about experts, local government planners and others getting together to agree a paper that has already been written and a decision that has already been made. Does the panel have a view on that?

Professor Gray: With consultation there is a balancing act. At one end of the scale there could be consultation on everything, and at the other end of the scale we could say that the nature of parliamentary democracy is that we elect representatives such as yourself to make decisions on our behalf. In reality, we are somewhere in-between. The civil service produces appropriate documents for approval by our elected representatives and we choose to consult on some matters and not others. Where on that spectrum the Government has chosen to place its marker is open to debate but, as Iain Docherty said, there is consultation fatigue and the Government cannot consult on everything. There could perhaps have been more public consultation on NPF 2, but the other way of looking at the matter is that that is what we trust our elected representatives and committees such as this one to do on our behalf.

Cathy Peattie: So it is consultation rather than participation.

Professor Gray: I think that consultation is participation. What tends to happen and what can obscure proper consultation is that the doers, the doubters and the lobby groups get involved. You could spend a lot of money trying to get to the disengaged, but would it be worth it when we have elections every few years to elect people to do the job on our behalf?

Cathy Peattie: I could talk about the issue all afternoon, but I will not.

The Convener: I guess that the concern is that this is the first time that elected representatives at parliamentary level have been asked to express a view on planning developments that have been given national priority and national infrastructure status. Previously, members of the public would have been able to participate in the planning process, to a greater or lesser degree, at a local level when a development was proposed. If ministers sign off the NPF as it stands, such developments will be given a status in the planning system that they have not had. However, do you agree that, although the legislation that led to the planning process that we are involved in was designed to deliver greater up-front public involvement, there is concern that there will be less public involvement than there would have been under the previous scenario, in which ministers did not designate the status of planning developments?

Dr Docherty: That is a valid criticism. However, you have to take a philosophical or almost ethical view about where the balance lies. The way in which this conversation is going reminds me of some of the debates that we had a few years ago around the third-party right of appeal.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the jurisdictions, countries and Administrations that are best at implementing transport infrastructure schemes engage in less consultation than do other places. One of the most difficult things for any Government to do is to say no. If you ask people what they want out of the planning system, they will say that they want more infrastructure and personal benefit but that they do not want to pay for it. The difficult task of the planning system is to somehow come up with an affordable balance of interventions that give the greatest possible benefit to everyone in the country and accord with the strategies and policies of the Government of the day. The job of this committee and the Parliament is to scrutinise that process.

There are difficult choices to be made. I take on board the comments of Cathy Peattie and others that we are perhaps moving towards a situation in which there is less consultation, but our infrastructure is in something of a mess, because we have not invested in it sufficiently over several decades. Another of the strengths of the NPF is that it identifies and prioritises the things that we need to fix. I will stick my neck out and say that we need to get on with fixing those things, and therefore consultation might not be as valuable as we would like.

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): As you say, one of the concerns is that the details of some projects will not be discussed as fully as they might have been. For example, with regard to project 3, which bears the heading "Strategic Airport Enhancements", there will be a degree of consensus on infrastructure enhancements relating to public transport access to airports, but that might not be the case if the enhancements involve the construction of additional runways. There is concern that putting content under that relatively anodyne heading will be a way of getting around the need for a proper planning inquiry.

Similarly, with regard to project 8, which bears the heading "New Power Station and Transhipment Hub at Hunterston", there is a debate around whether clean coal technology can be developed quickly enough to be considered as a replacement for the current process. Some of us might suggest that it would be better to go for nuclear technology or something else instead. There is a danger that the NPF might mean that we are unable to sensibly discuss individual projects, because the Government could say that

the approval of the NPF implies approval of everything that might be done under it.

Dr Docherty: I agree that the heading "Strategic Airport Enhancements" probably is deliberately vague. However, given environmental considerations and the medium-term economic situation, I believe that the focus on aviation expansion is very much yesterday's policy, and that changing the mix of destinations and improving people's experience of the existing aviation paths to Scotland might become more important again in the next few years. Improving the traveller experience by enhancing hubs and gateways would be valuable. I do not know whether vague terminology has been chosen deliberately to capture that potential future and to leave open the door to capacity management, but it is entirely reasonable to use such terminology in a plan with a 20-year timescale.

14:30

From previous comments, it occurs to me that there is a complex interplay between devolved and reserved competences. NPF 2 is a Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament document, but it impinges on some areas—notably energy and aviation—where Westminster legislation is still important. Perhaps the deliberate vagueness of the language that is used in relation to airports reflects the fact that the Scottish Government is unable to say some things about aviation planning around the major hubs because it sees that issue as ultra vires. I do not know whether that is the case, but it would be perfectly reasonable for the Government to take that position, given the current distribution of powers.

The same point applies to energy. We all know about the debate that is taking place not just on the mix but on the location of energy facilities. I do not want to talk about particular forms of energy generation, because that is way beyond my expertise, but I will make a brief comment on Hunterston. Hunterston is already a major site of energy generation, has excellent deep-water port facilities and is connected to the rail network, so it makes sense for the location to be safeguarded strategically, if not enhanced. It is quite reasonable for it to be included in the national planning framework.

Professor Gray: I agree with Iain Docherty that the language is necessarily vague, given that we do not know how much money will be available to spend on projects such as improved public transport access to Aberdeen airport. For many years there has been lobbying for enhanced rail access to the airport, but that is an expensive option. We may have to look at the cheap option, which is to improve bus access to the airport. We need to be vague at this point, as we do not know how much money we will have to spend.

Alison McInnes: In your opening remarks, you touched on the relationship between the strategic transport projects review and the national planning framework. Can we also look at the relationship between the framework and the national transport strategy? Will the transport and land use policies and developments that are set out in the national planning framework enable the Scottish Government to achieve the three key strategic outcomes that are set out in the national transport strategy, of which I do not need to remind you?

Phil Matthews: As I indicated, our main concern relates to the desired outcome on emissions levels. The STPR states that it will lead to a saving of around 100,000 tonnes of CO_2 per annum, but if we dig quite deep we find that that figure relates to a business-as-usual scenario that involves significant emissions increases. The STPR as it stands will lead to an increase in emissions from the current level, which means that it is not in line with one of the aspirations of the national transport strategy.

Dr Docherty: NPF 2 says a lot of the right things, and the national transport strategy says most of the right things. For those of us who were involved in some way in preparing the NTS, it is notable that it has survived the change of Government to an extent that many of us did not expect. That tends to emphasise the robustness of the conclusions that underlie it.

Earlier, my colleagues made the point that there is a big difference between what we put in our plans and what we do in policy—a plan is only as good as its implementation. We are still making significant public investment decisions, especially on land use, that are not consistent with the aspirations of the national transport strategy or the new national planning framework. The siting of certain large hospitals in Glasgow is an excellent example of that. Although the facility in which £892 million is being invested is excellent, it is in completely the wrong place from a transport perspective. The first thing that we must do is stop making mistakes and stop making matters worse. Once we have done that, we can try to ensure that the aspirations of all the planning documents are writ large—literally as well as metaphorically—in implementation on the ground.

That does not apply to big public investment alone: difficult decisions also require to be made about, for example, the siting of new residential developments. We are still building too many houses and public and other services, such as out-of-town retailing, in the wrong places. We have probably had between 20 and 25 years of policy rhetoric that said we need to stop such building, but I do not yet see any genuine evidence that we are making things better rather than worse.

Des McNulty: I agree strongly with what Iain Docherty just said. I will pick up on two specific points. The first is the hospital situation in Glasgow. I was a member of the health board more than 10 years ago when decisions were being made about the siting of new hospital developments in Glasgow. I think that at that time I was the strongest opponent of the Southern general as the site for the new south Glasgow hospital. It is more than 10 years since that development was agreed, yet the strategic transport planning framework does not address the transport consequences of the hospital being on that site and how on earth people are going to get to it from the north and south sides of the city.

There seems to be a lack of interplay between transport decisions and health decisions. I agree with Iain Docherty that we should approach such decisions the other way round and make decisions that fit with transport. Given that the decision about the hospital site was not made in that way, should the transport strategy be adapted to take account of the fact that the decision has been made and money is being committed to it?

The second issue is that part of the argument for a new Forth crossing is that it is needed as a result of decisions that go back over 20 years to have residential suburbs in Fife, on the other side of the Forth. I am not making a political point; if we continue to make such decisions, all that we will do is increase the required transport capacity on that crossing.

Dr Docherty: I defend the transport sector by saying that colleagues, including some of us round this table, have argued for a long time that other sectors that make public policy need to think about the transport impacts of big investment decisions about, for example, health care and new hospitals. It should not be up to the transport community to say that loudly or stridently; it is up to other people to listen. Sadly, we are not there yet.

More accurately, and less politically, the amount of movement across the Forth is effectively the price that we are paying for the Edinburgh green belt. Over a number of decades, decisions have been made about protecting particular parts of the country for valid local reasons, but one of the unintended consequences of those decisions is the level of commuting across the Forth that we now have and the amount of capital expenditure that the Scottish public will have to invest to ensure that we keep the current level of mobility across the river.

Returning to today's discussion, I think that the new NPF probably takes a more rounded and holistic view of the interplay between some of the big issues than any equivalent document has done in the past. However, David Gray and I, and other colleagues, have written about what we call the strategy gap—our strategies say all the right things, but the machinery of Government is not able to deliver them. I fear that we still have to face up to that challenge in the iteration of new documents.

Professor Gray: The strategies might be sound, but often some of the important details have to be implemented by local authorities. Occasionally, our local authorities are not as well aligned with the national interest as they could be. That can cause problems, which is understandable because some tough decisions have to be made by our local authority colleagues about, for example, how one achieves a balanced climate change inventory when building new roads and infrastructure. Such decisions might well be unpopular and unpalatable. Although we might have a national strategy, encouraging or bullying local authority colleagues to sign up to it can be difficult.

Alison McInnes: At the end of last year, the Scottish Government backtracked on its commitment to make the new Forth crossing multimodal and opted instead for a single-mode Forth replacement crossing while keeping the current Forth road bridge open for buses, pedestrians and cyclists. Can I have the panel's views on that new, slimline proposal?

The Convener: There are some coy smiles, but please carry on with your answers.

Professor Gray: The debate—or joke—that I and colleagues such as Iain Docherty have is around how much money will be left for anything else in the strategic transport projects review once the new Forth road bridge has been built. We can front load some of the investment, but only a certain amount of money will be available to build the bridge and the 28 other projects. It therefore makes sense to take a more pragmatic and less expensive approach to building the bridge, which may free up resource that can go to other investments.

Dr Docherty: I preface my remarks by reminding the committee of my role as a non-executive director of Transport Scotland, which is responsible for the STPR and the accelerated Forth replacement crossing work. The role of a non-executive is to advise the agency's chief executive and not to be responsible for the decisions.

Nobody wants to spend money on a bridge that we could do without having to build—that does not get reported in the press. Nobody wants the current bridge to be in the engineering state that it is in. We would much prefer the money that we will have to spend on a replacement crossing to be available for other projects. By saying "we", I hope that I am not being too presumptive; I hope that I am being more generous in trying to sum up the

mood of the transport community in general. We are not trying to build a new bridge for the sake of it; we are doing so because there is a difficult problem with the existing one.

As the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth has said in the past, the position that we are in now—that of movement towards scoping out what the replacement crossing might look like—is the insurance policy if all attempts to remediate the existing bridge fail. We are not doing the work for the sake of it; we do not want to build a new piece of kit just because we can. We would much prefer to do other things and spread the investment around Scotland. However, we are where we are, and we have a problem that we must fix.

Something else that does not get reported adequately in the press is the level of professional expertise that Transport Scotland and other partners in the Government have brought to the table from countries across Europe and the world that have dealt with similar problems. Therefore, the expertise available to the Government that has been closely involved in the design of the bridge thus far is not just internal and does not just come via the transport, engineering and consultancy community. There has also been robust peer analysis behind the scenes by senior engineers who have done similar projects elsewhere in the recent past. They all think that we are doing the right thing.

The Forth replacement crossing that has been announced will be a replacement for the existing bridge and will have no new capacity for car traffic. That is to be welcomed, because the last thing that we want to do is give an additional stimulus to short-distance, cross-river commuting, which does not help sustainable economic growth in any way.

I do not think that the committee will be surprised to hear that I believe that the long-term future of the existing bridge is still in doubt in some ways. Once the replacement crossing is up and running and we transfer the existing traffic to the new bridge, we will be in the same position in capacity terms as we are in today. We will then have to begin to think long and hard about the long-term future of the existing structure. It will take a long time to remediate it, and we will have to find the money to do that. In the meantime, however, it will be possible to have a dedicated public transport route on the existing bridge. One of the strengths of that proposal is that it may make it possible to extend the life of the bridge, but only if we reduce its physical capacity so that it has, for example, only two lanes rather than four for many years while the works go on. It will be possible to continue to operate a first-class public transport service across the bridge while the engineering works go on.

What is commonly referred to as the managed crossing strategy is entirely sensible, bearing in mind that there are three Forth crossings in the strategy: the existing road bridge, the new crossing and the rail bridge. Would we have made different decisions if more money was available? Very possibly, but we are where we are.

Phil Matthews: The two gentlemen to my left, Professor Gray and Dr Docherty, have far greater expertise in the specifics of the proposal. I simply echo Iain Docherty's point that the important thing from our point of view is that although we do not envisage an overall increase in car traffic capacity across the Forth, we envisage an enhancement in public transport. I do not want to say anything more about the specific options that are available for delivering that.

14:45

Alison McInnes: Last month, the minister admitted that, as Dr Docherty said, the Forth replacement crossing project remains predicated on the possibility that the existing bridge might not be available. I am concerned about dedicating the existing bridge to public transport and about how its future closure might impact on those services. Are we being a bit short-sighted by investing in a new bridge long into the future and leaving public transport on a bridge whose capacity we are unsure of?

Dr Docherty: I return to the point that the managed crossing strategy that is being developed envisages that repair work to the existing bridge will be able to take place alongside a continuing public transport service. One of the weaknesses of the existing structure is the design of the deck, which makes it difficult to do routine maintenance while keeping the roadway open. There are technical reasons for that, but, once the general vehicular traffic is taken off and we have only public transport services, other technical tactics for implementing engineering work will become available, so it will be possible to fix the bridge while maintaining a public transport service in a way that is simply not possible while maintaining open access for general vehicles.

Every transport project has an opportunity cost. One of the strengths of the STPR as laid before the Parliament is that it tries, in a way that equivalent plans in the past have not, to address the opportunity costs and the fact that spending money on one project necessarily means that we are not spending money on other projects. We could build a larger Forth replacement crossing but that would mean that we would have even less money to do other transport projects in other parts of Scotland that have equally strong, and sometimes stronger, cases. It is a balancing act.

There are 29 projects in the final STPR, which is a relatively modest list. Something like 1,500 individual proposals were put forward for the 18-month filtering process, which gives you some idea of the consultation task, given the desire of every individual and organisation to have their preferred scheme in the national list. However, every pound that we do not spend on a bridge that is larger than we need is released to be invested in other projects that other parts of the country need. Therefore, the strategy that we now have is entirely defensible and justifiable.

The Convener: In your opening remarks, you spoke about the value of the NPF's emphasis on rail and the inclusion of specific rail projects. If the current uncertainty about the financing of the additional road bridge had a knock-on impact on other projects the value of which you said gave credibility to the framework as a whole, would we have to re-evaluate the overall balance of transport projects that the Government proposes and is able to implement? What would be the implications of that?

Dr Docherty: We would have to re-evaluate that balance. However, we would have to re-evaluate the Government's whole capital project portfolio because it is not necessarily a transport projects issue. A replacement crossing across the Forth is such a large capital project and so fundamental to the operation of many areas of the economy and society that it can be considered much more than a transport project. Therefore, it is fair to say that budgets across the portfolios would have to be examined if what you suggest were to happen.

Railway investment is a complex picture. The Government is able to fund certain parts of railway enhancement through Network Rail, so there is not always a direct read-across between resources lost to the railway and additional expenditure on the roads. Some cash that is available for railway investment through the current industry structure would not be available to invest in the road network. Nonetheless, there are spill-overs, so any decision about funding the Forth replacement crossing will have some impact on the profile of spending elsewhere in the transport network.

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP): Is it technically feasible to operate trams on the existing Forth road bridge?

Dr Docherty: I do not know.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That was nice and short.

The chief planner told the Local Government and Communities Committee that the strategic airport enhancements will mainly involve improvements to surface access to the airports. We touched briefly on the matter and you expressed scepticism about the proposed enhancements, but will you expand on what the heading means to you?

Phil Matthews: We have discussed it with people in the planning department. As Patrick Harvie said, we have just published our annual assessment of how the Government is performing across the range of sustainable development issues, and we mention the airports issue in that document.

The specific proposals in NPF 2 for Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen airports are not just about improving the sustainability of surface access. There is also provision for new departure lounges and other areas to allow for the expansion of passenger numbers. The matter also sits within the west Edinburgh planning framework, which is predicated on a number of land use changes in west Edinburgh and on the fact that the area is a business hub, and those factors can be expected to lead to increased use of Edinburgh airport, too. In fact, that is one of the main reasons for locating the new facilities in west Edinburgh. The proposals in NPF 2 are likely to stimulate growth in use of the airport and not just better access to the facilities.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Might the proposals involve changing the use of the airport away from short-haul flights from Edinburgh to London towards increased connectivity to Europe and so on? The proposals will not necessarily increase use of the airport; instead, they might change it.

Phil Matthews: There is a big debate to be had on all the issues. The Sustainable Development Commission published a paper last year about aviation, and our main conclusion was that we do not have the evidence base that we need for a lot of the decisions that we take on aviation. We do not know the likely impact of decisions on carbon emissions, and the effects on the local economy are not always as good as they are made out to be. It is difficult to answer the question with the knowledge that we have at present.

There is an argument that, if we have direct flights to the continent and miss out the London link, there is a carbon gain, or an economic gain without much carbon disbenefit. However, we must appraise every decision on an issue-by-issue basis to try to get to the bottom of that. The projections suggest that aviation to and from Scottish airports is likely to lead to increased greenhouse gas emissions in the next 10 to 15 years. I do not see much evidence that that will not be the case.

Dr Docherty: The committee is carrying out an inquiry into high-speed rail. I agree that we do not yet have the evidence that we need, but as we find and develop the evidence, the case for the

substitution of short-haul flights with high-speed, green and preferably electric traction railways will become stronger and stronger. I note with considerable pleasure that even the Department for Transport in London is beginning to come to that conclusion after at least 20 years of trying to invent arguments to the contrary.

One thing that interests me about transport planning in the United Kingdom is our inability to learn from what others do. We always think that, somehow, if we do things differently, we must be right and everybody else must be wrong. I believe that the attempts to avoid building a third runway at Heathrow, other politically sensitive aviation enhancements in the south of England and the current downturn in aviation might bring about a change of heart at the DFT. I hope that, before too long, there will be a more radical reappraisal of the role of airports throughout the UK and a much more sophisticated consideration of how aviation fits into the overall transport mix.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: NPF 2 contains just two of the projects that are identified in the strategic transport projects review as priorities for investment. A couple of the witnesses have already discussed the close link between those two documents, but I ask them to expand on that. Are the witnesses critical of the fact that only two projects appear in both documents or are they relaxed about that, believing that they contain different projects because they are different documents with different reasons for existence?

Professor Gray: The proposed new national planning framework perhaps highlights the projects that are almost certain to be funded between 2010 and 2020—the projects that I would suggest are of national strategic importance. The pecking order of the 29 projects in the STPR will depend on money and on building opportunities. The NPF identifies the transport projects that are deemed to be the most important in terms of national planning strategy.

Dr Docherty: That is fair comment.

I highlight the importance of large investment in the rail network in the west of Scotland. There are two reasons why that is a national project. First, it will improve connectivity between the different regions in Scotland. At the moment, Glasgow is a significant barrier because of the railway layout that we inherited—a layout that prevents the running of through services.

The second reason is equally important, and it became apparent during the latter stages of the work that was done on the STPR. No matter what we do with new infrastructure, and no matter how we try to achieve modal shift away from the car in other parts of Scotland, the fact that car ownership in the west remains low—especially in Glasgow—means that the carbon position will become very much worse unless we can safeguard and increase the proportion of overall mobility that is captured by the public transport network in the west. The dominant scale of mobility in the west, and the fact that it is relatively public transport intensive, means that unless public transport is safeguarded and improved, the national carbon picture will be substantially degraded.

I agree with David Gray that, as we all know, the visibility of the replacement Forth crossing makes its inclusion in the new planning framework fairly axiomatic. However, long-term and relatively large financial investment in the rail network in the west of Scotland is probably the single most important transport infrastructure measure that we can take to improve our carbon performance.

Cathy Peattie: As we have already heard, a few of the projects will cost an awful lot of money and will require considerable public investment. However, so far, the Scottish Government has not really made formal commitments to the projects. Questions also arise in relation to the timescales for the implementation of national developments. As we know, similar questions arise in relation to the 29 projects in the strategic transport projects review. Is there enough money to deliver the plans in the new national planning framework, and what are the timescales?

Professor Gray: When preparing for today's meeting, I put together a little spreadsheet showing how much it would cost to deliver everything in the strategic transport projects review over the 10-year period. The cost would be somewhere between £13 billion and £23 billion.

I also considered the current costs of all the transport issues that are the responsibility of the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change such as concessionary fares, grants for bus operators, and winter maintenance. Those costs came to £1.8 billion a year.

If we take the mid-range figure for the projects—halfway between £13 billion and £23 billion—we get £18 billion, and if we multiply the figure for current yearly costs by 10, we get £18 billion. Therefore, we could build everything, but there would be absolutely nothing left to support bus services, to provide concessionary fares or to grit the roads. Based on current spending, we cannot afford to build everything. We are nowhere near that.

We will have to make difficult decisions on what we consider as priorities. However, the 29 projects have been sifted from about 1,500 projects and are supposed to be the ones that we cannot do without. Either we will need a step-change increase in our expenditure on transport, which we probably cannot afford, or we will have to lengthen

the period of the strategic transport projects review from 10 years to 20 years, which would bring it into line with the new national planning framework—or there could be a combination of those alternatives.

I do not know how the Government will answer questions on timings and costs, but I would be interested to find out.

15:00

Dr Docherty: David Gray's analysis is fair, although it does not take account of the ability to fund some railway enhancements, in particular the electrification programme, which is an important and welcome part of the strategy, through Network Rail finance—there is perhaps a chink of light in that regard. The situation might not be quite as black as David Gray describes it, but his overall analysis is pretty much on the money and I expect that all three of his strategies for ameliorating the financial crunch will be adopted during the timescale of the STPR.

Cathy Peattie: Does the STPR represent a wish list of things that will never happen?

Dr Docherty: For once, that is an unfair criticism. If the STPR set out 1,500 schemes or even just if it included the half dozen or so projects that did not make it into the list of 29 but are being heavily lobbied for by local interests throughout the country, it would be more of a wish list. The evidence base behind the STPR is qualitatively better, by an order of magnitude, than has been the case for equivalent exercises in the past.

I remind the committee that the DFT considered what has been achieved with the STPR and decided to conduct a similar exercise for England—it will have the advantage of being able to learn from our mistakes. The DFT's approach represents a substantive vote of confidence.

It is a little harsh to suggest that the STPR is a wish list, although if it set out only 10 schemes, I am sure that David Gray and I could more confidently sign in blood a statement that it could be implemented during the given time period. However, that is the nature of long-term planning. To some extent, it is inevitable that we should take such a view, given that we operate in a comprehensive spending review cycle of three years.

Professor Gray: Some of the more expensive schemes are phased—there are usually three phases—and the more expensive elements will come into play towards the end of the period. For example, we might not spend £2 billion dualling the entire A9 before 2020; we might defer dualling the expensive bit north of Blair Atholl for 50 years.

Cathy Peattie: It is about priorities.

Rob Gibson: I want to get a handle on what similar countries are doing about transport infrastructure. There are major road and rail projects in Ireland, which I think amount to about £30 billion over 15 to 20 years, so achievement of the 29 projects in the STPR does not appear to be outwith the norm.

Professor Gray: Perhaps not. Historically, the United Kingdom has not tended to spend as great a proportion of its gross domestic product on transport as other countries have done, so we are playing catch-up to some extent. The levels of spending that are envisaged would be exceptional if we were to spend all the money now, but a phased, pragmatic approach to investment in the projects would not be out of step with what is happening elsewhere. We still need to find money and invest sensibly and strategically, which will be welcome.

These are good times for transport investment. The transport community is concerned that budgets might change direction, which would seriously hamper our ability to deliver the 29 projects. Our concern is that, in five or 10 years' time, instead of getting more money to deliver everything, transport will get less money and the list of 29 projects will be significantly trimmed.

Dr Docherty: It is worth noting the wider debate about the value of investment in capital infrastructure in smoothing out what appears to be a deep economic trough and preparing the circumstances in which we can recover from the downturn. That is especially the case given that, thus far, there is relative consensus that the STPR represents a good set of 29 projects, as members heard. We support its implementation in full.

I agree with David Gray that what is envisaged is entirely consistent with what we might expect similar places in Europe to be doing. Rather late in the day, the UK Government seems to have come to the view that investment in transport infrastructure and other capital projects is a good idea in the current circumstances; other Governments in Europe made that decision rather earlier in the financial crisis. For example, Sweden, a bit like Ireland, is investing heavily in urban public transport. Sweden is also moving towards a domestic high-speed rail network, for the reasons that we discussed. The French Government has decided to accelerate the construction of its next four high-speed lines and to construct all four lines at the same time, which represents infrastructure planning and investment that are beyond the UK Government's current capacity and underlines the potential of such investment to stimulate the economy and secure environmental wins.

Des McNulty: My question is on the impact of projects that are not in the STPR but which are

committed projects nonetheless—they are in the frame. I am thinking of the Borders rail link, the Aberdeen western peripheral route and other such projects. Last year, we heard that the cost of the Borders rail link has doubled and I understand that the cost estimates for the Aberdeen western peripheral route are four years out of date and are for only half the mileage. There are not only significant delays in those projects but the potential for cost increases on what was estimated originally. How will that impact on the capacity of the Scottish Government to deliver its transport projects and the national planning framework in the period between now and 2014?

Dr Docherty: The committed projects are the committed projects. The Government is of the view that the money—or, more accurately, the finance—is available to effect delivery within the timescale to 2012. Perhaps harder questions should have been asked when the list of projects for the current 10-year period was put in place. If one looks back at the numbers, it is fairly easy to see that previous Administrations were less secure in their confidence that the money would be available to deliver projects than they said at the time. That is why we are where we are.

The Government still intends to deliver those projects. As they are within the current comprehensive spending review period, they should not impinge on the STPR, although they might well do so, given that there has always been spillover and interaction between investment time periods and no doubt will be again.

The Convener: Does any other panel member have a comment to make?

Professor Gray: I do not have much to add. As I have said, we live in cautious times.

Cathy Peattie: Forth Ports has raised concerns about the designation of ports at both Grangemouth and Rosyth as national developments. What is your view on those designations? Clearly, the Government feels that Forth Ports is important to the economy of Scotland.

Dr Docherty: Maritime transport is not one of my areas of expertise. I return to the point that I made earlier. One of the strengths of the NPF is that it revitalises and makes best use of the existing investments that have been made in the national infrastructure. Rather than creating new infrastructure simply for the sake of it, we should be recuperating the financial and carbon investment that has been made in existing facilities.

I do not know on what evidence Forth Ports has based those concerns. The committee may wish to ask the Government whether the designations are based on the belief that competition between ports is a good thing. That may or may not be the case.

One interesting paragraph in the NPF makes reference to the Republic of Ireland's national spatial strategy, which recognises that congestion in England is a significant constraint on Ireland's continued ability to export to Europe and the wider world. Given that our ferry routes are much less congested, it makes sense for us to safeguard and enhance our current port capacity. That capacity could come into its own over the timescale of the NPF not only as a result of the improved economic performance that we hope Scotland will achieve but because of events across the Irish Sea and elsewhere.

Professor Gray: With Iain Docherty, I advised the south west of Scotland transport partnership on its regional transport strategy. During the process, one thing that came through loud and clear was that people were gazing south towards Holyhead and the investment that is being made in the Welsh trunk road network and expressing concern that that investment would affect the ports on Loch Ryan. They felt strongly that, if that part of Scotland is to be protected, investment needs to be made in the east coast ports to ensure that Irish hauliers view shipping freight through Loch Ryan and then Rosyth or Grangemouth as being more attractive than putting it through Wales.

Cathy Peattie: Forth Ports's argument would be exactly that—that we should increase the amount of freight transport going through the existing ports, thus saving on journeys of heavy haulage to the north of England, rather than build a new international port on the Forth.

Dr Docherty: Our existing railway network is also well placed to facilitate that transit by rail, given its connections at Hunterston and the east coast ports, although there is less of a connection at Loch Ryan.

Professor Gray: One might argue that some of the rail freight grants are not encouraging that, but that is an argument for a different day.

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): Professor Gray has made the point about Loch Ryan. I want to relate it back to the strategic transport projects review. The Scottish Government is committed to an upgrading of the Euroroute, the A75 from Stranraer to Dumfries. However, as I said in the chamber—Dr Docherty has alluded to this from a different direction—some rail links from Stranraer, for instance, are very much underutilised at the moment. If there is the potential for Scotland, as a land bridge between Ireland and European markets, to benefit from the congestion that exists south of the border, we perhaps need to look again at the strategic potential of rail links from, say, Stranraer,

to the Forth ports such as Rosyth and Grangemouth. Of course, that would be predicated on filling in that gap in the rail network to which Dr Docherty alluded earlier.

Dr Docherty: I agree. Nothing in the STPR rules out that kind of investment in the rail network. I return to my earlier statements about the positive approach that has been taken in the document and the confidence in the rail network's ability to serve some of the strategic objectives over the long term, which has been very welcome.

Professor Gray: The Scottish Government is also committed to increasing the volume of freight that is shifted from road to rail. However, whether the current grants system encourages that is another matter.

The Convener: Let us move on.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): We move on to climate change issues. The framework document makes it clear that the Government continues to be enthusiastic about the use of renewable energy, but it concedes that there is a need—in the medium term, at least—for a large base-load electricity generation capacity. The Government seems to concentrate heavily on clean coal and carbon capture technology as the means of establishing base-load capacity either through the adaptation of existing power stations or through the development of future power stations. Is that approach compatible with the Government's climate change policy objectives?

Phil Matthews: We raise the issue in our written submission, albeit briefly. Carbon capture and storage has significant potential as a means of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Globally, it is important that we develop some way of addressing the carbon emissions from coal, as large countries such as India and China will continue to burn coal regardless of what happens. The point about Hunterston that we make in our written submission is not so much that there is an issue around carbon capture and storage—which is, potentially, good technology—as that, at the moment, the only commitment that has been made is to have the facility carbon capture ready. We are not sure what carbon capture ready means. It does not necessarily mean that we will end up with a power station that will definitely deliver lower-carbon electricity to the grid. That is our concern.

Alex Johnstone: If no one else is willing to jump in, I will continue my line of questioning. The document appears to assume that that technology will be available when it is required. Do you believe that the technology is in a position to be used inside the next 20 years? That appears to be what the document says is necessary.

15:15

Phil Matthews: Some versions of the technology are already in use. I believe, for example, that the first coal CCS project has just got up and running in Germany, although it is fairly small scale. Although the expectation is very much that the approach will be technologically viable, there is still a lot of debate about its potential cost. Some have estimated it as being within the bounds of the likely price of carbon over the next few years. However, according to others, the cost will be significantly higher than that, which means that, unless planning consent contains clear safeguards with regard to the delivery of carbon capture or other methods of cleaner coal production, developers of facilities such as Hunterston will find themselves under pressure not to take this route.

Alex Johnstone: In light of the document's assumption that both base-load capacity and renewable capacity will be necessary in the future generation of electricity, might the Government be accused of putting all its eggs in one basket?

Phil Matthews: Obviously, there has been a lot of debate on this issue, with arguments for and against both nuclear and fossil fuel base-load generation. Within the area of fossil fuels, there has been debate over whether coal should be used primarily or whether the best route is gas, which gives off fewer emissions but has a less secure supply. Another clear school of thought is that the generation of electricity could be decentralised much more and the demand for energy use significantly cut through energy efficiency and conservation measures.

I do not really want to go further than that. The design of Scotland's energy infrastructure means that there will be a need for base-load capacity of some sort over the next 20 years, but we believe that any capacity that is deemed to be required must be low carbon and must help us to meet our greenhouse gas emission reduction targets.

Electricity accounts for about 20 per cent of our energy load. Given the huge amount of energy that is consumed in heat and so on, the potential for making savings is massive, but there is also potential for electricity, which is a very flexible fuel that can be used to power vehicles, generate heat in homes and so on, to make up a larger share of total energy demand. Instead of commenting specifically on the Government's approach, I would rather just say that it—or indeed any Government—faces a major challenge in squaring the circle of having cleaner energy while ensuring a sufficient supply to keep the economy running, provide homes with power and so on.

Alex Johnstone: Tempting as it is to mention nuclear energy, I will on this occasion pass back to the convener.

The Convener: Your resistance is admirable, Mr Johnstone.

Rob Gibson: I have not noticed any suggestion either by the Scottish Government or in this framework document that any coal-fired power station would be built without carbon capture being integrated. Am I correct in that view?

Phil Matthews: I am not saying that any of these developments does not have the potential to deliver lower-carbon energy. As I have said, our only concern is with the development and application of what is—at least at a commercial level—a nascent technology. We are concerned less about the development of carbon capture and storage in Scotland—as I have said, the method has great potential both internally and in the wider global economy—than we are about the need for any consent for these schemes to contain safeguards that guarantee the delivery of lower carbon energy. I am not saying that that is not the Government's intent but, as others have pointed out in highlighting various examples, there is still uncertainty about the exact design of and strictures in some of these national developments. The question is how to ensure that those safeguards will definitely be in place.

Rob Gibson: So it all probably boils down to the order in which these schemes are developed. After all, the document is not necessarily saying that Hunterston will be the first of these plants to be built.

Phil Matthews: There are various things that one can do to roll out CCS as a technology. One suggestion is to have a moratorium on new fossil fuel development until it is likely that the European Union emissions trading scheme will drive the commercial development of CCS and we have a clear evidence base and a clear cost understanding for the technology. That may happen from 2012 onwards, with the third wave of the EU ETS. We might be able to go down the path that California has gone down, where we set a mandatory emissions standard on all new development, or at some stage in future we might have a situation in which the Government would withdraw a permit to generate energy from a plant that has failed to move towards CCS. The proposal for Hunterston is that it should be CCS ready. The concern is how we ensure that in 2020 or at some point in future that translates into the generation of energy from clean coal at Hunterston.

Rob Gibson: I understand that, but you would agree that the timescale that we are talking about is adequate for the development of CCS. In particular, I would suggest that if Longannet were able to win the competition in Britain, which is part of the EU effort, that coal-fired power station could be adapted for CCS during that timescale.

Phil Matthews: That is certainly potentially the case. I have heard it argued that we may not have viable CCS in place until 2020 or so. Others are much more optimistic about when we can get a viable scheme. The uncertainty about the cost per unit of electricity delivered from such schemes might cause problems in future. Although I do not want to pour cold water on aspirations for CCS, I am concerned that there are still uncertainties about the technology and when it could be developed. If it was the case that the Government did not give the go-ahead for such schemes until there was a clear understanding of the technology, the cost and the practicalities, that would be a different matter.

Charlie Gordon: Continuing Rob Gibson's theme, I note that the Sustainable Development Commission's submission has grabbed a few headlines today. I compare and contrast it with the rather more measured words on the same subject in the commission's written evidence on the Climate Change (Scotland) Bill. I detect a different emphasis. Would you agree?

Phil Matthews: I do not agree that there is a difference. Our submission to the committee this time round says:

> "Carbon capture and storage has great potential to contribute to a lower carbon economy. It is not as yet developed to an extent where it is proven to work effectively and efficiently."

We do not say that it is not proven to work. We are referring to developments of the scale of Hunterston. That applies as of 6 January 2009, but we are not saying that CCS cannot work in future or that there is not potential for it to be part of the energy mix in Scotland in future.

Charlie Gordon: So the only difference of emphasis is the headline grabbing.

I put my cards on the table and say that 1,700 people work at Scottish Power/Iberdrola in my Glasgow Cathcart constituency. Thousands more work for the company in different parts of Scotland, not least on the various sites mentioned in the submission. We want those jobs to survive the recession; indeed, we want more jobs to be created in future, for example if Scottish Power/Iberdrola is successful with its bid in the national competition for the development at Longannet. You can see the potential social impact of what you say and how you say it, and, especially, of your media activities. You can see the concern that I and other parliamentarians, and our constituents, would have at such a sensitive time in the economic life of our country.

Phil Matthews: As we make clear in our submission, sustainable development is economic, social and environmental. It is not about one taking primacy over the others but about delivering

solutions that are sustainable in all senses. Employment and social issues are fundamental to a sustainable Scotland.

On the specifics of the media coverage, the media's activities were not driven by us. The issue was picked up from the Parliament's website and run with—

Charlie Gordon: I assume that that was not accidental.

The Convener: Surely Charlie Gordon can appreciate that people sometimes attract media publicity accidentally. [*Laughter.*]

Charlie Gordon: In your case, convener, I do not believe that that happens. However, it is now clear where the media coverage came from.

The Convener: I have a couple of other questions for the Sustainable Development Commission. However, let me first reinforce the point that the commission's written evidence identifies carbon capture and storage as having significant potential in the long term. The concern that the commission has raised is that we do not have that yet. Is that the situation that we are in?

Phil Matthews: The only point that we are making is that being carbon capture ready does not necessarily equate to using carbon capture in future generation. We are not pouring cold water on the potential of carbon capture. Of all the countries in Europe, Scotland probably has the greatest potential for carbon capture because of our proximity to the North Sea and our facilities to develop the technology as part of a European grid based around the storage of carbon. We are certainly not doing down the potential of the technology. We are just expressing concern about how we ensure that carbon capture is delivered. In our discussions this afternoon about all aspects of planning, we have heard a lot about the gap between the aspirations of strategy and what ends up being delivered on the ground. Our comments are made in line with that general analysis.

The Convener: I have a couple of further questions on your comments on aviation. You said that, given some of the ambiguities around the inclusion of strategic airport enhancements as national developments under the NPF, it is likely that allowing such developments to go ahead will lead to an increase in greenhouse gas emissions. Obviously, we are just about to begin our scrutiny of the Climate Change (Scotland) Bill so we will have the opportunity to put such questions to ministers. Is there a way of ensuring that such increases in carbon emissions do not take place? Iain Docherty might want to comment on that as well. One idea is that the previous priority on increasing the use of aviation might now diminish in importance or fall off the agenda a bit. How do we ensure that any changes to the airports result in a different use of aviation capacity rather than a growth in aviation capacity? How could the national planning framework ensure that any increase in greenhouse gas emissions from that source is prevented?

Phil Matthews: Let me first make the general point that looking at future plans through the lens of our target of cutting emissions by 80 per cent by 2050 does not mean that there can be no expansion of emissions from any sector; it just means that any such expansion must be matched by an even more significant decline in emissions from other sectors. Everything must be done within the diminishing bubble of emissions that we are allowing ourselves.

On the specifics, I return to my previous point that I do not think that the evidence base exists as yet to enable us to make decisions about exactly how we will achieve the various economic, social and environmental benefits that we all want and what part aviation should play within that. Also, as has been touched on, complicated cross-border issues arise with aviation as well as with alternatives such as high-speed rail. The first thing that we need is a detailed study to look at not just the emissions but the economic costs and benefits of, say, new routes. I would not dispute that some new routes into Scotland provide a definite economic benefit, but I am not sure that that is always the case. There is a potential for such routes to lead to a net journeying out of people from Scotland on holiday, with very little in the way of traffic coming the other way. We are not entirely clear about not only the environmental aspects, but some of the wider issues that are raised in the debate about aviation. Therefore, I would be very wary about making large-scale infrastructure decisions on that basis.

15:30

Professor Gray: I was involved in the development of the NTS, and I remember that aviation was regarded as a sensitive issue during various prolonged discussions. That was primarily because of the tension between the importance for future economic growth of having extensive links to important destinations such as European capitals—and, say, between Aberdeen and Houston—and the need for the climate change impact of such flights to be mitigated; the Scottish Government probably had limited powers to do that, given that responsibility for carbon trading schemes, for example, was likely to be reserved. I would not say that it was a no-go issue in the development of the NTS, but it was certainly trodden around very carefully. On the one hand, there was the necessity of achieving economic growth; on the other hand, there was, obviously, the climate change impact.

The Convener: You describe one of those objectives as a necessity. Was dealing with both seen as a necessity?

Professor Gray: Yes. I would not say that one was a necessary evil, but it certainly came at a cost, and something had to be done about that. I guess that the question about what to do regarding climate change mitigation was parked in the too-difficult-for-now box.

Dr Docherty: I want to pick up on comments about the sheer scale of aviation between central Scotland and London. I do not have the exact figures, but I think that we are talking about around 130 flights a day. There are two things that we could try to do to mitigate that, one of which would be to reduce demand. In that context, I am sure that we could have an interesting conversation about how closely we would like the Scottish economy to be linked to London and the south-east. Assuming that we would not want to diminish the level of economic interaction between Scotland and London, the evidence is becoming ever stronger that high-speed rail is the only realistic way of reducing the carbon impact of that demand. That is an important point for the committee for several reasons, in light of its high-speed rail inquiry.

In Network Rail's early public musings about a high-speed network in Great Britain—I will be geographically accurate—it said that it would need to come to Scotland in the first instance if carbon reduction was to be a major aim of such a network. From a carbon perspective, there is little point in speeding up journey times on routes between London and other major cities in England, where rail already has the vast majority of the rail/air market share, but that is not the case in Scotland at the moment. Rail will no doubt continue to do better as the west coast main line improvements in particular begin to filter through to journey habits, but if we really want to make an impact on the carbon picture, we must substitute rail journeys for those flights.

The media debate misses another point. We think about high-speed rail in terms of the technology of 20 or 25 years ago; we probably all have some experience of travelling on the continent. However, that is not how many European countries are looking at high-speed rail over the next 20 or 25 years. There is a debate about whether completely different or new technologies such as magnetic levitation should be chosen, but even with conventional high-speed rail, we are looking at speeds of 360kph, not 300kph. In addition, as the security situation continues to unfold, overall journey times on air trips are increasing because of the new security demands. European Commission research on rail and air links across Europe that I have seen says that the threshold at which rail travel becomes more attractive than air travel has moved from around three hours to closer to four hours because of the difficulties in negotiating security arrangements and other present-day pleasures of air travel. That means a substantial part of Scotland becoming accessible to London through competitive rail journey times and the use of modern, conventional high-speed rail technology.

Trains of the kind that Alstom released 11 months ago are capable of 227mph. The Italian open access operators have already bought them, and the French national railway and others are likely to buy them over the next few years. That would mean not only Scotland's central belt becoming highly accessible to London through journey times of two or two and a half hours; Perth, Dundee and even Aberdeen would also be accessible. Perhaps it would be difficult to make a conventional economic case for high-speed rail as far north as the north-east, but that depends on the assumptions that we make, particularly about the price of carbon. If the Scottish and UK Governments have the vision to implement the conventional high-speed rail technology that is available, we could substitute not only the 130 flights a day between the central belt and London, but some of the important short-haul air links from other Scottish regions and airports by using rail.

The Convener: The Scottish Government is not and never will be in a position to give the go-ahead unilaterally to high-speed rail. That has nothing to do with powers; it is just a matter of geography. The national planning framework places priority on strategic airport enhancements but cannot say anything at the same level about high-speed rail. If your assumption that carbon emissions reduction should be a major objective of a high-speed rail network is right, are you confident that rail journeys would be substituted for flights, given the priority for airport enhancements? Do we or the Scottish Government need to do anything to ensure substitution rather than additional journeys?

Dr Docherty: Several issues are bundled in those questions. I am comfortable with the terminology about airport enhancements in the NPF. As an occasional aviation user, I think that it is fair to say that not many of our Scottish airports offer particularly good passenger environments or experiences, in comparison with equivalent airports elsewhere in Europe. A fairly strong case can be made for enhancing the experience, which is important to international business and tourism. Investment in the physical infrastructure of terminals and gateways is not necessarily a bad thing or closely linked to capacity enhancement.

Flexibility is built into any good plan over timescales such as those of the NPF. The NPF

should be able to adapt to changing circumstances. Who knows—by the end of the NPF period, we might wish to adopt a much greener aviation technology, so our views about the optimal level of aviation from Scotland might change again. That flexibility is welcome.

If we have substantive substitution from aviation to rail—particularly between the central belt and London—that will produce an interesting challenge for railway capacity at the route's northern end. We will need somewhere to put the trains—we will need approach capacity and significant new railway terminal capacity. The fact that the NPF flags up strongly the west of Scotland railway enhancements concept is valuable, because that will be the biggest challenge. Many other European cities have dealt with such a challenge in the past 20 or so years and many more are doing so now.

If we are to continue to have our railway terminals in the heart of our city centres—we want them to be there so that they do not become just grandiose car parks on the fringes of cities—we must invest in the conventional railway network, to release capacity for long-distance, high-speed services. Many continental cities have had to make substantive investment in railways and railway terminal capacity for existing and enhanced local routes before they could begin to think about long-distance, high-speed interventions. Strongly flagging up the enhancements in Glasgow in the NPF is welcome, because that issue will be the most difficult to resolve.

Charlie Gordon: My questions are for Dr Arthur, who has waited patiently. The proposed national planning framework says:

"Generally, lack of capacity in water and drainage infrastructure should no longer be a … constraint on development".

What is your view on that?

Dr Arthur: Changes in the past year or so mean that Scottish Water now has an obligation to lift such constraints. My limited dealings with Scottish Water lead me to believe that it welcomed that, because the decision has been taken outside its remit and has been made for it. That development is good and I view it positively.

Charlie Gordon: The only national development that relates to water and drainage in the national planning framework 2 is the metropolitan Glasgow strategic drainage scheme, to which you referred near the beginning of the meeting. Do any other water and drainage schemes merit inclusion as national developments?

Dr Arthur: No—the problems in Glasgow are quite acute and, as I said, the issue with regard to the Glasgow water courses is about not just flooding but water quality. The level of the degradation of those water courses is a disgrace on a national and international scale, and it is right that they are a strategic priority for the nation, even given the cost of putting them right.

Charlie Gordon: Just to clarify, are you talking about ancient burns that have in the main been built over or culverted?

Dr Arthur: Yes: the combined sewer overflows discharge into water courses, which in turn discharge into the Clyde. We are all aware of those problems. There are also problems in Glasgow in relation to fly tipping in water courses. That leads to blockage of culverts, which, as we know, led to flooding in 2002.

The Convener: I see that there are no further questions. I thank all four of our witnesses for their time in giving evidence to the committee. I close the meeting, but remind members that we have a private briefing on the Climate Change (Scotland) Bill.

Meeting closed at 15:40.

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