

AIRDRIE-BATHGATE RAILWAY AND LINKED IMPROVEMENTS BILL COMMITTEE

Monday 11 September 2006

Session 2

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AIRDRIE-BATHGATE RAILWAY AND LINKED IMPROVEMENTS BILL COMMITTEE 3rd Meeting 2006, Session 2

CONVENER

*Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

*Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

John Baggaley (MVA Consultancy)

Stuart Borrowman (Platform Blackridge)

Jim Dickson (West Lothian Council)

Michael Greig (MacRoberts)

Peter Hawkins (CTC Scotland/Spokes)

Fiona Hyslop (SNP) (Lothians)

John Lauder (Sustrans)

Alan Leslie (North Lanarkshire Council)

Graham Mackay (North Lanarkshire Council)

Alan Macmillan (Network Rail)

Joe Magee (Jacobs Babbie)

Graeme Malcolm (West Lothian Council)

Ron McAulay (Network Rail)

Craig McCorriston (West Lothian Council)

David McDove (North Lanarkshire Council)

Councillor Thomas Morgan (North Lanarkshire Council)

Councillor Graeme Morrice (West Lothian Council)

Mrs Mary Mulligan (Lab) (Linlithgow)

Ian Mylroi (Transport Scotland)

Tavish Scott (Minister for Transport)

Damian Sharp (Transport Scotland)

Edward Steele (Blackridge Community Council)

Paul Tetlaw (TRANSform Scotland)

David Wagstaffe (North Lanarkshire Access Forum)

Stephen Webster (Greenrigg Community Council)

Karen Whitefield (Lab) (Airdrie and Shotts)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Fergus Cochrane

LOCATION

Sir John Wilson Town Hall, Airdrie

Scottish Parliament

Airdrie-Bathgate Railway and Linked Improvements Bill Committee

Monday 11 September 2006

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:35*]

Airdrie-Bathgate Railway and Linked Improvements Bill: Preliminary Stage

The Convener (Phil Gallie): I formally open the third meeting in 2006 of the Airdrie-Bathgate Railway and Linked Improvements Bill Committee, and our second oral evidence-taking meeting.

This is the first time that a committee of the Parliament has met in Airdrie—we are delighted to be in such palatial surroundings. I thank the officials of North Lanarkshire Council for their assistance in enabling us to hold the meeting in the John Wilson town hall and for providing such excellent scones.

The purpose of today's meeting is for the committee to continue its consideration of the bill's general principles—in other words, of the need for the railway. Specifically, we shall hear evidence from the promoter and a range of other witnesses on environmental issues, such as the proposed cycle path relocation and the impact on road traffic; the proposed railway route and choice of stations; and advance and voluntary purchase schemes. The Minister for Transport will also give evidence on a wide range of general principles issues.

We are again grateful to everyone who responded to our request for written evidence. Our site visit along the proposed railway route has helped to broaden our understanding of the issues surrounding the railway, and of the general location of the track, the stations and some nearby properties.

We hope to break for an hour for lunch around 12.30 pm. Members of the public are welcome to leave the meeting at any time, but I ask them to do so quietly. Although the meeting is being held in public, it is not a public meeting but is the formal work of Parliament. I would therefore appreciate the public's co-operation in ensuring that today's business is properly conducted.

We have a full agenda with quite a few witnesses. We will ask succinct questions and expect succinct replies. Finally, I ask everyone to

ensure that all mobile phones, pagers and so on are switched off.

As the meeting is quorate and no apologies have been received—or, indeed, are necessary—we shall take evidence from our first panel of witnesses, who were scheduled to give evidence later in the meeting. I thank them for agreeing to switch places with the first panel, some of whom are held up in traffic and have not been able to make it for the start of the meeting. I point out to the members for whom this might come as a surprise that we will start today with the questions to group 4.

Strangely enough, I have the first question. Will the railway route and its station stops and journey times prove to be attractive to commuters, the business community and, indeed, potential inward investment?

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I welcome the committee to my constituency. I am delighted that the committee is visiting Airdrie. The fact that the first panel of witnesses is a little bit late highlights the benefit that the railway line will bring to the people of Airdrie and to West Lothian as a whole. It will make a real difference by allowing people to move around central Scotland.

We have to remember that the purpose of the railway line is not just to provide an additional route between our two major cities, but to tackle road-traffic congestion in the central belt. The central Scotland corridor study highlighted the fact that between 35,000 and 39,000 journeys are made every day between West Lothian and North Lanarkshire. I believe that reopening the line will allow many of those people to leave their cars behind and to use rail, so that they will be able to travel by public transport between West Lothian and North Lanarkshire, and so that they will have a reliable form of public transport, which many people in the villages in the area currently do not have.

For anyone who lives in my constituency and currently commutes to Edinburgh, to which we do not have a reliable public transport route, that journey takes an average of an hour and 10 minutes, and sometimes much longer, particularly at peak hours. Average running times of 37 to 39 minutes into the centre of Edinburgh will be of real benefit to the people of North Lanarkshire. My one regret is that the village of Plains is not to have a station—I am sure that we will come on to that later.

The Convener: I have a feeling that if we do not come on to it, you will. Thank you for your welcome and for your opportunism in picking up on the traffic problems.

Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): I support Karen Whitefield's comments about the

principle behind the bill and the need for the line. It is clearly the link that is missing in the middle of the country. We recognise that it will allow people to get out of their cars and on to public transport, but it will also, as mentioned in the initial question, allow businesses to examine further opportunities for development along the central belt. I will cite an example from West Lothian: a lot of business and industry is located around the Livingston area but it is always a challenge for businesses to move out beyond there, because getting people to their work would be more difficult. The more opportunities we can offer businesses to have other forms of transport to bring their workforce in, the more likely they are to take up those opportunities. That in itself will regenerate communities that have not until now benefited as have places such as Livingston, Edinburgh and Glasgow. We should seize this chance to expand those opportunities.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): The success of the reopening of the Bathgate to Edinburgh line bodes well for the Airdrie to Bathgate line. We must also consider the shape of West Lothian and the expansion of housing, particularly in Armadale. There is a question about whether Armadale station will be able to cope with the huge volume that is expected there, bearing in mind the fact that the promoter thinks that it might be even busier than Bathgate. In the area around Whitburn, there is huge business development, especially with the opportunities that the Heartlands community scheme at Whitburn could bring. If we are looking at a regeneration argument, the west of West Lothian and the east of North Lanarkshire are the areas that have been forgotten, and there must now be a determined focus from public office, nationally and locally, to ensure that regeneration reaches those communities. That is why the argument for regeneration in Blackridge and Plains is so strong.

West Lothian is one of the areas of fastest population growth, and we should look at the central belt of Scotland not as an end-to-end corridor but as an area where people live and in which there are communities that could thrive. We need to look at central Scotland as the heart of Scotland, and I hope that the committee will be able to pursue that aim in its consideration.

10:45

Stuart Borrowman (Platform Blackridge): I will try to address the question about the attractiveness of the line to commuters. Our group, Platform Blackridge, fully supports the line and is delighted that it will almost certainly be built. The Blackridge and Armadale area, which I represent on West Lothian Council, is very attractive to commuters. Perhaps a third of the people who are moving into new houses in those two towns have

come from outside Scotland or are returning Scots. When I ask them why they have come there, they simply point to the map. It is typical to find one partner working at Edinburgh Park and the other working in Glasgow. The area is already attractive to commuters, and an enormous number of houses are being built there. I suppose that the question is whether the rail system can respond to what is already happening. The area is attractive for commuters, who mostly travel by car. Many people who do not have access to a car are at a disadvantage with respect to the existing public transport. The rail line would be an enormous attraction to existing and potential commuters.

Stephen Webster (Greenrigg Community Council): We are seeking a modest £2 million of public investment, which we feel will attract further private investment into our area. After two or three decades post mining, there has been a lot of investment in public housing and a new motorway junction. We feel that such a modest investment, given the capital scale of the new line, will help to prevent us from being excluded from further growth.

Members have driven round the area and will have seen some new housing that is being built. Despite that housing there is a feeling—which members might agree with—that Blackridge in particular is excluded from much of the economic activity in West Lothian. Much of the focus of investment, especially judging from discussions that we have read about in connection with the bill, seems to be on Edinburgh, Glasgow and some areas of West Lothian. When it comes to the villages of Harthill, Greenrigg, Eastfield and Blackridge, however, we feel excluded from some of the potential benefits that could accrue. We feel that a modest £2 million of investment and a platform at Blackridge would help to include the population of about 5,500 who live in the catchment area of such a station.

In our submission, at page 8 and later, we present economic statistics about Blackridge and Harthill. The employment, economic activity and car ownership rates are all below the Scottish average. In fact, Harthill turns out to be better than Blackridge, which I was surprised about. There is a strong case for the station, at least from the social point of view, and I would like the committee to consider the benefits that would accrue to the area from a modest investment in the line.

The Convener: I am sure that other people on the panel will pick up on that point, as will others who will contribute later.

Edward Steele (Blackridge Community Council): I am part of the steering group, but I am also chairman of Blackridge community council. I am the only one of the group who lives in Blackridge at the moment. We currently have 720

houses in our village, and there are to be an extra 568 houses according to the local plan—an increase of 78 per cent. We have been socially excluded for a while. As Stephen Webster said, we will come on later to the statistics on page 8 of the submission.

We want a station at Blackridge because 83 per cent of the new houses that will account for the 78 per cent increase that I just mentioned will be built near the location that has been earmarked for the new station. Some might say that it is a long way to walk from a certain part of the village to the station, but most of the population will be there.

I will leave it for now. I have a lot to say later, but that was an introduction.

The Convener: We have now gone through the whole panel. From now on, I ask those who wish to contribute on specific points in response to my colleagues' questions to concentrate on those points.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): How will the railway impact on the economic viability of local buses to Plains and Blackridge? How would public transport develop if stations were not provided there?

Mrs Mulligan: I shall speak specifically about the West Lothian example; I am sure that Karen Whitefield will give you her experience. At the moment, local buses do not provide a service such as we would all hope for. In Blackridge, buses do not run beyond 6 pm and, at the weekends, buses are few and far between. Buses do not go west to Airdrie with anything like the same regularity as they go east to Livingston and on into Edinburgh. At the moment, therefore, the service that people experience is not good. To think that the railway opening may have a detrimental effect on the bus routes is to miss the point. What we would be doing is filling a gap. People's only alternative is to use cars, but not everybody has a car. At various times of the day, when there is no bus, some people do not get out of the villages.

We seek to ensure that we have an integrated transport policy such that the buses support the trains and are able to get people to the various stations. However, in recent discussions, local bus providers have told us that they are not willing to tender for some of the routes locally because there will be insufficient passengers, even in the instances in which subsidies were being offered. Frequently, the bus service is not the answer to the problems. However, a regular train service would provide for some of people's needs in areas in which the distances may seem fairly small but where the opportunity to travel on public transport does not exist. That is why the operation of the train service—especially the introduction of a train station at Blackridge, which would serve the

Blackridge community and the Greenrigg and Harthill communities—is thoroughly supported by many people.

Karen Whitefield: I agree with much of what Mary Mulligan has said. In Plains and Caldercruix, we, like people in West Lothian, do not have a bus service for the vast majority of the evening after 6 pm and we do not have a reliable bus service at the weekends. That excludes the people of North Lanarkshire from access to recreational and social activities with relatives and friends in neighbouring communities. It excludes people from attending the theatre and doing the things that many of us take for granted when we have our own transport. Members might be interested to know that in the village of Plains, for example, 45 per cent of the population do not own a car and have no access to one. A round trip in a taxi from Plains to Drumgelloch station in Airdrie costs £5, in addition to the rail fare into Glasgow. Considering that 27 per cent of the 2,300 people who live in the community are in receipt of benefits and are not in employment, and that a further 16 per cent of the population is in receipt of incapacity benefit, that is—in the unlikely circumstances that someone would want to travel to Edinburgh—a hefty price for such people to pay. The reopening of the railway line, and giving people access to that service, will open up a raft of opportunities. The railway line would be used by those who want to have the opportunities that so many other people take for granted.

Cathy Peattie: Is there an opportunity for improved bus services to and from the railway stations?

Karen Whitefield: If Plains were to have a station, 2,000 of the 2,300 people who live in the community would be within walking distance of that station. Although this is about getting cars off the roads, we must remember that almost half the population do not have access to a car.

I want improved bus services between the villages, particularly between the top parts of both schemes in Plains and Caldercruix and the station. Sadly, bus services are often seen as unreliable. People who use them to get to work find it difficult that they cannot depend on the buses. As the committee heard from Network Rail last week, the rail service is seen as being a fast, reliable and efficient way of transporting people, but our current bus service is not seen in the same way. In 1999, I campaigned for a bus that would provide a similar service. Although the Strategic Rail Authority agreed to it, it never came to fruition. There were difficulties with the level of subsidy and with how reliable the service would be. The success of the bus service is connected to its marrying up with the vital rail service and with ensuring that every community has equal access

to it.

Stuart Borrowman: I want to add something about the difference between a bus and a train service for such communities. I am of a generation that remembers dense bus services—I worked as a bus conductor all over central Scotland. The perception is that because the bus service is slowly dying, a fixed link and new investment in a train line and new station would have a psychological impact. People will not establish work or social activity habits based on bus services that they believe to be fragmentary, constantly changing and—as Karen Whitefield said—not as reliable as the train. However, people will develop such habits based on there being a railway line and station in their community. Nobody can promise that bus service links to railway stations will stay for long, but a fixed link into those communities will change people's psychology, and their work and social habits.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): There is already a line from Edinburgh to Glasgow through Lanarkshire and West Lothian—the line through Shotts. Although I do not have the statistics in front of me, I am not sure that the existence of that service has necessarily stimulated the habits to which Stuart Borrowman referred in places such as Shotts or Fauldhouse or other places that are not stops on that route, which does not seem to be all that well patronised.

Stuart Borrowman: We are dealing with a somewhat different situation in Armadale and Blackridge because we are building houses there. We are dealing with new commuters who will commute anyway—we want to get some of them off the road and into trains. The proposed new line would create new opportunities and would be the shortest route between Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Alasdair Morgan: That is a different argument. You are saying that people are already building houses without the existence of a railway line. The line is not proposed to regenerate those communities—

Stuart Borrowman: We are talking about two markets. We are talking about commuters who are already arriving in Armadale and Blackridge and who are currently obliged to use their cars almost exclusively. It is likely that we will provide an additional 3,000 houses in Armadale over the next 10 to 15 years—that is a market to which we can respond. Stephen Webster made the point that we have an accessibility-deprivation island in Blackridge that means that people cannot get out of the village after certain times. They will not change their habits based on a bus service that comes on but which might go off again in a few weeks or months. That is a common experience. However, people will respond to a fixed link.

Fiona Hyslop: The station is proposed for the south-east of Armadale, but a lot of market growth will be to the north and west, which would be nearer to a station at Blackridge. There is also the opportunity cost to consider. One of the proposals is that the line would take traffic off the M8. Part of the argument that we are proposing is that growth in that area is already happening. If there are no opportunities for people to access the line in other areas, more traffic will come from the north and west of Armadale and people will stay in their cars.

There is also a danger that the Whitburn/Polkemmet Heartlands development will mean 5,000 new houses being built beside the M8. The question for the committee is how best to take traffic off the M8; there are solutions that form part of the proposals. The argument is different if we consider places such as Breich or Fauldhouse.

11:00

Alasdair Morgan: Are you suggesting Blackridge as an alternative to Armadale?

Fiona Hyslop: No—but it would be a very strong supplementary. Some people in parts of the development in Armadale would be nearer to Blackridge station than they would be to their own station in Armadale. As the promoters have argued, growth could mean that Armadale becomes bigger and busier with traffic than Bathgate. We are asking whether there is a market for such a station and the answer is most definitely yes. However, how do we best deal with that market as well as regeneration?

Mrs Mulligan: I would not want the committee to think that there would be no desire to use the train from Fauldhouse. In fact, the most recent correspondence that I have had with First ScotRail is because constituents in Fauldhouse want the service to run on a Sunday; it does not do so at the moment. There is a demand for that station.

Stephen Webster: On the effect on bus services, there is no doubt that investment in transport supports other services that hang off it. The problem with Greenrigg is that we cannot get out of the place on public transport after 5 o'clock. We have heard from bus operators that they cannot get drivers to work the back shifts. There are all sorts of cumulative reasons why it is difficult to run and sustain bus services after 5 o'clock. You cannot get out of Blackridge on a bus after 6 pm either.

The trains will not stop running after 5 or 6 o'clock; the only question will be how often they stop at each point. If there is a platform at Blackridge, it will encourage existing bus operators to stop there to support the service. It will encourage taxi drivers and private hire car owners to wait there for people alighting at the station. We

see it as part of a more integrated scenario. It will not have a detrimental effect because it will support the fragile bus service that our communities have at the moment.

The Convener: Given how spread out Blackridge is, is it not the case that bus services would have to be added to take people to the station to coincide with the trains?

Stephen Webster: That might well be. The last bus out of Greenrigg is at 5 o'clock, so the bus operator might decide to run an extra bus at 6 or 7 o'clock to pick up commuters who are coming back late from the stations en route.

Stuart Borrowman: Edward Steele made a point about the structure of Blackridge. I know that the committee has recently been there, and historically it has always been a long, straggling and linear community. However, the way in which housebuilders are developing it and the allocations in the housing plan will make it a much more compact and square community, with the prospective railway station plonked in the middle of new development. That is highly attractive.

On the relationship between Armadale and Blackridge, Armadale station will be enormously successful because it will draw on several communities in the area. However, it is almost the least attractive option for people in the northern half of Armadale and Blackridge. Fiona Hyslop made the point that people living on the west side of Armadale would be as likely to use Blackridge station as Armadale station because it would be as convenient to motor through the town centre or to use any bus link to it. Blackridge station would reinforce the station at Armadale.

A precedent has been set at Bathgate. Historically, the vehicular and passenger traffic using the station has never been absorbed properly, and there are car parking problems. Our worry is that Armadale station will be so busy that there will be car parking problems there.

A station at Blackridge is highly attractive as an alternative for people on the west side of Armadale as well as the people of Blackridge and Harthill. It will take some of the pressure off a station that, as Fiona Hyslop said, is predicted to be busier than Bathgate, which struggles to cope with its market.

Karen Whitefield: I want to pick up on the points that Mary Mulligan made. I do not think that the Shotts line is comparable to the Airdrie to Bathgate line. Journey times between Airdrie and Bathgate and the major cities on either side will be much shorter than the times on the Shotts line. That is one reason why people tend to use it more for leisure and recreation and would want the service to be there later at the weekend, particularly on a Sunday. Different arguments

need to be advanced in relation to the Airdrie to Bathgate line.

Cathy Peattie: Where has the promoter got it wrong in its decision not to provide stations at Plains and Blackridge?

The Convener: To be fair, we have covered that, so the witnesses should just hit on any points that they feel have not been made.

Stuart Borrowman: There is an issue about being optimistic about investment and believing in communities. We think that the rail promoter has perhaps been cautious and pessimistic. The evidence from Bathgate, Larkhall and other places is that once the investment is made and the service is established, people respond in much bigger numbers.

Clearly, the rail promoter's job is to develop a railway line. However, the relatively minor issues of local knowledge and geography are important to us. The bus connection between Blackridge and Armadale is much longer and more onerous than is presented in the promoter's material. The promoter's claims that Blackridge station would be in the wrong place for Blackridge are wrong, given how Blackridge is developing. We asked 400-odd people in Armadale whether they would be less likely to use the train if there was an extra stop at Blackridge. They are the people most likely to be affected and, to a man and woman, they said no; there is strong support among the people of Armadale for a station at Blackridge. On those grounds, we think that the promoter's proposal could be improved and could embrace those additional opportunities.

Stephen Webster: We feel that the promoter did not consider initially the full catchment area. The original draft document considered only the population of 1,900 in Blackridge. When Harthill, Eastfield and Greenrigg are included, that takes the population up to 5,300. That has been addressed, but even the promoter's own figures suggest that, on the new catchment area figures, there would be annual boardings from a station at Blackridge of 80,300. The boardings are currently 55,789 at Shotts; 34,435 at West Calder; 16,025 at Fauldhouse and 333 at Breich—those are Network Rail's figures, not ours. I am not sure about the economics of deciding which station should be built, but I suggest that projected annual boardings of 80,000 mean that a proposal for a station at Blackridge for a modest £2 million warrants serious consideration, given the kind of area that it is.

Fiona Hyslop: I want to be fair to the promoter and say that, at the start, it was looking at an end-to-end, Edinburgh to Glasgow service—from the Airdrie to Bathgate line—travelling at 100mph, with four stops. Consideration of the corridor and the

opportunities and markets within it has led to the current proposal, which includes Armadale and Caldercruix. To be fair to the promoter, the proposal has been a moving feast. We have to consider the opportunities. The promoter has been dealing with historical data. The points about the catchment are well made. The only time that the Blackridge station was given serious consideration was in the sensitivity testing on page 30 of the promoter's memorandum. Even scenario Abs3 uses historical data on catchment and population. There is an opportunity to pursue that a bit further with the promoter.

Karen Whitefield: Having seen the minibus, I know that members visited the route of the line a couple of weeks ago. On the same day, I was out in Plains delivering a survey. I will leave committee members a handout that gives the responses, but I would like to read three quotes that highlight why people think that it is a mistake not to have a station at Plains. The first quote is:

"Plains should have a station like Caldercruix and Clarkston because Plains is being discriminated against as people still have to leave the village by bus"

or taxi

"to enable them to travel to West Lothian. Unemployment is high in this area and the bus service is neither cheap nor frequent."

The second is:

"I think this would be a great opportunity to leave the car at home. No taxi service runs from Drumgelloch—our nearest station. It would be great for my son travelling daily to university next year and the year after."

And finally:

"A station in Plains is not only desirable, but necessary—providing a vital link to the East and at long last, overcoming the 'isolation' felt by the people of Plains. Many would leave cars at home on the advent of such a facility. Non-drivers would be instantly mobile."

Those quotes sum up the feelings of the people of Plains and highlight a number of important issues.

At the committee last week, Mr Purvis pointed out that, compared with some rural communities in the Borders, Plains and Blackridge are not nearly so isolated. I appreciate that, but the people suffer different types of isolation, including social isolation and a serious lack of access to opportunities.

Plains is the community that will suffer the greatest environmental disbenefit as a result of the reopening of the railway line. People's homes and quality of life will be affected, and yet those people will not have easy access to a station. They will lose access to their local golf course—a new route will have to be provided, but it will take people much further away before they get there. They will also lose access to their countryside park, which

was an excellent example of a community trying to improve its local environment. Despite all the disbenefits, people will not receive any of the benefits of having a railway running through their village community.

The railway could give access to educational opportunities in further and higher education. North Lanarkshire Council and the Scottish Executive are already playing their part in relation to primary and secondary education—two brand-new shared campus schools are being built in Plains and Caldercruix. In Plains, the number of school leavers who go on to further and higher education is low. The national average is 15 per cent, but in Plains the figure is 10 per cent. Giving people easy access to a station would allow us to do something about that.

North Lanarkshire has already been tasked with closing the opportunity gap; it is one of the seven local authorities that has to reduce the number of people in receipt of benefits by 20 per cent. As I have already said, 27 per cent of the residents of Plains receive unemployment benefit. A further 16 per cent receive incapacity benefit. Denying those people access to a station will lead to real difficulties.

For all the reasons I have mentioned, I believe it was a mistake not to include Plains as a site for a station.

Mrs Mulligan: Committee members have heard the social and economic reasons for Blackridge having a station. Like Karen Whitefield, I have contacted constituents, sending letters to all of them. As all MSPs know, getting responses can sometimes be difficult, but more than 500 households in Blackridge and Plains have responded of their own accord to say that they would support a station. That number of responses is higher than the number I have received for any other inquiry during the time I have been the MSP for the area. Both villages clearly support the idea of a new station.

As members know, the alternative for people in Blackridge will be to use Armadale station. I want to make two brief points about that. The first, which has already been made, is that we are not sure that Armadale station will be able to cope with the traffic from Armadale town itself, let alone people coming from outwith that area. As has been mentioned, Whitburn—the other town that would feed into the station—is also growing at a huge rate, with more than 5,000 houses expected at the Heartlands site. The one thing that people will talk about in Armadale is the chaos and traffic in the town centre, at any time of day or night. To add to that by expecting people to travel there from Blackridge to use the train is unreasonable and would put people off using it.

Secondly, it is also wrong to expect those people to come to Armadale to get on the train to go west. That is not going to happen, as they do not naturally travel to sites in North Lanarkshire. Without the other stations, we will not be able to achieve one of the aims of the track, which is to take some of the traffic off the road, and we will not be providing opportunities for the communities between Edinburgh and Glasgow. We will not meet the aims of reopening the track. I hope that the committee will recognise the need for additional stations at both Blackridge and Plains.

11:15

The Convener: The committee certainly picked up on problems with the station in Armadale town centre.

Jeremy Purvis wanted to come in on one point, but we have reached his questions. The witnesses have made such widespread comments that some of the issues will be addressed again in future questions. I leave it to Jeremy to continue.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Before moving on to patronage, I have a supplementary specifically about Plains.

In evidence, the promoter has indicated:

"The potential site for a station is located on the southern edge of the town ... The disabled access ramp would run perpendicular to the rail line on the north side, further constraining the provision of facilities."

There would be

"A limited amount of parking (30 spaces ...), meaning that this station cannot significantly contribute to the achievement of the overall objective of reducing car trips on the A8 corridor."

In addition, there would be restricted drop-off spaces for buses and taxis, meaning that the interchange for buses would be on the A89, 60m away from the station.

Is it the view of the local community that there should be a station at any price; or, acknowledging that there could be technical difficulties, would the community be satisfied with a guaranteed improved bus service with connections to nearby stations, which the committee could insist on in its report?

Karen Whitefield: The simple answer is no. It would not satisfy the local community, which is of one voice on the matter: everyone believes that they require a station.

I want to highlight a couple of figures. Some 45 per cent of the population of Plains do not own a car, so car parking is not a key issue. Of the 2,300 residents of adult age, 2,000 people live within what is considered to be reasonable walking

distance of the station, so the likelihood of people taking their cars down to a station is not an issue. We would need car parking, but sufficient parking would be provided at Caldercruix for those people travelling any distance to access the line. Having only 30 spaces at a new Plains station would not be detrimental.

The disadvantages of having no station at Plains far outweigh any difficulties around the siting of the station. That is the clear view of the people of Plains, including those who live nearest the line and who would suffer the greatest disadvantage. I know that that is something of which you have considerable experience.

Jeremy Purvis: I have a question on forecast patronage levels, and I open it up to all witnesses on the panel. I know that there have already been some comments on this subject, and we do not want to repeat ourselves.

The promoter asserts that the forecast patronage levels are lower at both Blackridge and Plains. The estimated growth for Blackridge is less than for Armadale, and from our site visit and the evidence that we received last week, it seems that the growth around Armadale is fairly substantial.

It would be helpful if the witnesses had any comments about the patronage forecasts, because we want to find out whether the promoter's specific figures are accurate.

Stephen Webster: We are not experts on whether Network Rail's projection of 80,300 annual boardings at Blackridge would make the station economically viable, but it sounds like not insignificant patronage for a new station. Given that, historically, such projections have been conservative, that figure might well be more. However, as we are not experts on the models used by Network Rail, that is all we can say on the matter.

Karen Whitefield: Of the 188 responses to my survey, 6.9 per cent said that they would use the service once a week; 4.52 per cent said that they would use it two to three times a week; 26.6 per cent said that they would use it four to five times a week; 20 per cent said that they would use it more than that; and 2 per cent said that they would not use it because they were elderly, disabled or housebound. People would use the service to go to Glasgow, Edinburgh, Airdrie, Bathgate, Coatbridge, Armadale, Helensburgh and Balloch and to access other connections in Scotland.

I believe that patronage will be much higher than has been suggested, and I hope that the committee will reflect on the success of Bathgate station, for example. Although it was suggested at the time that its patronage figures would not be all that high, it is now considered to be one of the greatest successes of public transport provision in

Scotland.

I will finish with a quote:

"In my view, the patronage forecasts are too pessimistic. In addition, they do not take into account the positive economic impact on"

the village

"and its surrounding communities."—[*Official Report*, 14 June 2006; c 26659.]

Given that my colleague Mary Mulligan and I supported your case for Stow station, Mr Purvis, I hope that you will now remember the people of Plains and Blackridge.

Jeremy Purvis: That was a very good quote, although I would correct your pronunciation of Stow.

Last week, one line of questioning centred on the number of people who, station or no station, might use the service as a means of local transport either to move from point to point or to access work. The promoter's information suggests that, in the catchment areas of Plains, Caldercruix and Bathgate, the travel levels of people accessing work will be particularly low. Does your survey indicate how many people will use the service to access employment, or will it be used primarily for leisure activities or social inclusion purposes? The promoter has indicated that, given the low number of people involved, travel to work is not a significant reason for having stations in those areas. In fact, it appears that the number of people in those areas who would use the service for that reason is dramatically lower than the number in other areas.

Stephen Webster: That simply reflects the social profile and demographic of the catchment area. Indeed, the committee should give weight to that issue in its consideration of whether there should be a platform at Blackridge. We are not saying that the year 1 patronage figures are wrong; however, we are looking at years 5, 8 or 10 and feel that the station will be an economic incubator for changing the current situation.

Stuart Borrowman: I have a comment on access to work. I do not need to ask members to remember this, because I am sure that they are aware that Blackridge's economic activity rates are lower than the national average, so in that sense it is excluded from opportunities. One main aim of the railway is to close the opportunity gap and bring more people into the active labour force. It would also mean that students would not have to move away, as I did, but could travel backward and forward. The scheme would create an opportunity for people to become economically active. It would close the gap between the national average economic activity rate and the rate for Blackridge and then continue to grow that rate.

The question was about whether people will use the train service for leisure purposes, such as having a day out at North Berwick, or to get to work. The answer obviously must be both. We should not discount the fact that my mother, who is a fit 83-year-old, can no longer go to Armadale co-operative women's guild, which she has done all her life, not because she is not fit, but because she cannot get home after it. I do not decry the opportunities that will be created for the huge swathe of people who have contributed to society and who cannot understand why they cannot access leisure opportunities.

Access to work is another issue. In fairness to Network Rail, it does not claim that we have anything other than a model, but the situation reflects 30 years of disinvestment in public transport. Inevitably, travel-to-work patterns from a place such as Blackridge reflect that. Blackridge sits right on the border—historically, it has straddled West Lothian and Lanarkshire. In the past, there was a strong commuting pattern west to Airdrie and Coatbridge but, because of the disinvestment in public transport, that has largely been lost. We think that that pattern would be revived, because those towns are so close. The answer to the question is that there will be a significant change in how people access work, although that will build in the way that Stephen Webster described. People's ability to access work and their choice of work or study will change considerably, which will make Blackridge a much more economically vibrant place.

Fiona Hyslop: A strong case can be made for righting a wrong in Blackridge. If the scheme is built, it will help to regenerate the area, which on its own is a strong argument. However, we would have an added bonus. When the promoter put the case together, it did not include people from Greenrigg, Eastfield or Harthill, so we can add those to the figures. We also have the development of 5,000 new houses at Whitburn, which is near the railway, and the new development at Blackridge. The houses there will be by and large be owned privately by people who have cars and who are commuters. We need to marry up the first argument with the potential growth in the number of commuters in the area. The growth in Whitburn is to such an extent that the Executive has agreed to provide another motorway exit for the Whitburn area—that is extremely unusual, because it is hard to get such an exit. As well as the argument about the growth in the number of commuters, there is the powerful argument that, many years ago, the life was sucked away from the community and we now have a great opportunity to ensure that it comes back.

We have talked about the use of the railway for leisure or work purposes. One big issue in West

Lothian and Lanarkshire is access to hospitals and health services. I have constituents from Blackridge who were taken to Monklands hospital, under the old system. People from Blackridge now have to travel all the way to the Edinburgh royal infirmary. For old and infirm people who have had an operation or who perhaps have a fracture and need to go for supplementary treatment, it can be difficult even to get to Armadale by bus, never mind the ERI. The committee should bear it in mind that the scheme would give people access not only to work and leisure, but to the more centralised hospital services.

Jeremy Purvis: Ms Whitefield ably quoted words of mine that were connected with another rail project. Does the panel agree that, for consistency, as in that project, there should be developer contributions for the construction of the line and potentially the stations, and that the capital figure should not exceed that which the Minister for Transport has already announced?

Karen Whitefield: My understanding is that the project is to be entirely publicly funded. The minister has given that commitment, although perhaps you will want to pursue that with him when he comes before you this afternoon. I am sure that North Lanarkshire Council will look for developer contributions for other developments in the communities. The reopening of the railway line and the stations at Plains, Caldercruix, Bathgate and Armadale will have a positive effect, but those communities need other developments and I hope that developer contributions can be used to achieve some of them.

Mrs Mulligan: I understand the point that Jeremy Purvis makes. It is clear that the panel is arguing strongly for specifics, particularly in the form of stations at Blackridge and Plains, as well as recognising the huge advantages that the railway will bring to our local communities.

However, the reason why we are here today is that the provision of the link came top of the Executive's multimodal study, which was more about the provision of a strategic link for the whole of Scotland. The proposed line will benefit many people outside West Lothian and North Lanarkshire. Karen Whitefield is right to say that, although contributions from developers in the local authority areas concerned have a role to play, the scheme should be funded nationally. The overview of the project as being of national importance means that it is right that, at this stage, it should receive the support that the Executive has said that it will provide. However, like all members, I hope that it will come in on budget.

11:30

Alasdair Morgan: I want to pick you up on what you said about the line being a strategic link,

which is based on the argument that people will use it not just for local travel, but to come through Glasgow and to go on to Edinburgh without having to change trains. However, do you accept what the promoter says, which is that every time a station is added to a route, a percentage of people will no longer find the journey time attractive? There is a trade-off between the local interests of people in Blackridge and Plains and the overall strategic aim that you mentioned.

Mrs Mulligan: I have two points on that. First, I do not think that having stations at Plains and Blackridge would slow the service down to such an extent that it would act as a disincentive to people who wanted to use the line. I was referring to journeys such as Coatbridge to Edinburgh or Armadale to Glasgow, rather than Edinburgh to Glasgow, for which I appreciate that the Falkirk High route would probably still be quicker. I am sure that a few extra minutes can be found for the service to stop at stations at Blackridge and Plains.

Let us be clear—I do not think that any member of the panel is asking for every train that runs along the line to stop at Plains and Blackridge. We simply want to find a way of building into the timetable services that stop at stations in those places. That would probably add on only a few minutes to the journey time on that route and would allow the members of those communities, who feel excluded, to have a service that provided them with economic and social opportunities.

The Convener: Mr Steele wants to come in. Once he has spoken, I will go to Janis Hughes and then the members of the panel can sum up their comments.

Edward Steele: I want to address Jeremy Purvis's question. Page 3 of our submission states:

"The case for a station at Blackridge is undeniable in terms of public policy, need and opportunity. The people of Blackridge and elsewhere would be puzzled at best as to why trains would rush through the eight-mile 'gap' past the village station site - and the 5,000 people who would be served by it - having passed stations every two miles or so along the length of the journey."

I return to Jeremy Purvis's point about Network Rail. I will just reiterate what previous witnesses have said. I do not think that Network Rail has taken into cognisance the population of Greenrigg, Harthill, Eastfield or the new Heartlands area of Whitburn. That is all that I have to say at the moment.

Stephen Webster: I have a point about the three minutes that would be added on to the timetable. That begs the question who the train is for. Is it for the people of Edinburgh and Glasgow, or is it for the communities along the line's route? That is all that I have to say on that.

We feel that the line will be more beneficial for the people on its route than it will be for the people of Edinburgh and Glasgow, although the people of Edinburgh and Glasgow will use it—that is part of the reason for the promoter wanting it in the first place. Our question is who the line is for. Should we be denied a stop in our catchment area for the sake of three minutes in the timetable? We are not expecting the train to stop every 15 minutes, which is the proposed frequency of the trains that will pass through Blackridge. I am sure that the timetabling can be adjusted in such a way that what we ask for can be accommodated.

The Convener: Thank you for that. We will no doubt pick that issue up with the promoter later on.

Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): My question is perhaps the converse of Mr Morgan's about the potential reduction in patronage if extra stations were provided along the line and journey times were lengthened. If extra stations were not provided, what would be the economic and social impact on the communities of Plains and Blackridge?

Stuart Borrowman: Stephen Webster put it eloquently to me at the weekend. The question is what would Blackridge be like in 10 years' time if we did not get a railway station; the answer is that it would be much the same—it would be a missed opportunity.

Karen Whitefield: I think that if we do not take the opportunity, when building this line, to give maximum access to the service for people living along the line, very little will change. That would be a missed opportunity and it would be neglectful of us as a Parliament.

Janis Hughes: I have a supplementary question on Karen Whitefield's evidence on the economic impact of the lack of additional parking on Airdrie town centre. She suggested that there need to be 100 additional car parking spaces in Airdrie. One of the promoter's arguments is that there will be extra car parking spaces at the new Drumgelloch station. However, as Karen Whitefield said, that station will have only a half-hourly service. If the Drumgelloch service were to run every 15 minutes, would that reduce the need for an extra 100 car parking spaces at Airdrie station?

Karen Whitefield: Only partly. I hope that many people will leave their cars behind and use the service to commute towards Edinburgh. Those people currently make the same awful journey on the M8 that I make three days a week, which sometimes takes up to two hours in the morning. Many people will come from slightly further afield than I do and their nearest station will be Airdrie. In addition, people coming from places such as Calderbank and Chapelhall will not drive past Airdrie to go to Drumgelloch—they will go to

Airdrie. Therefore, the promoter needs to consider seriously why it has reduced the number of car parking spaces at Airdrie.

All the dialogue that the promoter had with North Lanarkshire Council and me up until two weeks prior to the bill's publication indicated that there would be an additional 100 to 110 car parking spaces at Airdrie. We will need those spaces. I am sure that some committee members encountered difficulty finding somewhere suitable to park today. That situation will be exacerbated when we have a modernised station and a greatly improved railway line, which I desperately want. We must recognise that there will be an impact on the local community and that there will be a need for additional car parking spaces. The promoter must address that requirement.

Janis Hughes: So you think that there is a need for such spaces and for an increased service at Drumgelloch.

Karen Whitefield: Yes.

Jeremy Purvis: I want to come back to the question of the buses in Blackridge. I do not know whether Mr Steele or Mr Webster will want to respond. On page 9 of the Platform Blackridge submission, at the section just before the "Unsuitability of Armadale Station" section, you say:

"The creation of a train service may well lead to a diminution of the bus service in the Bathgate-Armadale-Blackridge route ... if it is the case that there is no Blackridge station, this will mean an absolute and not just a relative reduction in public transport serving the village."

If there were a station at Blackridge, that would be good for those passengers who wished to use the train from point to point, but it would not necessarily be good for those who wished to use a local bus service or a bus service elsewhere. There might well be a reduced bus service even if there were to be a station at Blackridge because there would be no incentive to have a shuttle service that would act as a local service as well as feeding other stations. Have you given any thought to that?

Edward Steele: I will let Stuart Borrowman speak on that one and then I will come in.

Stuart Borrowman: The words that Mr Purvis quoted from our submission came directly from the advice of the public transport officials in West Lothian Council. Their view is that a station at Blackridge would mean that some daytime services would probably be sustained, but it would lead to a further diminution of services outside peak hours. Our argument is that the creation of a railway line without a station at Blackridge would imperil the network of bus services in the area. We are concerned that there will be a double whammy for Blackridge if there is no station there.

Jeremy Purvis: If I understood things correctly, the majority of people who responded to Ms Whitefield's survey said that they would use the train service once every day or every two days, even if services were spread throughout the day. Mr Steele may want to come back on that. As Mr Borrowman has said, the majority of services will be in the daytime. I cannot see how that would address the point that Mrs Mulligan made about the difficulty of tendering for other services, even when there is a public subsidy, for passengers who do not wish to use a point-to-point train service. I am thinking about evenings, Sundays and weekends.

Stuart Borrowman: I am not sure that I entirely followed your point. There could be a negative, pessimistic scenario in which there is no train station at Blackridge and people cannot directly access services. At best, we are sceptical about subsidised shuttle bus services. We are concerned that that option is not as credible as some people believe it is and think that the village could be hit twice by having no access to a train station and a diminishing bus service.

Edward Steele: The community council prepared a questionnaire for people to fill in. Many people completed it. I have one or two quotes from them—there was a question-and-answer section at the bottom of it. One person stated:

"Without a station or a halt, there is absolutely no positives for Blackridge and its people only negatives. What good is a public service like this if commuters still have to use other transports e.g. car/bus (none after 7pm) to neighbouring towns to catch a train."

More than 100 trains will go right through our village. If we do not get a station, there will be noise and inconvenience, but we will be unable to board or alight the trains.

Stephen Webster: We envisage the station attracting bus services and reinforcing the existing bus services; we do not see it as being in competition with or detracting from existing services. Apparently, there has been talk of a £0.5 million fund for subsidising buses that travel between Blackridge, Harthill and the station at Armadale. We are not interested in bus subsidies—we want buses that are sustainable because they are economically viable. We would prefer to attract bus companies that will operate buses that people will want to use as opposed to unsustainable bus subsidy arrangements. At a community council meeting last year, a woman said that she had to give up her job because her bus simply stopped coming in the morning. There was no notice of the cessation of the service—it simply stopped and she could not get to work. We would much prefer public investment and—hopefully—secure economic growth on the back of it for our catchment area. An opportunity exists that we simply cannot let go by.

The Convener: Thanks, Mr Webster. Karen Whitefield will make the final comments on what we are discussing.

Karen Whitefield: Thank you for your indulgence, convener.

Fiona Hyslop said that the communities that we are discussing are at the western and eastern extremities of the local authority areas. There are often difficulties with subsidies that are aimed at attracting bus companies to operate across the two local authority area boundaries, and those difficulties often negatively impact on bus contractors' willingness to operate in both North Lanarkshire and West Lothian. There are difficulties when bus operators are being contracted to deliver services. I hope that the committee will bear that in mind.

The Convener: I thank the members of the panel for their contributions. You have given us a lot to think about. The promoter is listening in and I am sure that you have given it a lot to think about too. You have presented the local community interests very well indeed. Karen Whitefield referred to parking at Airdrie station. Janis Hughes and I took the last two parking places there this morning. We went there deliberately to find out about the parking.

11:45

Karen Whitefield: There is no discount if you have no train ticket.

The Convener: Network Rail will realise why we parked there.

I ask those who were due to be on the first panel to step forward. We will be talking about the cycle path interests. I welcome the panel, which comprises representatives from Sustrans, TRANSform Scotland, North Lanarkshire access forum and Spokes, the cycle organisation. We will move right into gear with Alasdair Morgan.

Alasdair Morgan: We found it ironic that the cycle lobby—if I can refer to you as that—was held up by traffic problems. Maybe that is the shape of things to come.

Does the realigned cycle route that the promoter is suggesting offer any advantages over the existing route? In its proposals, has the promoter employed what you would call best practice in cycle route design?

John Lauder (Sustrans): First, we were delayed by the train being late at Airdrie station. There is irony for you.

You have visited the route so you know that at the moment the cycle route goes right along the top of the embankment. Clearly, nothing will be as good as that. Where it drops to the south of the

embankment, the realigned path is good. On the other hand, where it goes to the north of the embankment, we have some concerns, because the route will be in the shadow of the embankment and, particularly in the winter months, it will really not see any sunshine at all. The route to the north of the embankment will also not benefit from the views that the route has at the moment, at the top, or that it would have if it were to the south. That is a pity. In its discussions with the promoter, Sustrans wanted the route to the north of the embankment to be on its own embankment about 30m or so from the line, which would have afforded it some sunshine and given it an improved view, but that has not been possible to settle. Generally speaking, I think that the proposed alignment is not as good as it is at the moment. It is perhaps the best that can be agreed.

On whether we consider that best practice was followed, we were concerned throughout our discussions that it seemed that the needs and the influence of landowners had a great bearing on discussions. In replacing a national cycle route, we would like to have seen a more robust approach from the promoter to getting the very best cycle route that it could. I am not sure whether the hierarchy of use that is in Scottish planning policy 17, in which cyclists are at the top of a pyramid of use that filters down to the motor car, was followed.

We were also concerned that the need for car parking at stations, which are quite close to communities, seemed to have a greater bearing than did creating traffic-free paths to those communities from railway stations. We heard from the previous panel that concern is already felt about parking at stations. Where possible, we would like paths to be created from stations to communities so that people can walk or cycle to the station, rather than needing to take their cars.

Peter Hawkins (CTC Scotland/Spokes): CTC Scotland and Spokes are very concerned about the proposed alignment of the route. I reinforce what John Lauder said about SPP 17. Paragraph 40 of the policy says:

"Cycle networks should be continuous, with severance ... avoided".

That is Scottish Executive policy. Paragraph 37, which is about disused railways, says:

"Where disused routes forming part of walking and cycling networks are to be re-used for road or rail based transport, appropriate measures ... should be taken to safeguard the integrity of the walking and cycling network".

Under the scheme, that integrity will not be maintained. The continuity of the existing route will be completely disrupted in at least four main areas, one of which is Drungelloch to Plains, where the route will be diverted by as much as

400m in each direction and will cross and recross the line of the original railway. Severe diversions will be created at Armadale, towards Bathgate and at Caldercruix. In all those places, the continuity of the existing line, which is about 14 miles long, will be broken by those deviations. As we have seen, the Executive places strong emphasis on preserving walking and cycling routes, so it should be prepared to go the extra mile to have the continuity maintained and not broken.

Paul Tetlaw (TRANSform Scotland): I will talk about access to stations. I listened to the discussion earlier, in which much concern was expressed about car parking capacity, the popularity of stations and how close people live to stations. The scheme offers the perfect opportunity to create high-quality walking and cycling routes to stations and to encourage people to walk and cycle, which means using an active travel mode that would have great health benefits. Everybody is now concerned about health.

Such travel is not terribly uncommon or unusual. I am sure that any committee members who have travelled in northern European countries such as Holland, Denmark or Germany will have seen station car parks where bikes outnumber cars. In those places, it is common for people to cycle to stations. Here, it is common for people to walk to stations. My plea is that we should not overlook good-quality walking and cycling routes that are well maintained, have a good surface and are well lit and well signed to stations. Such routes can have many benefits as well as relieving car parking.

Alasdair Morgan: I will pick up the point about the integrity of the cycle path—"continuity" might be a better word. Why did the promoter choose the route that it chose? Was that simply to avoid increased costs or argument with landowners?

John Lauder: It is our impression that the promoter wanted to avoid acquiring too much land and working with landowners who were unwilling to part with land close to or around the line. However, we accept the pragmatism of the route. Sustrans has been happy to work with the promoter to come up with the best possible line. Your point is correct, however: the route is as it is in order to avoid acquiring any more land. I think that the decision has been cost driven.

Alasdair Morgan: Were any of the objections strong enough to require a rerouting of the cycle path, the committee would have to determine how it could be rerouted and how much that would cost. Have you put monetary figures on any of the things that you would like to happen?

John Lauder: Sustrans is not objecting to the line that the path is taking. We have worked well with the promoter on that, and we feel that we

have come up with the best proposed route that we can. It is not as good as the current route, and it is not as good as it could be if more money were spent on it but, as we have been given an assurance that the route will be built, we are happy to accept that.

David Wagstaffe (North Lanarkshire Access Forum): We have a wonderful cycle route and heritage trail sitting on the railway track now. However, we are delighted that the track is to be reopened. I think that that will bring the area a remarkable development opportunity, as we heard from the previous panel.

However, the forum is concerned at the proposal to put a substantial section of the route through the centre of Plains and on to the A89, which is a remarkably busy road. That totally takes away from the opportunity to cycle or indeed walk in safety. The existing cycle track includes the heritage trail from Summerlee heritage park to Caldercruix countryside and nature park. As an access chair, I am looking into the opportunities that are presented by core paths, which we are now trying to pull together. It seems that we are taking away a valuable asset. Although speed considerations may require the cycle path to embrace the railway route—whether or not my colleagues like the proposed route; I acknowledge that it will not be up on the embankment—as we say in our objection, there is also an opportunity to adopt a new heritage trail via existing rural paths and rights of way. I have prepared a document on that, which I am happy to leave with the committee. There are also woodland walks that we could incorporate both in the cycle route and in a heritage trail.

Alasdair Morgan: Did you put that specific proposal to the promoter?

David Wagstaffe: Yes. We have proposed that in a drawing along with our objection. We have been rather greedy, in fact. We want amendments to what was put forward for the cycle track—if you don't ask, you don't get. We want you guys to express concern about the most hazardous areas on the A89. It is a quarry area, with lorries hammering up and down. It is not the easiest thing to do to ride a bike there. Knowing about the money constraint, however, we feel that the heritage trail could be rerouted, utilising existing path networks and rights of way, and that we could ask for a minimum amount of expenditure that would still allow us a pretty route past Plains and so on.

Alasdair Morgan: What was the promoter's response to that?

David Wagstaffe: In fairness, I have not spoken to the promoter. I honestly do not know.

Peter Hawkins: We have received a letter from MacRoberts, which works for the promoter,

Network Rail. MacRoberts has said that it will come back to us to discuss the detail of our objection. I have talked about the proposed deviations. We want the route to be much more continuous, not chopped up like it is proposed to be. Then, we could perhaps talk about the costs that would be involved.

I would like you to take back to the Executive the principle that cyclists and walkers should not be disadvantaged by the rail project. Rail is public transport; cycling is a sustainable form of transport, as is walking. Here, two good methods of transport are conflicting with each other. The cycle route that we have at the moment is going to be chopped up and made into an inferior product. We argue that what we are given should be at least comparable in quality with what we have at the moment, bearing in mind the Executive's stated policy of looking after walkers and cyclists as a top priority.

12:00

Alasdair Morgan: It would be fair to say that negotiations on the issue are still going on between certain people from your interest group and the promoter.

Peter Hawkins: Yes, that is what we have been led to understand.

Cathy Peattie: What is your estimated usage of the realigned cycle path compared with your usage of the existing cycle path?

John Lauder: Sustrans must put its hand up and say that we do not have good figures on the use of the path. Anecdotally, we know that it is well used. For example, earlier this year a local landowner dug up a section of the path and the situation was very quickly rectified through enormous pressure from local people and cyclists who use it for an east-west route.

There is tremendous growth in cycling. In the past couple of years, Sustrans has received much better funding from the Executive's transport group and we now have an on-going monitoring programme, so we will have better figures. The number of people who are cycling has, in some parts, doubled in the past five years. There is a growth and a desire.

Cathy Peattie: Do you feel that the realigned route will offer advantages over the existing route, regarding access to local social, employment and leisure opportunities?

John Lauder: No, we do not. A lot more could be done to create links into communities from the path. At the moment, the path is a bit like a trunk road for cyclists; it goes right through a number of communities and there are quite good links running off it into those communities, although

they are often informal—they are not surfaced, lit, signed or well maintained. An opportunity has been missed, thus far in the planning, to put in much better paths.

I return to the point that I made about the need for good, traffic-free paths to stations, particularly the one at Armadale. People are much more encouraged to cycle and walk where they are not in conflict with motor cars. Even when there is a pavement, if it is beside a busy road that goes in and out of a station, it is still not a pleasant experience. A path that is away from the traffic, well lit, well maintained and well signed is attractive and creative and makes for a much more enjoyable experience. A lot more could be done to make Armadale station, in particular, accessible to the local community.

That would avoid a lot of the car parking issues that were beginning to surface today. There would be health benefits, as well. We are all encouraged to take some moderate physical activity every day: adults for 30 minutes; children for an hour. If someone walks or cycles to the station every day instead of taking the car, they will quickly have more moderate physical activity than they would if they used the car. More could be done to provide links into the communities.

Because the path is currently right on top of the embankment, it can go either way—north or south. Sadly, once it is down to the south or the north of the embankment, the embankment becomes a barrier. That is another issue.

We have worked with Jacobs Babbie on the design and it has incorporated a lot of our ideas. It has incorporated some bridges. In response to an earlier point about Plains, we have been given an assurance, through Jacobs Babbie, that an off-road alternative will be considered. We would be a lot happier if we had a concrete assurance that that will be done. However, there seems to be a willingness to take cyclists away from what everyone acknowledges is a dangerous road and what could be a dangerous crossing.

The Convener: Spokes has suggested that it is happy for cyclists to be squeezed in under bridges alongside rail tracks. Are there any dangers in that?

Peter Hawkins: That is really a health and safety issue, I suppose, but I cannot see why there should be any particular dangers. On the Roseburn path in Edinburgh, we have managed to persuade the promoters to squeeze us under the bridges by reducing the width of the footpath a little bit. Admittedly, we are talking about trams there, rather than heavy rail. However, given the fact that many of the bridges on the Airdrie to Bathgate line will have to be rebuilt anyway for electrification, we feel that every effort should be

made to get us through the bridge, if that is the choice.

At Armadale, for instance, there is an underbridge under the road. We could go to the top of that and then down the other side without going under the bridge, as long as that is what we are provided with. At the moment, what is proposed for Armadale is a huge deviation—400m at least—and we do not see why that is necessary. As John Lauder said, it is question of land ownership and of being prepared to spend a little bit extra to give us something that is much more continuous and direct, rather than sending us all round the moon. If you have those deviations, people will simply stop using the route as much as they are using it at the moment. It just ceases to be attractive.

Janis Hughes: I will ask about station issues. On the occasions when I have been to Airdrie station recently, I have noticed only a couple of cycles there. I note that the written evidence from CTC Scotland and Spokes states that

“there is no consideration at all of the question of cycle access to stations.”

Indeed, the promoters have said that that is a matter for local authorities. What is your view on cycle parking? Are we seeing only a couple of cycles at Airdrie station because the facilities are not good? Have you had any further dialogue with the promoters about who is responsible for cycle access?

Peter Hawkins: The facilities are not good, because there is no cycle access to the stations. Cyclists have to mix it in with all the traffic on the road. We are talking partly about an economic argument. If you are going to provide car parking space you need a huge amount of land, which has to be bought from the landowners. As we have already seen at places such as Croy, when a train arrives at the station, between 50 and 100 people get off the train and all rush like mad to the car park, so there are then between 50 and 100 cars all trying to get out of the car park and on to the road network, causing enormous congestion, and the road network obviously cannot cope.

Imagine instead that some of those 50 to 100 people are going to run for their bicycles. That immediately alleviates the problem, because you do not need so much land for car parking. Eight bicycles can be parked in the space occupied by one car, so would not it be much more sensible to provide cycle parking instead of the huge land take for the car park? Of course, people will not use the cycle parking if there is not some way of getting to the station by bike in the first place. That is where we see the problem.

We were talking about the journey from door to destination, and people use the train as an

intermediate stage in coming from their doorstep to where they are heading for. That has to be taken into account. If you provide cycle facilities to the stations, such as cycle lanes, a slight widening of the road, or the construction of a joint use pavement for walkers and cyclists, that can all be done on land that is already owned by the council. It will not cost much to create that extra width or other facilities at junctions, which will encourage people to cycle or walk to the station instead of using their cars.

As John Lauder said, there are also enormous health benefits. The average car owner has a stressful drive to the station and a stressful drive home. He pays for a gym membership to go and work out, and he drives to the gym, has his workout and drives home again. A map that I have with me shows that almost all the communities in West Lothian—we have mentioned Whitburn, Blackburn and Armadale—are within easy cycling distance of this railway line. If cycle routes were provided from those towns to the station it would help to solve the problem of congestion on the road and would make it possible for people to have a 20-minute cycle ride in the morning to the station. In 20 minutes someone can cycle the 3 or 4 miles that is the distance of each of those towns from the station. The person would have a 20-minute bike ride in the morning and another 20-minute bike ride in the evening. They would have had 40 minutes of good, healthy exercise. They would be healthier employees who would have fewer days off sick because they have combined daily fresh air and exercise with the journey to work, which is an eminently sensible thing to do.

We have a letter from the Executive that states that it cannot be bothered with providing cycle routes to the stations and that that is a matter for the local authorities. However, the local authorities will not have the money to provide those facilities. We are saying that, right from the start, the Executive should say, "We will provide proper cycle routes and walking routes to the station and try to encourage people to use those modes rather than their cars." Someone will not make a journey that is a 20-minute cycle ride much faster in a car. By the time they have got their car out of the garage and on to the road a cyclist could already be half a mile down the road. Proper facilities make a huge amount of economic and health sense. That is the second part of our objection.

Paul Tetlaw: I will mention some comparative figures for the United Kingdom and northern European countries. In Denmark, which is typical of a number of countries, more than 20 per cent of people cycle as their main mode of transport daily—to work, school or whatever—but in the UK the figure is 2 per cent at best and only 1 per cent in certain areas. Edinburgh sets a good example as it has managed to lift the figure to 5 per cent

through consistent investment in cycling facilities. That backs up Peter Hawkins's argument that, if there is a national policy to encourage healthy travel, it is possible to reach a much higher figure.

People mention climate as a difficulty, but Denmark is a northern European country. It rains there and it can be windy. The climate is similar to ours, so it is an example that shows that it is possible for us to have much higher cycling figures. The fact that we now see very small numbers of cyclists at stations is not a reason to say that it will always be that way—we could easily change the situation. The health benefit, perhaps above all others, is the best reason for doing that.

David Wagstaffe: I spent quite a while in Cambridge where people use a bike for everything—riding to the shop and everywhere.

The access forum tries hard to consider cycle routes and walking routes and to take on board the fact that people need to stay healthy. When we are spending such a vast quantity of money on the route from Glasgow to Edinburgh, we have an opportunity to incorporate cycle routes and give folk the opportunity to ride safely. We should not ask them to ride on a main road such as the A89, which is a recipe for being dead because the attitude of many drivers is that they do not take cyclists into account. It would be foolish for us not to take the opportunity to incorporate cycle tracks and cycle parking into stations and to improve many people's cycling awareness.

Jeremy Purvis: I will widen the discussion to bus issues. My questions are probably directed more towards TRANSform and Sustrans. What can be done to make the bus services to the stations more sustainable? What discussions have you had with the promoter in that regard?

12:15

Paul Tetlaw: We have had no specific discussions about that with the promoter, but I support the evidence from people earlier this morning that it is a matter of looking at integration to ensure that the bus services link with the train services. It is common practice in Europe for the bus to arrive a few minutes before the train arrives—people get off the bus and on to the train. Similarly, the bus meets the train at the other end. We do not have to invent anything new; we just have to look for good practice elsewhere. The secret is the integration of different modes—we need to integrate the bus and train services.

John Lauder: I am afraid that we have had no discussions about buses with the promoter.

Jeremy Purvis: Will you help the committee by indicating ways in which integration could work better? Although the committee heard that

integration would make things work better, we heard examples of cross-county difficulties. How could such difficulties be overcome? Should the committee insist on a bus service to go with the proposed train scheme? Perhaps you have no views on that.

Paul Tetlaw: The scheme might provide an opportunity to have a new look at all the bus services in the area and perhaps recast them in light of such a significant new means of transport. We could see how the two modes could work together, rather than in competition with one another.

The worst possible scenario would be if we had a low-quality bus service that sought to undercut the rail fare and run parallel to the railway line. That would suit no transport purposes. The strategy should be to look at how the buses can be recast to support the rail services and to serve those areas not served by the new rail line.

John Lauder: I agree with everything that Paul Tetlaw said. As the line was redeveloped, it would be useful to have a big promotion about how people could access it—how they could get to and from the stations. We want to discourage the short car journeys to and from the station that Peter Hawkins spoke about and promote the alternatives of walking, cycling or using a bus to access the stations. It is important that such a promotion should include signage and the creation of good path networks.

Peter Hawkins: So-called soft measures such as signage, leaflets and little maps that can be given out for free are important in making people aware of the possibility of cycling to stations. I was late this morning not because of traffic—the route that I followed had virtually no traffic on it—but because I got completely lost coming here from Croy station through Cumbernauld. I assumed that I could follow the B802, but there was no sign to the B802 at the second roundabout I came to, so I got lost. There were no signs on the little roads that I came on and I had to go into farms to ask where I was and how to get here. That shows the importance of signage on the roads. Simple measures such as signage do not cost much. Low-technology methods can achieve an awful lot at little expense.

Jeremy Purvis: Thank you. I am glad that you escaped the farms.

David Wagstaffe: Earlier on, we spoke about stations at Blackridge and the opportunity to access the train at Harthill. We looked at bus routes going into Airdrie from Salsburgh and Allanton. If one wants to catch a bus to go to Cumbernauld, one has to take three buses. If the route is to be reopened, which is absolutely marvellous, the bus routes could operate from

Salsburgh, through Harthill, into Blackridge and Armadale. That would allow us the opportunity of a better bus service to link with the railway. We are also charged with core path planning. Consequently, we look for cycle routes and walking routes and want to link existing rights of way from Salsburgh to the new railway station. We would like what we have proposed to be looked on sympathetically.

The Convener: We have not talked about cyclists taking their bikes on trains. The arguments about health apply at both ends. What are your views on the facilities that Network Rail and the train companies provide for cyclists? Should we consider those?

John Lauder: The capacity to put bikes on trains has improved a lot over the past few years. We work closely with ScotRail and we are pleased with the increased amount of parking that it is providing in stations, and that people can get bikes on most trains. However, I came back from Inverness last week at the end of a tour and found that, south of Inverness, there is the restriction of only two bikes per train. That is wretched, because if someone has not booked their bike on to a train, they do not get on it. There is ample capacity for about six bikes per train and it was rotten to see people being turned away.

In the central belt, there is good capacity for bikes on the more modern rolling stock. Staff are helpful and it is often left to the discretion of the guard whether to put more bikes on—often they are very accommodating. However, there are other lines where there is no capacity whatever to take a bike on a train. It is a pain for cyclists, because they are a nuisance to other passengers and have to stand and hold their bike the whole time.

A lot more could be done. Demand will only increase. I travel regularly on the Glasgow to Edinburgh line and see more and more people wanting to put their bike on the train. We have mentioned the health aspects and it is often quicker to cycle to avoid traffic congestion.

I hope that the line is reopened. Sustrans really supports that, but we hope that there will be ample capacity to put bikes on the trains, so that when people get to the station they can cycle on to their work.

The Convener: None of your colleagues disagrees with that comment. Thank you for coming along. I am sure that your comments on signage will be picked up, possibly by the next panel, which includes representatives of North Lanarkshire Council.

Mr Wagstaffe suggested that he might have something else to submit in writing to the clerks. We look forward to receiving that, as well as the surveys that various MSPs have carried out.

I welcome the representatives from North Lanarkshire Council. I hope that they will bear with us in working a little beyond half 12, perhaps until about quarter to 1. I ask Alasdair Morgan to commence the questions.

Alasdair Morgan: Perhaps I could follow on immediately from one of the previous witnesses and ask why there are no signs to tell people how to cycle from Croy to Airdrie via the B802.

Councillor Thomas Morgan (North Lanarkshire Council): It is Graham Mackay's fault.

Alasdair Morgan: I thought that it might be. I take it that you will take that point on board.

David McDove (North Lanarkshire Council): I have a cycling map for the whole of North Lanarkshire, and I will be happy to pass it on so that the previous witness can find his way back without any problems.

Alasdair Morgan: Good. You heard my question about whether best practice had been adopted in designing the proposed cycle route and whether it would have any advantages over the existing route. Could you comment on that and two other substantive points that were made? The first was about the continuity of the cycle route. Although the promoter's proposed version will be continuous, it is not an obvious route and has lots of diversions on it. Is that acceptable? Secondly, do you have any comments about cycle access to railway stations?

David McDove: I will take the point about continuity first. As it is just now, the route is easy to find east of Drumgelloch as it follows the railway solum. However, there is a problem with the many diversions, and the deviations have been mentioned. It is obviously a matter of trying to find the best fit, but that leads to problems with lining and signing continuity. There are difficulties in other areas, but lack of signing is an issue as it makes it harder to follow a route, predominantly for the leisure cyclists on day trips. It is more difficult for them to distinguish a route if they are crossing over roads and going down footpaths and through parks.

The crossings over busy roads were mentioned. Cycling along the A89 through Plains—where there is a lot of quarry traffic and heavy vehicles, albeit in 30mph limit area—is not the most pleasant experience. Coming westwards, the route crosses outwith the confines of the village. There is a 30mph limit, but speed is an issue there, which will raise concerns. East of Caldercruix, there is a crossing of a derestricted road with a 60mph limit, which will be an issue for families with children. Only so much signing and lining can be done in advance from a motorist's point of view. When there are lots of crossings and deviations

going through towns and villages, it is harder to keep the continuity.

Alasdair Morgan: Have you had discussions with the promoter in an attempt to resolve the problems, particular those relating to the A89 through Plains?

David McDove: We have had a number of discussions, and there is an appreciation of the problems. What has been provided is perhaps the best immediate solution, but we are always trying to see whether we can refine it for the areas where there are still some difficulties. For the A89 for instance, we have looked at redetermining the northern part and changing its legal status to make it combined cycle and pedestrian usage in one section. That would take away some of the issues of cycling along the A89 and crossing outwith the village, as the crossing would be in the village.

However, there are problems with that, one of which is the fact that that would be outwith the scope of the bill in terms of deviation and the amount of land that has been referenced. The question is how much could be done through the bill and how much it would come back to the local authorities to provide and pay for. The discussions are continuing, but could possibly do with a bit of a steer through the committee considering other options beyond those that have been referenced to date.

Alasdair Morgan: Is there land that could be acquired to overcome some of the difficulties?

12:30

David McDove: The redetermining of footways is local-authority controlled. In discussions to do with Plains, other land under different ownership has been considered. That land would have to be acquired, which could not be done immediately. For example, a route to the south of Plains and Caldercruix has been considered—a route that would be more rural and traffic free. However, that is outwith the scope of the bill and issues arise to do with how it would be promoted and funded. We have discussed such issues with the promoter and will continue to do so.

Alasdair Morgan: Would it be fair to say that you are in active discussions?

David McDove: We have had a number of discussions to date. Proposals have now been submitted, so the question is the extent to which our discussions with the promoter can change the proposals. It may be that direction is required from you. However, we can discuss the issues to see whether there are better options.

Alasdair Morgan: I am anxious that people should not say, "Oh well, there's a problem in Plains, but that's tough." We have not arrived at that stage yet, have we?

David McDove: No—we have always highlighted any problems and suggested other options. We have worked with the North Lanarkshire access forum, with other departments in the council and with the likes of Sustrans. We have a common interest in considering alternatives that we have put forward.

Cathy Peattie: Will the railway route, the station stops and the journey times prove attractive to commuters, the business community and potential inward investors?

Graham Mackay (North Lanarkshire Council): As we said last Monday, there is a great economic need along the length of the line. The promoters have done a good job in the economic appraisal. The Scottish transport appraisal guidance assessment benefits give a factor of 1.8. Even the option at Plains that we would like to talk about later comes out at 1.7. There are clear economic justifications.

We have said that 400 jobs would be created in North Lanarkshire as a result of the line. A larger number of jobs would be created in West Lothian, too. However, economic appraisals and the financial success of the line are not the only important things; the social inclusion aspects are important too. North Lanarkshire has high unemployment and reducing that figure is a key council objective. We are putting a lot of effort into that and we consider the railway to be part of the solution. It will improve people's employability and lead to more housing in the area. I will come on to the population figures for Plains later.

Cathy Peattie: How will the railway impact on the economic viability of local bus services to Plains and Blackridge? How will public transport develop if no station is provided, for example, in Plains?

Graham Mackay: The economic viability of buses is a big issue. I agree with a previous witness that bus services will have to be reconsidered. If a high-quality train service offers a much superior transport service that attracts people, it will be a challenge to all of us—not just Network Rail but Strathclyde Partnership for Transport and the local authority—to work together to improve bus services.

Some areas are not within walking distance of the railway and they will have to be connected to it. Villages such as Greengairs and Wattston are areas in which we want to improve social inclusion. As well as buses, the local authority must provide cycling lanes and walking lanes from housing areas towards the railway.

Buses can be used differently from the way in which they are used at the moment. I hope that the bus industry will see the opportunity and provide feeder links to the trains. Traditionally, bus

services in the west of Scotland have headed towards Glasgow. Previous authorities in Strathclyde did a lot of work to improve radial routes into Glasgow, but orbital routes have been missing. The orbital connections are poor, and in North Lanarkshire that means the north-south routes. It is those routes that will be feeder routes providing custom for the trains. We will certainly go to SPT to try to encourage bus operators to provide north-south feeders. Perhaps the better alternative—the train—will lead to less reliance on the bus services on the radial routes.

Councillor Morgan: The word “investment” was used earlier in a discussion about the possibility of bus services. If an investor is considering investing in a rural area that is socially deprived and has been so for several years—an area that is in the top 15 per cent of disadvantaged areas, according to your figures—that area would not be too attractive to them if they found out that the service was dependent on a local bus. I am the local member for Plains and Caldercruix, so half of me is delighted and the other half is disappointed.

I am, probably uniquely in the room, a person who does not drive. I depend on public transport. I am trying desperately not to make this a narcissistic exercise in which I just sit and talk about myself, but in this personification, I speak on behalf of the people whom I represent in Plains, where the bus service after 6 o'clock at night is non-existent. The insinuation in the discussion has been about putting money on the table and temporarily providing a bus service. That will not work. I do not know whether there is some stereotyping of people who sit on buses, but the previous attempt to provide a bus service went nowhere, as Karen Whitefield mentioned. If people have to break their journey from the bus to get on a train and potentially get back on to another bus, as I do regularly, they will find another way.

The present bus service is unreliable and cannot be depended on, although I do not mean any disrespect to the people who interface with the public on a daily basis. I assure the committee that there is no public confidence in the service. That lack of confidence would spill over into any potential reinvestment. The only way to reinvest in the area is through reopening the line with stations at Plains and Caldercruix.

Cathy Peattie: What assessment have you made of the possible patronage of a station at Plains? Would folk use the station?

Graham Mackay: Karen Whitefield referred to a survey of that matter. Network Rail used a model to assess the usage, which may be appropriate, but it is difficult to do that, given that each village and location has a different need. For that reason, it is difficult to assess the patronage in Plains. Karen Whitefield can provide members with a

survey that shows an estimated patronage level for Plains station of about 100 people a day. However, that level is based on existing journeys and there is great potential to increase the number of journeys. The population of Plains has declined by about 14 per cent in the past 10 years, of which 17 per cent has been among those of working age. People are leaving Plains and the place is in decline. We hope that the railway line will provide an impetus to stop the decline and for reinvestment in the village.

We should expect a modest number of trips from a declining centre. Government policy is to target finance to remove social exclusion. As has been mentioned, under the closing the opportunity gap agenda, we have a target of getting 20 per cent of unemployed people back into work. We believe that, if people were given new travel options—not only for employment, but for social and leisure reasons—demand in Plains would increase. The whole town is within walking distance of where the station would be. We think that the promoter has not examined fully the demand that could exist. There are economic and social reasons for providing a station at Plains.

It has been suggested that there could be a dedicated feeder bus service from Plains to Drumgelloch station. That is an option, but it is very much a second-best option for Plains. Councillor Morgan mentioned the increased numbers of modal shifts. When people go to Glasgow or Edinburgh, they are likely to have another modal shift, which would be two modal shifts. The feeder bus service would simply add another shift on to a journey that already involves one.

Buses create different issues for mobility impaired people from those that are created by trains. Making mobility impaired people get a bus to Drumgelloch would be another barrier for them. Safety is another issue. Communities in villages are different from those in towns. People will have to go from the village environment in Plains to stand in Airdrie in the middle of the night, which is a different community. Many of those people might be young and vulnerable. It is difficult for them to do that for a social reason.

Another statistic that I will throw at you is that there has been a 23 per cent reduction in the number of children going on to further education. Karen Whitefield indicated that the Scottish average for people taking up further education opportunities is 15 per cent; in Plains, that figure is 10 per cent. The proposal does not meet the great suppressed demand, not only for employment but for social and educational opportunities.

Cathy Peattie: How many people in Plains use the bus service to access employment and further education? Councillor Morgan said that the figure is very poor.

Graham Mackay: Coatbridge College has told us that the take-up from the villages is lower than that from the towns. I am afraid that, like Sustrans, we have only anecdotal evidence. When we asked for evidence from SPT, which collects all such data, it could provide information only about what was along the route. It is very difficult to assess what is coming out of a particular settlement.

Councillor Morgan: At this time of day, bus services between Plains and Airdrie and between Caldercruix and Airdrie are excellent. However, the buses go only as far as Coatbridge. People cannot catch a direct bus from Plains or Caldercruix to Glasgow; instead, they have to change at Coatbridge. As a result, only shoppers use those services.

Another important issue is health. There is no immediately accessible doctor's surgery in Plains, although, ironically, there is one in Caldercruix. People who go regularly to the hospital—which is the area's biggest employer—either to work or to visit relatives or friends depend on the bus from Plains. That situation would continue even if there were no station at Plains.

For example, after visiting my mother-in-law, who is seriously ill in Monklands hospital, I saw a constituent of mine from Caldercruix, who is in her eighties, waiting for a taxi. I got talking to her: I knew that her son drove, but he was working, so she had no choice but to pay the £10.50 taxi fare. If she had had to take the taxi both ways, it would have cost her £21. I know the lady's circumstances and she cannot afford to do that. She is one of many such people in these villages. Caldercruix is okay, because it is on-plan for a station; however, that example of how deprivation hits the people I represent can be multiplied many times in Plains. As I have said, the bus service during the day is excellent. However, the service disappears at night and the place becomes the back of beyond.

Graham Mackay: On bus and rail patronage, I ask Alan Leslie from the planning section to explain proposals for the village under our land use policies. We do not think that Network Rail is taking full account of the existing situation or of the opportunities that the station at Plains might present in that regard.

Alan Leslie (North Lanarkshire Council): At the moment, there are about 900 houses in Plains. We are writing a new local plan that will cover the whole of North Lanarkshire, and have been taking submissions for the best part of two and a half years. We have been offered sites in Plains—I put it no more strongly than that—that, if we add up the notional capacities, might give us another 700 houses in the area. One of the few reasons why we are actively and seriously considering such a proposal is because of the railway line's proximity.

For the first time, the council has taken a strategic view—by which I mean North Lanarkshire-wide—about areas in which long-term growth or expansion might take place. The results of that exercise, which were reported to the council's planning and environment committee last August—I can give the committee a copy of the report if it does not have one—identified six areas in North Lanarkshire, the common denominator in all of which was the presence of a railway line. The difference with what we have called Airdrie east is that the railway line does not yet exist. If there had been no plans to reopen the Airdrie to Bathgate line, it is highly unlikely that Airdrie east would have made it on to our list of areas that are considered appropriate for expansion.

We have to assess the submissions against a range of capacity constraints in Plains that includes education, water and sewerage and the roads infrastructure. At the same time, there is the environmental constraint, which is to do with whether it is feasible, in landscaping terms, to expand Plains and the issue of whether virtually doubling the settlement's size over 10 or 20 years would alter its characteristics and so on.

For those reasons, we are looking at an area that is, as yet, undefined. We have called it east Airdrie, in broad terms, and it covers the eastern part of Airdrie, Plains and Caldercruix. During the forthcoming local plan, once we have published our consultative draft, which is timetabled to be reported in December, we will undertake such a study, in conjunction with a further two studies that we are doing concerning east Motherwell villages and Coatbridge north and west. The first of those studies is railway based and the second is potentially railway based.

12:45

Janis Hughes: Other witnesses have spoken about the lack of bus services in the area and whether that has an impact on the likelihood of people using a more reliable train service. It strikes me that some of the arguments that are being made are a good argument for some kind of reregulation. What has the council been doing with regard to supporting replacement bus services or helping some of the communities that are struggling due to a lack of suitable transport?

David McDove: North Lanarkshire is part of the SPT area. SPT, rather than the council, deals with bus issues; that is slightly different from the situation in the rest of Scotland. For example, there is an application for a bus route development grant in relation to Gartcosh station, which opened recently. One of the current routes is extending its services from Easterhouse up through Gartcosh. That funding lasts for three years but the bus companies have to run the service for four years,

which means, essentially, that there is a four-year guarantee of any sort of service. Beyond that time, there is no control over whether the bus will continue to operate. The funding is based on a decreasing allocation and it is hoped that, by the fourth year, there will be a sufficient amount of patronage that the company will be able to continue to run the service. Because of deregulation, our control over what happens with buses is quite limited.

Janis Hughes: Obviously, there are other initiatives, such as community transport initiatives, that the council can consider. We have to consider the proposal that is before us in the context of whether the only solution to the problem of areas in which there are no good transport links is to provide them with a station. That is why I am interested to know what the council has done.

David McDove: There is a community transport facility in North Lanarkshire—a village runs a bus that takes local groups to various places. We are investigating the potential for having a community transport project for getting people into employment. In that regard, we are looking at specific groups, such as disadvantaged groups, and the potential for taking children into home care and then onwards into employment. Again, that service is quite localised. Extending the service into the larger villages, which would include a variety of origins and destinations, would be quite difficult.

There are limitations to how much can and cannot be done and there is a question about how the funding element can continue. Further, there are limitations to do with evening and weekend services. The dial-a-bus service is predominantly for certain groups but there is also the ring-and-ride service, which is an on-demand bus service in North Lanarkshire that is funded by the council using money that comes from SPT. However, only certain areas have a service beyond 6 o'clock or at the weekend. Some areas can get a regular service and some cannot. That service is a glorified taxi service; people could not rely on it to take them back from work regularly after the hours during which public transport runs. The current service does not go to the hospital after 6 o'clock, but even if it did it could not be relied on to take people to and from hospital.

Graham Mackay: The council gets funding from the Government for rural transport. We pass that on to SPT and it manages that for us. We also get money from the Government for cycling, walking and the save our streets campaign. We promote these integrated features towards the railway lines. We recently opened a station in Greenfaulds, which David McDove mentioned. Along with SPT, we have provided a subsidised bus service. We have also provided walking and

cycling routes to the station. It is our intention that, when the Airdrie to Bathgate line opens, we will provide those support services for that line, so that as many of our communities as possible feed into the Airdrie to Bathgate line using buses, cycling and walking.

Along the main routes, the radial route that goes in and out of our main population areas gives us the biggest opportunity for those communities. We think that the best option is the train service. We will use buses wherever that is appropriate and we are doing that. As I mentioned last week, we are also using buses at a successful park-and-ride facility that we have just built at Harthill. That service goes from Harthill to Edinburgh and from Harthill to Glasgow, direct into town. However, it is a point-to-point service; it does not deliver the flexibility of stops that we need in Lanarkshire and West Lothian. Where appropriate, we will use buses to the best advantage, and we will try to support the railway line by feeding as much traffic into it as possible.

Janis Hughes: If there was no station at Plains, would the residents of Plains use the stations at Drumgelloch, Caldercruix and Armadale? Would those who did not have their own transport be able to access public transport to get them to those stations?

Councillor Morgan: I have represented both villages for 18 years and grew up in the area. I am Plains born and bred, and it is pleasing for me to sit here today and hear so many national politicians mention the village of Plains as if they know it as well as I do. I am glad that you have seen it. If you have walked through the villages, you will have seen the ways in which the council and the Scottish Parliament have tried to address the deprivation there. For example, there are the excellent local joint campus schools, one of which will open shortly in Plains and one of which has already opened in Caldercruix. Those are excellent examples of initiatives through which we are trying to kick-start the regeneration.

As for usage of the stations, I cannot foresee people going to Caldercruix along the A89. As a chap said earlier, that would be a recipe for death with or without a walkway or cycleway.

I do not want to be disrespectful on the issue of the walkway and cycleway, but nobody would lose any sleep if they thought that they were going to lose the walkway and cycleway—that is the reality, folks. I walk it regularly to my weekly surgeries in Plains and Caldercruix. The main users of the path are from outwith those villages. I mean no disrespect to the network, but if local people had the option of losing the walkway and cycleway—this is not a proposal; I am painting the doomsday scenario—and having a train station instead, to a man, to a woman, to a person, they would plump for the train station.

As was mentioned, 45 per cent of the path's users are non-car owners. One or two of those people might, like me, use the path by choice—I am doing my bit for the environment and have never owned a car—but in most cases it is a matter of necessity. How do we get people out of social deprivation and up there? The council is working on initiatives to address deprivation and create social inclusion. Scottish Executive initiatives have targeted rural areas of multiple deprivation. Plains is the litmus test for those initiatives.

How do people get out of Plains to go, for example, to college for training? Coatbridge is just down the road. Luckily, there is a bus to Coatbridge during the day, but coming back at night would necessitate a train journey from Coatbridge, getting off at Drumgelloch and taking a feeder bus to Plains. That brings me back to my criticism as a daily user of public transport: bus services and connections are unreliable. I teach in Glasgow and use the Airdrie to Glasgow line. Whenever there is a disruption to the service—for works or whatever—and a bus service is put on, the next day people take their cars because the bus service is unreliable and time consuming.

I cannot make any clearer the real need for the station at Plains. Using the buses is okay if the services are regular but, after 6 o'clock at night, I would not want my daughter coming out from Glasgow and waiting at Drumgelloch for a supposed feeder service to bring her up to Plains. That would apply to any person, whether they were old, young or whatever. A bus service could have a negative impact on overall usage.

If the convener will allow me to do so, I will fling this in—do not fall for the red herring that Plains is not suitable. Some people in here know that they speak with forked tongue. I have attended public meetings with them and, between Plains and Caldercruix, Plains was the original choice for a station. Perhaps more will be said about that later.

The Convener: After that powerful contribution, Jeremy Purvis has a question.

Jeremy Purvis: Before Network Rail promoted the scheme, did the council always support the idea of a station at Plains?

Councillor Morgan: I do not know.

Alan Leslie: Yes. My colleague Shirley Linton led evidence last week that the district council had included policies in its local plans of 1981 and 1991, calling on the relevant authorities to reopen the Airdrie to Bathgate line for passenger use with stations at Plains and Caldercruix.

Graham Mackay: In addition, I refer you to the document that we submitted to the committee—the economic impact and location study—which

was commissioned by West Lothian Council, North Lanarkshire Council and the enterprise companies. That study promotes the all-station option as a sustainable option.

Jeremy Purvis: I have another quick question about buses for Councillor Morgan, with his local knowledge. Would all residents in Plains be within easy walking distance of the location of the proposed, possible or hoped-for station at Plains? Looking at the plans, it seems as if parts of the north of the village would be quite far away.

Councillor Morgan: Absolutely, but you can see on the radius plan that about 80 per cent—possibly more—of the village is within the 800m radius.

There has been new development in the north of the village in the past three or four years. That area is economically active and the people there would have cars if they wanted to get to the station.

Jeremy Purvis: Even with a station at Plains, would you still be looking for a feeder public transport system to serve it, or would that be unnecessary?

Councillor Morgan: The service that goes along the A89 goes through Airdrie, Clarkston, Drumgelloch—as you know, the railway line is there—Plains and then up to Caldercruix. Some buses run up to Blackridge because, as Fiona Hyslop said, there are people in West Lothian who are patients at Monklands hospital. Do not hold me to this but, presumably and hopefully, that service would be sufficient to tie in with a railway station on the main A89.

Jeremy Purvis: I was just sharing what could be a concern—ironically, if there was a station at Plains, some parts of the community there might get a reduced bus service if a feeder service was felt not to be viable, whereas if there was one for Drumgelloch or the other stations—a feeder service might go to all the stations—

Councillor Morgan: May I clarify something? Until 6 o'clock at night, the buses go up slightly into the scheme, as we call it, and then turn around. Some lobbying was done for the buses to go further north, but the narrowing of the roads further into the scheme and on-street parking by the 55 per cent of people there who have cars made it difficult for them to do that. A reduced bus service would not be too much of a problem because, at present, the bus service goes only part of the way into the village until 6 at night.

13:00

Jeremy Purvis: Last week, we received evidence from Mrs Linton about the new housing that is planned for the area. I think that Mr Leslie

said that it could well be the case that 700 houses would be proposed for Plains, which would represent a significant increase in the local population. In your discussions with developers, have they said that they are interested in the sites in question only if there is a station at Plains, or are they likely to proceed with development anyway?

Alan Leslie: Our discussions with developers so far have been relatively limited. What has happened is that they have thrown their hats into the ring. A new local plan is being prepared and they have said what they want from it.

To set that in the strategic context, I will give you the broader figures. As you know, the structure plan for our area is the Glasgow and Clyde valley joint structure plan, which has set a target of providing an additional 6,500 to 7,000 units for North Lanarkshire up to 2018. We have received offers to the tune of 70,000 units over that 15-year period, so it is clear that a substantial proportion of developers—nine out of 10 of them—will be disappointed.

As officials, we must ensure that the developments that we recommend be built satisfy the best fit from the point of view of location. The location criteria are all geared towards urban renewal, sustainable transport, support for services and so on. Although there is a proposal to build some 700 or 800 houses, it is highly unlikely that officials will recommend the whole of that offer to the council, for two very good reasons. I hoped that I had conveyed that to the committee earlier, but obviously I had not.

The first reason relates to the broad spectrum of impacts, which I have already mentioned, and the effect on the landscape. Along the route of the line, there are four communities that are very close to each other—Airdrie, Plains, Low Caldercruix and Caldercruix. It has been made clear to us by our elected representatives and by Government guidelines that it is extremely important to maintain the gaps between those settlements. The gap between Airdrie and Plains is about 1km, as is the gap between Plains and Low Caldercruix. The gap between Low Caldercruix and Caldercruix is less than 1km. Because there is not a great deal of spare land to expand those settlements along the route of the line, expansion to the north and south must be considered. The south of Plains is delineated by the river and the north of it is substantially delineated by former and current opencast and landfill operations, so the scope for expansion is limited.

I would not want there to be an “Alan Leslie said” moment relating to the building of 700 houses in Plains—in other words, I would not want to be quoted as saying that that will happen. What I can say is that if there was no proposal to reopen

the Airdrie to Bathgate line, which has been included in various local plans for years, we would not even be considering the idea of building in Plains as carefully as we are.

To return to the original question about developers, we have a combination of landowners and developer companies rather than construction companies. There is nothing firm at the moment; it can go either way. The committee has been to Plains, so it will know that it is one of those villages in which the population decline has been quite stark over the past 10 years. One of the reasons for that may well be the lack of housing opportunities. The same situation exists in village after village throughout Scotland. Young people are keen to go back to, or to stay in, the village in which they were brought up. Opportunities to do that in Plains may have been limited over the past few years.

I have an anecdote about a discussion that I had with a developer who is promoting a site in Plains. He got very excited when I mentioned the prospect of a station, which led me to believe that he was not working on the basis that a station was a given. He wanted to be in Plains for Plains' sake.

The Convener: I thank the panel for coming along. We will see some of its members again next week, when we examine in more depth the transport arrangements. We will now adjourn for lunch, which will be reduced to 40 minutes. We will resume at about 13:45, when we will hear from West Lothian Council representatives.

13:05

Meeting suspended.

13:44

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome to the afternoon session of the committee's visit to Airdrie. We are joined by representatives of West Lothian Council, some of whom have been before the committee already, and will be again next week, I believe. We will move straight to questions. I remind everyone that mobile phones should be switched off.

Alasdair Morgan: Are the witnesses happy with the relocation of the cycle route in their area? Has the best possible approach been taken? Will the relocated route have any advantages over the existing one?

Graeme Malcolm (West Lothian Council): The existing cycle route has been a great success since it was built. West Lothian Council supported its construction and has worked with Sustrans over the years to get the facility. It is arguable that it will never be as good as it is currently; it runs

along the railway track, so its geometry and alignment are excellent. Notwithstanding that, the bill provides an opportunity that does not exist currently. Under the existing arrangements for the national cycle route, the route is temporary. It was always temporary, on the basis that if a railway was to come forward at any time, it would be replaced. The council's aim is to work with the promoter to ensure that we are getting a good replacement for the national cycle route.

We have worked hard with the promoter to date. We have increased the number of crossing points. The cycle route, including access points, will be compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which it currently is not, which is a big plus. However, several issues still need to be resolved. We have a particular problem at Armadale station, where the logical route would be under the existing road bridge. We have suggested that to the promoter several times, but we are told that the suggestion has difficulties, mainly because of engineering constraints. We are not fully convinced of that and we would like the promoter to consider the issue during the detailed design stage. However, despite some minor issues, the bill will provide a good replacement for the national cycle route.

Alasdair Morgan: Another point that was raised in evidence this morning was about the council's opportunity to provide cycle access to stations from the housing that is to be built within 2 or 3 miles of them, so that people do not have to use their cars and can get their 20 minutes of exercise in the morning. Given that the promoter will not do that as part of its work, will the council consider it?

Graeme Malcolm: That is a good point. The council tries to achieve such measures with all its new planning applications. We try to encourage as many cycle and footpath linkages to key services as possible. In evidence last week, someone commented that Armadale station will be in the middle of nowhere but, in the future, it will be right at the centre of the development there. There are many opportunities to work with developers to secure the critical linkages into Armadale. We will strive to get those from developers as part of the planning process, as we normally do.

The Convener: You suggest that, inevitably, the new cycle path will not be as good as the existing one. However, given that £7.2 million will be invested in the new cycle track, surely, while it might not achieve perfection, it should be pretty near that.

Graeme Malcolm: I agree. The current path is a straight route between two points on a flat plane. As I mentioned, a lot of work has been done with the promoter, for example to ensure that access points that will be severed by the railway alignment are dealt with in the best way possible.

We think that we are now pretty close to getting the right balance. At the early stages in the discussions, several key north-south routes that are to be severed were not to be replaced with facilities, but that will now happen under the bill.

Janis Hughes: What is your view on the proposed railway line? Will the journey time be attractive to people in local communities who may wish to use the service, and will it attract inward investment?

Councillor Graeme Morrice (West Lothian Council): We fully welcome the scheme, although it is not the whole scheme that we would like. It is no secret that we strongly support a new station at Blackridge and the cause of colleagues from North Lanarkshire Council, who support an additional station at Plains. The arguments for those stations have been well rehearsed this morning and last week and no doubt will continue to be rehearsed. There is plenty of written evidence to suggest that the new rail link will greatly enhance social and economic opportunities, not just in West Lothian and North Lanarkshire, but throughout the central belt. The scheme is very much a strategic transport project, but it is important that we try to get as much benefit as possible for local communities in West Lothian and North Lanarkshire. To maximise the benefit, both councils strongly support the call for stations at Blackridge and Plains.

Janis Hughes: We discussed bus services with earlier panels. How would the railway impact on the economic viability of bus services, particularly those to Plains and Blackridge? How do you want public transport to develop? Indeed, what are you doing to assist the development of public transport in those areas?

Councillor Morrice: I will make some general points on the theme that emerged this morning of how bus services and the proposed rail link will connect with communities, and then ask my officers to expand on some details. However, first, I must be honest and tell the committee that I thought that buses would be discussed next week. If we had known that we were going to face detailed questions on the matter today, we would have brought with us our public transport manager, who is a walking bus and train timetable.

The Convener: We accept that point. The issue will be covered next week.

Councillor Morrice: On Janis Hughes's question, I think that the points have already been made. Certainly, in the evidence session before lunch, Councillor Morgan from North Lanarkshire made some powerful comments about the current bus situation.

We must ensure not only that there is full integration of bus and train services as part of an

integrated public transport strategy but that, in the provision of public transport, there is adequate choice in the modal split. As we pointed out earlier, it is also a matter of equity. Although many communities will greatly benefit from having train stations on their doorsteps, what will happen to the communities that are not close to stations? As other witnesses have made clear, public transport connections will make a huge difference to areas in the west of West Lothian and in the east of North Lanarkshire that suffer from social deprivation, exclusion and isolation.

Of course, there are issues with the bus service. We do not have enough money in West Lothian to provide the best possible service and buses in certain areas are very reliant on public subsidy. In fact, nearly 70 per cent of services are subsidised. I am not sure of the exact figure, but we are putting between £2 million and £3 million into buses. We want more commercial services, and the prospect of the railway link and additional stations in our communities might act as a catalyst in that respect.

Jim Dickson (West Lothian Council): As we said at the previous meeting, it is about getting the right mode of public transport for the right distance. For example, when the Bathgate track was relaid and reopened, there were roughly 200 relatively direct bus trips a day to Edinburgh, whereas the train generated 1,600 trips a day. However, both modes of transport were still available. For distances such as those between Bathgate and Edinburgh, Bathgate and Armadale and—we hope—Blackridge and Glasgow, the train is by far the more attractive mode of transport. There will always be some access to buses; after all, because of the capacity issue in central Scotland, we will need both buses and trains to carry everyone. As a result, although there will be competition, I do not think that it will be a matter of one or the other. However, with local services, buses become the more attractive option.

The committee asked about alternatives such as having a feeder service from Blackridge to the other stations. That would be a good question to put to our public transport manager, but we think that providing such a service would be extremely expensive; indeed, it would cost us about £1 million a year. Each year, the same cost, which might well increase, would have to be met. We would have to compare the income generated by the 200 or more people a year who might get on the train at Blackridge with the subsidy that would be required to provide a feeder bus service.

An opportunity to have a fixed, hard-rail service that is relatively near to fairly substantial populations represents a solid basis for public transport investment. I am not having a go at public transport; the issue is fitness for purpose

and how we secure the best mode. West Lothian Council's public transport manager has built our ideal public transport model, based on rail and bus links, so we know how we would prioritise different services if the Executive ever provided additional funding. The proposed rail link would be a fundamental building block of our public transport model and we would not have a better system than the one that is proposed, with the addition of a station at Blackridge.

The Convener: I want to return to Janis Hughes's question about station stops and journey times. Is it fair to conclude that such matters are relatively unimportant to the communities for whom the two new stations would be provided, but that for people who live on either side of Airdrie and Bathgate, who would use the through line, such matters could be quite important?

Councillor Morrice: That is a fair point to consider. I was interested that you mentioned communities in North Lanarkshire and West Lothian who are served by an existing station or who will be served by a new station, as opposed to people in Edinburgh and Glasgow. The argument was made earlier that people who want to travel by rail between Edinburgh and Glasgow will probably continue to go via Falkirk, which takes much less time than the other two routes.

If stations were provided at Blackridge and Plains, the additional journey times would probably not be a big issue for the people in those communities who want to travel to and fro. We concur with the point that was made earlier that not every train would be expected to stop at every station. On Saturday, I travelled from Livingston South to Glasgow on the Shotts line and the train did not stop at every station—the journey took an hour, but at least I reached my destination. Another two or three minutes on the journey time would not make a big difference to people. The people who want a bullet train from Glasgow to Edinburgh would probably go via Falkirk.

Jim Dickson: We are talking about a journey time of less than an hour from most places in West Lothian to Glasgow, which is pretty attractive and competitive, compared with the alternatives. At peak times it takes a long time to make such journeys by car, because there is so much congestion. We are not convinced by the argument that people would be put off by an extra three minutes on the journey time. We understand the principle behind the argument, but when we weigh up the nature and spirit of what is intended and the scheme's social and cultural objectives, we think that the extra three minutes would be a price worth paying.

It is good that the community representatives who gave evidence today are realistic and do not expect a train to stop at their station every 15

minutes. In our model we have tried to preserve an approach whereby the larger places have a more frequent service and smaller, intermediate locations get a less frequent, but reasonable, service. Not every train would stop at every station. Such an approach would strike the right balance.

14:00

Cathy Peattie: Would residents of Blackridge travel to Drumgelloch, Caldercruix and Armadale to access the train?

Jim Dickson: Some people would do, but uptake would be limited and more socially excluded people would not travel to stations at those locations. In the context of social justice, we should consider the people in the west of West Lothian, who must travel to the Edinburgh royal infirmary for some operations. The bus journey to Edinburgh from Blackridge is pretty long and it would help people if they could take a train to the centre of Edinburgh and then catch a bus or train to the infirmary.

Cathy Peattie: What would be the wider impact of a station stop at Blackridge on patronage and journey time and therefore on the line's economic viability?

Jim Dickson: As I said, not providing a station at Blackridge would limit the railway line's potential to meet the objectives that have been set for it. The cost of providing the station would be relatively small in comparison with the gains that would be made by doing so. In a planning context, our position might be different from that of North Lanarkshire Council in that some of the proposed development would happen even if no station was built—although perhaps not as quickly. However, there would be a downside in the longer term. In West Lothian, we are pretty good at using our assets and at planning 20, 30 or 40 years ahead. Once we have been allowed to produce the Lothian structure plan, we are likely to be asked to come up with more development. In the long term, we will want to build on the back of the rail service in the greater Blackridge area. We are allocating land where we think that people will benefit from the service, and we think that there is further potential.

As we said last week, and as other witnesses have said today, increasingly family members go in different directions at different times. Having a railway that serves communities all the way along the track will help those communities to access services.

Jeremy Purvis: The panel has answered most of my questions. Does West Lothian Council agree with the promoter that, notwithstanding the issues of connectivity that have been raised, there is no

business case for Blackridge station, if we offset patronage levels against capital costs? Have you worked with the promoter on that issue?

Councillor Morrice: I will start by making a general point. We do not necessarily accept the presumption that has been made, but we can discuss that in a moment. As Jim Dickson said, we must look at the long term and at the future development of places such as West Lothian and North Lanarkshire. It is no secret to most people that West Lothian has one of the fastest-growing populations in the whole United Kingdom. That is set to continue for the next 15 or 20 years. Perhaps 25,000 new homes will be provided by 2020.

The Bathgate to Edinburgh line was opened 20 years ago, in 1986. That was a struggle, because many people thought that the line would not be viable and would not pay, because there would not be sufficient patronage. As we know, the opposite was true. Members are well aware of the fact that there are major capacity problems on the line. We think that the same will be true of this project in the future. I genuinely believe that if we do not provide platforms at Blackridge and Plains at this point, we will have to do so at some point in the future.

The most cost-effective, best-value, long-term, strategic approach is to do that now. Sure, there will be additional cost, but we have heard that, in relative terms, it is not sizeable. Providing those platforms would save money in the long term. We will need to do it in the future anyway. What we think of now as being viable or not viable could be entirely different in five, 10, 15 or 20 years' time. With more congested roads and with an increased population in the east central belt in particular, we will be increasingly dependent on public transport, especially trains. We can see what has been happening with trams in Edinburgh.

Jim Dickson: Graeme Morrice has stressed the long term, which I have also mentioned. In the short term, the council's view and my view is that the minimum of 220 extra trips a day that would be generated by Blackridge station is positive. It adds to the overall economics of the plan. You will perhaps have the opportunity to ask the Transport Scotland people about this when they come before you. Almost all the models that we considered were pretty impressive when it came to overall economic advantage. It is quite unusual for public transport projects to come up with such a high factor. The marginal difference between each of the various options is not an awful lot, even at a theoretical level. From my perspective, an extra 200 trips a day or more is pretty significant. People have said in evidence today about existing stations that the figure would be a lot lower, but there is a reasonable case against that.

The only counterargument is to ask whether the stop at Blackridge would delay the whole service.

We have rehearsed that point. The challenge to us all is to ascertain whether three minutes extra will make a difference with such a service. I do not think that the stations are no-hope stations, with relatively little patronage. We are saying that there is a pretty good base-load now. If we go ahead, there is a pretty good opportunity to make the service an awful lot better in the future. The planning system sometimes takes quite a long time to react. However, if we put a station in, we can certainly react and, in future years—in the next five, 10, 15 or 20 years—we can reflect on the situation and add extra base-load.

The council is pretty keen for the west of West Lothian to develop. Over the past 20 to 30 years, almost all the development has taken place around Livingston and to the east. We have regenerated our communities. The unemployment level has gone from extremely high to low. Our remaining issues are in the west of West Lothian. The Blackridge and Armadale area is the area of highest multiple deprivation. As people have mentioned today, we have been pretty successful at getting more development in the Whitburn area. It is our challenge to get the Armadale and Blackridge area going. The rail project is fundamentally solid as it is. At the margins, it could achieve quite a lot more for those communities that would not be possible otherwise.

Jeremy Purvis: You will have heard my questions to the witnesses from North Lanarkshire with regard to the number of people who travel outside Plains for employment purposes. The information that we have received indicates that 3 to 7 per cent of Blackridge and Armadale residents travel to work in Airdrie or areas west of Airdrie. That compares with the figure of about 30 to 35 per cent of people who travel to employment within the area. That is quite a big bias. Is the issue with the rail service not more to do with having a faster service for those who will be moving into Armadale, where the population will nearly double, as opposed to having an additional local service, which should be by a radically improved bus service, for the 30 to 35 per cent of people—the biggest proportion—who want local bus services?

Jim Dickson: I think that you are mixing different objectives. In Blackridge, we are now going for a substantial amount of extra housing. There will be something in excess of 500 houses, which I think is an expansion of 60 to 70 per cent. New people will be going into Blackridge, almost all of whom will live in private houses and will be in employment. They will need to access their jobs. If there is a station in Blackridge as they move in, there is a better chance that at least one member of the family will use the train to access their work.

Jeremy Purvis: I am using the promoter's figures for the population expansion between the

2001 census and the forecast for 2021. The figure for Blackridge goes from 2,149 to 2,875. You expect that growth in population to be made up of commuters.

Jim Dickson: Craig McCorriston will give the population figures.

Craig McCorriston (West Lothian Council): There are a few issues that we need to look at. Mr Purvis picked up the fact that the population of Armadale is predicted to double. The figures that we are currently working on for Blackridge suggest that there will be close to a doubling of the population of Blackridge also. It will start from a lower base, but we are looking at 75 to 80 per cent growth.

Jeremy Purvis: Are you saying that the promoter has underestimated?

Craig McCorriston: I believe that the promoter has underestimated. Unfortunately, along with everything else, we have a moving picture in terms of growth. I will give a practical example. In the local plan, we have a site in Blackridge that we anticipated will have capacity for around 200 to 210 houses. I assume that those are the figures that the promoter has used. The reality is that the developer has lodged a planning application for that site for around 330 houses—a projected 50 per cent growth above what we anticipated when we prepared the local plan.

Jeremy Purvis: Is that not just the normal trick among developers of lodging an application for something that is way in excess of what they want so that, when it is knocked back, they get what they wanted in the first place?

Craig McCorriston: I do not imagine that that is the case. I know that you are particularly keen on developer contributions to railway lines and so on. As we said in evidence last week, our education system is creaking at the seams. The more a developer talks up the capacity of a site, the more he has to give the council in various contributions to education, affordable housing and so on. There is no financial reason why a developer would talk up the capacity of that site. More important, not only is the developer keen to increase the capacity of the site; he is desperately keen that we allocate the neighbouring site—the field immediately to the east of the site—as a development site as well. That is a practical example of where the development capacity will continue to increase.

This morning, we heard about Whitburn and the Polkemmet site. The developer there is knocking on our door, seeking consent for an additional 1,000 houses on that site. That proposal would be contrary to the council's development plan at this time; however, as my director Mr Dickson has said, we are already looking at the structure plan to see where growth will be in the future. Although

I do not want to second-guess the shape of the development plan that we take to the council's elected members, I think that there is a real possibility that an additional 1,000 houses in that area would fall within the council's development strategy, as that would promote the west of the district. There is real potential for growth in that area.

We need to be clear that it is not just housing that we are promoting in these areas, especially in the core development areas in and around Armadale, which we spoke about last week, and 50 hectares of economic development land are proposed as part of that. We firmly believe that the benefit of the railway line will not come solely through getting people from Blackridge into Edinburgh or Glasgow. We want to ensure that there is a two-way flow and that the railway line brings real benefit to the economy in Armadale and other places by bringing workers into that area to take up opportunities at the sites that we are promoting.

14:15

Jeremy Purvis: During our site visit we heard concerns that the proposed station at Armadale will be outwith the existing settlement. We acknowledge that, when the development proposals are considered, the station appears to be more central. However, some parts of the community will be considerably further than 800m from the station, which is the distance that was mentioned in relation to the case for a station at Plains. What will the council do to ensure that the whole community in Armadale will be connected by bus to the station?

Councillor Morrice: Your comments apply not just to Armadale but to Whitburn, given that there will be major expansion on the road to Whitburn and in the Polkemmet area. The trick is to provide a bus link to both communities. We will facilitate that.

Jim Dickson: In other communities on the scale of Armadale we have secured a small, local, town bus service. For example, the Whitburn wanderer links residential areas with the centre of Whitburn. We would want there to be a similar service in Armadale, which would not go exclusively to the station but would include the station in a notional figure of eight. We can address the matter at our next meeting—

Jeremy Purvis: We can ask the walking timetable at next week's meeting.

Graeme Malcolm: There are generic requirements for developers. Towards the end of last week we provided the committee with additional information on the Armadale core development area. Appendix 7.1 of the finalised

West Lothian local plan is entitled “CDA action plan” and sets out what the council expects developers to provide, which is important in the context of your question. Under the heading, “contributions for sustainable transport initiatives”, we include

“funds to subsidise new bus services”

and

“contributions to public transport corridor studies and funds to assist with implementing proposals”.

Through its work on the local plan, the council is in a strong position to be able to pursue as best we can any opportunities that arise. There are no guarantees in life, but at least we have put in place a mechanism—I think that it is unique—to deliver some of the added benefits that the community will require.

The Convener: Earlier in the meeting, witnesses talked about traffic congestion in the centre of Armadale, particularly in the light of the flow of traffic to the new station. Would the provision of a station at Blackridge help to reduce congestion in Armadale?

Graeme Malcolm: It would certainly assist in reducing traffic from the north-west of Armadale, where there are large developments that should not be overlooked. Any measure that took motor vehicles away from Armadale Cross, for example, would be beneficial. A station at Blackridge would generate important benefits in balancing traffic between Blackridge and Armadale.

Everyone has a different opinion on what constitutes congestion. Armadale has a vibrant town centre, which is busy at peak hours and less busy during off-peak times. The railway station would be open all day and traffic levels would vary during the day. If there was a station at Blackridge, people from the west of Armadale who were heading towards Glasgow might be encouraged to use it. It is counterintuitive to take the opposite direction from the line of one's journey, so people who stay to the west of Armadale might regard a station at Blackridge as their first choice, rather than heading in the opposite direction, through Armadale Cross.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for their evidence. I am sure that we will see some of you again at next week's meeting.

We are pleased to welcome the Minister for Transport and his entourage. We are delighted that you beat transport problems to get here just about on time. We will not delay you further and will swing right into action with questions from Jeremy Purvis.

Jeremy Purvis: Minister, do you consider the proposal that is before the committee to be as robust and accurate as possible?

The Minister for Transport (Tavish Scott):

First, convener, it is a delight to be here. We have just been discussing who Sir John Wilson was and the origins of this hall, which is named after him. We talked to some local people and gathered that he was a famous man in these parts. All that has given me two seconds to think of an answer to Mr Purvis's question about the overall assessment of the project.

I am sure that others have given evidence about the central Scotland transport study that looked into appropriate transport links for this part of the country. The study produced what I believe is an objective assessment of transport needs and therefore of the need for the Airdrie to Bathgate railway line set against other transport modes, such as the M8 in particular. I am sure that the committee has looked at the transport study and the work that was done thereafter to produce the Airdrie to Bathgate proposal.

The project flowed from that work and, as the committee would expect and as Parliament knows following my statement on 16 March this year, it has been through the type of assessments that all our capital transport programme goes through. We are clear that the project matches up to the on-going financial assessments that are now made for each capital transport project during its planning, inception and the stages through to actual delivery.

Jeremy Purvis: Did Transport Scotland assess all the issues surrounding the scheme, including the potential risks, before agreeing the scale of the funding with the promoter?

Tavish Scott: Damian Sharp will deal with Mr Purvis's specific question. The committee will know that we have a staged process for every capital transport project, including this one, which involves a number of key steps as the project proceeds. They include regular and robust financial reviews and the Executive's gateway assessment. Therefore, we are clear about the final figure of £299.7 million for the project's budget. I expect that budget to be held to, just as I expect every budget that we set for our capital transport programme to be held to. I am confident about the robustness of the process that has led up to the current stage.

I can assure the committee that, having got to this stage, we will in no way back off from our on-going work to ensure that the financial robustness continues, that we are as clear as we can be about the elements of risk and its profiling and that it is constantly assessed. Damian Sharp may have further information that would help the committee to understand precisely where we are now.

Damian Sharp (Transport Scotland): A comprehensive risk assessment was done and the

quantified risk analysis forms part of the £299.7 million price that is before the committee. My team meets with Network Rail's team every four weeks to review that, check that actions that are due to be taken to mitigate the risks have been taken and initiate any further required actions. The process to manage the risk is regular and thorough.

Cathy Peattie: Transport Scotland will provide 100 per cent capital funding for the project. Why will the project, unlike other transport projects, have no element of funding through section 75 contributions or Scottish Enterprise? Why is the scheme different?

Tavish Scott: Damian Sharp will deal with the history of the decisions that have been made. However, I will be up front. I share some of the views that have been expressed. It is important to lever as much additional finance—including developer contributions—as we possibly can into the pot for our transport capital programme. We certainly hope to make progress with developer contributions to the project—I am talking about private money rather than Scottish Enterprise public sector finance, for example, which Cathy Peattie mentioned. One of the challenges of public sector procurement is ensuring that we lever in private sector moneys where there are advantages in doing so simply because we can achieve more with those moneys. Perhaps Damian Sharp can outline to the committee where we are with the councils and developer contributions.

Damian Sharp: We have talked to West Lothian Council and North Lanarkshire Council—indeed, I am due to meet the chief executives of those councils again on Thursday this week to consider what contributions to the project they might make in cash or land.

The minister mentioned the history of the decisions that have been made. The scheme resulted from the central Scotland transport corridor study and is seen as a strategic alternative to the M8, for which, because it is a trunk road, we have funding responsibility. The project is a national strategic project, which is why by far the largest funding burden will fall on Transport Scotland. However, we are trying to find out from the local authorities what they can contribute in the areas around the stations in relation to support for getting people to stations in particular.

Cathy Peattie: What level of subsidy will Transport Scotland provide year on year?

Tavish Scott: We will find the figure for you. If we cannot, I am sure that we can provide detailed information on the matter in writing.

Cathy Peattie: That would be helpful.

Tavish Scott: We will try to locate the information now, however.

The Convener: While you are looking for it, Janis Hughes will ask the next questions. We will return to Cathy Peattie's question.

Janis Hughes: What is your patronage forecast for the railway, minister?

Tavish Scott: I am sure that I can give you that if you give me two seconds to find the right piece of paper. I can bring instantly to mind many patronage figures—such as the number of people who must get on a British Airways plane before it will be late, as my plane was this morning—but I will have to find the piece of paper that contains information on patronage, or get one of the guys to hand it to me, before I can answer your question.

Damian Sharp: While I was looking for the answer to Janis Hughes's question, I found the answer to the previous question on operating costs.

The Convener: That is teamwork.

Damian Sharp: It is.

Of the annual operating costs of £9 million, we expect around £4.5 million to be captured through additional fares and £4.5 million to be provided as a public subsidy through the ScotRail franchise.

Tavish Scott: If I may, I would be happy to deal with Janis Hughes's next question, after which I will return to her question on patronage. Believe me, we have the figures, which we can provide in writing if they are not immediately to hand.

Janis Hughes: We have heard a lot of anecdotal evidence about, and I have personal experience of, issues to do with traffic on the M8 and the congestion on that road, which we are all used to. How will the railway impact on car usage? What clearly identifiable benefits will it offer over other public transport schemes?

14:30

Tavish Scott: Based on modelling and the corridor study that was mentioned a moment ago, eastbound and southbound vehicle movements between junctions 4 and 5 of the M8 are expected to decrease by 41,500 annually, and westbound and northbound vehicle movements are expected to decrease by 28,000 annually.

As I am sure Janis Hughes knows from other evidence and from the corridor study, it is important to recognise that that is only 1 per cent of the traffic on the M8. I am not suggesting that it will be a sudden, massive change, but it will be certainly an important change in itself, principally because the corridor study said that the rail project was the best investment to begin the process of

change in relation to ever-rising traffic levels on the M8.

I hope that I can say without fear of contradiction that the estimates are fairly conservative. Janis Hughes will also be familiar with the figures for the Larkhall to Milngavie railway. When we opened that railway, the actual passenger numbers exceeded expectations by 34 per cent. I think that it is important to be conservative in our estimate of the figures for the Airdrie to Bathgate line, but we clearly hope for some modal shift, to use that dreadful transport planning phrase. We hope that that shift will be more considerable than the conservative estimates that have been made.

The other important aspect is that, because the investment decision has been made that the railway is to be electric—Ian Mylroie can talk about the rolling stock, if that is important to the committee—its environmental impact will be minimised. I hope that, when we make the wider climate change and carbon footprint argument, we will assess that benefit in respect of the reducing number of cars on the M8 as a result of that investment and as part of the overall package.

Janis Hughes: Can Transport Scotland tell us whether it will be making any funding available for the enhancement of local bus services to integrate with the railway? We talked earlier about a feeder service from Drumgelloch to Plains, to serve that community should there not ultimately be a station at Plains. What level of investment will be made available for that?

Tavish Scott: It would not be Transport Scotland that would make that investment available. It would come from the transport group in the Scottish Executive, and we have mechanisms such as the bus route development grant to pump prime bus services and to begin the process of establishing them, working in conjunction with the local authorities. I take that question seriously. It is a fair, critical question about the assessment of the linkages between local communities and the train stations that will be available for local people. If we are to achieve and enhance the patronage levels that we want on the railway, those bus services are crucial, and I can certainly assure the committee that my department will work with local authorities to make as much progress as possible on that at this stage.

If bus services are designed now, as the railway is being built, there will be a seamless transport interchange when the service is formally opened. I respect the point that Janis Hughes makes about the timing of those decisions, and I certainly hope that, with West Lothian Council and North Lanarkshire Council, we can come to some understanding of what would best suit local need in that respect. My mind is certainly open about

the potential for using the bus route development grant for that.

Janis Hughes: I certainly welcome that level of proactivity.

Do you have the patronage forecast figures yet?

Tavish Scott: No, but we will write to you with them. I know that they are here somewhere, but we shall ensure that we formally write with them, so that they are on the record. We shall provide them later in the week.

Alasdair Morgan: One of the main controversies in the evidence before us is over the lack of stations at Blackridge and Plains. Are you happy that the stations that you are proposing are such that you will maximise the uptake of the rail service?

Tavish Scott: We are. I am sure that the evidence—written and oral—that has been provided in relation to Mr Morgan's question shows that the patronage figures relating to that issue have been explored. The promoter has some concerns, which we understand, and how one assesses those issues is a judgment call.

The promoter is concerned that, given the nature of traffic on the route to the east and to the west, adding the stations will have an impact on the route's operational efficiency, which could reduce patronage on the line. That is why Janis Hughes's question about links by bus to other communities is important.

To be honest, my principal concern about any additional measures at this stage in the process relates to the parliamentary time that the committee and we have for the bill. I want to ensure that the bill is passed. I certainly do not rule out any other station on the line, but I am conscious of the parliamentary timescale and of the assessment by the promoter—Network Rail—of the effect of additional stations on patronage figures throughout the route.

Alasdair Morgan: From the proposed number of stations and the likely service—which is not part of the bill—it strikes me that we are talking almost about two separate railways: the line from Edinburgh as far as Drumgelloch, on which stations are pretty well spaced out; and the bit from Drumgelloch to Queen Street and beyond, on which the train stops every two to three minutes. We are basically tacking an outer suburban service on to a service that stops every couple of minutes. Given not just the journey times, but the number of stops, are you sure that going from West Lothian to Glasgow via the service will be attractive? From Bathgate, the train will stop 13 times before Queen Street. I do not know what you expect when you board a train, but by about the 12th stop, I might begin to think that I should have taken my car. Has that been considered?

Tavish Scott: Yes. That line of questioning is reasonable. However, we are always conscious that a study was conducted—okay, it was in 2002, but it covered alternatives, such as the car or the bus. The assessment at that time and the continuing assessment throughout the bill's promotion have been based on those figures. Alasdair Morgan is right: a journey to the west that starts in West Lothian will stop at quite a number of stations. However, the arguments have been properly tested and the modelling has been done. I believe that the patronage figures are robust; otherwise, neither we nor the promoter would present the bill to the committee.

The only other aspect that I throw into the argument is that, in a series of discussions that I have had in recent weeks with the financial services industry, skill shortages in Glasgow and Edinburgh and related issues such as the price of housing are problems that have emerged again and again. There is a reasoned argument—although I grant that I cannot provide facts and strong figures on it—that people's ability to live in the central Scotland corridor and to move to the east or west is important to the strength of what we now describe as city regions and of the financial sectors in Glasgow and Edinburgh. We argue strongly that the rail line will assist in moving people to access those jobs.

Alasdair Morgan: Another issue that is not part of the bill but which is essential to the route's success is the provision of rolling stock. What guarantees can you give on that? Does Transport Scotland have enough cash to provide rolling stock?

Tavish Scott: I will let Ian Mylroi deal with rolling stock, because he is our rolling-stock person. A full study is being undertaken on rolling stock; my only observation is that that concerns not just the proposed route, but the entire rail network, which I am sure is a relief to Mr Morgan and other members who are making appropriate representations on such issues. I ask Ian Mylroi to help the committee with how that is going.

Ian Mylroi (Transport Scotland): The Airdrie to Bathgate project will require about 19 additional vehicles in the fleet. On top of that, we are well aware that various parts of the network have pinchpoints and overcrowding. I am putting together the strategy to consider each of those elements and pull them together in one coherent project to fix the problems.

The design development appraisal costings for the Airdrie to Bathgate project include the provision of the additional vehicles that we will need to deliver the project, so the business case for the project includes the cost of the additional vehicles that we all know we will need.

Alasdair Morgan: In my question to the minister, I said that the project will involve two separate railways, one of which will have short spaces between stations. Can you provide the rolling stock that will be suitable for both that intensive, stop-start service and the longer gaps in the service to the east?

Ian Mylroi: Without doubt we can do it. I am a railwayman by background and, this year, I will celebrate my 25th year on the railways. I come from a rolling-stock background. We need to consider two issues: the rolling stock's technical performance—matters such as how quickly it accelerates and how fast it goes—and the interior layout. We must consider whether we want a layout that is suited to a long, intercity journey or one that is suited to a more suburban railway. We can play the tunes with those two aspects. Once we get the train's technical features right—and we can do that—we will be able to optimise the interior layout however we think is most appropriate, as it will not be fixed at that point.

We will have to deliver a number of things on the vehicles. We take as read accessibility features for those with mobility impairments, for example, because we have to provide them and we want to provide them. However, the trade-off between seating capacity, leg room and luggage capacity is not yet fixed for the vehicles that we will buy.

Alasdair Morgan: You put it much better than I did. I think that Network Rail said last week that it would be most likely to address the need by cascading rolling stock from elsewhere in the network and putting in new rolling stock somewhere in the west. If that happens, we will not necessarily get rolling stock that is designed for such a varied service but simply whatever rolling stock is available to be cascaded down.

Ian Mylroi: At the risk of upsetting my colleagues from Network Rail, I must say that, if they said that last week, they were slightly jumping the gun, because none of those decisions has been made yet—I can feel Ron McAulay's eyes boring a hole in the back of my head, so I will talk to him later. The options that we are considering include, as you rightly suggest, the cascading of vehicles from other parts of the network. We need 19 additional vehicles for the Airdrie to Bathgate line and a similar number of vehicles for the Glasgow airport rail link. We have overcrowding in some areas, such as the Glasgow north electric line and the Ayrshire line, and some vehicles are getting very close to the end of their operational life. We want to take all those problems together and work out how we will solve them so that we can go to the rolling-stock supply industry with a single order for new vehicles for Scotland, which will allow us to cascade vehicles as we need to across the electrified network.

I think that one of the points that is behind your question is the fact that new vehicles, by virtue of being more accessible and having a larger toilet, have fewer seats than the vehicles that currently operate between Airdrie and Glasgow. We recognise that that is one of the key issues; it is factored into the figure of 19 additional vehicles to ensure that we provide the necessary capacity between Airdrie and Glasgow. The matter is not simple, but it is our intention to ensure that we do not underprovide on the route.

Alasdair Morgan: My final question is on another matter entirely: sustainability. There will be a lot of new car parks at the stations. Indeed, some of this morning's evidence concerned the number of car journeys there will be. Although many of those journeys may be short and replace car journeys from, for example, West Lothian into Edinburgh, a lot of cars will be going to the stations. Will any effort be made to reduce the number of car journeys, by making it easier to walk or cycle to the stations? Will we move away from going down the road in a car being the only way to get to the stations?

Tavish Scott: The building of a number of new stations and the redevelopment of some existing ones provide us with an opportunity to consider a proper transport interchange and the designing in of somewhere to leave bicycles safely and securely, and covered areas that assist in making waiting for a train on a dreich February morning a reasonable experience. I strongly believe that that is what we need, not just on this line, but throughout the network.

I take Alasdair Morgan's point about an increase in short car journeys, but I plan to ensure that the joined-up elements of the project happen and that facilities are provided. Another aspect that it is important to acknowledge is that, because there will be trains going west to Glasgow and east to Edinburgh, people will not have to use their cars. Let us be blunt: we know what parking in Scotland's two main cities is like. The savings from reduced car usage are another factor. I cannot give an absolute figure, but none of us would doubt the anecdotal evidence that there will be savings, not least to the environment and to people's tempers, which can be raised when they have to find a parking space in busy towns first thing in the morning.

14:45

Jeremy Purvis: I have a couple of questions, the first of which is on rolling stock. A figure of £2.4 million has been set aside in the operating costs for leasing and traction charges. Is that for the 19 vehicles that are required?

Ian Mylroi: That is correct.

Jeremy Purvis: So if any other requirements arise because of a cascade effect, they are not included in the operating costs?

Ian Mylroi: Any other vehicles that may be required, for example to deliver capacity on other parts of the network, are not costed in the Airdrie-Bathgate figures.

Jeremy Purvis: One of the aims of the project is to take traffic away from the main Glasgow to Edinburgh rail service. Last week, my colleague Alasdair Morgan asked the promoter's witnesses about that. The information that we got from First ScotRail suggested that there is confusion among the promoter and the operator about how many people the scheme will take away from the main Edinburgh to Glasgow service. First ScotRail's evidence stated:

"detailed modelling of passenger flows is needed before this question can be answered".

Mr Morgan asked a further question of the promoter's witness, who said:

"Obviously, there is a bit of confusion between us in this area".—[*Official Report, Airdrie-Bathgate Railway and Linked Improvements Bill Committee*, 4 September 2006; c 82.]

Mr Sharp has said that there are quarterly reviews of all the risk elements. Has that issue arisen in any of those discussions? Have you spotted it?

Damian Sharp: We have not covered that issue. People who have a choice may go south to one of the stations on the new line, rather than north to Croy, for instance. However, that is likely to be a marginal effect at the edges of the scheme, rather than the main impact. We have focused on the main impacts of the scheme and its patronage, which is driven predominantly by the patronage in West Lothian and North Lanarkshire. Corridor studies there show that, at present, 95 per cent of journeys are by car, so the scope for a lot of switching between the two railway lines is not particularly great.

Tavish Scott: In providing the patronage figures to answer Janis Hughes's earlier question, we will try to include an answer to Mr Purvis's question. We will do that as quickly as possible.

Jeremy Purvis: Could Transport Scotland also provide a breakdown of the patronage model into a forecast of how many passengers will use the scheme as a point-to-point service and how many will use it as a local service? We heard this morning from witnesses about their priorities. As yet, the committee has not received any evidence on that from the promoter or Transport Scotland. That is another issue on which the quarterly chats perhaps need to focus.

Tavish Scott: We will pull together all that information and ensure that the figures are available to the committee.

The Convener: We look forward to that.

This morning, we heard a lot of convincing evidence from local communities about the need for two additional stations. The committee will consider that issue when it looks at all the submissions that have been made. If the argument for those two stations was strong enough and the committee came down on that side of that argument, would there be any additional funding from Transport Scotland?

Tavish Scott: We do not have additional funding for any additional measures in this or any other capital transport project across the programme. The £299.7 million is the budget.

The Convener: That is clear.

Is the proposed advance purchase scheme for the project consistent with schemes provided for similar projects in recent times?

Tavish Scott: Yes. As the committee will know, earlier in the summer Transport Scotland published the approach that we take to such schemes across the capital transport programme. I assure you that the scheme is consistent with that policy.

The Convener: Will a voluntary purchase scheme apply in respect of the project?

Tavish Scott: I am not aware that the promoter sees the need for a voluntary purchase scheme with regard to the project. My understanding is that in the continuing assessment—I was going to call it the initial assessment—of the line, the promoter perceives that no properties fall into the voluntary purchase category. Therefore, at this time, we are not aware that the promoter will have need for a voluntary purchase scheme.

The Convener: If the promoter changed its mind, is that something you would consider, given that the option is available in other schemes?

Tavish Scott: Yes, of course I would consider that option, but I hope that by now the promoter is clear on its position on the matter.

The Convener: Can you say where we stand on revisions to the home loss payment rules? Are provisions being made for home loss payments?

Tavish Scott: We may need to come back to you. I am not aware, either off the top of my head or from my briefing today, of any issues that are emerging. We would be happy to write to the committee to clarify the situation.

Jeremy Purvis: I notice that a large proportion of the overall capital costs are civil engineering costs. They account for about a quarter of the overall capital costs but are the biggest part. Has geological or topographical work on the project commenced? I notice that a bit of work needs to

be done on old mine workings along the route, but I do not know whether any of it has been done.

Damian Sharp: Some work was done as part of the initial technical feasibility study that was carried out in 2004 and 2005. Further work is planned to inform the design and ensure that the risk is fully understood. An important theme of the risk management is to ensure that we get that right. Survey work has started, but it is not complete. That is what we would expect at this stage of a scheme's development.

Jeremy Purvis: Are you confident that the contingencies within the overall scheme will be suitable?

Damian Sharp: Yes.

The Convener: I would like to come back to funding. The minister has given an ultimate figure for the funds available for the scheme. Are you attaching any conditions—let us say must conditions—that have to be met to obtain the full sum?

Tavish Scott: No conditions are attached that differ from those that apply to our other capital rail projects in Scotland, in the sense that we expect a budget to be set for each of our rail investments and for it to be maintained. I apologise for being general, but if any of our capital transport projects begin to look as though they are in financial difficulty, the process—which Damian Sharp described earlier—calls for a fundamental reappraisal of the costings and the robustness of the business case that is in front of Transport Scotland.

I am clear that no exceptional conditions would apply in this case.

The Convener: Thank you for offering to provide us with the patronage figures. I would like to put a bit of pressure on you to do so quickly, given that we will have further deliberations next week. It would be helpful if we could get the figures by Thursday.

Tavish Scott: I assure you that we will do our level best to get them to you by Thursday.

The Convener: Okay. Thanks for coming along.

I welcome the promoter's witnesses, most of whom we have met in the past, with the exception of Ms Hunter and Ms McLean.

Alasdair Morgan: We asked quite a few questions this morning about the revised cycle path. Are there any advantages to the community in the revised cycle path, as opposed to the one it has just now? Is it just the next best option, given that you will have taken back what was originally yours?

Ron McAulay (Network Rail): First and foremost, the cycle path is a crucial part of the

scheme, so we recognise the need for it to be replaced. Because the current cycle path runs along the line of an old railway, it is linear and has gradual gradients and sweeping curves. That also means that it will be difficult to replace with a mirror image. However, we believe that through looking at a number of routes and through our consultation with Sustrans and the councils, we will provide a very good alternative.

Alasdair Morgan: I will pick up on specific concerns—although I will leave to one side concerns about whether people are cycling in the sunshine.

Two things struck me as important. The first is the lack of direction markers. It can be frustrating to arrive at a junction and not know which way to turn, especially if the signs have been knocked down, as tends to happen. The second is the specific problem in Plains with the A89. Will you say a bit more about those two issues?

Ron McAulay: I will ask my colleague, Joe Magee, to join in here. The work that we did with Sustrans took out a lot of the issues with sharp 90 degree bends and lack of continuity. We are not averse to putting signage on the cycle path to ensure that people are clear where they are going.

We considered other options to rule out the section on Main Street in Plains—I am in danger of answering the whole question rather than giving Joe Magee a chance to speak. We considered another dedicated cycle bridge across the railway at the end of the access road that takes us to Ford Farm. That would have been an additional structure, it would have been quite high—perhaps 6, 7 or 8m high—and it would have crossed over the backs of people's gardens. It would have had quite an impact on some residents in the area, so we felt that the compromise that we came up with was probably the best way forward. Joe, do you want to add to that?

15:00

Joe Magee (Jacobs Babbie): Yes. I would like to confirm that throughout all our work on the initial technical feasibility study, we regarded the cycle path as a key element that required as much engineering and dedication to come up with a working solution as the railway itself. We worked with Sustrans on the ITFS throughout 2003 and 2004. We also worked with the local communities, which were very concerned about maintaining the cycle track facility. We came up with three routes: the first mainly followed the A89; the second followed the route—north or south—of the existing railway alignment or existing cycle track; and the third was a combination of the first two.

A couple of issues about Drumgelloch have been mentioned. Some groups noted that

Drumgelloch was an issue. Well, Drumgelloch out to Clarkston is a built-up area and we are removing the cycle track that is ideally located along the route. We have done our best, through consultation, to achieve an acceptable and recognisable cycle route in a built-up area.

Moving out to Plains, we chose to locate the cycle track on the A89, but I point out that the existing footpath in Plains approaches 6m wide for much of its length, although it reduces as it moves eastward out of the village. We believe that we can work with the local council and come up with a workable solution for that area.

Alasdair Morgan: Does that mean acquiring more land?

Joe Magee: We hope not. David McDove of North Lanarkshire Council pointed out that there are ways of extending the council's ownership in that area. We think that we can work with the council. I point out that that area is a 30mph zone. Perhaps cameras of some description could control the traffic there, to safeguard cyclists.

Alasdair Morgan: The other point that the witnesses to whom you referred raised concerned cycle access to stations and the fact that much seems to have been done to create car parking. The witnesses were not sanguine about provision for pedestrian and cycle access to stations, particularly for communities that would be within cycling distance of them.

Joe Magee: We believe that we have dealt with that issue, given the constraints that we are working under. All the stations—the new Drumgelloch, Caldercruix and Armadale—will have dedicated access via the cycle path. In addition, the road access and footway adjacent to the roadways will give access to the stations. For new Drumgelloch, we have designed a dedicated path at the south side of the station, which would have been difficult to provide previously. We therefore feel that we have addressed the issue to which you refer as best we can.

The Convener: You may feel that you have addressed the issues, but objectors suggested this morning that considerable further contact between you and them is required. They feel that you have not addressed the issues to their satisfaction. Will you undertake to continue dialogue with those individuals, who, to be fair, made valid points?

Joe Magee: We can make that undertaking. Indeed, we continue to discuss with the councils and Sustrans how best to achieve that.

Ron McAulay: It is worth saying that we did not get to this position on our own; we got here through a great deal of consultation with Sustrans, the councils and people involved with railway cycle paths. We have not been working in isolation.

Having said that, we are happy to continue dialogue to find out whether further improvements can be made. We have made a lot of changes: the original proposals had about three options for the cycle path and the one that was chosen was based on advice and guidance from people involved with railway cycle paths.

The Convener: One of the points that was made in the written submissions that were given to us by this morning's witnesses was that people would be quite happy to "squeeze through bridges" with the railways. We were told that that particularly related to points at which you would otherwise be obliged to provide new bridges. Would it be possible to bring the cycle track alongside the railway at some points?

Ron McAulay: Yes, and we plan to do so in some instances. The situation at Armadale was raised this morning. The issue there is not so much to do with squeezing under a bridge as taking away part of someone's garden. That is why there is a diversion in that location. We have looked at ways in which we can accommodate the cycle path where bridges are being replaced already.

Joe Magee: We are squeezing under bridges at four points. Of course, that comes at a cost, because the deck has to be 3m to 4m longer.

Janis Hughes: Can you confirm that all the stations that are planned along the route are compliant with current best practice and that all are in accordance with section 19 of Scottish planning policy?

Ron McAulay: I am not going to pretend to be completely familiar with section 19 of Scottish planning policy. Could you enlarge on what that covers?

Janis Hughes: I am particularly concerned with DDA compliance and accessibility.

Ron McAulay: All the stations that we are proposing, including the ones that we are altering or relocating, will be DDA compliant. They will have DDA-compliant footbridges, ramps leading to platforms and everything else that you would expect. I believe that there will be lifts in the stations in Airdrie and Bathgate to help people get from one side of the tracks to the other.

The design at the moment is only an outline design to ensure that we have enough space to build the station that we have to build. We will take on board all the issues that are likely to come to us from organisations such as the British transport police in relation to security, lighting and so on.

Janis Hughes: I believe that the journey time from Edinburgh to Glasgow on this line is estimated to be 74 minutes, although a time of 70 minutes has also been mentioned. In what ways

do you intend to reduce that estimated time? Will you do that through the use of faster, more modern, rolling stock?

Ron McAulay: We are suggesting a time of 74 minutes between Glasgow Queen Street and Edinburgh Waverley. At this stage, we are not looking to reduce that time. We have to take into account the need to fit in with the timetable at either end, as there are other services that run back and forward. The issue is not as simple as merely buying new rolling stock. Issues that must be taken into account include speed limits on the line, acceleration time, stopping patterns and so on.

Janis Hughes: Yes, but will the rolling stock that is to be used be the fastest and most modern available, given the conditions that it will operate under?

Ron McAulay: The rolling stock will be dictated by the alignment of the track and the speed limits that are in place. We are designing the track around a speed limit of 80mph from one end to the other. We might be able to raise the limit slightly higher than that in certain areas, but I do not think that there will be many such areas.

Joe Magee: The work that we carried out was based on the assumption that we were going to use class 334 electric stock. However, because of the topography of the route and the power of the vehicles, it is possible to reach the 100mph running speed that was part of the original brief over only a short section of the route near Armadale. The constraints of the topography dictate running speeds, as well as the need to tie into existing services at each end of the route.

Alasdair Morgan: That class of stock is one that would be cascaded down. What is the provision for cycles on that kind of stock?

Joe Magee: That is probably a matter for the train operating company.

Alasdair Morgan: It is not a matter for the operator unless it is going to refit the interiors: the stock will have a certain level of provision at the moment. Assuming that there is no refit, what is the current provision?

Ron McAulay: I do not know, off the top of my head.

Alasdair Morgan: Okay. We will come back to you on that.

The Convener: I am told by the clerk that we planned to have a witness changeover before we discuss some of the issues about stations, but I think we have dropped that panel.

Ron McAulay: We had planned on there being two separate panels: one covering the environment and cycleway and one covering route

alignment and station alternatives. We had intended to change witnesses, but today's programme has changed as a result of time pressures.

The Convener: Are you happy for us to continue—

Ron McAulay: If we get on to station options, I would like to switch. However, if we could cover all the questions on the environment and the cycleway first, that would be helpful.

The Convener: We have done that. We will move on to station issues at this point.

Jeremy Purvis: Before we do, I have a quick question on the rolling stock. I refer to the evidence from First ScotRail, with which you have been in discussion. Is it likely that the class 320 stock will be operated on the service?

Joe Magee: We studied four types of vehicle plus a freight locomotive: class 320 and class 334 in electric stock and class 170 and the new class 220 in diesel stock. We chose to proceed with the class 334 rolling stock because it is slightly less powerful than the class 320 stock.

Jeremy Purvis: First ScotRail's evidence states that class 320s are

"high density units without toilets."

I hope that the 334s will have toilets, given the length of journey that will be involved.

Joe Magee: I would hope so.

Jeremy Purvis: Do you know whether that stock has toilets?

Joe Magee: I had better not say that I am certain, although I believe that they have toilets. They run on the Ayrshire routes.

Jeremy Purvis: As good as it would be to have space for bikes, it would be better to have toilets.

Ron McAulay: I am told that the 334s have toilets.

Jeremy Purvis: Good.

The Convener: I want to pick up on a couple of other questions that the panel should address. You have heard the evidence from North Lanarkshire Council and you will be aware of its written submission. Have you responded to North Lanarkshire Council? If so, is that part of the ongoing negotiation? Where do we stand on that?

Ron McAulay: We have had regular dialogue with North Lanarkshire Council and West Lothian Council, and we continue to have that dialogue. We are still discussing outstanding issues, including section 75 developer contributions and the potential contribution of land. Such issues are regularly on the agenda for our discussions with the councils.

The Convener: Another issue that arose today concerned the number of car-parking places and the fact that many will be filled and emptied at peak times. That led to a question about road congestion at such times. The fair point was made that people should be encouraged to use bicycles. What are your views on the congestion aspect?

15:15

Ron McAulay: Two people who will join us on the next panel will be able to discuss traffic congestion in more detail. However, on encouraging people to use bicycles, cycle lockers will be provided at all the stations, provision of which is almost standard practice nowadays. People will therefore be encouraged to bring bicycles to stations and leave them there.

I wonder whether I may be allowed the liberty of suggesting a change of panel now—I assume that traffic congestion will be dealt with in the discussion on station locations.

The Convener: That is fine. I think that you dealt with the other issue that I raised. You are saying that, along with pedestrians, bus travellers and perhaps car users, cyclists take high priority in your thinking.

Ron McAulay: That is very much the case. An indication of that is in the effort that has gone into the cycle path's design to make it as acceptable as possible to as many people as possible. The best solutions to problems must be found—we think that we have found the best solution to the cycle route problem.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

Michael Greig (MacRoberts): For members' convenience, I would like to make a factual point about cycle links. The answer to the committee's question 40 to the promoter describes the cycle and pedestrian accesses that the promoter will put in place to and from the stations. The eventual act will mean that pedestrian and cycle links will be put in place.

Secondly, as I understand it, West Lothian Council said earlier that the finalised local plan will require developers at least to make available funding for further links, if not to make available actual further links. Therefore, it appears from its evidence that there will be further links beyond those that the promoter will put in place.

The Convener: Thank you very much. There will now be a change of panel. This will be our final panel.

I want to make it clear not so much to the panels but to people in the gallery that we have decided to drop questions on advance and voluntary purchase schemes. We will deal with those

schemes in a fortnight, on 25 September. I apologise if anyone has come to the meeting to listen specifically to what people have to say about advance and voluntary purchase schemes.

Jeremy Purvis: I want to ask the promoter's witnesses about the modelling for Plains and Blackridge. You might have seen evidence from an objector that called into question the consistency of the modelling that was used for Blackridge, in relation to the inclusion of Plains. How was the modelling done? Was each station considered on its merits?

Ron McAulay: I will ask my colleague John Baggaley to provide a detailed response, but it might be useful if I say a few words first. First, the figures that we used are not ones that we dreamed up ourselves; rather, the councils provided us with the figures that they used in their local planning. I understand that the figures were provided in 2005, so they are relatively up to date.

We have heard many references to the central Scotland transport corridor study. The original plans for the Airdrie to Bathgate railway showed no stations between Drumgelloch and Bathgate. No recommendations were made during the initial technical feasibility study, although stations were considered. It was not until after the consultation in 2004 that the question of stations between Drumgelloch and Bathgate came to light. The matter was revisited and, as a result of the modelling, the option to have stations at Caldercruix and Armadale was included in the proposals.

At last week's meeting, it was said more than once—I think that Jeremy Purvis said it—that it is important to understand what rail is good at and what it is not good at. Rail is good at taking people long distances in short journey times. It is also good at moving large numbers of people into heavily congested areas. It is not so good at stopping every couple of miles and picking up small numbers of people. I have to emphasise that. It is more important to consider the integrated travel network, including the feeder buses that we have been talking about this morning.

Our role as the promoter is to put what we believe is the best case for delivering the railway between Airdrie or Drumgelloch and Bathgate. We believe that we have done that. We have made proposals that are based not only on our extensive experience of running railways, but on sound analysis and modelling techniques, which John Baggaley will detail. That analysis follows the Scottish transport appraisal guidance. We believe that what we are proposing is the best solution for the railway.

John Baggaley (MVA Consultancy): I will break down Jeremy Purvis's question into two

separate bits, because there were two distinct strands to some of the evidence that we heard this morning. First, it was said that we restricted artificially the catchment area of Blackridge station to Blackridge village. That is certainly not true. All our modelling has included in the possible catchment area of Blackridge station the communities to the south against the M8 and Harthill and the surrounding villages. As you heard from the witnesses from North Lanarkshire, those communities already have good access to the express bus services along the M8 in both directions. The express service stops at Harthill services, where a park-and-ride site has just been built. Those people have, in a sense, the equivalent of a railway station. All our modelling for Blackridge station has taken into account those communities and the transport facilities that they already have.

Secondly, we did not limit artificially the alternatives that were considered. As well as considering a station at Blackridge on its own and a station at Plains on its own, we considered them in all sorts of combinations, some of which appear in the table in the promoter's memorandum. We took both into account and were extremely rigorous in our examination of the alternative combinations of station.

Jeremy Purvis: Did any of your modelling exercises produce a more favourable case for Plains and/or Blackridge?

John Baggaley: A case that was more favourable than what?

Jeremy Purvis: A case that was more favourable than the one that is stated in your final conclusion.

John Baggaley: No. As the minister said, we need to go back to where the scheme came from, which was the corridor studies. The corridor studies identified the importance of the line in giving people who lived in the areas of significant deprivation between Airdrie and Glasgow access to jobs, not just in Glasgow, but in the east of the country between Livingston and Edinburgh, just as people in West Lothian would be given access to jobs in Glasgow. Putting extra stations in the middle of the line would have an impact on people who wanted to make a crossover movement. In all our work, we have been balancing what would happen in the middle of the line with what would happen at both end sections.

Jeremy Purvis: We have heard that for those whom I have been calling point-to-point travellers, there would be a quarter of an hour time difference between the proposed new service and the existing Edinburgh to Glasgow service. It emerged from questioning last week that First ScotRail believes that the Airdrie to Bathgate line will not

take that many passengers from the existing EG line, if I can call it that.

If we believe what the operator says about the attractiveness of the new service to passengers, surely that means that people will be more inclined to use the Airdrie to Bathgate line as a local service rather than as a point-to-point service. That being the case, there must be a stronger argument for including in the group that will be served by the line the growing communities in Blackridge and Plains, so that they can access other labour markets. Under the present proposals, the perverse situation will exist whereby although we will have a slow service that will not be competitive with the EG line, it will go through Blackridge and Plains without stopping, even though stopping in those places would result in a disadvantage of only two minutes.

John Baggaley: There is a middle way between what you call a point-to-point service and a service that stops at all the stops. One of your colleagues has already mentioned the 13 stations that exist between Airdrie and Glasgow. Given that Glasgow Queen Street is the 13th station, there are 12 stations on that stretch whose passengers will find it more convenient to use the Airdrie to Bathgate route to get to Edinburgh than they will to backtrack into Glasgow and then go on the EG line. The people who might want to board an Edinburgh service from Easterhouse or Coatbridge, for example, are in the same mix as the people of Caldercruix, Plains and Blackridge.

Jeremy Purvis: The committee would be reassured if the promoter could provide us with some of the data that have been used to make those assumptions, which it is working on doing at the moment. We would like to know what modelling exists on people who will get on the service at Armadale to go to the centre of Glasgow to work, for example, and on what the cross shift will be. It seems to be slightly counterintuitive for a service that will not be competing with the existing Edinburgh to Glasgow service not to stop at the communities along the route. We look forward to receiving those data.

Cathy Peattie: You spoke about areas of deprivation between Airdrie and Glasgow. Why are they a greater priority than the areas of deprivation between Airdrie and Bathgate, of which Plains is an example?

Ron McAulay: We seem to be getting hung up on the idea that the only effect of adding a station to the line would be a delay of just two minutes.

Cathy Peattie: I am hung up on the issue of deprivation and people using the train to get out of it.

15:30

Ron McAulay: I appreciate that, but it might be useful if I took a minute to go through some of the issues with each of the stations.

If we were to introduce a station at Plains, that would have a serious impact on 18 to 20 houses and we would probably have to compulsorily purchase half a dozen additional houses. The distance from Plains to Drumgelloch is 1.4 miles and the distance from Plains to Caldercruix is 1.2 miles, so we are talking about relatively short distances. In addition to the costs of building a station and operating and maintaining it in the years ahead, there would be costs from the lost customers who would otherwise have used the line. We reckon that if Plains were added to our current proposal, there would be a reduction of just over 600 passengers per day.

There would be an impact on many people's gardens and the loss of patronage would result in a substantial on-going increase in the subsidy cost of the railway each year. We would also need the additional bridge that has been mentioned in relation to the cycle path, which would have to be put in to allow people to avoid the main street because it would no longer be possible to have the cycle path and pedestrian footbridge in the location that is currently proposed.

One of the most important issues is that the introduction of a station at Plains would probably add six months—perhaps even as much as a year—to the overall programme for the project. There would be issues of land referencing and designing the location. We would also need to consult statutory consultees, which we believe would take at least six months, just for Plains. I can go through the same issues in relation to Blackridge, if that would help the committee.

Jeremy Purvis: Is it correct that there would be 600 fewer journeys if there were a station at Plains, because people would not use the train because of the additional time?

Ron McAulay: That is what the modelling tells us. We have modelled the proposal for Blackridge, which produces a figure of 513. Because Plains has a different catchment, we have assumed that the number for a station there would be slightly larger. We have not modelled the proposal for Plains but, using Blackridge as the basis for calculations, it is assumed that the figure would be just over 600.

Jeremy Purvis: What was the basis for the modelling?

Ron McAulay: The basis was the proposal that is currently before the committee.

Jeremy Purvis: I am interested in the number of drop-offs. You have not presented to us figures

that break down people's journeys into journeys to other stations in North Lanarkshire or West Lothian and journeys to Glasgow or Edinburgh. However, you have been able to extrapolate from information—that we do not have—data for the number of train journeys that will not take place if additional stations are built: 600 journeys for Plains and 500 journeys for Blackridge.

Ron McAulay: I ask John Baggaley to explain the figures. He knows more about the detail of the model. As I understand it, it is based on increasing journey times, which make the overall journey less attractive to people at each end of the line. I am deliberately not saying Glasgow or Edinburgh Waverley.

John Baggaley: We use a model that is used for public transport projects and road projects throughout Scotland. What we are doing is consistent with the methods that were used to evaluate the A80 improvements from Cumbernauld and the M8 improvements from Baillieston to Newhouse, which are proceeding at the same time. We are seeking a consistent platform that we can use to compare major transport projects. As some members will be aware from their experience over the years, that is a great step forward, because it gives public transport projects a chance against road projects. The model takes account of the same sorts of considerations that apply to road projects, such as how people react to changes in journey time and changes in the cost of journeys.

On that basis, if we assume a new station in the middle of the line and an increase in overall journey time of about two minutes, we can conclude that at the margins—let us face it, we are talking about 500 people out of a possible 12,000—people would choose not to use the service, because the additional journey time would push things a little too far and it would be quicker to take the car or use the local bus service. I am talking about a net change in journeys: the number of journeys might increase because some of the people who would drive to the stations at Armadale or Caldercruix under the promoter's proposals would use a station at Blackridge if one was provided, but other journeys might be lost, for example between Coatbridge and Edinburgh Park station, because the journey time would be slightly longer. In the modelling process, many small changes enable us to arrive at the number that I gave you.

Janis Hughes: You said that the inclusion of stations at Plains and Blackridge could add six months or even a year to the timescale of the project. However, am I correct in presuming that if those stations had been factored into the proposals from the outset, they would be built concurrently and their construction would not add greatly to the timescale?

Ron McAulay: That is correct, but it would have meant that we had not put forward the best proposal for delivering the scheme. The promoter's task is to put forward the best way of delivering the scheme. On the basis of all the analysis and consultation that have been carried out, our proposal represents the best way forward.

Janis Hughes: You said that if a station were constructed at Plains, there would have to be compulsory purchases of residential properties, but why would that be different from the compulsory purchase of properties elsewhere along the line?

Ron McAulay: It would not be different, but it would add to the number of compulsory purchases. The current proposal requires some 15 properties along the line to be compulsorily purchased, but the construction of a station at Plains would add another six compulsory purchases, which would be a substantial increase.

Janis Hughes: Yes, but the approach would be no different from the approach elsewhere along the line.

Alasdair Morgan: In the modelling exercise, did you assume that the current service pattern between Drumgelloch and Queen Street station was a given, or did you consider what would happen if you put in a station at Blackridge but took out the one at Garrowhill, for example?

John Baggaley: In the context of the Airdrie to Bathgate project, we did not consider taking out stations between Airdrie and Glasgow. As some members know, during peak periods limited-stop trains operate in addition to the existing quarter-hourly service between Airdrie and Glasgow and the modelling exercise considered the implications of linking the limited-stop services with the proposed service, to provide a faster service into Glasgow—you asked about that earlier. There would be benefits in providing such a service, which can be considered at a later stage. It is clear that at this stage we cannot start suggesting major reductions in rail services in the corridor between Airdrie and Glasgow.

Alasdair Morgan: You are saying that Garrowhill has four services per hour and it would be politically unacceptable to change the service, even though if you had started with a blank sheet of paper, you might not have ended up with such a service.

John Baggaley: Those are your words, not mine.

Alasdair Morgan: I saw you nod.

Did the modelling exercise include information about the proposed interchange on the M8 at Polkemmet? An interchange would give easy car access to a station at Blackridge and might make the case for such a station more attractive.

John Baggaley: The information that we have about the Polkemmet interchange does not accord the proposal the definite status that it has been accorded during this meeting—we do not know whether the interchange will be built. All the information that we have on the proposal suggests that an interchange would not make for particularly easy access from the M8 to Blackridge. People would still have to use a considerable amount of local road, some of which runs through residential areas. The proposal might therefore be contentious. We are aware of the proposed Polkemmet interchange. At the moment, it is a separate project and does not have the status within the trunk road programme that would allow us to take it as a given.

The Convener: When Mr McAulay made his opening comments, he pointed out that the thing that he is good at is running railways. I would not disagree with that, but the money is being provided on the basis of social inclusion and other advantages and, from what we have heard to date, there could well be social arguments for a station at Plains or Blackridge. Mr Morgan asked about the stations along the line to Glasgow, which in some cases I suspect are only a mile or two apart. Would it not have been wise to have examined the overall, end-to-end implications in the modelling right from the start? It seems to me that you are looking at the end-to-end implications and saying that you cannot afford any more stations in the middle.

Ron McAulay: I will ask John Baggaley to talk about the modelling. I fully understand that it is for the Parliament to decide whether additional stations are introduced into the scheme. I am simply keen that you understand where Network Rail has come from in its proposals for the scheme and that you understand the implications of introducing stations, such as the differences in cost and timescale.

On the face of it, it is easy to suggest that we have a slow train that would stop at all the stations between Glasgow and Airdrie followed by a fast train that would stop at perhaps only one or two stations. The problem would be that we would have to examine the line and find how we could get the fast train to pass the slow train, because that is what would happen. The modelling would become more and more complicated.

The Convener: I will stop you on that—not rudely, I hope. You have already acknowledged that some of the trains from Drumgelloch will run only once every half hour. Surely it would not be beyond the wit of man to have trains that stopped at some stations, evening out the time, so that you would not need a fast train and a slow train.

Ron McAulay: I am sorry, but I thought that you meant that we would have a train that stopped at

only two or three stations between Glasgow and Airdrie as opposed to just missing one or two stations out.

The Convener: No, I am suggesting that you alternate.

Ron McAulay: I think that I said last Monday that we started from the position that we would not reduce the level of service that any of the existing stations enjoyed. That was our starting point for the modelling.

The Convener: I am not sure whether the clerk has the patronage figures for the stations along the route from Glasgow, but would you mind giving them to us? If there is low take-up at some of the stations, there might be scope for change. If we had those figures, it might help the committee to centre its mind on the issue.

Ron McAulay: I do not have those figures with me at the moment, but we are happy to get them for you.

The Convener: That would be helpful to me at least.

Jeremy Purvis: I have one last question on stations and the modelling that was done. You have heard all the evidence from the local authorities in response to our questions about housing forecasts in their areas. There seems to be a disparity between the housing growth figures that you used in your estimates and the picture that we are now getting from the local authorities. You heard this morning that the number of forecast houses in the Plains and Blackridge areas is now higher, so can you do modelling that incorporates the figures that the local authorities have given the committee and come back to us with reworked models? I would have thought that you could just put those figures into a computer.

Ron McAulay: It is a wee bit more complicated than that.

Jeremy Purvis: I am sure that you do not do the modelling in longhand.

15:45

Ron McAulay: I would not claim to be able to do it in longhand. I am sure that John Baggaley will be able to answer yes to that, but I should say first that we have used the council's figures, which were provided to us in 2005. I have heard lots of terms such as "speculative", which make me a little bit cautious about some of the optimism that I am hearing.

John Baggaley: Clearly, we could just plug in some new figures, but we rarely do that because if the council says that there is going to be much more housing in one area, we have to assume that that housing is not going to go somewhere else.

Therefore, the modelling is not just a matter of putting an extra 500 houses—or whatever figure we want to use—at Blackridge. It also has to take account of the fact that those 500 houses are not going to be built in Livingston, for example. We heard that there might be 700 additional houses around Plains, but then we heard serious doubts from the same panel from North Lanarkshire about whether that would be acceptable environmentally.

If the committee wished, we could show it what impact those aspirational levels of housing for those communities would have on patronage on the line and at those stations in particular. However, I caution against the long-term validity of those figures if we do not have the time to do the necessary checks on where that housing is coming from across the area.

Jeremy Purvis: You can appreciate our difficulty if we have been given the figures by the planning authorities. As one of the planning officers was very keen to say earlier, this is on the record so if a planning officer tells a parliamentary committee that there will be 700 houses somewhere, the local community will be quite concerned if that figure is outwith the current plan—he was therefore quite right to add the caveat that he did. However, you can understand our difficulty. Have you spoken with the council over the past 18 months?

Ron McAulay: Extensively.

Jeremy Purvis: When was your most recent discussion with the council?

Ron McAulay: About two weeks ago.

Jeremy Purvis: On that basis, you are confident that your proposed figures are robust.

Ron McAulay: We have to base our figures on those that were given to us by the council. In questioning the council, you asked whether this is about a house developer saying that he is going to build a certain number of houses. I do not have enough detail from the council to be able to say whether these figures have a high probability, have a low probability or are pie in the sky. I do not know. I have to go by the figures that we have been given.

Michael Greig: The written evidence from North Lanarkshire Council refers to 600 additional units, which became 700 in this morning's evidence. However, the written evidence goes on to say:

"At this stage, it is impossible to say how much, if any, land will be released, as there are concerns relating to school capacities and settlement coalescence."

To be fair, that ties in with the evidence but, as things stand, the council's evidence gives no certainty about how many, if any, additional units will be released at Plains. As my colleagues have

said, it would therefore be somewhat dangerous to make assumptions based on any set number of houses.

Cathy Peattie: How far did you factor in neighbouring villages when you were considering modelling for Plains and Blackridge?

John Baggaley: The model that we used considered the whole of central Scotland. We are talking about anywhere that could possibly be regarded as lying within the catchment area of the railway line; anywhere where people have the choice of using it, even if it is not particularly relevant to them.

Cathy Peattie: What assessments do you have of the number of residents in Plains and Blackridge who regularly use buses to get to work or access leisure facilities both in the east and in the west?

John Baggaley: Rather than read out all the data that we have, we will put the information in a written answer to the committee as that will be more comprehensive. We have very good data from the census on every mode of travel for journey-to-work movements, but we do not have data on other activities specifically for the inhabitants of Plains or Blackridge.

Cathy Peattie: Earlier this morning, we heard that a number of people from Plains would be keen to use a railway station if that was provided in their area. Were you aware of the figures concerning the level of interest in that village?

John Baggaley: I will make two observations. First, we were not aware of those specific figures, which have not been given to us. Secondly, as a consultancy that specialises in carrying out that type of survey work, we would never ask questions in that form. We never ask people, "Would you use this facility?" Instead, we ask questions from which we can infer whether they will use it. If people are offered something and then asked whether they would use it, they will say yes to ensure that it continues to be offered. We find that that type of survey greatly overestimates the number of times that a particular facility will be used.

Cathy Peattie: At the moment, however, the people in Plains and Blackridge are not being offered very much. What assumptions have been made about the extent to which people from Plains and Blackridge will use the stations at Drumgelloch, Caldercruix and Armadale?

John Baggaley: In the modelling that we undertook, those people have the option of getting to the available stations by walking, by bus or by car.

Cathy Peattie: By walking?

John Baggaley: Yes.

Cathy Peattie: We have heard what the bus service is like. We have also heard about the low levels of car ownership in Plains.

John Baggaley: All of that is reflected in the modelling. The model takes account of the levels of car ownership in Plains and the growth that will occur during the period when the line opens. Our modelling has tried to reflect the choices that people currently have, including the current bus services. As we heard, there are not many bus services in the evening, but the existing daytime bus services are included in the model, along with the car options. People would need to walk only a mile or a mile and a half to get to the station—which is slightly less than the distance that I walk to work every day—so that option is also included in the modelling.

Cathy Peattie: There are, I suggest, choices and there are choices.

John Baggaley: That is right. We all have choices.

Ron McAulay: I should add that our operating costs for the railway include moneys to help to subsidise or kick-start the link bus services that have been discussed. The operating costs include £1 million per annum to help to subsidise those services and get them moving.

Cathy Peattie: If the stations are not provided, what will be the economic and social impact on Plains and Blackridge?

Ron McAulay: Are you asking about what happens if the railway goes ahead without a station at Plains or Blackridge?

Cathy Peattie: Yes. We hope that the railway goes ahead, but what will be the impact of it without those stations?

Ron McAulay: It is difficult to predict the future, but I think that Plains will benefit from the reintroduction of a railway to which it will have close links at Drumgelloch and Caldercruix. I think that the area will benefit immensely.

Cathy Peattie: We heard this morning about the inconvenience that will be caused by the lack of a station.

Ron McAulay: The station will be very close and the journey time to the station will be very short.

Janis Hughes: I think that most of my questions have been answered, but I want to pick up on a point that is made in the "Design Development Appraisal" report. The report states:

"From North Lanarkshire in particular, it can be seen that there is very little travel to work to West Lothian by public transport. In addition, there is virtually no travel by public transport between West Lothian and North Lanarkshire."

Other witnesses today have highlighted the difficulty of trying to get bus companies to enter into contracts for services that cross local authority boundaries. Given that the promoter has stated that there are virtually no public transport links across the two local authority areas, why is it not seeking to improve that by providing the stations at Plains and Blackridge?

Ron McAulay: We believe that, by having stations at Caldercruix and Armadale, we will provide that opportunity. The gaps between the stations will not be great. We have talked about link buses to the stations. We genuinely believe that that is the way in which to get the best out of the investment in the railway. If we keep adding extra stations, we will end up either with extremely long journey times, which will put people off using the link, or with skipping patterns, which will make the service unattractive to people, because the trains will stop infrequently at some stations. All those issues are dealt with in the modelling that has been done. We carried out the modelling to allow us to produce what we believe to be the best way in which to deliver the project.

The Convener: I seek confirmation on an issue to do with the modelling. You have heard the evidence from the local authorities today. Can I have a categoric assurance that you stick 100 per cent by the figures that you have provided from the modelling, particularly with respect to population development and patronage? Alternatively, are there doubts in your mind or issues that you want to return to?

Ron McAulay: I certainly want to go back and question the councils on the aspirational numbers that they have talked about today. I can say categorically that the numbers that we have used have been provided to us by the councils.

The Convener: It is important to the progress of the bill that the figures that you have provided us with are 100 per cent accurate.

Ron McAulay: They are as accurate as possible, based on the information that the councils provided us. I emphasise that the figures are not ours—they are the councils' numbers, which are based on their local planning. They are as accurate as we could hope to get them.

The Convener: Okay. We take note of that.

You have emphasised the importance of timing along the route. I remind you once again that there may be room to consider the total journey time between Glasgow to Edinburgh, with a view to providing social benefits to places in between. In other words, it is unfortunate that you have not considered all the stops and possible changes of timetabling, particularly between Glasgow and Airdrie.

Ron McAulay: I hear your comments, although I am not sure that I agree with you.

The Convener: Everybody is entitled to disagree with me.

Alasdair Morgan: I have a couple of questions that arise from the evidence of the Scottish Association for Public Transport. The association refers to the reservation of land for potential future stations at Boghall and Newbridge. I am particularly interested in Newbridge, because the Edinburgh Tram (Line Two) Bill Committee, on which Mr Purvis and I served, at least authorised an extension of the tramline to Newbridge. I seek an assurance that nothing in the linked improvements will make it more difficult to build stations at those locations.

Alan Macmillan (Network Rail): That is correct—nothing will preclude that.

Alasdair Morgan: I suspect that the other point that the SAPT raises is outwith the scope of the bill, but I will ask about it anyway. The SAPT mentions the point at which, I presume, the Airdrie to Glasgow line crosses the Coatbridge to Mossend line and talks about the provision of a chord between the two lines. I am not sure whether a chord existed between the two lines in the past, but that would provide the possibility of a north-south to east-west interchange at that location.

Ron McAulay: I am not aware of that.

Alasdair Morgan: I will leave that issue sticking to the wall.

The Convener: As there are no more questions from members, do the witnesses have any further comments?

Ron McAulay: I have covered the issues to do with station locations. It is important that we all understand that we have proposed what we believe to be the best solution. I accept fully that the issue is up to the parliamentary committee, but if we had to go back, that would have fairly serious implications for the project as a whole and for the passage of the bill.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for coming. I look forward to the next occasion on which we will hear from them.

15:59

Meeting continued in private until 16:15.

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