



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 13 April 2010

Session 3

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body 2010

Applications for reproduction should be made in writing to the Information Policy Team, Office of the Queen's Printer for Scotland, Admail ADM4058, Edinburgh, EH1 1NG, or by email to:
licensing@ogps.gov.uk.

OQPS administers the copyright on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.

Printed and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by
RR Donnelley.

Tuesday 13 April 2010

CONTENTS

	Col.
TRANSPORT AND LAND USE PLANNING POLICIES INQUIRY	2721
PETITION	2744
Rural Fuel Prices (PE1181).....	2744

TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE
9th Meeting 2010, Session 3

CONVENER

*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD)

*Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP)

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Alison Irvine (Transport Scotland)

Jonny Moran (Transport Scotland)

Graeme Purves (Scottish Government Directorate for the Built Environment)

Helen Wood (Scottish Government Directorate for the Built Environment)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee

Tuesday 13 April 2010

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 14:00*]

Transport and Land Use Planning Policies Inquiry

The Convener (Patrick Harvie): Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the ninth meeting this year of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee. I remind everyone that all mobile devices should be switched off.

I record apologies from Marlyn Glen and Alex Johnstone.

There are two items on the agenda, the first of which is the beginning of our inquiry into the relationship between transport and land use planning policies. In the first evidence session, we will hear from witnesses from the Scottish Government. Jonny Moran is development management manager in the Transport Scotland trunk roads network management division; Alison Irvine is senior transport planner at Transport Scotland; Helen Wood is principal planner at the directorate for the built environment; and Graeme Purves is assistant chief planner at the directorate for the built environment. I welcome you all to the committee.

We have issued a call for views, for which the closing date is 7 May. For anyone who is keen enough to be watching the meeting remotely, people are welcome to submit written evidence to us by that deadline. The committee is to consider the nature and extent of the current relationship between transport and land use planning policies, the scope for further integration of those policies, and the benefits that further integration might deliver.

Graeme Purves has indicated that he would like to make some opening remarks before we kick off with members' questions.

Graeme Purves (Scottish Government Directorate for the Built Environment): Thank you very much, convener. I would like to make some opening remarks and briefly outline my colleagues' roles.

I thank the committee for inviting us to give evidence. We welcome its inquiry into the relationship between transport and land use planning. The effective integration of transport and

land use policies is essential to the success of strategic and local planning, and is important in our response to the challenges of climate change and sustainable development.

We have, of course, recently undertaken a major reform of the planning system to ensure that it is fit for purpose. A number of the changes should help to ensure that transport considerations are effectively integrated into development plan preparations and are given due weight in development management decisions.

At the national level, the second national planning framework highlights the importance of the relationship between transport and land use in our drive to reduce transport-related emissions. It also reflects the priorities for investment in transport infrastructure that have been identified in the strategic transport projects review. More recently, the consolidated Scottish planning policy set out clear policy messages on climate change, sustainable development and the integration of land use and transport. Beyond that, the recently published "Designing Streets: A Policy Statement for Scotland" shows how residential streets can be made more attractive for pedestrians and cyclists. The Scottish sustainable communities initiative provides early opportunities to give practical effect to the new thinking and to create national exemplars of sustainable living for the 21st century.

In considering the first question posed by the committee, it is important to be clear that we are still at a fairly early stage in the preparation of the new generation of development plans. Many planning authorities are only now at the stage of publishing main issues reports. We are actively engaging with planning authorities on those reports at the moment. The Scottish Government is actively encouraging a partnership approach to the preparation of development plans, and Transport Scotland and other transport interests are engaging with the process from an early stage.

I will explain my role in planning. I head the national spatial planning and north division of the directorate for the built environment. My responsibilities include the preparation and implementation of the national planning framework and liaison with planning authorities in the north of Scotland, which is essentially everywhere north of the Forth and the Clyde.

My colleague Helen Wood works in my team and has responsibility for planning policy in relation to transport matters and for liaison with planning authorities in the TAYplan area. From Transport Scotland, Jonny Moran engages with planning authorities on development management matters, and Alison Irvine engages with planning authorities on development plan matters. Between us, we can cover quite a lot of the ground that the committee is interested in.

The Convener: Thank you. It is fair to say that the committee decided to undertake this inquiry because we were aware of various informal comments that suggested that more could probably be done to ensure better integration between the functions of transport and planning, which would have a number of benefits.

You mentioned individual pieces of work, such as the STPR. Will you describe in more detail how different offices work together in developing individual pieces of work? What is the process for dialogue and communication between the various offices in the Scottish Government? How might the process be improved, if there is scope to do so?

Graeme Purves: Liaison between Transport Scotland and the directorate for the built environment works fairly well. We engage with each other regularly. The exact method of engagement depends very much on the project concerned. I was closely involved with the preparation of the national planning framework. At that time, a major strategic transport projects policy review was going on in parallel. It was important that we worked to the same strategic agenda, so we met formally every month throughout the process and liaised by e-mail and telephone on a daily basis. We are used to working across the boundary between Transport Scotland and the directorate for the built environment.

We also work with colleagues in the transport directorate on policy matters. It is a feature of our work in planning that we are used to cross-boundary working in the Scottish Government, which generally works fairly well. I was involved in the preparation of the first two national planning frameworks during the past eight years and that process has helped us to get out of our silos, think across boundaries and ensure that we work to a common spatial and geographical agenda and a common set of priorities in the context of infrastructure investment.

The Convener: Is there scope for further integration of transport and planning functions, through better communication between different parts of Government?

Graeme Purves: That is something that we must continue to work on, but there has been a significant improvement in the years in which I have been involved in strategic planning. We must keep working at that, because of course the personnel change over the years, but the system is working better than it did under the previous Administration. We are brigaded differently now. We were brigaded with transport under the previous Administration, but—curiously enough—our day-to-day working is probably more effective now than it was then, which might be partly because we have been doing a lot of work

together at strategic level on the STPR and the NPF.

The Convener: What happens in the context of the Scottish Government's planning casework? How well is the transport lens applied to individual planning decisions? How well do the various functions of Government inform decisions?

Graeme Purves: Do you mean in cases that are notified to the Scottish Government?

The Convener: Yes.

Graeme Purves: Our transport colleagues are routinely involved in and consulted on relevant cases. Probably most of the cases that are notified involve transport matters, and our transport colleagues are involved in them as necessary, as a matter of routine.

The Convener: How significant is that element of individual cases? Obviously, it will differ from one planning application to another—

Graeme Purves: It differs from case to case.

The Convener: In general, are transport considerations given sufficiently high priority as a planning issue?

Graeme Purves: Very considerable weight is given to Transport Scotland's views in any case.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): Good afternoon. Does the Scottish Government provide any specific advice to public authorities—health or education authorities, for example—on locating new facilities to maximise the opportunity for access by sustainable modes of transport? If not, can you explain why?

Graeme Purves: Our general policy on location and design matters applies equally to those bodies and to any other bodies, and we hope that they consult and have regard to it. We certainly advise those agencies when invited to do so.

It is encouraging to note that, in general, the health community has more recently taken a much greater interest in such matters than it did in the past. We welcome that. A member of staff in my division is specifically responsible for liaising on health matters.

Cathy Peattie: You said that you advise those agencies when you are invited to do so. I am from Falkirk, where a wonderful new hospital is about to open. It is great for people who can get there by car, but people in my constituency who are on the other side of the central Scotland area say that it will be impossible for them to get there. What do you mean by saying, "when invited to do so"? Do you mean that the strategies exist, but you do not get involved if you are not invited?

Graeme Purves: The people who are responsible for that hospital development should engage first and foremost with the local planning authority to seek its views on the considerations that are relevant to any significant development in the area. I do not know that there is a formal mechanism to ensure that we in the directorate for the built environment are always consulted on public projects of that type; we sometimes are.

Cathy Peattie: And are you involved only if you are invited?

Graeme Purves: That is often the case—for example, with prison developments, on which I am aware that we have been asked to comment.

Cathy Peattie: How do your offices ensure that the planning and transport policies that you promote have positive climate change impacts if you comment only when you are invited to do so?

Graeme Purves: How do we ensure that the policies—

Cathy Peattie: Are implemented with regard to climate change developments and impacts.

Graeme Purves: We have clearly stated that we view climate change as a key element of national policy. We have just completed the national policy framework, and the national planning framework is in place. We published the Scottish planning policy in February.

Our focus is now turning to engaging with planning authorities to ensure that their development plans give the right messages on climate change. We have refocused our staff resources on close liaison with the planning authorities, which are, for the most part, now busily engaged in preparing development plans. We have a plan-led system, and it is important that the right policies are in place at a national level and a development plan level, because developers will take their lead from those policies and planning authorities will have to assess individual developments in relation to them.

Many of the planning authorities are at the stage of publishing reports on the main issues, and we are taking the opportunity to co-ordinate Scottish Government responses to them. Where we feel that the matters you mention are not being given sufficient prominence, we will flag that up and engage with the planning authorities to try to remedy the situation.

Cathy Peattie: I am pleased to hear what you are saying, particularly on flagging up issues if the system is not working. I am interested in the process that is in place to monitor the success of that work, with regard to where things are and are not happening. Sometimes it is best to agree the monitoring process at the start. Is that process in place?

14:15

Graeme Purves: We monitor in a wide variety of ways. One advantage of being a relatively small country is that Scotland's planning community is fairly small. Maintaining close personal links between professional planners in the directorate for the built environment and local authority planners is manageable for us. We try to go out and meet each authority at least once a year, and usually twice a year. We do not just produce the policy and run away; we go out and meet authorities regularly.

Since the Planning etc (Scotland) Act 2006 has been implemented fairly recently, we are discussing with authorities what snagging issues are coming up, how we can improve and streamline the system and how we might remedy policy that is proving difficult. We are actively engaged with all planning authorities at that level all the time.

We certainly do not monitor every decision that every planning authority makes to check whether it conforms in every respect with the body of policy—that would not be a manageable exercise—but we engage with and take feedback from authorities and stakeholders. As you can imagine, the development community and environmental interests are not slow to tell us when they feel that policy and procedures are not working. We receive good feedback.

Cathy Peattie: I was not asking you to monitor every planning authority—that would be impossible and you have a big enough job to do. I know that it is early days, but I am interested in how you monitor your work.

Graeme Purves: We receive good feedback. For the most part, we enjoy pretty positive relationships with the planning authorities. They are not slow to tell us when problems arise.

Cathy Peattie: Have you conducted research into how effectively transport and planning guidance is working in practice, and particularly into its influence on the location of developments and how they are connected to wider transport networks?

Graeme Purves: From time to time, we research how effective policy is. Over the years, a number of reports have been produced. Work is not being done to address the issue that you raise, but we do such research regularly, particularly when people suggest that it might be time to review policy. One mechanism that we use to do that is the commissioning of research.

Helen Wood (Scottish Government Directorate for the Built Environment): Research was done into the effectiveness of SPP17, which was the forerunner to our

consolidated SPP. That piece of work was useful and gave us quite a bit of information—it told us that the policy was well accepted and reasonably well understood, but it raised questions about the extent to which the policy was being implemented. A range of actions flowed from that, some of which have been taken quite some way forward. I am happy to speak more about that, if the committee would like.

Cathy Peattie: That is fine—thank you.

The Convener: The value of such research is central to the inquiry. The question is how transport and climate change considerations affect where developments happen. The example was given of a hospital development. You think that people are working better to consider the transport impacts than they did some years ago. Are we at the point at which such considerations inform whether and where development is proposed in the first place or do we still look at each development and say, “Okay, what do we do to ameliorate the negative impacts or to connect it better to the transport network?”

Graeme Purves: Alison Irvine is eager to answer. I will speak after her, as I have an angle on the issue, too.

Alison Irvine (Transport Scotland): I will explain Transport Scotland’s role in liaising with planning authorities. We have started to do that much earlier in the planning process—while the main issues reports are being prepared. Part of the work that we do with councils is the very activity that the convener described—looking at locations that are being considered for different ranges and types of developments and appraising them from a transport perspective to identify which sites could be or might not be preferred. Planning authorities use that information and must take into account a range of other issues, such as education provision and water infrastructure, in making the recommendations that are in main issues reports and ultimately in proposed plans.

Graeme Purves: We are in the process of commissioning another piece of research at the moment. We are commissioning a team of consultants to consider the development of a tool that will allow us to use quantitative assessments of greenhouse gas or carbon emissions to inform choices about settlement patterns and policy development. That is a challenging piece of work. We have quite a number of tenders in for it at the moment, and we hope to be able to award the contract within the next couple of weeks. We hope that the outcome of that will be a tool that can be applied within the strategic environmental assessment process to give authorities a better idea of their choices in developing alternative strategies for reducing their carbon footprint.

The Convener: For how long is that piece of work expected to run?

Graeme Purves: Initially, we envisage six months. It is quite a major piece of work.

The Convener: On that timescale, it could inform the public sector climate change duties that will be imposed on planning authorities.

I have a supplementary question from Alison McInnes.

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): Thank you, convener. While we are on the subject of research, many local authorities will use planning conditions to bring about green travel plans and so on for major developments and particularly major employers. Has the directorate for the built environment carried out a national review of the effectiveness of those green travel plans in the longer term?

Graeme Purves: Jonny Moran can best answer that.

Jonny Moran (Transport Scotland): I can give some context from Transport Scotland for the trunk road network that we are looking at. One of our consultants is reviewing the planning conditions that Transport Scotland has imposed through the planning process during the past number of years to determine the number of travel plan conditions that we have invoked and the effectiveness in delivering them. It is fair to say that that work will focus solely on the trunk road network from the Transport Scotland perspective; it will not look nationwide at all 32 local authorities and the other planning authorities.

Alison McInnes: That is interesting as far as it goes, but is anything being done at the national level to review what is being done on individual planning applications?

Graeme Purves: No, not at present.

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): Can you outline what effect, if any, the changes to the most recent Scottish planning policy have had on Scottish Government advice to planning authorities on dealing with transport matters as part of the planning process?

Graeme Purves: We have just completed a consolidation of national policy in which we boiled down what was becoming a large volume of policy into a much slimmer document, which we hope distils the key messages in some ways and makes them clearer and easier to get across. We have not been changing policy. Policy as it relates to transport takes the approach that was previously set out in SPP17, so there has been no substantive change in policy. We are now turning our attention to what might be termed good practice advice and street design policy, but we

have not changed the thrust of the messages in policy.

Charlie Gordon: What practical impact will the publication of the SPP have on planning authorities' handling of the transport aspects of development planning and management?

Graeme Purves: Because we have given clearer and more distilled messages, it should broadly help them. Stakeholders, planning authorities and others have broadly welcomed the SPP because of its clearer messages. Although we have not changed policy, we have taken the opportunity to strengthen the messages on matters that have assumed greater importance in the meantime, such as climate change and sustainable development. The SPP contains clear statements on those, and it should be clear to planning authorities that they are important dimensions of their approach to transport and land use.

Charlie Gordon: Do planning authorities place enough emphasis on transport matters when they draft their development plans? What more could they do to ensure that planning policies and proposed development sites strengthen the development of sustainable transport networks?

Graeme Purves: The broad answer is that, by and large, planning authorities recognise the importance of transport and effective integration of transport and land use in their policy development. The effectiveness with which authorities deliver on that probably varies. For much of my career in the Scottish Government, I have been in close liaison in the Glasgow and Clyde valley area, which probably has the strongest cultural capital in that regard, in that it has been producing strategic plans since the late 1940s. People understand what the business is about. They understand the importance of successfully integrating transport and land use and, by and large, they do it well.

There is always room for improvement, which is why we are paying particular attention to our partnership approach, to ensure that Transport Scotland and the other agencies that are involved in transport, such as regional transport partnerships, are closely involved in development plan preparation from the outset. That is work in progress, but by and large authorities in Scotland recognise the importance of such an approach and do a reasonably good job. If you compare us with other countries, you will probably find that we rank quite highly on the international scale.

The Convener: Is it wildly unfair of me to wonder whether your description of effective integration is truer in relation to thinking about, for example, how the people in a housing development will get to work, based on assumptions about their need for a high level of

mobility, than it is in relation to thinking about, for example, where people's food comes from? Demand for space for allotments, grow-your-own schemes and so on wildly outstrips supply, but we do not protect spaces for such activity and we do not build them into the planning of residential areas, although doing so could reduce transport demand.

Graeme Purves: That is a fair comment, although it is also fair to say that that is a much newer agenda. There is increasing interest in the issue, which has come up in debates on the land use strategy, for example. We are engaged in the strategy, because in due course it will influence spatial planning—and so it should.

It is interesting that in much of the literature there is great emphasis on the compact city or settlement as a response to the challenge of climate change. There are also people who argue for a much more dispersed approach to settlement, which perhaps provides scope for more people to grow their own food and allows for every house to be its own power station. Those are two very different models. I suspect that the answer lies not in one thing or the other. We will not have a situation in which everybody lives either in high-rise flats or in a much more dispersed rural environment; I suspect that it will be horses for courses and that both models will have a role to play. I accept your premise that there probably has not been enough thinking on the issue. This is a relatively new agenda, and we must get to grips with it.

The Convener: Or rather, a very old agenda that needs to come back. We managed to turn things round pretty quickly in the middle of the 20th century, for other reasons.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): The problem with making plans is that a top-down approach always seems to be taken. People are not asked first what they want; they are told what the guidelines will be, whether that is at a regional or a national level. We know that that is your job, Mr Purves, but I am interested in knowing to what extent you go to local communities and discuss the approaches to transport and planning that we are talking about, not for the purposes of a specific plan but more widely, to inform your recommendations for future SPPs.

14:30

Graeme Purves: There are two parts to the answer. A number of the changes that we have introduced as part of planning reform are designed to ensure that communities can engage more effectively from an early stage, both in the preparation of development plans and in development management.

For example, the process of preparing development plans has a new stage that is called the main issues report, which is the authority's first stab at identifying the key issues that it feels it needs to address. It means that communities and other interested stakeholders can engage with the plan before all the policies are set in stone. That is its purpose—to encourage early engagement by the community rather than it appearing that there is a pre-prepared plan that is ready to go and which needs only a rubber stamp. The intention behind the main issues report is for the authority to say, "We think these are the main issues we have to address; let's hear what you think."

On the development management side, we have introduced new procedures to ensure pre-application consultation, which is designed to ensure that communities can engage with proposals at an early stage before a formal application is submitted and to flush out issues that are likely to be of concern to communities.

That is what we have sought to do at one level through our reforms; another important work strand, which has achieved quite a lot of publicity recently, is our work on Scottish sustainable communities, which are intended to be exemplars of 21st century sustainable living. In the past month, we have held a very successful series of charrettes in various parts of Scotland, which have been well attended—people have packed them out. That work has been about engaging communities, some of which are quite old and well established and well worn, such as Lochgelly, and it has engaged them in an appealing and inspirational way, considering how we might transform communities into the sort of place that meets all the challenges of the 21st century. Our colleagues in our architecture and place division have been hard at work on that project recently.

Rob Gibson: Happily, the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change has explained to us what a charrette is. We are not going to bring in a tumbrel for the next person who uses it, but—

Graeme Purves: It is not a term I particularly favour.

Charlie Gordon: Use a Lochgelly one.

Rob Gibson: Lochgelly deserves better.

It is important to think about these things. We have considered urban communities and communities that are easily planned for, but nobody has mentioned ferry transport and the links that planning should have with it. I am particularly keen to discuss that question, because it is an aspect of planning that might well have a bearing on climate change.

Let us consider the places where there are short ferry journeys and overland links in between—the journey to Islay, for example. Starting on the Argyll mainland, we could cross the narrow sea and, if the road was improved, take the road through Jura and then a short sailing. Instead, we find ourselves with a new ferry being built at the cost of however many million pounds for a nearly two-hour journey across the sea. Surely we could have some discussion with you about how you advise on such transport and planning developments.

Graeme Purves: I may ask Alison Irvine to answer that, perhaps to highlight the limits and scope of our various responsibilities.

Alison Irvine: Yes; ferries do not fall within the remit of Transport Scotland, so we do not tend to liaise on that basis, I am afraid.

Rob Gibson: Nevertheless, the question of joining up ferry services to buses, trains and roads is an issue that we uncovered in our recent ferries review. There seems to be a discontinuity.

Graeme Purves: On the planning side, we liaise on such matters with colleagues in the transport directorate who have responsibility for ferries. In fact, ferries both internal and international loomed fairly large in our engagement with stakeholders in the preparation of the second national planning framework. I admit to being taken slightly by surprise at just how important an issue that is to so many communities. As a consequence, we have said quite a lot about port development in the second national planning framework—rather more than I expected we would say.

Rob Gibson: I am delighted that the 90 inhabited islands in Scotland have had some recognition.

Decisions on planning applications are influenced by many factors. What weight should planning authorities attach to transport when considering applications for planning permission?

Graeme Purves: The weight that planning authorities attach to transport depends very much on the individual case, but it is frequently an important material consideration.

Helen Wood: The general answer is that it very much depends on the individual application. Basically, the decision maker will consider the application in terms of the development plan. That is the first reference point for the decision. Then other material considerations will be taken into account. Transport considerations could be significant or, in other cases, they might be less so.

Alison Irvine: Members might be aware of the transport assessment report that must be submitted to support planning applications of a

certain size and significance. It aids the planning authorities' decision making when they have that information in front of them. Transport Scotland is consulted on that within specific remits, under the general directions orders and so on.

Rob Gibson: It concerns me that when we talk about sustainable communities, we think about something that is a little circle. Graeme Purves talked about different models of development, some of which are extended or spread out. Can your theory embrace sustainability for places that are highly disadvantaged in their transport links, such as the islands and remote Highland areas? If so, the weight that transport is given in planning decisions for developments in remote communities would become pretty critical.

Graeme Purves: I am sure that it can. The national planning framework makes the point that there is a wide range of models of sustainable development. A model that is applicable in the Highlands and Islands might be different from one that is applicable in Glasgow or Edinburgh. At the weekend, I watched the film "Laxdale Hall" on DVD, which is about a community in the 1950s that is modelled on that in Applecross. A member of Parliament suggests that the appropriate solution is to move the people to a new settlement in Drumlie Dubs in the central belt. That did not go down well with that community in the 1950s and it would not go down any better with the people of Applecross in 2010.

Rob Gibson: Indeed. The transport considerations also have to take into account geography, which presents quite a big problem in Scotland for our ability to be connected. Planning considerations often seem to focus on larger developments such as supermarkets. For at least the last decade, planning guidance has advised against the creation of out-of-town facilities that can be accessed only by car, as was mentioned earlier. However, many such facilities have been granted planning permission and that continues to happen. Why is that the case and can anything be done to change it?

Graeme Purves: Those decisions are taken by planning authorities, assessed against policy. The clear policy position that is set out in the SPP favours development that will sustain existing town and village shopping centres and states that those areas should be developed in preference to out-of-town developments. The supermarkets, to be fair to them, have reacted in other ways; they have come up with various models for smaller units that can be accommodated in existing town centres. To an extent, that has been a response to the fairly strict planning policies that national Government and authorities have sought to impose. However, local planning authorities are elected bodies in their own right, and they take

decisions in the light of the specific proposals in front of them.

Rob Gibson: I will give a specific example to develop my point. It is nearly impossible to walk from the centre of Inverness to the golden mile, where the major developments and chain stores are. It is extremely dangerous to cycle because of the volume of traffic and the fact that there are no cycleways. Some review is surely required with regard to how people access that type of out-of-town development, which was built around 10 to 15 years ago, because Inverness is a growing city.

Graeme Purves: It may well require some review. When I was actively engaging with the Glasgow and Clyde valley structure plan, there was interesting debate not only on the physical provision of retail premises, but on quality and accessibility. It was sometimes retailers who argued that we needed to pay more attention to those issues rather than simply considering issues of floor space; I have some sympathy with that view.

The development plan process can provide an opportunity to review the quality and suitability of existing provision and to give a policy steer on where that may need to be amended and improved.

Rob Gibson: The committee has just published the report of its inquiry into active travel, and it is clear that the issue of how people can move to places that they need to go to for retail therapy and so on has a big bearing on planning. Is there any improvement in the way in which you examine the casework and tell planning authorities, "You cannot do this ever again"?

Graeme Purves: The imperative will be greater as we move forward to the new generation of development plans. We will certainly scrutinise those plans to ensure that they fully reflect policy, but our efforts in improving the environment of new developments have focused primarily on residential developments. An example is Polnoon, where we have worked closely with a specific developer on improved layouts that favour the pedestrian and the cyclist at the expense of the private car. That is widely recognised as a good example, but it is a relatively medium-scale residential environment—I agree that more work has to be done with regard to town centres and retailing.

Jonny Moran: I can provide some extra information on that. Transport Scotland's guidance on the transport assessments that were discussed earlier considers person trips from the development rather than car trips. We consider the active mode hierarchy—walking, cycling and public transport—and we deal with cars as the residual issue.

That links into the plan-led system, which completes the circle of issues that we are discussing. An important aspect involves getting the developer in at an early stage for the pre-application discussions, supported by the local authority and the planning authority, and engaging with communities. Our strategy replicates the way in which we want to progress the issue.

Rob Gibson: What happens with developments that have already been built? You are talking about future or current developments, but there are problems with major developments, such as the one in Inverness that I mentioned, which have not been solved.

Graeme Purves: A characteristic of the planning system is that it tends to focus on areas of change. When we prepare development plans, we focus on areas that are likely to be subject to change, and when we deal with planning applications we consider proposals for change. That means that planning does not have many ready levers for making any adjustments that we feel are necessary to the bulk of the existing built environment.

That environment is in some respects relatively stable, but we will need to find new mechanisms—not all of which may be to do with planning—to address the challenges that climate change poses. For example, the new towns of the immediate post-war period are now looking distinctly middle aged, if not elderly. Some were planned with the assumption of 100 per cent car ownership and on the basis that everybody would drive everywhere on a sea of roundabouts. There may be a case for imaginatively remodelling and retrofitting those settlements to make them more suitable for the 21st century, but we do not necessarily have all the mechanisms available under the existing planning system for that.

14:45

The Convener: A point was made about the hierarchy approach that is taken with developments. I entirely accept that such a paper process takes place, but massive car parks are built for developments. Some committee members were in Copenhagen and Malmö for the recent climate change conference. I have honestly never seen any development in Scotland that has the cycle facilities that we routinely saw in those cities. I cannot think of any major retail development or any other development in Scotland that has such facilities built into it. Whether such facilities come forward from the developer or are a requirement from the planning authority, they simply do not happen here. The hierarchy may exist on paper, but it does not exist in what we are building.

Jonny Moran: That is a fair assumption. The challenge rests with the planning authority, because the issue is a local walking and cycling issue. Unfortunately, Transport Scotland can only help people to engage with that process and mitigate impacts on the trunk road network. To balance things up, all the person trips that are generated from the development come within our remit. Colleagues may have other comments about the planning authority aspect.

The Convener: Is there a way of turning the situation round from the Scottish Government's perspective? In the committee's active travel inquiry, the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change was keen to say that he wants the Scottish Government to give leadership on such issues. What does that mean in practice for how we change the planning system?

Graeme Purves: We have a sustainable transport unit in the transport directorate, which engages in the development of policy in that area and is the sponsor body for organisations such as Sustrans. Funds are channelled through such mechanisms.

One aspect of the national planning framework that we cover is the development of green infrastructure, specifically the central Scotland green network. That network applies specifically to the central belt, but we have identified the development of strategic active travel routes there as one of six key components of that initiative. That development provides an opportunity for a step change in the provision of resources in the central Scotland green network area, provided that they are applied suitably for that purpose.

The Convener: I am tempted to go into that matter, but I am aware that a member wants to ask questions about the NPF.

Alison McInnes: That was useful.

The development of strategic transport infrastructure features quite strongly in NPF 2. Why were the transport projects and policies in NPF 2 chosen for inclusion in it? How will they contribute to sustainable development and greenhouse gas reduction targets?

Graeme Purves: Transport projects were identified as national developments on the basis of assessments against the criteria. First of all, they were informed by the strategic transport projects review—quite a number of projects came through the strategic transport projects review, of course. The projects that were chosen as national developments were selected because they accorded with the criteria for national developments that Mr Swinney announced to Parliament in September 2007. That is how transport projects were included in the list of national developments.

Several of the transport projects contribute directly to the climate change and sustainable development agenda—the high-speed rail link to London is an obvious example. There are also the west of Scotland strategic rail enhancements. While the national planning framework was going through Parliament, the committee heard expert evidence that that was probably the single most important project that the Scottish Government could undertake to contribute to that agenda.

Several of the projects directly address the climate change and sustainable development agenda. Quite a number of the national developments are at least in part transport related, in that they relate to major port developments. Part of that agenda is about getting more freight and heavy goods off the roads and on to water. To that extent, many of those projects could contribute to it as well. That is recognised by independent commentators including the Sustainable Development Commission, which, in its most recent report, acknowledged that the national planning framework sets an appropriate policy agenda for addressing sustainable development.

Alison McInnes: As those projects are developed and start to come to fruition, what review and revision processes will Transport Scotland or the Government go through to ensure that the latest information is taken on board?

Graeme Purves: Now that the national planning framework has been published, we are actively engaged with stakeholders and delivery partners on implementing the national planning framework action programme, which is a web-based working document that is available on the national planning framework website. It keeps people up to date on how the various national developments and other key components of the national planning framework are being implemented and provides updates on how measures to mitigate environmental effects, including effects on climate, are being progressed. In other words, it includes commentary on how mitigation is being addressed, when that is considered necessary.

Alison McInnes: Before I move on, did the convener have a question about the national planning framework?

The Convener: No—thank you.

Alison McInnes: What importance do Scottish Government planners attach to transport matters in considering applications that have been called in by Scottish ministers to make a decision on? Will you illustrate your answer with some practical examples?

Graeme Purves: As we have indicated, in the general course of consideration of applications, the importance of transport in any case very much depends on the nature of that case. In many

cases, transport is an extremely important consideration and is given a great deal of weight. Helen Wood might wish to comment.

Helen Wood: Indeed. In some circumstances, that may well be the reason for notification of a case. For example, Transport Scotland might have an outstanding objection. Transport would certainly always be an issue that would be explored.

Alison McInnes: Can you identify any applications that have been refused in the past year on the ground of adverse transport impact?

Graeme Purves: I do not think that we have had occasion to refuse too many applications that have been notified. The proportion of cases that is refused following notification has always been relatively small, but it does happen.

Alison McInnes: Have you ever approved any applications to which Transport Scotland has objected?

Graeme Purves: That happens extremely rarely—although I will not say that it has never happened—because a great deal of weight is attached to the views of Transport Scotland.

Alison McInnes: When the regional transport strategies were being drawn up, did your office have a role in considering them?

Graeme Purves: Are you referring to the directorate for the built environment?

Alison McInnes: Yes.

Graeme Purves: We would normally expect to be given the opportunity to comment on them. Planning authorities have a statutory obligation to take them into account.

Alison McInnes: Were you involved in consideration of the regional transport strategies? None of them has been revised, as yet. I am talking about the first tranche of the regional transport strategies.

Graeme Purves: Yes. I can recall that when they were being prepared, our territorial officers were involved in commenting on them.

The Convener: Might it be possible for you to supply in writing after the meeting further information on applications that were approved or refused in the circumstances about which Alison McInnes asked? It may be that there are none.

Graeme Purves: We will look into it. Are you interested in cases over, say, the past year that may be of relevance to your question?

The Convener: I think that we would be interested in cases over recent years.

Graeme Purves: We will look into that and get back to you.

The Convener: That would be helpful.

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP): What role does Transport Scotland play in the drafting of local authority development plans?

Alison Irvine: My role within Transport Scotland is to act as liaison with planning authorities when they prepare their development plans. The scale and level of that role is dependent on the scale and level of development that is considered within a development plan area.

At the moment, we are active in the development planning process in the Highlands, Aberdeen city and Aberdeenshire. Also, the SESplan, TAYplan and Glasgow and the Clyde valley strategic development plans are all coming forward. The planning authorities all look for something slightly different from the liaison process but part of our role is to provide them with the information that we hold on the performance of the strategic transport network—the trunk roads and railways—and to discuss with them their proposals and the appraisal of those proposals as they move forward through the various different stages of the plans. We are in the process of drafting guidelines on transport appraisal through the development planning process. That is being undertaken in consultation with various stakeholders.

We are trying to move forward on all those fronts. Such a question does not have a really short answer, unfortunately; I could spend a long time talking to you about it. We tend to take a proportionate and positive approach to our work, and some major improvements have been made in the way that the development plans that are now being produced take into account transport and the implications for transport. About half a dozen planning authorities have published their main issues reports and a few are coming up to proposed plan stage, so we are still fairly early on in the change process that we have gone through, but there has been a great improvement in our dialogue with planning authorities and their dialogue with the Scottish Government.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It may be too early in the process to answer this question but, if you are concerned during the development plan process that your issues are not being given sufficient weight, is there a means by which that can be taken on board? If you have concerns that are not being addressed, can they be dealt with later in the process with another authority, such as the directorate for the built environment?

Alison Irvine: First and foremost, if we have concerns about a particular development, we relay those concerns to the planning authority informally

as the plan is being prepared. Once the main issues report has been published, we provide some fairly detailed responses on areas of the plan that we like and support and on areas that cause us concern. We always try to identify ways in which those concerns can be overcome, such as adopting a different locational policy or further appraisal of the pertinent issues.

When we get to proposed plan stage, if we have not resolved all the issues, Transport Scotland responds via DBE colleagues to the proposed plan in an official capacity as a key agency. At that point, we have the opportunity to object if something that causes us concern remains in a proposed plan.

15:00

Shirley-Anne Somerville: You said that planning authorities are all looking for something different out of the process. Does the fact that plans are dealt with in different ways make it more difficult for there to be a national strategy? Is it difficult to ensure that there are national minimum standards, for example, and that policy is being correctly followed? If everyone is looking for something different, I am concerned that what is done is based on what a planning authority wants rather than on national policy.

Alison Irvine: The reason why things are done or approached differently is to do with the different characteristics of areas. An issue for a rural area might not be the same for an urban area. We should not be concerned about that; it is probably a positive feature of the dynamics of Scotland. I take a more positive view of the Government's and Transport Scotland's ability to respond in a proportionate and appropriate way.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Is there feedback on active and sustainable travel, as well as on the national trunk road network and so on?

Alison Irvine: As part of the appraisal process that we are encouraging planning authorities to undertake, all modes of travel are covered. The mode hierarchy—walk, cycle, public transport, car—is followed. Active and sustainable travel is taken on board in that context.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As the convener said, the hierarchy has been set out and the policy exists, but is the policy being followed? Is anything changing?

Alison Irvine: We would always be able to point to somewhere and say, "It didn't happen there." However, we find that in planning authorities there is greater recognition of the importance of all modes of transport. Authorities are taking the issues more into account in their development plans.

Graeme Purves: There are clear signals about the importance of active travel in the SPP and the national planning framework. Our territorial planning staff would pick up such issues with planning authorities if there was concern.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: How does Transport Scotland deal with development proposals that impact on the trunk road network? The issue was briefly mentioned. There is concern that the approach is to adapt the network to suit the development, rather than try to move the development to a more sustainable location.

Alison Irvine: As we establish a more plan-led system, we are trying to ensure that the thinking about locations of developments happens up-front in the development planning context, before we reach the development management context, which is the planning application stage. Part and parcel of development planning liaison work is consideration of location and, to a certain level of detail, the mitigation of the effects of a development or combination of developments. We then move into the development management stage, when the transport assessment deals specifically with mitigation associated with the development.

Alison McInnes: You said that you hope more often to join up all modes of transport with the planning process. About eight years ago, Scottish Water's investment plan was not at all in step with local planning. Local plans identified where development should go, but no investment was flowing in from Scottish Water. I understand that the disconnect has been more or less sorted out, through much dialogue and discussion. Is there sufficient discussion between commercial operators in the public transport sector and local planners, and does such discussion take place at the right time, so that there can be investment in new public transport routes, particularly bus routes?

Alison Irvine: Planning authorities discuss public transport possibilities for developments with the operators as part of the development planning appraisal work that they undertake. The operators are much more interested in when a bus service will be needed, how many buses will be required and how many drivers will be needed than in whether it may be desirable to extend bus route X into an area in five years' time. If the planning authority has a high-quality public transport unit, such issues can be identified and built into the plan. However, if the authority's public transport unit is not so forward thinking, opportunities can be missed.

Alison McInnes: What can we do to improve the situation?

Alison Irvine: It might be possible to improve the relationships between public transport operators and local authority public transport units.

The Convener: Another answer would be to regulate the buses, but we can perhaps debate that when the minister is here.

I want to follow up Shirley-Anne Somerville's question about Transport Scotland's role in relation to developments that impact on the trunk road network. Is Transport Scotland's role different for developments that do not impact on the trunk road network but still have transport implications? If so, what is its role?

Alison Irvine: All the development in an area is taken into account in our development planning appraisal work. There are also certain rules and regulations governing development management that require Transport Scotland to be a statutory consultee. However, if a development does not fall within those rules, we are not consulted.

Jonny Moran: There are rules on developments that are within 67m of a trunk road and on anything that would have a material impact on traffic flows or congestion on the trunk road network. It depends on how close to a trunk road a development would be and on the level of impact that it would have. It is important to engage in discussions with the planning authority at an early stage to agree the scope of the development and to help the developer to take forward his work.

The Convener: If Transport Scotland is not a statutory consultee under those rules governing development, do you have no role at all, or do you have a discretionary role?

Alison Irvine: We have a role only in the development management context, in which our remit covers the whole development planning area. Because of the nature of our responsibilities, we will be much more focused on areas in the vicinity of the trunk road network and the rail network.

The Convener: Okay. Does your relationship with planning authorities involve the direct provision of guidance or practical support in assessing complex transport proposals that might have major or national planning implications?

Alison Irvine: Yes. I briefly referred to that earlier. We are in the process of preparing guidelines on the transport appraisal of development plans and development management. At this stage, that is being undertaken at a relatively low level of stakeholder consultation, but we hope to broaden that out over the next few months into a wider peer review process.

The Convener: What is that expected to comprise? What kind of activity is taking place as part of that?

Alison Irvine: On the appraisal guidelines?

The Convener: Is it simply a matter of publishing guidelines and handing them over, or do you provide practical support to local authorities?

Alison Irvine: Sorry—I am perhaps doing myself an injustice here. We will not just publish the guidelines, as we have a team within Transport Scotland whose role is to liaise with planning authorities as they deliver their plans and to provide advice on the transport issues that are associated with those plans. It is not just a matter of publishing the guidelines and telling planning authorities to follow them; we also discuss how we can help them in that process.

The Convener: Okay. I have a further question about the training of planners. Has there been any change over recent years in what they are expected to learn about, think about or be exposed to regarding sustainable transport and the climate change aspects of transport?

Graeme Purves: Our planning development programme seeks to address those issues. Training is probably required in the more technical aspects of such things, and the programme is designed to address that.

By and large, most planners are probably fairly up to speed on the fundamentals and the principles. They are probably more environmentally aware than the average citizen, and most of them have bought into the climate change and sustainable development agenda. However, there may be technical aspects of addressing the issues at a practical, day-to-day level with which they may need help—I am thinking of the technical assessment of carbon impacts and how that can be applied in the context of development planning. We probably need to focus on such areas.

The Convener: Okay. The committee has no further questions. I thank you all for your time in answering our questions today. We will continue to take evidence from other witnesses over the next few weeks and will report in due course. I suspend the meeting briefly to allow our witnesses to leave.

15:11

Meeting suspended.

15:13

On resuming—

Petition

Rural Fuel Prices (PE1181)

The Convener: The next item on the agenda is consideration of PE1181, in the name of Helena Coxshall, on rural fuel prices. Members have been provided with a paper relating to the petition, and we have today received correspondence between John Swinney, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. During our previous consideration of the petition, we agreed to urge the Government to write to the chancellor, and the correspondence is the result of that. The cabinet secretary has made the argument in favour of the petition, citing the example of the French Government being granted permission to apply a reduced rate of fuel duty. The chancellor's reply acknowledges the problem but argues that the difference in fuel prices in remote and rural areas is

“the product of market forces”

rather than a result of the fuel duty regime. The chancellor then gives two reasons for taking the position that the fuel duty regime should not be used in the way that has been suggested by the petitioner and by members of the committee.

15:15

It seems to me that we have a fairly limited number of choices about what to do. The petition simply calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to make representations to the United Kingdom Government about the issues. We can do relatively little now that the terms of the petition have been complied with.

We have also had a note from the Scottish Government saying that it would welcome suggestions from island communities on ways in which transportation costs could be mitigated and on whether it could help to facilitate those. We can certainly highlight that to the petitioner, and it might be worth having a short discussion about any other things that committee members might want us to do on the petition. However, it seems to me that the fundamental terms of the petition have been complied with at this point.

Alison McInnes: I am not sure that I entirely agree with you that the terms of the petition have been complied with. The minister wrote in November 2008 and then again in March 2010, but no action was taken in between. The minister has not sought a meeting with the chancellor to discuss the issue and press the case. That disappoints me because we have all said in

different arenas that the issue is important. I am keen to keep the petition open, especially given that we might soon have a new chancellor to talk to about the issue. We should keep the petition open.

The Convener: For completeness, I point out that the letter of 19 March 2010 from John Swinney to Alistair Darling says:

“Over the course of the last two years, I have written to you on a number of occasions”,

so it would be fair to say that the Scottish Government has pursued the issue. However, there is a difference in position between the two Governments. The Scottish Government takes one view and the UK Government takes another. A future chancellor, whether they are of the same political persuasion or a different one, might well take a different view, but that seems to be the situation as it stands.

Alison McInnes: As far as I can see, there has been no attempt to bridge the gap between the two Governments, and that should have been done.

Rob Gibson: On the basis of our previous discussions and in light of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's reply, I think that there is still room for discussion. One suggestion of a non-market nature that I mentioned was that we could have some kind of bulk buying process. Since our previous discussion, I have raised that suggestion with Highland Council, which said that the regulations would be complex. However, it seems to me that any petrol station already has to go through complex regulations to store and sell petrol. Because of the severity of the market disadvantages for people who live in the remote Highlands and on the islands, I wonder whether we should ask the Government to consider how such a bulk buying approach might be adopted. People out there are looking for something innovative but, at present, the Chancellor of the Exchequer is just saying, “Sorry. One size fits all.” We know that that does not wear well with people in the areas that I represent.

Whoever the chancellor is in London, and given the recent budget discussions there, it seems that there are no differences between the parties that vote on these matters in London, and that the issues are between people who come from Scotland, particularly the more remote parts, and those in large areas in the centre. We have only to look at the figures on people who vote on the issue when suggestions are made on mitigation of the problem to see that there is no difference.

We have to look at a different route to find some way to address the question of people being disadvantaged. The suggestion that I mentioned is one way, and there might be other ways, but I

wish that we could ask the Government to tell us whether councils could buy in bulk, and how the fuel could be distributed thereafter.

The Convener: I again point to the Scottish Government's response, which says that it would welcome suggestions from island communities on ways in which transportation costs could be mitigated and on whether the Scottish Government can help to facilitate that. That is a specific reference to the sort of arrangements that Rob Gibson describes. The issue is certainly on the Scottish Government's radar.

Charlie Gordon: From a strictly formal point of view, your interpretation is correct, convener. This is the third time that the petition has come to the committee. The strict wording of the petition asked us to

“urge the Scottish Government to make representations to the UK Government”.

The Scottish Government has done that. It is not good for the Parliament's reputation for us to have petitions that do the rounds repeatedly. However, that is not to downplay the significance of the issue. Leaving aside the fact that there is a United Kingdom election campaign on and that we will debate the wider issue in the Parliament this Thursday, courtesy of the Liberal Democrats, I have considerable sympathy with the view that we need to find a way within a devolved Scottish context, and perhaps other contexts, to address the problem. The high petrol and diesel prices are impacting adversely on communities, particularly island communities.

The recommendation in the paper gives us an opportunity to explore practical suggestions. We have just heard such a suggestion from Rob Gibson, with which I do not have a particular problem. Formally, the strict terms of the petition have been complied with. Are we going to say that the petition should come back to the committee for a fourth time? That is not a good way for the Parliament to operate. However, I do not run away from the issue. I am open to other suggestions alongside the one in the paper.

The Convener: The public petitions process is certainly important for putting issues on the Parliament's agenda. The issue is clearly on the Parliament's and the Government's agenda.

Charlie Gordon: It is on the public's agenda, too—members of the public are talking about the issue. I do not deny that.

Cathy Peattie: I agree with Charlie Gordon and I feel bad that the petition has gone round and round. It is bad for the Parliament when petitions go round the committees but get nowhere.

Hauliers from my constituency tell me that, when they travel north to deliver goods, whether

goods for the farming community or petrochemicals, the cost of doing so ends up being paid by the people in the islands and rural communities. There are issues about what travels north and what system could be put in place to support those communities, which carry the cost of things being delivered. Some lateral thinking makes sense. The petition has flagged up the issue, but it is not appropriate for it to go round and round while that lateral thinking takes place. The issue has been flagged up and the invitation has gone to the Government and local authorities to consider a way forward. That is probably the best that we can do. Otherwise, we are saying that we can do something that we cannot, and that is not fair.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am disappointed by the reliance on market forces in the response from the chancellor. We surely should have learned in the past couple of years that that might not be the way forward in certain circumstances. The issue that we are discussing is one such case. The two Governments have different policy agendas to follow on the issue. We could go round the houses demanding meetings, but the Governments would make exactly the same points. A better way forward is to take up the Scottish Government's offer to consider innovative ways of dealing with the issue. That might not technically be what the petition asks for, but we all know that the petitioner is calling for action on fuel prices. The Scottish Government is offering a way to do that.

Rather than have a stand-off between the two Governments, we are being offered a third way, whereby we can come to a solution that addresses the outcome that I think the petitioner wants. We need to take that up. I do not know how the petitioner will feel about that, but I think that she will appreciate that an alternative solution is being considered and that the matter is being kept on the agenda. If that means that we must keep the petition open, we should be open to doing so.

The Convener: I agree that we should encourage the Scottish Government, the petitioner and, potentially, the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, which might have more interest in the energy aspect, to consider the options that the Scottish Government and Rob Gibson have talked about. The question is simply whether the petition continues to appear on our agenda, given that there is little that this committee can do about it in practice, even though the Government can start to take forward some ideas.

We could consider the petition again and have the same discussion in six months' time, we could leave it as a legacy issue for our successor committee in the next session of the Parliament, or we could close the petition. None of those options

would prevent the Government from taking forward creative options, including bulk buying, if that proves possible, nor would it prevent the Parliament as a whole from expressing its view in Thursday's debate or subsequently. On that basis, does the committee agree to write to the petitioner and to close the petition?

Members: No.

Charlie Gordon: Sorry, convener. Were you making the recommendations that are set out in paragraph 12 of our paper?

The Convener: Yes.

Charlie Gordon: It did not sound like you were doing that, but if that is what you were doing, I support the approach.

The Convener: We do not seem to have agreement in the committee on what to do. Is there another proposal?

Rob Gibson: How can the committee, on the basis of the discussion that we have had, write to the Government to say that we are happy for it to continue with its approach, while sending the petition to another committee, as you seemed to imply that we might do? You suggested that the petition could be closed but that the issue could be kept going through the Government reporting to the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee—

Charlie Gordon: Like Rob Gibson, I did not agree with much of what the convener said, but I agree with the recommendations on the petition. I am not for kicking it for a shy to another committee. This is a transport matter, and the fact is that, for the foreseeable future, the motor car will be the main means of transport in many parts of rural Scotland. There are other transport-related issues, not least to do with the movement of goods. The recommendations in the paper are fine and accommodate the practical suggestion that Rob Gibson made.

The Convener: Okay. Rob Gibson seemed to be asking that we also write to the Scottish Government, to ask it actively to pursue the issue and to keep the committee informed. Is that sufficient?

Rob Gibson: I am asking that we do that. However, the real issue is whether we close the petition, as members suggested. Germane suggestions have emerged from the debate on the petition and I am sure that the petitioner would be happy for discussions to be kept in that context. If the Government comes back and says that there is nothing that it can do, we can close the petition then. I would rather keep it open at the moment. I support Alison McInnes's proposal that we do so.

The Convener: We seem to be split two ways on whether to keep the petition open. The text of

the petition is simply a call for us to urge the Scottish Government to speak to the UK Government about the matter. That has happened.

Alison McInnes: The issue is too important at the moment. It is high in people's minds. It is passing strange that we should close the petition when there are clearly some solutions that we want to work through and when we want to urge the Scottish Government to keep up its dialogue with the UK Government. We must keep the petition open.

15:30

The Convener: There is a difference between closing consideration of the issue and closing the petition.

Charlie Gordon: Correct—the petition is specifically worded and its requirement has been met.

The Convener: That seems to me to be the case, but that is not to say that the issue goes away—it will certainly remain on the Parliament's and the Government's agenda, as we have heard. We can write to the Government to urge it to continue to pursue it.

Alison McInnes: Should it not also stay on our agenda?

Cathy Peattie: It is on our agenda.

The Convener: The issue may well stay on our agenda if the Government informs us of progress, but the petition asks us to urge the Scottish Government to speak to the UK Government and that has been done.

Cathy Peattie: The issue does not go away. It is one that we must continue to look at, but I think that we have met the petitioner's expectation. I feel that it would just not be fair if we were to hang on to the petition for another six months or if we were to pass it on to the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee. We would be passing the ball around and people would watch and think, "What on earth is the Parliament doing?"

Charlie Gordon: The fact that the issue will undoubtedly be carried on with in the Scottish Parliament and in other forums, not least the Scottish Government, does not mean that the petition will have been unsuccessful if it is closed. It will mean that the petition has moved the issue on to a different arena.

The Convener: Absolutely. I would say that the petition has achieved its objective in getting the issue on to the agenda across the political perspective.

I have been passed a note by the clerk, but I am sorry—I cannot read it. [*Interruption.*] I again suggest that we write to the petitioner in the terms that are set out in the proposal in the paper and that we write to the Scottish Government to urge it to continue to pursue the alternative options that Rob Gibson and others have outlined, and to keep us informed of progress on that. I propose that we close the petition and recognise that the issue remains high on the agenda not just of this committee, but of the whole Parliament and the Scottish Government. Is that agreed?

Alison McInnes: Not by me. I am sorry, but I want to keep the petition open.

Rob Gibson: That is my position, too.

Cathy Peattie: I think that we should close it.

The Convener: Are there any other comments?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I agree that we should keep the petition open to ensure that the issue stays on our agenda. I do not think that it is satisfactory to say that it will be kept on the Parliament's agenda when we do not know what that work plan will be, or to say that it is somewhere in the public consciousness. I think that we need to ensure that it is part of our work plan, and that is best done by keeping the petition open.

The Convener: We seem to be split 50:50, which I guess means that the decision about what to do comes down to a casting vote. I do not think that the casting vote was necessarily designed to deal with decisions on whether to close petitions, but I am aware that the committee has already signed up to an extremely busy programme, which takes up its time not just this year but to the end of the parliamentary session. We will write to the Scottish Government to ask it to keep us informed of its progress on the alternative options. When it gets back to us, we can decide whether extra value would be added by having further committee consideration of that progress. I close the petition.

I also close the meeting, because we have reached the end of our agenda.

Meeting closed at 15:33.

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice at the Document Supply Centre.

Members who wish to suggest corrections for the archive edition should mark them clearly in the report or send it to the Official Report, Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh EH99 1SP.

PRICES AND SUBSCRIPTION RATES

OFFICIAL REPORT daily editions

Single copies: £5.00

Meetings of the Parliament annual subscriptions: £350.00

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS weekly compilation

Single copies: £3.75

Annual subscriptions: £150.00

Printed and published in Edinburgh by RR Donnelley and available from:

Scottish Parliament

All documents are available on the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.scottish.parliament.uk

For more information on the Parliament, or if you have an inquiry about information in languages other than English or in alternative formats (for example, Braille, large print or audio), please contact:

Public Information Service

The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh EH99 1SP

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Fòn: 0131 348 5395 (Gàidhlig)

Textphone users may contact us on **0800 092 7100**.

We also welcome calls using the Text Relay service.

Fax: 0131 348 5601

E-mail: sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk

We welcome written correspondence in any language.

Blackwell's Scottish Parliament Documentation

Helpline may be able to assist with additional information on publications of or about the Scottish Parliament, their availability and cost:

Telephone orders and inquiries

0131 622 8283 or

0131 622 8258

Fax orders

0131 557 8149

E-mail orders, subscriptions and standing orders
business.edinburgh@blackwell.co.uk

Blackwell's Bookshop

**53 South Bridge
Edinburgh EH1 1YS
0131 622 8222**

Blackwell's Bookshops:

243-244 High Holborn
London WC1 7DZ
Tel 020 7831 9501

All trade orders for Scottish Parliament documents should be placed through Blackwell's Edinburgh.

Accredited Agents

(see Yellow Pages)

and through other good booksellers