



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

ECONOMY, ENERGY AND TOURISM COMMITTEE

Wednesday 15 September 2010

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ECONOMY, ENERGY AND TOURISM COMMITTEE

24th Meeting 2010, Session 3

CONVENER

*Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab)

*Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con)

*Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

*Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)

*Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)

*Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP)

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Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP)

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)

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

David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)

*attended

LOCATION

Committee Room 5

Scottish Parliament

Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee

Wednesday 15 September 2010

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 09:34*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Iain Smith): I welcome you to the 24th meeting in 2010 of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee. We have had apologies from Chris Harvie, who is running a little late again this morning but should be here reasonably soon.

Agenda item 1 is to consider whether to take two items in private. The items are, first, an approach paper on our enterprise network inquiry and, secondly, our choice of budget adviser. Are members content to take those in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Protection of Workers (Scotland) Bill

09:35

The Convener: Item 2 is the Protection of Workers (Scotland) Bill. We have an approach paper and a private paper from the Scottish Parliament information centre, which indicates some of the issues that we may wish to cover in the evidence sessions. Are there any comments on the approach paper?

Stuart McMillan (West of Scotland) (SNP): It is very helpful.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): Broadly, I think that what it suggests is the right approach and that we should go forward on that basis.

The Convener: I understand that Hugh Henry, who is the member in charge of the bill, may have difficulty attending our meetings, because he has a committee that sometimes meets at the same time as we do, but he will attend as often as he can when we are taking evidence. His absence should not be taken as an indication of a lack of interest on his part; it is simply that he has important duties elsewhere.

Lewis Macdonald: Clearly, there is a particular issue in relation to the session at which he will give evidence.

The Convener: We will of course schedule that evidence session for a time when he is available.

An issue that arises partly from the Government's response is that there seems to be a lack of evidence on the deterrent impact of the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Act 2005. I do not know whether SPICe will be able to assist on that, but I would like the clerks to ask it whether it can. There is a lack of evidence on whether the 2005 act has resulted in a reduction in assaults on those covered by it. I wonder whether SPICe can find out whether there is any information about the number of assaults, as opposed to the number of prosecutions. That might indicate whether the act is having a deterrent effect, which seems to be one of the key issues with the bill. Do members agree that we should ask whether that information is available? It may not be, but if we do not ask, we do not get.

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Other than that, are we happy with the recommendations?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Specifically, I ask members to allocate to me the final decision on any changes to

the agreed witness list and the payment of associated witness expenses. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Is it also agreed that we will take consideration of any draft report in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you, colleagues.

Financial Services Inquiry (Update)

09:38

The Convener: Item 3 is an update paper on the banking and financial services inquiry outlining some of the recent developments. Are there any comments on it or any issues that we may wish to take up with any of the people with whom we have been in correspondence?

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): The green investment bank is mentioned on page 5 of the update paper. I have been in correspondence with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, John Swinney, who fully backs the idea of campaigning to have the green bank's headquarters in Scotland. I am awaiting further replies, but I have had an acknowledgement from the Treasury and a response from Michael Moore at a little more length.

I noticed in my mail today that the Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce is interested in having a meeting to discuss a campaign to bring the green investment bank to Edinburgh for Scotland's benefit. I urge members to consider, on a cross-party basis, getting behind that move, because there are opportunities for us to lobby various cabinet ministers and to get business backing for it, as businesses would see the sense in having a green investment bank here, given the level of investments that are taking place or are being planned. I hope that the committee can take this forward together.

Lewis Macdonald: Do we have any information on the decision-making process that will apply?

Rob Gibson: I do not have any.

The Convener: We do not at present, but we can certainly check that out.

Lewis Macdonald: It might be worth getting that.

The Convener: We might be able to raise the issue with Chris Huhne when he comes before the committee in a few weeks, and in our informal meeting with Vince Cable. They both have an interest in the green investment bank, so the committee might be able to lobby on that directly.

Do members agree that the committee should support efforts to locate the green investment bank in Scotland?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Do members wish to raise any other issues?

Lewis Macdonald: Can I confirm that you just said that the meeting with Vince Cable is not a formal meeting?

The Convener: Unfortunately, he is available only between 2 and 3 on the Thursday of the week in which the committee will meet Chris Huhne on the Tuesday. That clashes with a meeting of the Parliament, so it is not possible to have a formal committee meeting. It will be an informal meeting.

Lewis Macdonald: Understood. Will the discussion that we have with Vince Cable be recorded?

The Convener: The detailed arrangements have not yet been agreed with his office but, once they are, we will let you know.

Lewis Macdonald: It would be helpful to know that in advance, because the nature of the discussion will be rather different if it is on rather than off the record.

The Convener: Yes. I hope to meet Dr Cable on Saturday during the Liberal Democrat party conference to discuss some of the issues that the committee might wish to discuss with him.

Lewis Macdonald: So you will informally represent the committee at the party conference.

The Convener: I will.

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): I apologise for being a couple of minutes late, convener.

The banking inquiry update is helpful. There are various things that I hope we can do to follow up. First, it would be good to have a meeting with Sir John Vickers.

Secondly, page 3 of the update paper lays out some proposals on small business finance. The final bullet point cites four schemes. I ask the clerks to provide a brief note on whether those are reserved or devolved. I for one do not have a clue on that, so that would be helpful.

Thirdly, page 4 has a bullet point on "the OFT's current review of barriers to entry".

I presume that we will submit evidence to that based on what we said in our committee report. That would be useful, given how much of an issue we made of that in our report.

My fourth point might cover something that the committee has just discussed. We had an update on the green investment bank on 29 June, but there have been developments since then. As Chris Huhne is coming to speak to us, it would be useful to have a brief note on that—just a page or so—in advance of the Huhne meeting. Was that what you were talking about as I came in?

The Convener: Yes, that has already been asked for.

Ms Alexander: Sorry.

My next point is on job losses. I was going to ask SPICe to provide a table of job losses and job creations, but it would be better if the committee requested that. My rough tally is that 3,500 jobs have gone in financial services recently and about 1,000 or so have been created. A table on job losses and creations would be helpful for the forthcoming meeting with Vince Cable.

In our letter to John Swinney, we requested the Government's

"quantitative and qualitative analysis of the extent to which competition has increased",

or decreased, in the three principal markets of personal accounts, mortgages and small business banking. However, we did not get that in the response. It would be useful to have whatever current data are available in advance of the meeting with Vince Cable. The Office of Fair Trading is offloading the problem on to the independent commission on banking. We would want to make the point that, particularly in small business banking, we have greater, rather than less, concentration and there is no evidence that any of the new entrants is changing that. It is reasonable to ask the Government to itemise what it understands to be the current level of concentration.

My final point is about our letter back to the OFT. The OFT referred to its review on barriers to entry into retail banking. Could we write another letter to ask it to clarify for us what it is doing on small business banking competition, which seems to be totally different and separate? I thought that the update was very helpful. We should keep a watching brief on all this for the remainder of the session.

09:45

The Convener: Are there any other points? Are members content to do what Wendy Alexander suggested?

Lewis Macdonald: I am sure that we would all agree that it would be nice to see the green investment bank come to Scotland. However, I am keen that we find out the process before we make a formal submission of any kind. Otherwise, we could end up putting the cart before the horse.

The Convener: Indeed. Do members agree that we should keep a watching brief on the banking inquiry and to leave it to the clerks and me to decide when it is appropriate to bring forward other reports?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Secondly and more specifically, do members agree in principle that we should make a submission to the independent commission on banking, on the basis of our inquiry report?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Obviously, we would bring any submission to the committee for approval before we submitted it.

Do members think that we should draft a submission on the green paper on business finance, for which the closing date is 20 September? We would have to clear the submission by correspondence.

Lewis Macdonald: I am not sure that we should respond as a committee to each and every consultation in this area. I accept that we have an interest in them all and we should certainly keep a watching brief, but, given that there are tight deadlines, and complex issues are involved, I would be inclined to say that we should see what the consultation produces and then see whether we want to respond.

Ms Alexander: If we were to make a submission, it would simply be to say how significant an issue this is. The meaningful point to establish is whether the four remedies that are proposed are United Kingdom-wide or specific to England and Wales.

The Convener: We will certainly do that. We will come back to that issue once the consultation has been completed and responses have been evaluated. Likewise, do members agree that we should keep a watching brief on the consultation on the proposed banking levy, rather than make a response?

Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con): Yes, because we did not look at that specifically.

The Convener: Further to Wendy Alexander's point regarding jobs, as well as asking SPICe for its take on it, we should write to the financial services jobs task force to ask what it thinks the current situation is with net job numbers and gains and losses. We get the headline figures, but I suspect that what is happening on the ground might be slightly different. We do not know about little job losses caused by jobs not being refilled when they become vacant and so on. It might be worth getting an update from the task force about what the situation is and what it is doing.

Christopher Harvie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I am sorry that I am late; I did phone in.

The Convener: That was recorded.

Christopher Harvie: As I looked through the various submissions on employment, what struck me was a statement towards the end of the

Government's submission about increasing enforcement through the amalgamation of the Serious Fraud Office with the various other bodies that deal with financial criminality. I believe that that is also a means of rationalising those none-too-efficient institutions, which are losing a lot of jobs.

Some of you might have looked at the Financial Services Authority's report on the Royal Bank of Scotland's compliance with computerised supervision of its transactions. It was discovered that, although it handles trillions of dollars practically every week, the Royal Bank did nothing to install the firewalls that it had been told to install until Mr Hester took over. That does not seem to be a very good argument for diminishing the number of supervisory people even more. What the Royal Bank was up to would, in America, have resulted in its board being seen in manacles. A little of that robust attitude to malefactors of great wealth would be no bad thing here.

Ms Alexander: Where was that? I missed it. What was the report that highlighted that?

Christopher Harvie: I am surprised that you missed it, Wendy. It was the FSA report on compliance with computerised supervision by the Royal Bank, which it had failed to do for about 18 months, admittedly largely under the regime of Sir Fred Goodwin. It was done under Hester, but that was 18 months after it should have been done.

Ms Alexander: That report was published in the summer.

Christopher Harvie: Yes.

Ms Alexander: Was there an associated fine?

Christopher Harvie: There was a fine of about £5 million but, compared with the amount of money that was going through the Royal Bank's accounts—the procedure was introduced because money could have been going to terrorists—and the profits that the bank made, the fine was infinitesimal.

The Convener: I ask Christopher Harvie to provide a link to that document to other members of the committee, for their interest. I also remind members that they are not meant to have conversations with each other during the meeting.

Energy Inquiry (Update)

09:51

The Convener: We requested an update from the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism on some of the outstanding issues from the energy inquiry—not all the issues, but some of them. His response has been circulated to members for information and comment. I remind members that the committee's letter was sent on 27 July, so things might have moved on slightly in some areas since then.

I will make a couple of comments before I open it to others. First, the response that publication of the energy efficiency action plan has been

“delayed until a new Order on Annual Climate Change Targets can be laid before Parliament”

is incredible—I mean that in the literal sense. The energy efficiency action plan is meant to have been published well over a year ago. To blame the fact that it has not been published yet on the fact that the Parliament rejected the climate change target order is not acceptable. I think that the committee should write to the Government again and ask it to get a move on with something that our inquiry report said needed to be published urgently.

Secondly, I have similar views on the fact that the Government has still not got round to publishing even the draft orders for the extension of permitted development rights to micro wind turbines and air-source heat pumps. That seems to be dragging on for ever. Again, we asked a year ago for that to be done imminently, but we still do not have a date for publication of a new order. I think that we should write to the Government to say that the committee's view is that the matter should be dealt with immediately and not delayed further.

Rob Gibson: When the order is published, there may well be elements of the targets that impinge on that energy efficiency action plan. It would be worth while for the clerks to look out for the detail of that so that we are focusing any remarks that we make about the publication of the action plan as a whole. As the targets involve housing, transport and other things, we might well find that there are some elements in there.

I have a point on community benefit issues, but if we want to deal with that separately, I will wait and say something about it in a moment.

The Convener: Does anyone else wish to comment on the energy efficiency action plan?

Lewis Macdonald: I support your recommendation, convener. It is the most inefficient and inactive action plan that I have ever

encountered from any Government. It is astonishing that we are now being told that it was prepared and ready for publication—it was on the stocks ready to go—and yet for some reason, in spite of the urgings of the committee and many others, the Government failed to do the simple thing and publish it. We all understand that, the moment a Government plan is published, the need for review and updating begins. The point is to publish, but the Government has failed to do that in spite of the fact that the plan is a long-standing commitment. We should pursue that. I also agree with what you said about permitted development rights.

The issue of transmission charges is referred to in the main response and in Jim Mather's letter of 9 September. It is positive that the Department of Energy and Climate Change has made its announcement, which responds to the cross-party position that the Scottish Parliament adopted when the issue was last debated. The review will go beyond the issue of locational charges, which Mr Mather's letter highlights; if I have understood the annual energy statement correctly, it will cover the whole range of transmission issues. It is important that the impact on Scottish consumers of any changes to price is taken into account fully. I look forward to receiving further information about the review in due course.

The Convener: Last week, I had a meeting with the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, at which it indicated a willingness both to provide a briefing to the committee and to appear before us, if we wish, to discuss the transmission charges review when it is published in October. Ofgem is happy to engage with the committee on the matter. If members are agreed, we can make arrangements for that to happen. We can decide nearer the time whether Ofgem should engage with us through an informal briefing or in a more formal way.

Gavin Brown: Could we ask the minister to consider publishing immediately the energy efficiency action plan that was drafted and ready, with an accompanying letter saying that it may change—perhaps not much, but perhaps significantly—after the new order on annual climate change targets has been laid? That seems perfectly reasonable.

The Convener: That seems to be a reasonable way forward. The plan should try to achieve the best energy efficiency that we can manage and should exceed the targets in any formal order. I would be disappointed if the plan on which the Government has been working for seven years is such that it requires to be strengthened as a result of any order that is laid before the Parliament at this stage. That is not a credible position. If the Government is planning to weaken the plan

because of any order, that is even worse. Gavin Brown makes a valid and fair point.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I would like to get further information on skills and training. We were concerned about the clutter that we found—who was doing what—skills shortages and a number of other issues. I am pleased that the forum for renewable energy development in Scotland skills group has been established, but I am a bit confused about how everything is linked together. We have been told that the Parliament will be updated on the Government's skills strategy

“early in the new session”.

I presume that that will inform how everything takes place.

The response states that a link has been established between FREDs, OPITO and the national skills academy for power, but it is still unclear to me how the process will unfold. It will be worth while, especially once the Government has delivered the new skills strategy, to see how the new skills will be developed. We welcome the establishment of the FREDs skill group, but how does it fit into the skills strategy and how will delivery take place? The response does not tell us that. Once the skills strategy has been presented to the Parliament, we need to look at it and to ask some questions.

The Convener: We may wish to highlight concerns specifically about modern apprenticeships with Siemens, on wind turbines, at Carnegie College. We could seek clarification from the minister on how the matter is being resolved. There is a great opportunity for Scotland to become a centre of excellence for that sort of training, but it looks like we may be conspiring to let that opportunity slip through our hands.

Marilyn Livingstone: You are right. The question is how everything will join up. At the moment, it does not seem that it will. I would like to get some more reassurances.

Ms Alexander: I raise the issue of community benefit, which has two dimensions: onshore wind and offshore wind. The issue merits some attention from us.

On onshore wind, the response from Jim Mather states that section 75 agreements cannot be used; that the programmes are happening in some places but the Government does not collect data on those; that, given the outcome of the independent budget review, the Government will not collect any information in that regard; and that some communities are doing well out of the programme but the Government does not know where those communities are.

10:00

On offshore wind, the programme for government stated a desire to get into dialogue—I will put it no stronger than that—with the Crown Estate, although I note that the Crown Estate's letter to the committee on community benefit is pretty weasel-worded. I also note that the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment, Richard Lochhead, engaged in discussion in Inverness this week on whether community benefit in an offshore context should be assessed on a Scotland-wide basis or community by community. I am very interested in hearing the deputy convener's views on the matter.

We need to ensure that we get our act together fruitfully onshore and not just offshore, and that with regard to offshore wind, we have some input into what is generally quite a problematic discussion about local versus national. We could usefully make a little progress in that area by keeping a watching brief during the next nine months, but I defer to the deputy convener's greater knowledge on such matters. I was worried from reading Jim Mather's response that, although we broadly support the Government's approach on offshore wind, we have not fully grasped the nettle with onshore wind.

Rob Gibson: The idea of using Forestry Commission land to develop renewable energy by leasing it to people and providing a higher level of community benefit than is often achieved under section 75 agreements at present is a good move.

I also welcome the idea of Scottish Water, as the biggest electricity user in Scotland, creating a lot more of its own energy. There is potential for it to get close to providing all its own energy, which would be a terrific achievement in terms of the cost to the taxpayer.

In that context, we should expect each community—in the Highlands and Islands, for example—to continue to discuss the community benefits. However, Highland Council told the cabinet secretary yesterday that it did not want a Scotland-level levy on the Crown Estate. At the same time, the council wants to centralise the collection of part of the community benefit from the schemes in its area, which makes the situation rather complicated.

The Crown Estate's collection of money from offshore expenditure is supercentralised at present, and any move to decentralise it to Scotland would be a step forward. How the money should be divvied up so that local communities benefit from it is another debate, but one that must take place.

Tackling the Crown Estate is quite different from dealing with individual wind farm developments onshore; we would probably need a legal change

in Scotland. The committee would, I hope, want some input to ensure that when we decide to move in that direction, if the Parliament believes that we should, the orders that are set up provide for local communities to benefit.

It is an on-going debate, but I am concerned that Highland Council might be following the very bad example of South Lanarkshire Council in centralising and spreading out the community benefit away from the areas that are directly affected. There is a debate in that regard about what communities are, and how we should advise people and tool them up so that they can deal with wind farm companies. That is partly dealt with in the Government's response, which states:

"As part of that drive, we announced plans for a feasibility study for a loan fund to ... de-risk"

the early stages of getting involved.

This is a complex area, as all those different layers are involved. We should try to get a specific report from the clerks and discuss in more detail how we should tackle each of the various aspects.

The Convener: I was about to suggest that the area is probably worth a discussion on its own merits at some future date. The clerks and I can consider how best we can facilitate that. We may want to raise the issue of offshore wind and the Crown Estate with Chris Huhne when he is here.

Christopher Harvie: About three weeks ago, I visited the headquarters of Voith Hydro, in Germany. It is one of the major water turbine producers in the world. I was told that its pumped storage turbines are now 90 per cent efficient. I had always assumed that pumped storage was about 57 per cent efficient and not a particularly good method of storing power, but Voith reckons that pumped storage that is 90 per cent efficient is the equivalent of an electric battery that can be fed by regular supplies of wind and tidal power, and that power will be on tap. That strengthens the whole argument for integrating Scottish Water and the hydro board schemes. I think that there is only one major pumped storage scheme in the hydro board, which is Cruachan—Foyers is small. Loch Sloy was also a possibility at one stage. If many of the hydro schemes were converted to pumped storage, that would be enormously important to Scotland's presence in renewables.

That returns us to a point that Rob Gibson raised. In steering this, is it not advisable to focus on where capital requires to be input, from a Scottish point of view, to build up that type of infrastructure? That will be expensive at the time, but any betterment is probably best handled by some Scottish equivalent of Statoil for renewables.

Lewis Macdonald: I have a couple of issues on planning consents on which it may be worth

asking the Scottish Government for a further update. First, in its response to the committee, the Government notes that the number of renewable energy applications that it has refused is small relative to the number that it has approved. However, it has omitted to address the critical point that we raised at the time of the inquiry—the scale of the projects that have been refused. It would be useful to get an update on the megawatt potential from renewable energy of the projects that have been refused and the megawatt potential from renewable energy of the projects that have received consent.

Secondly, one of the things that Jim Mather brought to the committee and made much of during the inquiry was his commitment in December 2007 to determine within nine months any new application for a renewable energy project that did not require a public local inquiry. It would be helpful to hear from the minister about the outcome of that commitment. The commitment was made nearly three years ago, and it should be possible to judge what has been achieved on the basis of Government information. If he is able to provide that to the committee, that will be very useful.

Ms Alexander: I am keen for us not to lose the onshore wind element when we come back to this. The committee will remember that the driver for this was the fact that 50 per cent of local planning inquiries resulted in wind farm applications being turned down, which has undoubtedly had a deleterious effect on the development of the infrastructure for onshore wind in this country. With respect, the loan fund that the Government has proposed in order to de-risk the early stages of the development of renewables projects does not address that issue of local communities simply not seeing it as being in their interest to consent. No intervention that the Government or we have made or urged has dealt with that problem of 50 per cent of local inquiries saying no. Perhaps the clerks can look at that issue in addressing the various dimensions of community benefit.

I am happy to have a battle about offshore wind, but I think that another pressing question is why with regard to onshore wind development the industry has not taken root in supply-side infrastructure as we might have wished. The fact is that we have no mechanism to compel local communities to agree and, indeed, have not sought any. Half of the communities said no to these applications, but we heard evidence suggesting that, in any case, these should be national infrastructure developments. We did not go down that particular route, but now the Government is saying that it has no data on whether creating such incentives has any community benefit even though the committee's general thrust was that the introduction of an

incentive mechanism and the spreading of good practice might, one would hope, reduce that 50 per cent rejection rate. The slight danger is that we simply say, "Let's worry about what we're doing about Forestry Commission land or what's happening offshore," and do not address what I think has been the failure of the past four years.

I do not mean that to be an intensely partisan comment; I am simply saying that this is a really difficult political issue that will require a little bit of cross-party work. It is evident that the minister himself is personally committed, but all this response says is, "There's nothing I can do about this issue, guys, and we're not collecting the data." It would be a pity if the issue were left unaddressed over the next four years, when we can put some positive suggestions into the process now. I accept Rob Gibson's point about the difficulties of incentivising a process carried out by a local planning committee, given that such a body is distinct from the community. Nevertheless, we might be able to make some suggestions if we held a round table or something.

Rob Gibson: I agree that the issue needs to be looked at. The Government has taken a particular view, but we could trawl local members for recent examples of areas that have rejected particular applications. With regard to two recent applications, one near Dava moor and the other near Inverness, I felt that the line being taken by the protesters and what was written on their placards—that tourism would be affected and that most of the money would go to the few and none to the rest—were unrelated to reality. Communities need the tools to be able to see the potential benefits of such schemes and to learn from other areas that have given consent to these applications. When you look at the map, it is obvious that the attitude that I have just highlighted is much more prevalent in particular parts of the country.

Ms Alexander: Perth and Kinross.

Rob Gibson: Indeed.

Ms Alexander: Which is not in Highland region. I think that it would be helpful if we had a brief attempt at finding something to say about this on a cross-party basis.

Rob Gibson: Agreed. That is why I was hoping that we might be able to collect information from around the country. Perhaps a trawl of local planning committees would be the easiest way of seeing where such applications have been made.

The Convener: There are two avenues that we could go down. First—and more obvious—we can ask local planning authorities and, secondly, we can ask the industry itself through its representative organisations to provide data on what is happening. We will ask SPICe to look into

the matter and then bring forward a proposal for a one-day mini-inquiry to be held when we have some space in our diary.

With regard to transmission charging, I assume that the committee will wish to make a formal submission on the issue, but we will wait until we have more details from Ofgem on its proposals for consultation.

Do members have any other comments?

Gavin Brown: On the Beaulieu to Denny line, I guess that the timetable set out in the Government's response might well have been prepared soon after your initial letter was received in July. For example, it says in the response:

"SSE are hopeful that they will be in a position to begin works on the ground towards the end of August."

Did that happen? It goes on to say:

"However, there remain a number of conditions whose terms must be met before any work can commence 'on-the-ground'."

I do not find the answer all that satisfactory. All it says is that hopefully something might happen by the end of August, but no one is sure. Without getting into a continual back-and-forth on this, I wonder whether we can get a better or more concrete answer about the timetable?

The Convener: We will have to go back and ask the Government.

If members have no other comments, I will conclude the public part of the meeting. Next week we hope to take evidence from witnesses for our enterprise network inquiry and for our consideration of the Protection of Workers (Scotland) Bill, but I should say that I will be absent next week as I will be in Liverpool for our party conference. Members will have the more efficient delights of Rob Gibson in the chair.

10:15

Meeting continued in private until 11:34.

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