



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Friday 29 October 2010

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

16th Meeting 2010, Session 3

CONVENER

*Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)

*Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP)

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)

*Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP)

*Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)

*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Nicol Stephen (Aberdeen South) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Malcolm Andrews (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Fiona Beaton (Scottish Youth Parliament)

John Beaton (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Liam Beattie (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Kelly-Ann Burns (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Grant Costello (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Derek Couper (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Rebecca Cox (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Marc Dickson (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Graham Dow (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Alan Drew (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Angus Duncan (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Laura Gorman (Scottish Youth Parliament)

David Leitch (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Megan Lukins (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Nicole Mouat (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Jamie O'Neill (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Danielle Rowley (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Jeanna Sally (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Emily Shaw (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Austin Sheridan (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Barry Thomson (Scottish Youth Parliament)

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Rowena Carlton (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Andrew Deans (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Jennifer Kerr (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Jodie McCoy (Scottish Youth Parliament)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Fergus Cochrane

LOCATION

The Chamber

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Friday 29 October 2010

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:36*]

New Petitions

The Convener (Rhona Brankin): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 16th meeting in 2010 of the Public Petitions Committee. I begin by inviting Derek Couper, member and chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament, to say a few words.

Derek Couper (Scottish Youth Parliament): Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, good morning and welcome to the 43rd sitting of the Scottish Youth Parliament, right here in the very centre of Scottish democracy, our national Parliament.

As I am sure that many of us will be aware, today young people will occupy the Scottish Parliament and the chamber of the House of Commons. This is a proud and significant moment for young people of all ages from all over our country.

Our sitting here in the Parliament also represents a huge opportunity for the decision makers of Scotland to be challenged, to debate and to involve our generation in some of the most difficult decisions facing our country in living memory.

We know and we show the value of young people being involved in democracy and the huge impact that our generation can have in shaping futures and changing lives. This weekend, we will debate and we will campaign and petition for the improvement of opportunities and services for the young people of Scotland. Our debates, our motions and our petitions are just some of the ways in which members of the Youth Parliament campaign for a better Scotland for our young people. Every day in communities from Lerwick to Hawick, MSYPs take part in local decision making and create a real way of young people being involved from a grass-roots level.

Today is significant in more ways than one, but especially as we will all be participants in the first ever session of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee to be held in this chamber. In March, the clerk to the committee, Fergus Cochrane, chaired four members' motions at our national sitting in Coatbridge, two of which will be submitted to the committee as official petitions today.

Andrew Deans MSYP will petition for the banning of Mosquito devices and Rowena Carlton MSYP will petition for political education to be provided to all young people in Scottish schools. Break-out details for the afternoon sessions are detailed on our badges, and members are encouraged to sign the picture the change installation that will be set up at break time and lunch time.

For now, I will hand over to Rhona Brankin MSP, the chair of the Public Petitions Committee, and wish Andrew Deans and Rowena Carlton the very best of luck.

The Convener: On behalf of all members of the committee, I welcome you along to this morning's special meeting, which is the first time that a committee of the Scottish Parliament has held a meeting in the debating chamber, so we are all privileged to be here.

We are keen to take the opportunity, through your conference, to take forward another of the commitments that we made in last year's report on our year-long inquiry into the public petitions process, which committed us to holding a young petitioners meeting. As well as being the first meeting of any committee in the chamber, this is the first time that the Public Petitions Committee has held a dedicated meeting at which it will consider only petitions that young people have submitted on issues that are important to them—to you.

Let us get started. We have three petitions before us—one from Andrew Deans MSYP, one from Rowena Carlton MSYP and one from Jodie McCoy of the South Ayrshire youth forum. The South Ayrshire petition came from a groundbreaking initiative to give a voice to people who are typically underrepresented in political life. That project has been developed by our education and community partnerships team, and it works with disability rights organisations, difficult-to-reach young people and people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds to help them to get involved with and influence the Parliament's activities.

The project's aim is to build confidence in external organisations by strengthening their understanding and awareness of the Parliament, its role and its processes; enhancing their ability to take positive action through parliamentary processes; and facilitating meaningful engagement by each partner organisation in the parliamentary process. It is important that the project is driven by the partner organisations, which bring their energy, vision and commitment and which ensure that their campaign and awareness needs are considered in the parliamentary engagement process. The fact that Jodie McCoy and Jennifer Kerr are sitting here

today demonstrates the Parliament's commitment to those aims.

I know that a lot of discussion and voting has taken place among MSYPs and young people across Scotland in producing the two petitions from the SYP. The process shows that the topics have emerged as grass-roots issues that are important to you.

We are keen to hear the views not just of the petitioners, who will speak, but of all of you who are here. We will therefore open up the floor to comment on each petition. This is groundbreaking stuff.

We move to the meeting's main purpose, which is consideration of the three petitions. I ask everyone to ensure that all mobile phones and other electronic devices are switched off—*[Interruption.]* I do not know whether the feedback is caused by my mobile phone—I do not know what is causing it; it might be from headphones.

We have had apologies from committee members Bill Butler and Cathie Craigie. Other than that, I think that we are all here. Our names are on signs in front of us, but it would be useful if each committee member gave their name and the part of Scotland that they represent.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP): My name is Anne McLaughlin. I am a Scottish National Party MSP for the city of Glasgow, which we must technically call a region.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I am Nanette Milne. I am a Conservative member for North East Scotland.

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): Good morning. I am John Farquhar Munro. I am the Liberal Democrat member for Ross, Skye and Inverness West.

The Convener: My name is Rhona Brankin. I am the Labour Party member for Midlothian.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I am John Wilson. I am a Scottish National Party member for Central Scotland.

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP): My name is Nigel Don and I am an SNP member for the region of North East Scotland.

Mosquito Devices (PE1367)

The Convener: Our first petition is PE1367, by Andrew Deans MSYP, on behalf of the Scottish Youth Parliament. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ban the use of the Mosquito and other such devices that emit a loud, unpleasant and high-pitched noise that is designed to be heard only by those who are under 25.

Andrew, you have three minutes in which to make an opening statement.

Andrew Deans (Scottish Youth Parliament): The principles of justice uphold that it is wrong to punish people for actions that they have not committed. They also uphold that it is wrong to punish people when they have engaged only in legal activities that are harmless, for they have done nothing wrong. It is astonishing that the Mosquito device combines those two points and collectively punishes all young people—including babies, young children and autistic youngsters—for the actions of a minority that are often legal, such as simply standing in a group.

Private individuals throughout Scotland are given the power to annoy and distress young people any time and anywhere that they want to, with no consequences. That is a horrendous fact of which we should be ashamed.

10:45

The Mosquito represents a certain approach to young people—an approach that says that the answer to behaviour that we find unacceptable is to shift it somewhere else so that it does not bother us. Furthermore, the only way to achieve that is to attack and offend young people until they move on. That serves only to alienate us, especially when local authorities themselves are using this device and that approach.

The way to tackle youth disorder when it occurs is through positive solutions in which the police, young people and any other parties involved—whether shopkeepers who are using the Mosquito or anyone else—work together to find solutions.

Our right to freedom of movement and peaceful assembly is destroyed by the Mosquito. We are left feeling like disfranchised, second-class citizens whose rights are not being upheld by those who are supposed to uphold them.

The Council of Europe has identified that these devices might well infringe our human rights. I would like to think that our Government takes human rights extremely seriously and that it would recognise that, if there is serious doubt about whether a product complies with human rights legislation, that product should not be legal.

Let us imagine for a second the reaction if a similar device were made that could be heard only by black people or women. There would be outrage. Would any Government ever allow it? Absolutely not. Why are young people the only group in society who are not covered by that reaction? Why is it okay to discriminate against young people? It is not okay; it is indefensible. That is why the Scottish Youth Parliament is here today to say that firm action needs to be taken. It

is simply not enough to pass the buck to local authorities.

Perhaps the reason why young people are susceptible to discrimination is that we cannot speak up as easily. For one thing, the majority of under-25s do not have the vote. I am here today and, by extension, my colleagues in the Scottish Youth Parliament are here today to be the voice of the young people of Scotland. That has been confirmed by “picture the change” and I am able to reveal that, of the young people consulted in our nationwide manifesto campaign, more than two thirds support a ban on the Mosquito.

Scotland's young people have spoken. The call is clear: enough is enough. It is time for the Scottish Government to clarify and justify its current stance and, more important, reaffirm that there is no place for discrimination and no place for the Mosquito in Scotland. I hope that you urge it to do so. Thank you very much.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Andrew. We will go to questions from the committee.

Anne McLaughlin: Thank you for that eloquent speech. I am very jealous, because I never stand up to make a speech without notes in front of me, so well done.

I want to ask you about the survey that you carried out among young people. Did you say how many young people you had surveyed?

Andrew Deans: No MSYPs know that. It will be revealed tomorrow.

Anne McLaughlin: Okay. You said that two thirds support a ban on the use of Mosquito devices. I am quite surprised by that. I would have thought that the figure would be much higher. Was any additional research done? Were any comments taken? Are you aware of the arguments that young people in particular might make in support of retaining Mosquito devices?

Andrew Deans: Of those who did not agree with a ban, almost half said that they did not know or were not sure. I think that that would mainly be people who probably know what the Mosquito device is but do not know that that is what it is called. For those who are against a ban, on the face of it the Mosquito seems like quite a clever device—a clever use of scientific knowledge. Perhaps when they delve a bit deeper into the implications for discrimination and equality and who it affects—many people forget that it affects young children and babies, who obviously have done nothing wrong and are completely innocent—more young people would support a ban. We saw that when we had the debate in the Scottish Youth Parliament and 88 per cent of MSYPs supported the call to ban the Mosquito.

Anne McLaughlin: The argument that you made that people would be outraged about a device that targeted black people or women is valid. I completely support what you are calling for. Some people might think that the language in the petition, in which you say that the use of the Mosquito could be construed as an assault on someone, is too strong. I do not think that that is too strong. I think that it is an outrage that it is possible to do that.

I would not support the use of the devices even if they could target individuals. At any rate, they demonise young people, as you have rightly said. If we accept that they may be used, we are accepting that all people under 25 have done something that merits that. It affects babies and young children, too. It affects people of your age, up to 25, who have done absolutely nothing wrong. I am glad that you submitted the petition, and I look forward to hearing what my colleagues have to say.

Nanette Milne: Andrew, I very much appreciated your comments at the start.

I did not have much knowledge about the Mosquito device until you raised the matter. How prevalent is its use in Scotland and in the other places, here and internationally, where it is used?

Andrew Deans: It is very difficult to tell, for the simple reason that anyone can buy and use them. Anyone can put one on their house and cause annoyance to anyone who walks past.

There are local authorities down in England that have used it, and some of them have found it to be successful. It is used internationally, in various European countries. I stress, however, that it is very difficult to tell how many there are. A majority of young people have come across one at some point, which indicates that there are a lot of them about.

Nanette Milne: Do you have any knowledge of what the police's reaction to them is?

Andrew Deans: I am not that sure. The Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland has been split on the matter. Some of the police think that it is quite useful, whereas some of them see it the way I do: even if it is effective, the end does not justify the means. The response varies quite a bit, anyway.

Nanette Milne: I can see how, superficially, the devices offer an attractive means of getting public order among young people, but I fully share your concerns, particularly about people who are not in a position to do anything wrong or to defend themselves. I am thinking of autistic people and very young children in particular.

I accept that, although a group of young people congregating in an area can be intimidating, that

does not necessarily mean that they are up to no good as far as the law is concerned. I share your concerns.

John Farquhar Munro: Good morning, Andrew, and welcome to the Scottish Parliament. You have started off very well. I have a lot of sympathy with the petition that you are presenting. What has the response been from the local authorities that you have made contact with regarding the possibility of removing or curtailing the use of the devices? Have you had any definite response?

Andrew Deans: I believe—and my support worker is nodding—that, since I started this campaign, Aberdeenshire Council has taken all its Mosquito devices down and locked them away in a cupboard somewhere. When the arguments are presented to local authorities and young people speak out to say that they are not happy about being discriminated against, the authorities listen, although some of them are sticking to their guns and saying that they want these devices.

John Farquhar Munro: You made the point that the device attacks everybody who comes within its range. It must be very distressing for younger children who come to an area with their parents to go shopping, for instance. I read that many parents who do not hear the sound that is emitted are very concerned by the agitation that is demonstrated by the child, apparently for no good reason. That must be a problem that needs serious consideration.

Andrew Deans: Absolutely. That is one of the worst aspects of the devices. There are a lot of bad things about Mosquito devices, but when young children or babies who are not yet able to communicate come within the range of a Mosquito and get distressed because of them, their parents, who cannot hear the sound, are none the wiser as to the attack that their children are coming under.

John Wilson: Good morning. The petition raises the issue of young people gathering in certain areas in certain communities. Many people in society have a perception that anybody under 25 who gathers in an area is out to cause some kind of trouble. The Mosquito device is described as an anti-vandalism device, but the reality is that it is about how people perceive young people.

You made an analogy with black people or ethnic minorities. Another analogy would be if we introduced a device that kept senior citizens from gathering in particular areas, or other minority groups. There is still a perception that all young people are out to cause trouble. It is important to change that attitude, and perhaps doing that is one way in which we can stop individuals using devices such as the Mosquito.

Andrew, are there any other reasons why young people feel it necessary to congregate in particular areas? There might be other, wider reasons why young people feel that it is necessary to come together in particular locations.

Andrew Deans: One thing that has been suggested to me is that it is often about hanging around shops. That is an interesting issue now that we are getting into the winter, because there is more light around shops. They are also an easy place for everyone to meet.

At the end of the day, it should not matter where young people are as long as they are not causing a problem—as long as they are not doing anything that is against the law and as long as they are not out to harm other people. They meet in certain places either because of what has been done locally in the past or for more practical reasons to do with shops, such as lighting and heat. However, I do not think that it matters whether they meet in those areas or down the road. All that the Mosquito device seeks to do is to move them somewhere else.

John Wilson: Thank you.

Nigel Don: It is good to see you all here this morning. I must admit that I am very uncomfortable sitting out here in the well of the chamber. We never usually walk across this area and I have always thought that there might be a pool and sharks underneath it.

The Convener: There are.

Nigel Don: I am waiting for the ground to open and swallow us up.

John Wilson: Crocodiles.

Nigel Don: Oh, you have seen them. *[Laughter.]*

Thank you, Andrew. This is a hugely important issue. I am reflecting on the fact that, although it has been around for a while, nobody has done anything about it, and I am asking myself why. I do not have any specific questions on the issue because my colleagues have already teased out the few that were necessary, and also because you gave an extremely good presentation and have provided an extremely good document, so thank you for those.

I am conscious that it takes a while for us to get anything done. That is my experience of working on the Public Petitions Committee. We cannot just click our fingers and expect something to happen, although I have no doubt that we will want to write to the Government and various other people because I believe that the device is wholly unacceptable and I think that my colleagues and indeed everybody in the chamber would agree. I just wonder whether there might be another way

forward. You have addressed your local council, and I am delighted to see that Aberdeenshire Council has responded. It seems to me that every other MSYP could address their local council and do precisely the same thing. Why not?

I also wonder whether you could take action in another way. It is a very long time since I had a baby in a pram, but if you could find a parent in that position who would go to the police and say, "Isn't this assault?" you might have a way of getting a test case that asks, even if it is only in the minds of the local police, whether the device should be legal. I am not a lawyer, but it seems to me that, *prima facie*, its use probably constitutes assault on the young child. I wonder whether pursuing that might get the matter dealt with rather sooner than we can deal with it through official routes. I do not know whether the Scottish Government could legislate on it. We will have to come to that question. However, it might be that you could pursue the other routes that are available to you, which might be more effective in the shorter term. We need to deal with the device, which is indefensible in principle.

11:00

The Convener: I have a question for Andrew Deans. There is a bit of a problem in a certain part of my constituency of Midlothian—not at the moment, but it can flare up—with groups of young people gathering round a particular shop. Other young people come from different parts of Edinburgh and there have been occasions when quite serious violence has broken out. It has been an issue for young people who live in the area but are not involved, as it is deeply unpleasant for them—and for the rest of the community—but it is difficult to tackle. Have you had any discussions with your colleagues in the Scottish Youth Parliament or with people where you live on the best way to deal with that?

It is obvious that young people need somewhere to go. I hung around outside shops when I was young. I hope that I did not cause too much bother, but it can be a problem at times. Do you have any suggestions? I am scratching my head and thinking about what I would have liked to do and whether there were any alternatives. It was certainly where people went when I was young, which is why I wanted to be there. What are the solutions when it gets difficult?

Andrew Deans: We cannot say that none of the young people who gather outside shops are doing anything wrong, as that is not necessarily true. There are groups of young people who engage in youth disorder and we need solutions, but we must shift away from saying, "Let's move this problem somewhere else," and, "Let's just try to tell young people." We need to work together and

ask young people what would make them go somewhere else. It might be that we need to invest in youth facilities, which might prove to be economical because vandalism or calls to the police would decrease as a result.

We need more discussion about what the solutions are, but the focus should always be that the solutions are agreed through consensus rather than by using something like the Mosquito device, which is anti-young people.

The Convener: Thank you. I will now open the chamber to comments from any of the MSYPs here. If you want to say something please stand up so that we can see you, and please tell us who you are so that we know your name. We have to do that because there is an *Official Report* of every committee meeting and every meeting that is held in the chamber.

Would anyone like to make a comment? Do not all rush at once.

Grant Costello (Scottish Youth Parliament): I am the MSYP for East Kilbride. This issue is very important to the Scottish Youth Parliament and for young people. The children's commissioner for England said—as one of your committee members did—that the Mosquito device demonises children and young people. It makes us look bad, but we are not. Not every young person is fantastic and brilliant, but we are not all going out and destroying things, trying to cause a fight or having a gang war. That is not what we are about. We meet at a particular place because it is the most central place. It is somewhere that we all know, and we decide to meet there because we can maybe go and get some sweets. I am quite partial to sweets myself.

The Convener: Nothing else?

Grant Costello: Companies are now trying to sell the device as anti-teenager. One company says that the Mosquito device is part of a war against antisocial behaviour, and it openly sells it as anti-teenager. It is blaming teenagers for antisocial behaviour—that is not fair, and it is wrong. We should not take the blame for something that is not just our fault, but society's fault. Young people are not the only problem, but the Mosquito device singles us out and that is wrong.

The Convener: Thank you. Would anyone else like to say anything?

Barry Thomson (Scottish Youth Parliament): I do not have a long story to tell, but I just want to say that there have been medical studies on the device that have shown that it induces migraines and epileptic seizures and causes quite a lot of mental health problems.

The Convener: Thank you. Is there anyone else?

John Beaton (Scottish Youth Parliament): I represent Edinburgh West.

In preparation for Andrew Deans's debate back in March, when he originally presented the proposal to us, I did a bit of research. There are roughly 3,500 such devices throughout the United Kingdom, but the exact figure is unknown as there is no legislation on them and people do not have to tell the Government where the devices are. I congratulate the City of Edinburgh Council and Aberdeenshire Council on initiatives that they have taken. Both have taken it into their own hands to ban the device. Obviously, East Lothian Council, Midlothian Council and West Lothian Council still have not legislated, but I hope that they will take a lead from the City of Edinburgh Council. In Edinburgh, there is a £5,500 fine for using the device.

How will the police be able to control the use of the device? Most police officers cannot hear it, as they are adults. We have to think about how the police can find the devices, as they are sometimes quite discreet.

I back up Andrew Deans's point about such devices hurting babies' ears. A couple of weeks ago, I went to Asda in East Lothian with my baby cousin. All of a sudden, she started to cry. I did not understand why until I got closer to the shop, heard a ringing noise, and realised that it was coming from a Mosquito device. The device is a big problem and the Scottish Government should start to do something about it soon.

Andrew Deans: Mosquito devices are sold by one company: Compound Security Systems. It should know where every Mosquito device is, as it should be keeping a record of where each such device it sells goes. If the devices were banned, the process should be simple. The company would stop selling them and a list would be passed on to the police, who would ensure that everyone who had such a device removed it.

Nigel Don: I have a question for the young man from Edinburgh—I am sorry; I did not catch his name. Am I right in thinking that he said that the City of Edinburgh Council has legislated on the matter in some form or other?

John Beaton: Yes, it has.

Nigel Don: So the City of Edinburgh Council believes that it has the power to ban the devices within the city boundaries as opposed to merely on its own premises?

John Beaton: Yes—in all premises in the city, whether in local supermarkets, corner shops or the council's own premises, which include its Waverley Court headquarters and the city

chambers. No one can use the devices in Edinburgh, but there is a problem over its boundary, in East Lothian, Midlothian and West Lothian. No legislation covers the matter in those places.

Nigel Don: If we assume that that is the case, that the City of Edinburgh Council's approach is lawful and that it has that power—by and large, its lawyers will have got that right, because that is what they are paid to do—we can see a solution. Perhaps we need to ensure that local authorities understand that they seem to have that power and that they could use it—if it has already been used. That gives us a way forward. It is extremely important that we find ways forward through the legal mire. Thank you. That is enormously helpful.

Danielle Rowley (Scottish Youth Parliament): I am from Midlothian. I completely support the petition, but what it proposes must go hand in hand with more policing, more education or the provision of other things for young people to do. Andrew Deans mentioned that before. There should be more policing to deal with the minority of young people who cause problems. They should not simply be moved on so that the problem is moved somewhere else—Andrew Deans also spoke about that. The police should speak to them to find out why they are there and causing problems. However, as I say, I fully support the petition.

Jeanna Sally (Scottish Youth Parliament): I am from Helensburgh and Lomond. I looked up a lot of things about the issue before the meeting. It was interesting for me to find out from a pupil in my school who has moved up from Portsmouth that there was a recent attempt to play classical music as opposed to using the Mosquito device. That worked better. There are other solutions; we simply need to look into them more.

Graham Dow (Scottish Youth Parliament): (*simultaneous interpretation from British Sign Language*) I am from the Scottish Youth Parliament and the British Deaf Association. I want to make something clear. People might think that deaf people get away with not being affected by Mosquito devices, but hearing aids amplify their sound, so the sound is worse for deaf people.

The Convener: At this point, I will ask the members of the committee for their views on what we can do with the petition.

Nanette Milne: As two local authorities have banned the devices, I wonder whether we should approach the issue through the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. We could ask it for its views and whether it would consider making its members aware of their ability to ban the use of the devices.

The Convener: As I am sure everyone present knows, COSLA is the umbrella body for local government bodies. I think that that suggestion would be a sensible way forward.

Nigel Don: If the City of Edinburgh Council has done what we are being told it has done, we should ask it under what authority it was able to do it.

Nanette Milne: And Aberdeenshire Council.

Nigel Don: Yes. We should also write to the Scottish Government to apprise it of the petition and ask for its response to it, as it might well have been considering the issue already and will be able to give us an assessment of what it can do and point us in the direction of those who have the power to do something about the devices if it does not. At the very least, it should be made aware of the young people's concerns.

John Farquhar Munro: Have we suggested the police?

The Convener: No. We will contact the police, COSLA and the Scottish Government. Are there any further suggestions?

John Wilson: We should write to ACPOS, as Andrew Deans suggested that the police appear to have some divergent views on the issue. We should also write to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, because if young people are being persecuted in such a manner, it is a human rights issue. We should also write to the Association of Scottish Community Councils to get its view, as many of the issues that arise come out of communities. Sometimes, the most vociferous supporters of such devices sit on community councils—I am not being disparaging of all community councils, but some of them have a particular view about young people and what they should be doing with their time.

Anne McLaughlin: As a number of shopkeepers appear to be using the devices, we should write to the Scottish Retail Consortium as well.

When we write, can we specifically mention the effect on health and the issues that have been mentioned by two MSYPs concerning people with mental health problems, epilepsy, hearing aids and autism? We should also raise the issue of babies and very young children who cannot tell their parents what is wrong with them. Those points should definitely be put to shopkeepers and people in community councils who might want to justify the continued use of the devices. I would like to hear their justification in light of all that information.

John Wilson: We should also write to Health Protection Scotland. As Anne McLaughlin said, we have heard some interesting information on the

health effects of the devices. It would be useful to hear from a professional health organisation that could identify the effects that the devices have. That would be better than having this committee say to retailers and others that the devices cause certain side effects, even though we do not have validating medical evidence. As we all know from various campaigns, there are always arguments around health issues, so we need to have the best evidence possible if we are to take this petition forward.

11:15

Nigel Don: Has anybody mentioned Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People?

The Convener: Not yet.

Nigel Don: We need to hear every side of the argument. You will realise that we are trying to hear from as many people as we reasonably can so that when the committee considers the petition for the second time, which is often the important meeting, we have heard all sides of the argument and can sort out what to do.

I am conscious that a lot of traders are small traders and that the Federation of Small Businesses may have a view. There will be some fairly significant small traders who will have a view on the potential use of the technology at corner shops. I would like to hear from them as well, please.

Nanette Milne: Would it also be worth approaching the National Autistic Society Scotland? It may have a view on the issue, as might the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, given the impact that the devices have on people who are hard of hearing.

The Convener: Okay. I thank committee members for their suggestions. Letters will be sent out to those various organisations and individuals this afternoon. Once we have received responses from them, we will forward copies to Andrew Deans and ask for his comments on the responses. They will then be included as papers for a subsequent meeting of the committee, when we will consider the responses, what Andrew Deans has said and decide what to do next with the petition. I thank Andrew Deans very much for bringing such an important petition to us today.

Political Education (PE1368)

The Convener: Our second petition is PE1368, from Rowena Carlton, on behalf of the Scottish Youth Parliament. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that political education is provided to all school pupils and is given prominence within the framework of the new curriculum for excellence.

Rowena, you have seen the format. You have up to three minutes in which to make an opening statement.

Rowena Carlton (Scottish Youth Parliament):

Thank you very much. Good morning, committee members. As you know, my petition proposes the introduction of compulsory political education in all Scottish schools. That would involve the study of national and international political issues affecting society and the economy. It could include learning about the structure of the Government, the political parties in the UK, elections and how elections are carried out. At the moment, such education is available but is limited to open learning and courses at higher level, and only a minority of schools teach it in class. I would like such political education to be made more widely available.

Primarily, it is important because we have the right to a basic understanding of how the country is run. It would also encourage young people to pay attention to current affairs that affect our everyday lives. I am aware of votes for 16-year-olds being high on the agenda for political discussion at the moment. If that policy is introduced, a form of compulsory political education should be introduced with it, as that will be necessary to make us feel more confident about voting. Like many other teenagers, I do not feel that I know enough about political parties, elections and how the Government makes decisions that affect us to make a well enough informed decision when I come to vote. Political education is essential for us, if only to create an opportunity for youths to gain a genuine interest in how the country is run. Political education also provides the motivation for young people to play a more active role in politics, even just through giving us the confidence to vote.

Throughout the summer, the SYP ran "picture the change", the largest youth consultation of its type in Scotland, to find out whether young people agree with our 50 manifesto statements. The final results and total number of responses will not be released until tomorrow, but I can tell you that 72 per cent of young people who responded agreed with my statement. I learned from my modern studies course, which I was able to take only through open learning, that, in the 2005 UK general election, only 37 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds voted. This would be a great opportunity to involve more people in politics.

Politics affects every aspect of our lives, especially from the age of 16, as more responsibility is given to us. If we are the future, it is only right that we should be given the knowledge that we need to have an effect on it. I hope that the committee agrees that we can make a difference, especially now. I am happy to answer any questions.

The Convener: Thanks very much, Rowena. Members will now ask questions. This time, we will start at Nigel Don's end of the row and work back the way.

Nigel Don: That would be disciplined.

I absolutely agree with Rowena Carlton, but I have a worry. My notes tell me that one outcome in the curriculum for excellence at the second level states:

"I can describe the main features of a democracy and discuss the rights and responsibilities of citizens in Scotland."

I was thinking that I probably could not have done that when I was 25. I could have done lots of things, but I am not sure that I could have done that. It would be good if young people could do it, but what is worrying me ever so slightly—I am sorry, but this is the cynic in me—is that I am not sure that many of the 25-year-olds, 35-year-olds, 55-year-olds or possibly even 75-year-olds who vote could really do it, although they vote far more often than do younger folk and they have determined reasons as to why they vote. What they know is another matter.

Improving the whole population's understanding of the political process, not just that of youngsters, would be enormously valuable. My difficulty with the petition is how to deal with political education in a way that does not tell folk how they should vote. I am a member of the SNP. So, for example, how do we have a discussion about whether an independent Scotland would be a good thing, without the person who is doing the teaching giving what they think is the right answer? That must be enormously difficult. How do you see your way through that?

Rowena Carlton: At the SYP sitting last year, we did a referendum on independence for Scotland. It was carried out in an impartial way. We were not told that we should vote for Scotland becoming independent. That is a clear example of how education can be impartial and not biased towards certain political parties.

All teachers have to undergo training. History teachers could be biased by telling people who should have won wars, but that does not happen often, I hope, because they have been trained to be impartial. Teachers should not brainwash us. That is an important argument to make, because we do not want that to happen. It is important for us to have an understanding of political parties.

Nigel Don: That will remain my biggest question about the petition. In physics, we can argue about the big bang theory, but there is not much to dispute. The situation changes as we move across the disciplines. When we get to history, as you say, there are things that we can argue about. When we get to politics, and all other areas of

sociology, there are so many things that we can argue about. So although I am absolutely sure that we should have education, I am not sure how we do it in a way that does not come out biased. Teachers are human beings—they have a vote and they come from different places. I would have to ask you to do some thinking about that issue and some research on it if we are to make the proposal work.

John Wilson: The petition is worth while. We expect certain subjects, including modern studies, to take up the issue so that pupils learn about the political system and how to operate within it. Unfortunately, as the petitioner mentioned, one surprising thing is that the subject matter that is taught in secondary education is not the wide range that we would expect to be taught. Modern studies is now an optional subject, rather than a compulsory one.

Very little political education and understanding of the political system is passed on to students before they leave school, and they are then expected to vote at the age of 18. Some of us here today are arguing that people should get the vote at 16 in Scotland so that they can participate in the political decision-making process earlier. We need to make sure that people understand the political system that they are engaging in.

Many schools throughout Scotland take up the opportunity during election times to hold hustings and get students to stand in the various political party colours and argue their corner. The political parties like to provide a lot of information to those candidates so that they can get the message out to the rest of the students and schools.

The real issue is about how we get the message over. Nigel Don is right to ask, if we leave it to teachers to give that education, how we can ensure that they are presenting unbiased information in a way that allows students to engage in and understand the process rather than lecturing them about voting and voting for a particular party? I have views on how people vote and the historic voting patterns in which they engage when they vote for a party because their parents or grandparents voted for it, when they might not fully understand the policies and issues that the parties are presenting at the time of the election. We need to enable people to understand what the policies mean for them. The political system is not just about voting but about understanding what we are voting for. How does Rowena think we can get that message over to people without being too dogmatic in our approach to educating people in politics?

Rowena Carlton: There are teachers who are already teaching politics in modern studies, and there is no reason to prevent more teachers from being involved with that because there is a fear

that there might be bias. If teachers are already teaching it, there is no reason not to have more of that.

It is not just teachers who could influence children or young people's voting behaviour. There is the television, the internet and other media. During the general election this year, debates were held on television. Young people have access to lots of forms of media that can help to shape who they will vote for.

John Farquhar Munro: I thank Rowena Carlton for her response, but I, too, am concerned about the quality of politics instruction, particularly in secondary education. As Nigel Don said, if a particular lecturer or teacher has a political opinion that is contrary to those of many in their class, that can be a significant influence on how an individual pupil develops their political ideas and allegiances.

If we were teaching the history of politics, that would be quite different. If we are going to insist that modern politics are taught in the modern-day classroom, I fear that the outcome could be very biased. I will reserve my judgment.

Nanette Milne: When I was young I was pretty unaware politically. I am always impressed when, through being an MSP, I meet people in this age group and I see how articulate many of you are. I wonder how aware you are of the proactive work that the Parliament does through its outreach education activities. Like other members, I am regularly invited to schools in the north-east to meet primary and secondary school pupils who often, if not always, have been visited by someone from the Parliament who has gone through the parliamentary process and described democratic activity in an impartial way—it is not politically biased. We are then invited on a cross-party basis: I have been to several events in the north-east with Nigel Don and other north-east colleagues. We tell the pupils a little about ourselves and they ask us questions. There are sometimes simple questions, but there are also some deep questions that put us on the spot. That system works well in the schools that take part.

11:30

The same happens down here. A number of school classes come into the Parliament—I mainly meet secondary schools—and we have a similar sort of discussion. I wonder whether some of what you are seeking could be achieved by more interaction with the Parliament and what we can do outside. It would not be a catch-all situation, but it might increase the number of people involved. Perhaps there might be a way of the Scottish Youth Parliament liaising with this Parliament on outreach education. What are your thoughts on that?

Rowena Carlton: That is a valid idea. It would be really valuable to have politicians come into schools to talk about what it is like in their own party or being in the Scottish Government. That first viewpoint would help young people's views, so I think that that is a good idea. It could be a part of the education that I am proposing.

Anne McLaughlin: I certainly support the principle that you suggest. As you said, politics affects every aspect of our lives, whatever our age. A substantial number of people do not seem to accept or understand that, so the earlier that we can make people aware of just how important it is to be involved in the political process, the better.

I know that there is some political education in schools, because my 13-year-old nephew Daniel told me recently that he stood in an election in his school, Port Glasgow high school, as the Labour candidate. He saw my face when I heard that and quickly said, "Yes, but I made sure that I lost," so I thought that I would let him off with that.

I initially shared the concerns of Nigel Don and a couple of others about the impartiality of teachers. We have modern studies teachers now, some of whom will be impartial and some of whom will be the opposite. Some of them will be vehemently in favour of my party, and some will be in favour of other parties. I am not sure that it matters much, because there is bias everywhere. Where else do people get their political education? The media is completely biased—and not often in favour of my party. Therefore, I think that it is better to make an attempt at impartial education.

When I was at school, some people were influenced by the teacher, but not those who were anything like me. I suppose that I was quite obstinate: whatever the teacher told me to think, I thought the opposite. Influence does not always get teachers anywhere.

I want to draw attention to a couple of recommendations in the charter for young people's participation that I really like. One is:

"Schools should help pupils register to vote".

A shockingly high number of people in this country are not registered to vote and if they do not register, they have no chance of voting. Being registered in itself and getting a voting card obviously makes someone more likely to vote—they cannot vote otherwise—but it also makes them more likely to get involved.

I also like the recommendation:

"Election days should be designated as 'democracy days' in schools, with opportunities for pupils to explore democracy and watch the voting process if their school is used as a polling station".

Polling day is probably the most exciting day of all. Although we are up and about from 6 in the

morning until 6 the next morning because we have to go to the count afterwards, it is really exciting. It is a day that could get people involved. I like the idea of turning polling day into a democracy day in schools. It is possible, but my only question is whether it is practical. That is my one concern about the petition: is there room for political education? Is it possible to introduce it in every school?

Although I support the petition in principle, I expect that when we come to discuss what to do with it, we will agree to write to the Scottish Government, and I want to find out a wee bit more about how much room there is to do what you are proposing. We might be trying to cram in too many things, but I absolutely support the principle.

Rowena Carlton: I realise that it would be difficult to put this into practice. However, I point out that in first year you are taught drama and art. I am not saying that those subjects are not important, but politics affects every moment of our lives—the very fact that we are at school, for example, is affected by politics—so I definitely think that there is room to squeeze in political education. English and mathematics are compulsory up to fifth year and I think that politics should be as well.

Anne McLaughlin: As a drama graduate, I want to make a little plug for the importance of drama, particularly in the west of Scotland. In that part of the country, people often find it difficult to express themselves and the subject is very useful in enabling young people to express their feelings. As such, it provides useful tools for the rest of life.

Nigel Don: As a former music teacher, I will resist the urge to pile in as well.

We ought to put on record the committee's great respect for teachers. I would not want teaching unions or professional teachers in years to come to read the *Official Report* and conclude that we thought that they were incapable of teaching politics. That is absolutely not true; we have great respect for our teachers and I would not want to imply a lack of professionalism in teaching this or any other subject. We are simply reflecting on human nature at elections.

People from my generation who want to learn about a subject ask, "Is there a good book about this?" and then go and read it. I am not suggesting that the younger generation does not read, but I think that we would struggle to produce a good book for people of your age, whereas I am not sure that you would have the same problem. Perhaps the Scottish Youth Parliament might reflect on whether it could put together materials—it does not have to be a book, of course—to help colleagues in schools understand the very subject that you want to be taught. It is not rocket science;

it just requires the right information to be put together in a reasonably objective way, and you might be far better at doing that than we might be.

Rowena Carlton: That is a brilliant idea. Perhaps we could take it up as a project. There are books such as “Politics for Dummies”—*[Laughter.]*

The Convener: Are you suggesting that we read that?

Rowena Carlton: The notes for my open learning modern studies course are also really good and completely impartial. Perhaps if we do what you suggest we could follow up something like that. Impartial information is certainly available; you can find it in books and the really informative course notes that I get from Edinburgh’s Telford College, which come in the form of booklets that have been typed up by the tutors.

John Wilson: The problem with such petitions is that you are talking to a group of political anoraks. Anne McLaughlin has already told you how at election time she gets a 24-hour buzz from the moment the polling stations open until the end of the count.

However, we have to be very careful about how we define the term “political education”. Taking its true meaning, I think that Rowena’s petition is about encouraging young people to understand and engage in the political system. The difficulty is that in some areas of Scotland—I will spare their embarrassment by not naming them this morning—political education involves the dominant political party, usually represented by the elected member, being called in to speak to students. That is a difficulty because often the modern studies teacher or someone else in the school thinks that providing political education is about bringing in the elected MSP or the MP to explain what politics is about.

If we want to provide a wider definition of politics and to get people to analyse what political parties are saying, we cannot do that by bringing in the dominant political organisation in an area to speak to pupils and students. We need to widen the process and have something like the hustings scenario during elections that I mentioned earlier, which allows other political opinions to be broadcast in schools.

Unfortunately, in my time in politics, I have had experience of schools continually short-circuiting political engagement by looking to bring in the existing elected members. As I said, sometimes that does not allow open debate of what all the political parties are about and involves spreading the message of a particular party, whether that is the Conservative party, the Scottish National Party, the Green party, the Liberal Democrats or

the Labour Party, which can result in a very narrow view of what political engagement is about.

We need to ensure that we look at a method that allows us to open up political understanding and gets people to analyse what political parties do and what they say about what they want to do when they get into government—not that they always do what they say they are going to do when they get into government. We need to allow people to be more analytical about what political parties say and do. We should allow people to go out and vote on the basis of that analysis rather than, as I said earlier, on the basis of a historical relationship that their family may have had with a political party for the previous three generations.

The Convener: Do you want to respond to that Rowena, or shall I throw the discussion open?

Rowena Carlton: It is fine to throw it open.

The Convener: Right—over to you. Let us hear what your views on the issue are.

Austin Sheridan (Scottish Youth Parliament): I am the member for the Glasgow Govan constituency.

In general, I support political education in schools, but one of the points that has been made is that the issue is linked to that of people being able to vote at 16 and that, for that to happen, we should have political education. I disagree with that, because I think that the reason why we should be able to vote at 16 is that that is when people take on a whole load of new responsibilities, such as being able to get their own home or pay tax. I think that that is reason enough for being able to vote at 16. However, I think that political education would help. I just wanted to clear that up.

Emily Shaw (Scottish Youth Parliament): I am from Shetland.

I just wanted to make a quick point about the impartiality of teaching. In higher religious, moral and philosophical studies, I was taught about different types of religion by a conservative Christian, and I can say that his teaching was completely impartial—I did not feel swayed towards any particular religion. Although religion and politics are different, they are both about beliefs and having a passion for something. We would not stop pupils being taught about different types of religion, and that should apply to politics, too.

The Convener: Rowena, if you would like to respond to any of the comments, just let me know and I will bring you in.

Rowena Carlton: Emily made a helpful point. The fact that someone has a passion for or a belief in something does not mean that they will

project it. People who teach politics will have to teach other parties' views anyway, so the pupil will not be prevented from gaining a wide understanding of all the political parties.

Liam Beattie (Scottish Youth Parliament): I am from the Scottish Borders.

I agree with Rowena that lowering the voting age to 16 must go hand in hand with political education. I do not think that there is any point in giving 16 and 17-year-olds the right to vote without giving them information about what that new right gives them.

Secondly, on impartiality, like a lot of other students in Scotland, I study politics. I can assure you that in no way have I been politically swayed, so I believe that it is a subject that can be taught impartially.

Alan Drew (Scottish Youth Parliament): (*simultaneous interpretation from British Sign Language*) I am from the British Deaf Association.

People often say that knowledge is power. I believe that knowledge empowers you. What we are looking for today is an agreement, but not just in principle—I want us to go further than that. We are young people.

I support Rowena with regard to political education for two reasons. One is that it empowers us and gives us confidence—and that is linked to the point that was made about drama. It also encourages debate. The second reason is that, if we want change, we can do it.

Political education takes place in universities. Amend what is there, and bring it into our schools. We are asking you to listen to us. You have decided that English and maths are compulsory; now, we are telling you that we want political education to be compulsory. Please listen.

11:45

Malcolm Andrews (Scottish Youth Parliament): I am from Gourock and Wemyss Bay.

Rowena used the example of a history teacher in response to Nigel Don's question about bias. My history teacher is extremely opinionated, and he voices his opinions strongly in class. However, it is his opinion—and he encourages us to have our own opinions. A teacher's opinion can come across in a class without it indoctrinating the pupils.

Jamie O'Neill (Scottish Youth Parliament): I am the MSYP for Glasgow Anniesland.

When I was 16, a politician came in to speak to our class. From then, I was interested in him and his political party. I am sure that many people will

be aware that our school in Drumchapel became quite political, with people getting involved in campaigns. That changed my view. I do not support that political party any more, but even if people are biased, if we give them the education, they will eventually grow out of it and grow up. The media will play a big role, and individuals will establish their own views.

Religious education has been mentioned. We might easily argue that a child who is sent to a Catholic school has not made that choice. Is that bias? Is that fair? Is the sharing of views through religious education impartial, biased or whatever? Young people should at least be given the opportunity to learn about political parties, including their history and structure, from a young age. When they grow up, they will establish their own opinions. People such as us are obviously politically active, although we do not always support any political party, including those that are in power, but we work alongside them while forming our own views. It is really important for political education to play a massive part in education, from secondary school age onwards.

Angus Duncan (Scottish Youth Parliament): I am from Dunfermline East.

I am a higher modern studies student, and my teacher is not impartial. She makes her views known regularly to the whole class. She makes jokes about it, though—it is quite light hearted. She encourages us to have our own views, and her views do not detract from the education that we receive. We know how the Scottish Parliament works, and we learn about proportional representation, the single transferable vote and the work of committees such as the Public Petitions Committee. That shows us that we can make a difference and encourages the class. If we go out and vote, we can make a difference. The teacher is not asking us to support her party—she is just making comments.

Rebecca Cox (Scottish Youth Parliament): I represent Gordon.

I totally agree with the concept of having political education, but I do not necessarily think that it has to be done in a certain class. One of my colleagues in Aberdeenshire recently spoke to Mike Russell about personal and social education, which includes sex education, education about drugs, talks from the police and so on. It lasted for an hour a week when I was at school and it was often a waste of time—basically, it was time that we could have used for something else.

That is where I think political education could be involved. It need not necessarily be a class for two hours a week, but it could be done every so often—perhaps every couple of months. A class could be provided for every year group, involving

an hour in which pupils learn about politics, instead of learning in a set politics class for two hours a week.

Megan Lukins (Scottish Youth Parliament): I am a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament from Aberdeen.

Rowena mentioned that 72 per cent of young people who took part in the “picture the change” consultation were in favour of reducing the voting age to 16. From my experience of speaking to young people in my constituency, it is clear that the only reason why the other 28 per cent of young people who took part in the consultation are not in favour of it is that they feel that they do not have sufficient knowledge of policies and of how the political system works in Scotland.

For us in the Scottish Youth Parliament, an improved political education is vital if we are to be successful in reducing the voting age.

We have already heard this morning from one of the members of the Public Petitions Committee about how important it is to find ways to move forward. One idea might be to incorporate political education into personal and social education classes. Whether you spend four, five or six years at school, you always revisit topics such as drug abuse, alcohol abuse, antisocial behaviour and sex education. Although those are of course fundamental things that we need to learn about, perhaps instead of revisiting them we might want to visit politics for the first time.

The Convener: Thanks very much. We are running a bit short of time, so I am afraid that I am going to cut things a little bit short. A lot of hands are still up. I am sorry about that, but we have to make sure that we have enough time for the next petition. Rowena, do you want to say anything or are you quite happy with the comments that have been made?

Rowena Carlton: All the comments have been great. Thank you very much. It is valid to say that it would be good to implement political education in PSE classes, as politics will affect us in society. That is a good suggestion.

The Convener: Thanks very much. I ask members of the committee for suggestions about what we should do with the petition. Please be quite brief, because we need to make sure that we have time for the next petition, too.

Nigel Don: I will be brief. First, I thank the MSYPs for their comments. I stand corrected, because you clearly have a very positive view about your teachers and their ability to work in an unbiased way. Thank you very much for saying so—I have learned something this morning.

How do we take the petition forward? Clearly, we need to write to the Government and ask

whether it thinks that there is space for political education in the curriculum for excellence, how it perceives it fitting in and whether it can be compulsory.

Nanette Milne: Following on from what I said before, I wonder whether it would be appropriate to forward the *Official Report* of this part of the proceedings to the education outreach department in the Parliament to get its views. Perhaps it could reach out to the Scottish Youth Parliament to get ideas about how it can spread out education among our school-age people.

Anne McLaughlin: I would also write to the Educational Institute of Scotland and Learning and Teaching Scotland to ask a number of questions. We should seek their views on the issues raised by the petition.

John Wilson: I take on board what Nigel Don said about the unbiased nature of teaching in Scotland. I was quite pleased to hear many people say today that teachers are not biased in the teaching of particular subjects, which is encouraging.

I suggest that we write to the Electoral Commission in Scotland to ask for its views. Many people might not know that the commission has been charged with trying to get people engaged in the political system and participating in the voting system. It might be worth getting its views on the issues that have been raised in the petition and how it thinks that it could engage with schools and education departments to encourage young people to be more politically active.

The Convener: I thank members for their suggestions. As with the other petitions, the letters will be written this afternoon. When we have the responses, we will contact Rowena to get her response to them. The petition will then come back to a further meeting of the Public Petitions Committee. I thank her very much for bringing the petition to us.

Leisure and Cultural Facilities (Young People) (PE1369)

The Convener: Our third and final petition is PE1369, by Jodie McCoy, on behalf of the South Ayrshire youth forum, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to require local authorities, under the power to advance wellbeing provisions in part 3 of the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, to undertake impact assessments and specify how, when, with whom—certainly community planning partners—and on what they will consult when they consider the provision of local leisure and cultural facilities; and to confirm that it will develop guidance to local authorities on that issue, which would assist in achieving its national outcome on young people.

Jodie McCoy and Jennifer Kerr have up to three minutes to make an opening statement. Over to you.

Jodie McCoy (Scottish Youth Parliament): A year ago, South Ayrshire young people mounted a conference at which we identified issues that are important to young people. We identified as our priorities childhood obesity, adults' perception of young people, vandalism and antisocial behaviour, and that young people need access to cultural and leisure facilities.

Our council in South Ayrshire needed to close a swimming pool, two activity centres, a theatre and some other public places. The councillors followed their normal procedures and decided to close the facilities. There was significant concern that the council did not consult before making the decisions and there followed an investigation by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, who found that the council's policy was not to consult on budget decisions and that it had followed its procedures, so the complaint against the council was not upheld.

South Ayrshire youth forum is concerned that councils throughout Scotland are rushing headlong into making cuts in services that affect young people without being fully aware of the impact the cuts will have on the wider community and other services. We know that councils will need to make savings, but we ask that before they do so councillors are aware of the full impact of those savings. It is not just about a figure on a spreadsheet: the bottom line is that if councils get it wrong and make the wrong savings, councils and their community planning partners might need to spend more in other ways.

Jennifer Kerr (Scottish Youth Parliament): The young people, as part of their research in putting the petition together, have identified that if facilities close without other services being provided in a different way, there could be negative and costly impacts on other community planning partners. A relatively small amount of funding spent on activities for young people can prevent considerable amounts of money being spent on health services, the police and justice systems, fire and rescue, and community safety.

We want councils to consult other partners and young people on savings before, rather than after, councillors make decisions, and to do impact assessments based on one developed by Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People. We believe that if you invest in young people, you will save money in the medium to longer term.

If people are involved in making decisions that affect them, there can be positive health benefits.

As Harry Burns, the chief medical officer, described it:

"actively involving people in decision making ... is very health improving and health creating."

Evidence from our community safety partnerships demonstrates that if you target resources for young people where they are needed most—on diversionary activities—it works.

Young people and communities can be creative in identifying solutions to making budget savings. Community planning partners need to be involved in discussions about savings. Not only councils but every Government-funded organisation is being asked to identify where they will make cuts.

We fear that the petition is a year too late in being presented, but we ask the Public Petitions Committee to support our plea for the Parliament to ask the Scottish Government to amend the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, to improve on the current advice to councils and to ask them to consult young people before making cuts.

The Convener: Thank you. We will now ask questions. I ask members to restrict themselves to one question each, because we were a bit short of time for members of the Youth Parliament last time.

Anne McLaughlin: Thank you. That was very well presented.

I will ask only one question. I was interested in your comment that only Highland Council has consulted young people in any significant way on budgetary issues that would have an impact on services to young people. It is not good that only one council has done that, but it is good that that council has done it. I would like to hear a little bit more about how Highland Council went about doing it.

Jodie McCoy: I think that it just carried out consultations with youth groups and young people in the area. That is how it got ideas from young people. It was mainly a consultation process.

Anne McLaughlin: Did Highland Council use the ideas? People often say to us that the local authority consultation procedure is nonsense, because the local authority does not consult you, although it says that it is consulting you. Did young people in Highland region feel that they were being properly consulted and that the council used some of their ideas?

Jodie McCoy: I am not sure how they felt about that, but I am sure that their ideas were listened to and taken forward, as a lot of young people were consulted on the decisions.

Anne McLaughlin: Perhaps other local authorities can look at how Highland Council did that.

Nanette Milne: I will ask about the practicalities. Do you envisage having a young person on, for example, community planning partnerships?

Jodie McCoy: I am on South Ayrshire Council's community planning partnership.

Nanette Milne: Do you know whether that practice is widespread across Scotland or is it particular to Ayrshire?

Jodie McCoy: I am not sure whether it is widespread across Scotland, but I sit on the community planning partnership through South Ayrshire youth forum, and that has been beneficial for us.

Nanette Milne: Do you feel that you therefore have meaningful input into decisions that are being taken, or is that not enough?

Jodie McCoy: The community planning partnership is at the highest level of the council, and it is a major success for us that I sit on it. That allows young people's voices to be developed and heard in South Ayrshire.

12:00

Nanette Milne: That is helpful, thank you.

John Farquhar Munro: Good morning, Jodie. Your petition implies that the leisure facilities that are currently provided are not appropriate, that they should be amended, and that the younger generation should be listened to so that the council can present and promote better leisure facilities that are more in line with what young people are looking for.

Jodie McCoy: The facilities that are open are beneficial to young people, but the problem is that a lot of places are being closed without consultation. It is not that the ones that are open are causing any trouble; it is that places are being closed without any consultation with young people.

John Farquhar Munro: What is your view of the current situation and the cutbacks in all services? Is that going to have an adverse effect on the provision of leisure facilities by local authorities?

Jodie McCoy: If we cut back on leisure and cultural facilities, there are implications for other services—the petition mentions a few examples. There are implications for fire and safety and antisocial behaviour. There will be lots of long-term costs for other services if facilities are shut down. It is a major problem.

The Convener: Jennifer, do you want to comment?

Jennifer Kerr: You talked about the other leisure facilities that are available. In South Ayrshire, there are only really one or two leisure facilities, which is not useful for people who live in Maybole or other places that are far out. The Citadel leisure centre is the only council-run facility, and it is not that big; it has only a gym and a swimming pool, and it does not really benefit people from outwith Ayr.

There used to be a lot of ice rinks—I was an ice skater—but they shut them all and now we have only one, which is about the size of the wooden floor in the well of the chamber, and that does not do much for ice hockey teams, for example. They have to travel to the Magnum centre in Irvine or to Glasgow.

John Wilson: The supplementary information that came with the petition was useful, and it related to John Farquhar Munro's question about how the costs of not providing facilities can outweigh any benefits that local authorities might get in the short term. We have figures from Strathclyde Fire and Rescue that claim that a massive £1.153 million was spent on dealing with the damage that was caused by various activities that could be directly due to the fact that there are no facilities. The cost to the council of vandalism was £148,000. So local authorities face costs if they close facilities. Do they take account of other factors and the costs that I have mentioned when they close down facilities for young people?

Jodie McCoy: Local authorities rush into making cuts and do not think about the implications for other services. That is why the consultation process is important for local authorities to realise what the costs would be to other services. As you said, £1.1 million for the fire service is quite extortionate. Sometimes, local authorities rush into decisions. They need to speak to other services and young people to see what the future could hold for the budget and the possible costs to other services.

Nigel Don: Thank you for bringing the petition to us. Most of the committee's members are former local councillors of one sort or another, so we recognise what you are talking about. What exercises me is that, even in the good old days when we had money, everything in the budget debate was done quickly—that is the nature of the process. I suspect that what is going on at the moment will be just as fast and more difficult, given the financial circumstances.

Should we look beyond what you ask for, which I understand, and ask whether community planning partnerships and others should consult on and consider alternatives all the time? Throughout the year, they should consider what might arise in the following budget or the budget two years down the road. People should talk about

the facilities that should be available rather than what they will cut. Does that make sense?

Jodie McCoy: You make a valid point. A major part of the petition is about thinking ahead to the future and thinking about what can be saved rather than what can be cut. Rather than getting the decision over and done with quickly, it is much easier to get other people's views about the future—about what facilities should and should not be available and in what ways savings could be made better. That would be much easier than saying, "We'll just cut this and get rid of this." Instead of cutting facilities, their potential could be used. The aim is to think about the year or two ahead.

Nigel Don: Yes. Politicians are not necessarily good at that.

The Convener: Jennifer, do you have anything to add?

Jennifer Kerr: No.

The Convener: I open the discussion to other members of the Scottish Youth Parliament. Who has comments?

Marc Dickson (Scottish Youth Parliament): I am the MSYP for East Kilbride. I will refer to the comments about community planning partnerships. South Lanarkshire has the corporate connections board, which consists of representatives of all South Lanarkshire Council's partner organisations, including the South Lanarkshire youth council. The youth council's chair has a permanent invite to that board's meetings when it discusses all issues that are to do with young people. The partners include NHS Lanarkshire, the police, the fire and rescue service and organisations from across the board. Young people might not be listened to everywhere, but they are definitely listened to in South Lanarkshire.

Kelly-Ann Burns (Scottish Youth Parliament): I am from Inverclyde. We are aware of the financial cuts that are coming—we do not have our heads in the clouds. We just want to be consulted on them. Unlike other people, we do not take trade union action. We are often overlooked. We are just asking to be involved in committees here and there. The Youth Parliament is brilliant for that. We are starting to be listened to. In Inverclyde, we are listened to, but it is obvious that we are not listened to everywhere.

Rowena Carlton: I am a member of the Highland youth parliament, which was included in the Highland Council budget consultation. The council's convener—Sandy Park—came to our parliament conference in Skye, where we had an open-mic session. We had questions on a board about all the services that we would or would not like to be cut and about alternatives. Notes were

taken and we wrote the answers on different tables. Perhaps that is a way forward for budget consultation across Scotland.

The Convener: Do Jodie or Jennifer have responses to the points that have been made?

Jodie McCoy: I am just glad that Rowena Carlton talked about that consultation, which I had vaguely heard about.

David Leitch (Scottish Youth Parliament): I represent the Livingston constituency.

West Lothian Council has been very proactive in consulting young people. We were the first group to be asked to write a specific document on budget cuts and where the council could make efficiency savings. We sat down with the chief executive and the head of West Lothian Council. West Lothian youth congress, which is a constituted body that represents and is run by young people in West Lothian, was asked to come up with a policy document, which was presented to the council and is being considered at all public development and scrutiny panel meetings at which final decisions on cuts are made. The document was also presented to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth. Therefore, there has been a lot of emphasis on involving young people in my local authority area.

We understand that cuts have to be made, that things have to go and that savings have to be found because of the financial situation in this country. However, one of the main things that young people in our constituency have said to us is that we have some of the best leisure facilities in the world in the public school estate, but they are not being used. We have a lot of duplication in Scotland in community centres, leisure facilities, library facilities and schools. Schools are not being used enough, although their facilities are often top class. They need to be opened up much more.

The community school idea was pioneered in West Lothian. The idea was that communities would be based around local high schools and community centres and that leisure facilities would be used by the community and school pupils. That was around 1972, I think—I do not know the exact year, but it was certainly in the early half of the 1970s. That idea seems to have died a death, but we need to revive it. We have a school estate with very good facilities that are not being used. They could be used for financial benefit when other leisure facilities have to close because of budget issues.

We can profit from school facilities. Currently, most high school estates are run by a business manager. In order to access a school's facilities, people have to find the business manager's contact details and go directly through them. In West Lothian, we think that there should be a

centralised website or a way of contacting schools in each local authority to get access to schools' leisure facilities without having to go to individual business managers.

Fiona Beaton (Scottish Youth Parliament): I represent Girlguiding Scotland.

We have heard evidence that there is good consultation with young people in particular areas, especially on the cuts. Such consultation is vital, and is needed across the board. That also relates to the previous petition. If we want young people to be involved in politics and to educate them about politics, what better way is there of doing so than involving them in the process from the very beginning so that they can have their say? They will never want to be involved in politics and society if they are not given the chance to get involved and have their say when they are young.

Nicole Mouat (Scottish Youth Parliament): I am from Shetland.

Our recent community planning partnership was based around young people and what helps them to thrive in Shetland. As a result of that, young people have become far more involved. Recently, young people were asked whether there can be a youth representative in our active lives partnership.

The Convener: That is good.

John Beaton: I thank the committee for discussing the petition with members of the Scottish Youth Parliament. I was quite excited when I saw the agenda. As convener for sport and leisure in the Scottish Youth Parliament, I know that there are issues to do with non-consultation and facilities shutting down in my constituency and throughout Scotland. Our committee discussed that matter back in July at the sitting in Livingston.

Kelly-Ann Burns and David Leitch spoke about the budget. We are young people, but we do not have our heads in the clouds and we are not airy-fairy about budgets. We know what is coming and what is going to hit us.

Edinburgh Leisure, which provides services in Queensferry in Edinburgh West, is going through a consultation process before it shuts down a facility, but consultation was planned to be at times that are not convenient for young people because they will be at school or on holiday, so they might be away. The times were not convenient for adults, either. The approach is tokenistic; Edinburgh Leisure simply says that it has set aside time for consultation. Could the Scottish Government make some kind of plan for the overall consultation that should take place before a Government service is shut down? How can our committee help to move that forward with the Public Petitions Committee?

12:15

Jodie McCoy: In South Ayrshire, we get through to young people in consultations through schools and youth groups. Various consultations have been done through those places. They should be the main focus of consultations. Young people should be consulted more and that approach should work because, to focus on the previous petition as well, being involved and knowing about politics would make them more enthusiastic about it.

The Convener: I open the discussion up to suggestions from members of the Public Petitions Committee on what to do with the petition.

Nanette Milne: It is clear from what we heard that there are at least pockets of good practice around Scotland, but we do not know how widespread that good practice is. If it is not widespread, it should be rolled out. Perhaps we should write to COSLA and get its opinion on which local authorities are involved in such good practice.

I am particularly interested in David Leitch's comments about opening up the school estate. That is a serious concern to an awful lot of groups—sports in particular—throughout the country. Because of expensive janitorial provision, organisations cannot afford to get into school premises outwith school hours. If the school estate could be opened up, it would have a huge social and health impact because many more people would be able to be involved in sport. The Scottish Sports Association is interested in such approaches. Perhaps we should write to it too and get a viewpoint on the petition.

The Convener: I owe an apology to Danielle Rowley because I said that I would bring her into the discussion and then completely forgot.

Danielle Rowley: The Midlothian youth platform carried out a consultation. We spoke to 15,000 young people, which is one young person in 20 in our constituency and, for two years running, antisocial behaviour came up as the biggest problem for young people in Midlothian.

We gave the consultation and responses to the council. Young people made suggestions on which leisure and community facilities would benefit them and which things they were not as interested in, but the council still puts money into things that young people have said they are not interested in. Community centres and leisure centres in some of the most deprived areas of Midlothian are being shut down. Consultation is all very well as long as someone is listening.

The Convener: Thank you. Sorry for forgetting about you. I will be in real trouble when I go back to Midlothian.

Anne McLaughlin: We should write to the Scottish Government and ask whether it agrees with what the petitioners ask for in the petition. We should also ask the Government and COSLA a number of questions.

We are all well aware that budget cuts are coming up. Kelly-Ann Burns from my home town said exactly what I was going to say: people are not stupid and do not have their heads in the clouds; they are aware of the cuts. They just want to be consulted and, as Danielle Rowley said, listened to.

We should ask the Government and COSLA what they are doing to encourage local authorities to include not only young people but all people in real, meaningful consultation. If we sit down with people, tell them that we have to cut 20 per cent off a certain budget, tell them what facilities we are examining and ask what they think, they will come up with ideas, such as opening up the school estate.

People come up with ideas after a cut has happened, but that is because they are not consulted beforehand half the time. If we listen to what the people who use and work in the facilities say, we will get far better ideas than simply removing a grant from a project, shutting down a facility and leaving somebody else to take up the slack because we need to save £80,000 in a particular budget.

We should also ask about the future costs of cutting budgets now. We will get the response that there would be a future cost implication to cutting culture and leisure facilities, but that could be said about anything. For instance, if we do not deal with potholes, there will be more accidents and more people will end up in hospital, which will have a knock-on effect. I will probably end up having a heart attack if the potholes near my house are not sorted out—I am not kidding. There is probably no area of finance for which that argument could not be made, but we should ask COSLA and the Scottish Government how they will address the fact that the costs will be so much higher in future years because we have cut facilities now.

The Convener: There are no other suggestions. The petitioners have heard what the committee intends to do with the petition. We will contact the various organisations concerned and, when we have responses, send them back to the petitioners. Jodie McCoy might want to share those responses with Jennifer Kerr and give us their views about them. The petition will come back to the committee at a later date.

That concludes this historic meeting of the Public Petitions Committee. We will now break for lunch. The Scottish Youth Parliament's main

conference will start this afternoon. I thank the delegates for attending and for allowing us to hold the committee meeting as part of their conference. We wish them well with their discussions and debates over the next couple of days.

Meeting closed at 12:22.

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