



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 29 May 2012

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

9th Meeting 2012, Session 4

CONVENER

*David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP)
*Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP)
*Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab)
*Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)
*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Nigel Don (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Tuesday 29 May 2012

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 14:12*]

New Petition

Ambulance Services (Remote and Rural Areas) (PE1432)

The Convener (David Stewart): Good afternoon. As always, I remind everyone to switch off mobile phones and electronic devices, because they interfere with our sound system.

Agenda item 1 is consideration of a new petition—PE1432, by Joseph and Anthony Duncalf, on improving emergency ambulance provision in remote and rural areas. Members have copies of a note by the clerk, which is paper 1, the Scottish Parliament information centre briefing and the petition.

The committee invited the petitioners to give evidence, but they cannot attend the meeting because of work commitments. They have provided a written submission that gives more background to the petition. With the committee's agreement, I will read out an extract from that evidence with the key points, so that they are on the record.

I quote:

"Since experiencing a delay in ambulance response after dialling 999 for an elderly neighbour, early in April, we have come across numerous accounts of similar delays in and around the Dalbeattie area of Dumfries and Galloway. We understand from our community councillors and MSPs that this has been an on-going issue for a number of years. With only one ambulance based within 5 miles of the town, in Castle Douglas, Dalbeattie, despite being the largest town in the Stewartry area, with a number of outlying villages and holiday parks, seems to stand little chance of an ambulance reaching us within the target 8 minutes for a life-threatening emergency. Certainly if this ambulance is otherwise occupied, the whole area is very vulnerable, being dependent on a unit attending from Dumfries (14 miles) or ... Newton Stewart (40 miles) ... From articles in the press, we gather similar issues are experienced in the more remote areas across Scotland. Clearly there is a need for something to be done to improve the situation, and we feel there is a need for an urgent review of how ambulance services are provided in areas such as ours, to ensure that local residents stand the best possible chance of receiving prompt attention in medical emergencies."

I ask the committee to consider the petition and the next steps.

14:15

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Having read the papers, I have some observations. There is certainly an abundance of information about what has been done by the Scottish Government and previous Administrations. We have the national health service performance targets, the report "Delivering for Remote and Rural Healthcare", the remote and rural implementation group, the working together for better patient care strategic framework, and the annual review of the Scottish Ambulance Service for 2010-11. I note that the United Kingdom's first retained ambulance service is in Shetland, and is to be expanded to other areas in the future. We also have the first responder scheme.

I have a couple of questions that we could perhaps ask in writing. The written evidence mentions a public meeting that was held on 28 March. The petitioners say that 4,000 people live in the Dalbeattie area, but according to the evidence in the committee papers, no one from the area actually turned up at the meeting. I would like to know how that meeting was advertised, at what time it took place and whether the petitioners were informed about it.

The petitioners' submission also says that the community council was looking at the issue and had been contacted, and that a number of people had expressed interest in joining the first responders team, but that that was not followed up. I would like to get some further evidence. This is a very serious issue. Some of my colleagues probably know the area a lot better than I do, but I would like to see some follow-up information about what is happening there.

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): The issue has been raised by individuals in Dumfries and Galloway, but most of us who have rural areas in our regions or constituencies will recognise the concerns that have been expressed. I am interested in the concept of retained ambulance crewing—a similar practice is prevalent in the fire and rescue service. Indeed, if it was not for retained firefighter crews, there would be virtually no firefighter coverage in many of our rural areas. Perhaps we should ask the Scottish Ambulance Service what work it is doing around the possibility of using retained ambulance crews in remote and rural areas, given the work that is being done in Shetland, and whether it has any plans to move that idea on further, especially given the example of the fire and rescue service. Let us see what we get back on that.

The Convener: That is a good point.

I want to throw another issue into the mix. A chief inspector from Strathclyde Police who is based in Dunoon told me that, in that area, the

force ensures that all police vehicles have defibrillators and officers are trained to carry out investigations. His point was that if someone who is 30 minutes from the nearest ambulance or doctor needs a defibrillator and is seen by a trained officer, that could be the difference between life and death. However, I understand that few other police forces have that system. Perhaps that is an issue for the single police force; we can pursue it when the chief constable is appointed, which I understand is not too far off.

This is a very good petition. I am sorry that the petitioners could not come to the committee because of their work commitments. We explored the use of videoconferencing but that was not possible because of their work.

I am looking for guidance from members on the next steps. Sandra White has already made some recommendations.

Sandra White: Yes, convener. I also note that we have another petition on the issue of transport for health and social care. There is a report from Audit Scotland about older people in remote and rural areas. Could we continue this petition and have a look at the other one? It would be ideal if we could do something jointly. We need to ask the Scottish Government and the Scottish Ambulance Service for their views on the petition, and provide an update on the progress of the implementation of the strategic options framework that is being monitored and reported on, particularly in relation to remote and rural areas. Dumfries and Galloway NHS Board should be asked for its views on the petition and about how that meeting on 28 March was advertised. I am amazed that no one turned up for a public meeting if the issue is causing such concern.

The Convener: Are members happy to continue the petition along the lines that Sandra White has suggested and the other recommendations set out in option 1?

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Although the petition concentrates on NHS Dumfries and Galloway, I suggest that when we write to the Scottish Ambulance Service and the Scottish Government we should also ask about service provision in the Highlands, which, after all, is the area with which comparisons can be made. We know that the central belt and most of the east coast of Scotland is—or at least should be—well served by the service, but it would be interesting to find out how those issues are dealt with in the Highlands and Islands. That would give us a comparator with service delivery in Dumfries and Galloway.

The Convener: That is quite a positive suggestion.

Given the similarities between this petition and petition PE1424, I wonder whether we should combine them and invite Audit Scotland to come along and give evidence on both.

John Wilson: I am slightly concerned about putting those two petitions together. This petition focuses on emergency call-outs, while PE1424 highlights the entirely different issue of transport for the elderly. I do not want to confuse the two issues for communities; given that ambulances are for emergencies, I would certainly hate to think that they were being used to ferry elderly people around. I suggest, therefore, that we keep the two petitions separate.

The Convener: The petitions would still run along separate channels; all I am suggesting is that Audit Scotland might be a common denominator in both. How do members feel about taking evidence from Audit Scotland on at least one of the petitions?

Sandra White: I take on board John Wilson's point, but note that although the subject of PE1424 does not necessarily overlap with this petition on emergency services it raises similar issues to do with transportation, health, social care and wellbeing. Given that Audit Scotland has already published a report on this very issue, it would be good to get its take and I am happy for it to come along and give evidence.

The Convener: As long as we ensure that we observe John Wilson's point and keep the petitions separate.

Sandra White: Absolutely.

The Convener: Do members agree with that course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

Current Petitions

A90/A937 (Safety Improvements) (PE1236)

The Convener: Item 2 is consideration of five current petitions, the first of which is PE1236, by Jill Fotheringham, on A90/A937 safety improvements. Members have a note from the clerk.

Once again, I welcome Nigel Don, who has a strong constituency interest in the matter; indeed, he has attended so many of our meetings that he has become an honorary committee member. I ask Mr Don to make a submission. We are a bit better off for time this afternoon, Mr Don, so you should feel free to take slightly longer.

Nigel Don (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): Thank you very much, convener. Good afternoon, colleagues. Most members will be very familiar with the petition and I have no desire to repeat anything just for the sake of it.

I have in front of me the draft development masterplan for south Montrose, as a consequence of which I have written a letter that the committee will have seen. As members will recall, Montrose is to the south-east of the Laurencekirk south junction and is the source of much of the traffic that comes on to the A90 at that aforementioned junction.

The last paragraph of the masterplan's introduction says:

"The primary purpose of this Development Masterplan report is to guide future change within South Montrose in order to further promote the competitive advantage of the area, capture the new opportunities associated with Offshore Renewables and secure and attract new commercial business interest, investment and jobs."

You would imagine—and you would be right to do so—that, as the constituency MSP, I would be delighted to read that. However, you will also immediately recognise that all of that is likely to involve traffic, at least some of which will go north, by road, through the aforementioned Laurencekirk south junction—hence my letter to Transport Scotland, which has been copied to the local authorities in question. Essentially, my letter says, "Dear Transport Scotland, what do you think this masterplan does to the equation as far as the flyover is concerned?"

That is the point we have reached. My request to the committee is to keep the petition open until we have received a response from Transport Scotland. Convener, forgive me for telling the committee what to do—I do not think that it need do anything but, of course, if it feels inclined to do something that would be wonderful. I just want to point out that the basic things that need to be done

have been done and we are essentially awaiting replies.

The Convener: Thank you for coming along and for those comments. I throw the discussion open to members.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I agree with Nigel Don. We have worked together on the issue for a long time, on both the previous Public Petitions Committee and the current one. I agree that the petition should be kept open.

The letter from Aberdeenshire Council states:

"work is underway that will allow a case to be put to Transport Scotland setting out the long term strategic benefits of putting in place a grade separated junction at Laurencekirk at the earliest opportunity."

That is interesting. The council anticipates that the work will be complete by the end of June. The letter continues:

"If it were considered of benefit Nestrans and Aberdeenshire Council would be willing to make officers available to attend a future meeting of the Petitions Committee to discuss this area of work further."

We should extend an invitation to those bodies to come to the committee, immediately after the summer recess, if possible.

Mark McDonald: I echo Nanette Milne's sentiments. Nigel Don's letter mentions the Tayside and central Scotland transport partnership, or tactran, which is the other transport partnership stakeholder. We should extend the invitation to it, given that the Laurencekirk junction straddles the boundary between the north east of Scotland transport partnership, or Nestrans, and tactran areas, and given the considerable interest that both bodies will have in the management of traffic going from Montrose via Laurencekirk.

The petitioner's submission mentions a grade separation at the north junction, but I was not aware that that was going to happen. Nigel Don, as the constituency member, might enlighten us on that point. I was not aware of grade separation being planned at either of the Laurencekirk junctions, but perhaps he knows more about that.

Nigel Don: I can enlighten the committee. The study that Transport Scotland undertook examined three junctions—the north, south and middle ones, for want of better terms. The study considered the possibility of work at those junctions and the benefits of it. The issue of grade separation at the north junction arises out of the long-term development plan for Laurencekirk, which recognises that new housing will be to the north of the town, rather than the south, and that many of the houses will be occupied by folk who want to commute by car to Aberdeen. That makes it sensible to have a flyover at the north junction. However, that is a completely separate issue from

the south junction, where, as members will recall, the A937 Marykirk to Montrose road comes in and which is currently the source of the most obvious hazard. I envisage that, in 20 years, we will have north and south flyovers at Laurencekirk, but the two issues are completely separate and arise for completely different reasons.

Mark McDonald: I hope that that does not mean that we will have the petition before us for another 20 years—I am sure that that is not what Nigel Don meant.

Another interesting point in the petitioner's submission is that the studies have tended to focus on the traffic travelling north and south and not on the traffic crossing at the junction. As a frequent user of the A90, I am aware that heavy goods vehicles and buses cross at the junction, which is different from small vehicles doing so. While we are waiting for the responses to Nigel Don's letter, and as well as inviting stakeholders to come before the committee, perhaps we could ask Transport Scotland about work that it has done to monitor crossings at the junction, rather than simply the traffic flows and speeds travelling north and south. Obviously, the traffic flows going north and south are not an issue if nobody crosses the road. They become an issue when large vehicles—often slow-moving, agricultural ones—cross at the junction. We should find out what work has been done to monitor that, as well as the north and south traffic flows.

The Convener: I presume that, given the nature of the junction, there are real dangers with slow-moving vehicles, so that is a good point.

14:30

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): We have some information in our papers about the cost refinement exercise. Nigel Don talked about a flyover, but what alternative options have been costed?

Nigel Don: All the costings were essentially for flyovers—grade-separated junctions at the south and the north. There are no viable alternatives. Laurencekirk is on one side of the road, and a dual carriageway runs down the side of it. I do not think that anybody looked at building a bridge that might provide a detour or whatever. To build a standard flyover—a grade-separated junction—is the only thing that we can sensibly do in the long-term at the north junction and at the south junction.

People looked at roundabouts and other ideas, but such ideas are quickly dismissed by the experts on the basis that roundabouts generate more accidents than they prevent where there is busy traffic.

Anne McTaggart: What about traffic lights or even something that goes under the road as opposed to going over it? Have those ideas been considered?

Nigel Don: Yes. We get the same answer on traffic lights that we get on roundabouts. In the process of stopping and starting traffic, we generate the opportunity for serious accidents. In those circumstances, the experts tell me that traffic lights would not be productive.

The idea of something that goes underneath the road is perfectly viable. Ground conditions and the fact that there is a small tunnel under the road at one point nearby tell me that that would be possible. The civil engineers tell me that going underneath and going over the top are just two different ways of achieving the same result. There is no significant difference in terms of cost or difficulty. The assumption has been that a flyover is the right answer.

Anne McTaggart: You made a great plea on television last night in favour of the option. It was fabulous. The matter is extremely concerning and I hope that we get some results soon.

The Convener: The letter that I have in front of me states that a comprehensive accident investigation and prevention study has been done. It was commissioned in 2009. Is there merit in our writing to Transport Scotland again? Are there any gaps that have not been covered?

Nigel Don: My instinct is that Transport Scotland is, perhaps quite fairly, looking at recent accident statistics, the work that was done a couple of years ago to give us a 50 mph limit and various other bits of information. For example, as a vehicle approaches the junction, if traffic is trying to turn across it, a warning sign comes up that says "Traffic turning". Transport Scotland is looking at the work that has been done and saying, "This has made a significant improvement." That is a fair comment in its own terms.

What Transport Scotland does not see—I am sure that my constituents would agree—is that a very serious accident is just waiting to happen. The high-speed traffic might have slowed down to 50 mph on approach, but in careless hands vehicles will be the other side of 60 mph by the time they pass the junction, given the nature of modern cars. We are all aware that large numbers of heavy trailer lorries and buses have to cross there. This is a 20-mile stretch, dare I remind folk, without any kind of flyover, bridge or underpass. If someone wants to take an articulated lorry across, they have no option but to pull out and stop on the central reservation with their tail out on the other carriageway. There is nothing else that they can do.

I think that Transport Scotland is still blind to the fact that that situation is an accident waiting to happen. As the local MSP, I, like many other people, suggest that we ought to solve the problem before the accident happens.

The Convener: You are saying that there is still room for manoeuvre to have another AIP study on the aspect that you have just identified.

Nigel Don: I do not know whether we need a study to look at the situation and say that it is dangerous. A single photograph of an articulated lorry sitting across the dual carriageway of a main road is enough to tell us that we have a problem. If somebody needs to study the situation in order to provide evidence, let us have the study. However, I think that it is obvious, and so does everybody who lives there.

The Convener: You make a good point. We need to write to Transport Scotland, draw its attention to your evidence and ask it to comment. We will not ask it to do a full study; rather, we will ask it to comment on a very obvious fact.

Mark McDonald: When was the last time that we had Transport Scotland in to give evidence on the petition?

The Convener: We have not had evidence from it this session. We will check the details, and I will get back to you on that shortly.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): I have a great deal of sympathy with the request to keep the petition open, given that it is guaranteed that traffic will increase on the A937 and the A90 as a result of developments in south Montrose and the building of new houses in Laurencekirk that has been mentioned.

There is still merit in writing to Transport Scotland, which has to be given time to allow it to take the matter into account. If we are going to invite it to the committee, that is all well and good, as it is clear that there is an issue. I have been up and down the road umpteen times, and it is obvious to anybody that there is an issue. We do not need a survey to see that.

The Convener: We believe that Transport Scotland came in and gave evidence at the end of session 3. What do members feel about inviting it to come in and give us evidence on the petition?

Mark McDonald: Indeed, that was the genesis of my question. Perhaps it might be worth keeping that on the back burner for now. We could see the evidence from Aberdeenshire Council and the transport partnerships first; we may then want to invite Transport Scotland in. It is interesting to find out how long it is since we last took evidence from it.

The Convener: That is a sensible suggestion. Are members happy with that course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will write to the stakeholders that have been identified and Transport Scotland. Obviously, we are awaiting the developments that Nigel Don identified. If necessary, we will ask for an evidence session with Transport Scotland, but perhaps that will be in the longer term, once we have more evidence, including from the local authority. Do members agree to that course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank Nigel Don again for coming to the meeting and for his contribution.

Victims of Crime (Support and Assistance) (PE1403)

The Convener: The second current petition is PE1403, by Peter Morris, on improving support and assistance to victims of crime and their families. Members have a note—paper 3—by the clerk.

Peter Morris came to the committee some time ago. The petition is very good, and his valiant campaign on victims has received a lot of media coverage.

I do not think that I have to declare an interest, but members will know that in the previous session I introduced a member's bill on the creation of a commissioner for victims and witnesses.

Mark McDonald: I am sure that the committee will want to note the unveiling of the new memorial plaque to Claire Morris in Aberdeenshire on Sunday. I congratulate Peter Morris on all his efforts to achieve that outcome.

I do not think that there is much more that the committee can do with the petition, given that the Government has given us an indication of the timescale. Two of the options that are mentioned in the briefing note are:

"To continue the petition until the legislation is introduced and write to the petitioner drawing his attention to the consultation and encouraging him to contribute"

and

"To refer the petition ... to the Justice Committee".

Rather than write to the petitioner

"drawing his attention to the consultation and encouraging him to contribute",

can we instead keep the petition open until the Justice Committee calls for evidence and simply pass it to that committee, if the petitioner is happy for us to do so? That committee could consider the

petition rather than have the petitioner submit new evidence to the consultation. That approach might be the best way to proceed, if it is above board.

The Convener: That is certainly a competent possibility.

Sandra White: I second Mark McDonald's suggestion.

I thank the petitioner for raising the issue, which is very important, and hope that he is keeping well—obviously, he has a medical condition. He has proved that justice will prevail. The petition has been a success for him as well as for the committee. There is great empathy from the Scottish Government, which sees merit in the petition. The briefing states that, as part of the legislative process,

“a paper prepared by the petitioner was being considered by the Scottish Government”,

which shows how much it has taken on board what the petitioner has said.

I endorse Mark McDonald's view that we should continue the petition, which is certainly a way forward for victims. I thank the petitioner very much indeed. I think that what has happened with the petition proves that the Public Petitions Committee does a lot of good work in the Scottish Parliament. I hope that we will be looking at a success story when the Government produces its review.

The Convener: Thank you for that. The suggestion is that we continue the petition until there is a call for evidence from the Justice Committee. That is a sensible way forward. Do members agree to that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Again, I record our thanks to Peter Morris. This is a classic example of how to do a petition in terms of the strong arguments for the petition, the publicity for it and the petitioner's sincerity. On behalf of the committee, I thank the petitioner for the work that he has done.

Educating our Future Generations (PE1417)

The Convener: The third current petition is PE1417, by Andrew Ellis Morrison, on educating our future generations. Members have a note by the clerk—paper 4—and copies of the submissions. I invite comments from members.

Sandra White: I note the responses that we have received, particularly those from the Scottish Parent Teacher Council and the Educational Institute of Scotland. All the responses that we have received on the petition are unsupportive of the proposed move; indeed, some—in particular the response from the Scottish Parent Teacher

Council—suggest that the proposed amendment to legislation would make the situation more difficult.

I obviously have sympathy for anyone who lodges a petition—it is not an easy thing to do—because they have an interest in a particular area, but I think that we have no option but to close the petition. Basically, all the respondents, including the Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, have said that local decision making and the accountability of individual schools should remain local and that there would be difficulties with majority decisions of consultees.

Mark McDonald: Putting on my former-councillor hat, I have been involved in consultations on school closures and so on. There will rarely—if ever—be a consultation on closure of a school that will elicit a majority response in favour of closure, although there might be overwhelming reasons for closure.

What the petitioner suggests could muddy the waters in a consultation. We should remember at all times that a consultation is not a referendum. The petitioner has put his views on the record, but it is clear that those views are not held by others, including the Scottish Parent Teacher Council, which obviously speaks for parents and others who might have an interest in the petitioner's approach. We should close the petition.

Anne McTaggart: I agree. If the Scottish Parent Teacher Council, among others, does not back the petition, we should take that seriously.

The Convener: Do members agree to close the petition?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: We are closing the petition under rule 15.7, in terms of the points that are identified in option 4 of the briefing paper.

Safeguarding Vulnerable People (PE1418)

The Convener: The fourth current petition is PE1418, by Katherine Alexander, on safeguarding vulnerable people. Members have a note by the clerk. There has been a further submission from the petitioner, and the committee has instructed the clerk to contact the petitioner about that. I invite comments from members.

Sandra White: We have heard evidence from the petitioner. Obviously, the lady in question has had a traumatic time, as have others. We took all the evidence, including the oral evidence, in good faith.

We have had some responses, one of which stands out. Ron Culley, who is the head of health and social care at COSLA, suggests that our going down the road that the petitioner proposes would

be problematic in terms of the integrated management structures for health and social care services that are being progressed. He has hit the nail on the head. It is a difficult petition, and it raises some issues that have caused concern, but we have no option now but to close it under action (4) in the recommendations in the clerk's paper.

14:45

John Wilson: The petitioner raised a number of issues in her evidence, several of which were personal issues to do with how her concerns were dealt with. It is clear that an examination of how individuals feel about how their complaints are dealt with by social work departments—or other departments, for that matter—is needed.

The convener stated that the petitioner has contacted the clerks with regard to potential further submissions. It would be useful to keep the petition open so that we can examine those at a future meeting.

We still need to raise some issues with the Scottish Government. It might be useful to pull together the information that we have received so far and to submit that to the Government and ask it whether the working group on social work complaints procedures could consider the issues that the petitioner has raised.

This committee has in the past requested that the Scottish Government get in touch with the petitioner to ask her to engage with any processes or inquiries that are taking place. It might be worth our while to pass on the petitioner's details so that the Government can contact her directly to discuss the issues that have been raised and consider how those can best be taken forward.

The Convener: That is quite sensible. My background is in social work. From when the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 came in, all social workers have had to be qualified. Local government structures have become more sophisticated, but a chief social work officer is still needed, while the overall director may have a housing, management or teaching qualification. The old traditional lines, where there was simply a director of social work, have gone. Members will see from the analysis in the committee papers that some local authorities have a department of housing and social work while others have a department of education and social work.

At one level—I say this as someone who is qualified in social work—it is probably unrealistic to expect the director at the very top level to have that paper qualification, but the chief social work officer must have it. The petitioner makes valid points in that regard.

It would be best for us to ask the Scottish Government what safeguards still exist, to ensure that we get a copper-bottomed answer for the petitioner. She is clearly very upset about a number of aspects that apply across Scotland. I would be happier if, in the light of the comments from John Wilson and Sandra White, we could continue the petition until we get more information.

Sandra White: Thank you, convener. In the light of what you and John Wilson have said, and reflecting on some of the evidence that we have heard, I think that it would probably be a good idea to continue the petition and to get more evidence.

The reason why I mentioned the point that Ron Culley raised is that—as you said, convener—it is not always possible in this day and age to have a social work professional as head of the social work department, given the integrated management of health and social care services. The submissions that came back from social work, COSLA and others all highlight that issue, so I wanted to put that point on the record.

The Convener: Are members happy with the suggested course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will continue the petition in the light of the comments that have been made, and we will write to the Scottish Government.

Scottish Minister for Older People (PE1419)

The Convener: The final current petition for consideration today is PE1419, by Jimmy Deuchars, on a Scottish minister for older people.

Sandra White: As the convener of the cross-party group on older people, age and ageing, a co-signatory to Alex Neil's proposed bill on a commissioner for older people, and someone who has, as recently as a few months ago, said that thought should be given to appointing someone—perhaps not a commissioner—who would be dedicated to older people and their issues, I take a great interest in the subject of the petition, as do others.

However, the accompanying papers and responses from Age Scotland and others suggest that many organisations are not in favour of a minister for older people—they do not feel that it should be a Cabinet post, because things have moved on. I am inclined to agree with that point. We have a minister who has responsibility for older people—Nicola Sturgeon, who is the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Cities Strategy.

The fear is that the influence that can be brought to bear in the interests of older people would be diluted if there were a separate minister.

I will listen to the comments of other members before I make up my mind about whether we should continue the petition.

Nanette Milne: I agree with Sandra White. The committee papers suggest that there is concern about possible dilution of the influence that can currently be brought to bear in the interests of older people. Age Scotland is concerned that—given the moves to integrate health and social care services—having a dedicated minister for older people could take attention away from older people and result in a process-driven approach rather than one that is focused on outcomes for people, which is the direction that we want to move in. The papers suggest that what we currently have is the best situation.

Sandra White: Having been a member of the Equal Opportunities Committee, I have always been supportive of equality proofing everything that goes through committees. As Nanette Milne said, older people's issues are represented in the Cabinet, but the best way forward might be to ensure that they are equality proofed—or age proofed—in the work of all committees. Perhaps we could write to the cabinet secretary and ask whether it is her intention that the interests that she represents on behalf of older people be dealt with by committees in the same way that they deal with equalities issues when they consider legislation and so on.

The Convener: The suggestion is that championing of elderly care be mainstreamed into day-to-day activity by Nicola Sturgeon. That is what the Government's response said.

Angus MacDonald: I concur with the comments that have been made by Sandra White and Nanette Milne. They made some valid points. It is surely better to have the interests of older people represented at the highest level in Parliament. Age Scotland's comments acknowledge that position. I would therefore be content to close the petition.

The Convener: The clerk has just pointed out that the issue about mainstreaming that Sandra White raised was addressed in the Government's response, which said, basically, that there are benefits in mainstreaming such issues.

Sandra White: In that case, I agree that we should close the petition.

The Convener: Do we agree to close the petition, under rule 15.7, in line with option 4 in the clerk's option paper?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Meeting closed at 14:54.

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