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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

RURAL AFFAIRS, CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 5 February 2014

Session 4

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RURAL AFFAIRS, CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE
3rd Meeting 2014, Session 4

CONVENER

*Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab)
*Nigel Don (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
*Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Cara Hilton (Dunfermline) (Lab)
*Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD)
*Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP)
*Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Carroll Buxton (Highlands and Islands Enterprise)
Scott Dalgarno (Highland Council)
Calum Davidson (Highlands and Islands Enterprise)
Stuart Goodall (Confor)
John Mayhew (Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland)
Dr Sarah Skerratt (Scotland's Rural College)
Professor Phil Thomas (Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lynn Tullis

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee

Wednesday 5 February 2014

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:04*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Rob Gibson): Welcome to the third meeting in 2014 of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. I ask everyone present to remember to turn off mobile phones and other electronic devices, as they interfere with our sound system. I have received apologies from Cara Hilton.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking business in private. Do members agree to discuss in private at our next meeting our approach to various aquaculture and fisheries issues?

Members *indicated agreement.*

National Planning Framework 3

10:04

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is an evidence session on the draft third national planning framework, or NPF3. This is our second panel of witnesses on the subject. Unfortunately, we have received a note from Scottish Land & Estates to tell us that Sarah-Jane Laing is not well and cannot be present. We are sorry about that. On behalf of the committee, I wish her a speedy recovery.

To kick off, I ask everybody to introduce themselves. We will go round the table, starting with John Mayhew. You do not need to say much—we will ask the questions.

John Mayhew (Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland): I am director of the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland, which is a membership charity with about 500 members.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): I am a member of the Scottish Parliament for South Scotland and the shadow minister for environment and climate change.

Dr Sarah Skerratt (Scotland's Rural College): I am the director of the rural policy centre at Scotland's Rural College.

Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP): I am an MSP for the Central Scotland region.

Professor Phil Thomas (Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation): I am chairman of the Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation.

Scott Dalgarno (Highland Council): I am the development plans manager with Highland Council.

Nigel Don (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): I am the MSP for Angus North and Mearns.

Carroll Buxton (Highlands and Islands Enterprise): I am the director of regional development with Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I am the MSP for Galloway and West Dumfries.

Calum Davidson (Highlands and Islands Enterprise): I am the director of energy and low carbon with Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD): I am an MSP for South Scotland.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): I am the MSP for Falkirk East.

Stuart Goodall (Confor): I am from Confor, the representative body for the forestry and timber sector.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): I am the MSP for Angus South.

The Convener: I am Rob Gibson, the committee convener and the MSP for Caithness, Sutherland and Ross.

The witnesses do not have to answer every question that comes up, but feel free to indicate, and I will try to bring everybody in.

How effective were NPF1 and NPF2 as long-term spatial strategies in rural areas? What do you think about the history of our trying to work out national priorities in this way and trying to hone them for the current period?

Carroll Buxton: Generally, we think that the approach is positive. Certainly, NPF3 is described as "the spatial expression" of the Government economic strategy, which is positive. The bringing together of economic development, sustainability and environmental issues is a positive and welcome move.

The Convener: Does anyone want to flesh out any of the differences that have arisen as we have moved on through three phases of having this national overview?

John Mayhew: It is important that we have a spatial strategy at national level. Overall, NPF1 and NPF2 worked pretty well. We have strategic development plans at regional level and local development plans, but there has to be something that gives a national spatial steer to those. That is what the NPF seeks to do and, in general, it does it well. There are tensions between some of the things that it is trying to achieve, just as there are tensions between Government objectives. We are trying to protect the landscape and generate renewable energy, and we are trying to provide housing for people and look after biodiversity. There needs to be a way in which some of those tensions are articulated and addressed and an overall national lead given on the priorities, which is what the NPF seeks to do.

The Convener: We are making a start on trying to work out what the priorities are, so that we can report. Clearly, sustainability in our economy and looking after our natural resources have to be carefully balanced. People have different views on that. Does NPF3 do that better for this age than previous NPFs did?

Professor Thomas: It has made progress. Overall, as a high-level strategic document, it is really quite good. This is not necessarily a weakness of where the framework is now, but it is the aspect that probably needs to be refined a bit more: if you are looking for further developments, it is sometimes quite difficult to predict the economic elements of development, but they are important for putting the rest of the flesh on the bones. That is the bit of articulation that I think might well develop more fully in subsequent documents over time.

The Convener: What do you mean by

"predict the economic elements of development"?

Professor Thomas: In Scotland, we have come a long way in identifying key industries and key parts of the economy that we wish to be developed. The next questions are how far and how quickly to develop. We all recognise that that is a challenge, but it is fundamental to thinking ahead about planning issues and it would build into NPF3—which is a good document.

The Convener: We do not need to labour the general point, but there might be things in there that folk want to come back on.

We want to look at the way in which the needs of rural communities have been taken into account—which is our main remit in this committee—when proposals are developed. How do rural communities fare in the documents before us, given that we are looking at the well-planned this and that?

Scott Dalgarno: We have a positive observation to make about the spatial strategy in NPF3. The previous NPFs had areas of co-ordinated action, which were mentioned in the main issues report, and everyone was clamouring to ensure that their area was picked up by one of those areas of co-ordinated action. The shift in the proposed NPF, with areas of co-ordinated action being separated into energy hubs focused on low carbon and the clear spatial strategy featuring three tiers going down from the cities and city regions to the rural towns and coastal hubs, is a positive one. That very fairly addresses the wider needs of Scottish communities, particularly rural communities. That was perhaps not portrayed so well under the previous areas of co-ordinated action.

Dr Skerratt: The integration that is proposed in the framework is really welcome but, as you will have seen from our submission, we would like further integration. We envisage that in three broad ways. First, we would like the framework to be integrated with other national policies and regional expressions of policy, particularly rural policies.

Secondly, we would like integration across geographies. As you will have seen from our submission, we welcome the differentiation that Scott Dalgarno has just talked about, although we are concerned that that might compartmentalise rural areas, rather than looking at synergies, at

how they are related in practice, and therefore at how they need to be related to one another in the planning context.

Thirdly, we would encourage more integration between themes: housing has been discussed, and we particularly highlight affordable housing; infrastructural investment in broadband and roads; and also employment and employability. As we know, those themes are knitted in with one another. We acknowledge the need to itemise them, but we are concerned that itemisation leads to compartmentalisation.

The Convener: Graeme Dey will take that point forward.

Graeme Dey: I would like to develop it in a specific direction. How does NPF3—or how could it be made to—help check the outward migration of young people from rural areas?

Dr Skerratt: I do not know whether this will answer your question but, as you have noted, we are concerned that that is not in NPF3—young people are not mentioned at all. We suggested that the framework should take account of affordable housing, which is critical to young people remaining in rural areas. We also highlighted business incubator units and the apprenticeships that are often associated with them as businesses grow. A further consideration is affordable transport—public transport and perhaps integrated transport between the private, community and public sectors.

We felt that those three elements would encourage the retention of young people and sit alongside what is mentioned in the document as well as what other documents say about further and higher education provision. Some education providers are enabling young people to stay in rural areas rather than having to leave, but the issue is what happens after that stage to retain those young people. The work in education is admirable and critical, but we need to look at what happens next, and we feel that those other elements—housing, business units and transport—are essential.

10:15

Angus MacDonald: It is clear that there is a major need for not just affordable housing but social housing in rural Scotland. The panel will be aware that one of the 13 priorities for rural Scotland as outlined by the Scotland Rural Development Council is:

"An improved supply of affordable housing in the places where it is needed, using designs which are appropriate and sustainable."

However, the submission from the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland raises concerns with regard to the possibility of

"uncontrolled sprawl of housing and other development in rural areas."

NPF1 and NPF2 have shared the same goal as NPF3 with regard to housing supply, so perhaps the panel can enlighten us on why there has been less progress than we would have liked.

The Convener: We will try to bring the issues of outmigration and housing together now, if the witnesses want to comment on them. Scott Dalgarno said that Highland Council has identified from the census that housing development will be key to many areas of success. Perhaps he can take his answer from there.

Scott Dalgarno: I was hoping to comment on young people in particular in response to the question that was posed. By way of illustration I will focus on the Caithness and Sutherland area, for which, incidentally, we are preparing a local development plan at present. That is a good illustration of an area in which the need to tackle the issue of retaining young people is particularly pronounced.

It is interesting to note that NPF3 specifically identifies Wick, Thurso and Scrabster as

"centres for investment, hubs for transport and servicing and as places to live and work."

That is positive, because we need a national framework that we can reflect in our local development plans. However, it illustrates the wider point that the NPF tends to reflect things that are already happening as part of those plans. We are addressing those issues through the local development plan process; we are very aware of them and are tackling them head-on with other agencies in the area. There is perhaps less focus in the NPF than there might be on what will drive that work forward even further.

The Convener: I will press you on that point just a little. It is clear that, in Caithness, the lack of land in the towns of Thurso and Wick has meant that people have sought to build houses in the countryside. Farmers have been able to sell plots—and the population of the rural areas in Caithness has increased—but only to those who can afford them.

What are we going to do about the need for people to have somewhere to live in those hub areas? That is the issue that the census raises.

Scott Dalgarno: There has historically been some land available—a generous supply, I would say—in the towns. However, there has been a shift, as the census shows, to outward landward areas outwith the towns. We are seeking to redress that by allocating more land in the towns

so that we can provide for a wide choice of housing there and concentrate on servicing the towns and reducing the need to travel in order to create sustainable places in which to live. We are very aware of that issue and are trying to address it through our local development plans.

Alex Fergusson: I will offer a south of Scotland perspective on that point. In my experience, the problem is that, where housing has been built in a rural part of south-west Scotland, it has tended to be built not so much where the identified need is, but more where the infrastructure will support the housing. Often, housing is built in communities where there are not a lot of local employment opportunities and where there is poor public transport infrastructure. Unless we join up all that thinking, we will not solve the problem. We might build houses, but building them in the wrong places has a particularly poor effect on meeting climate change targets, as people are more dependent on cars to get anywhere. This is quite a problem in not just the north but the south of Scotland.

The Convener: We have large areas of rural Scotland where there are small towns and quite big countryside areas.

We are thinking about outmigration—housing and so on; taking on all those points—and means of stopping it.

Carroll Buxton: I want to build on what Sarah Skerratt said. Housing, particularly affordable housing, is incredibly important in retaining young people in rural areas, but so are the connectivity issues. The young people who access that affordable housing must also have access to opportunities for employment or education and the ability to get to those opportunities. The linkages between those things are vital; if we have one without the other, that does not really address the issue.

As well as transport connectivity, digital connectivity is important and is mentioned in NPF3.

The Convener: I will have to press you on that because even the scheme around the Highlands is aimed at only 83 per cent of homes and businesses.

Carroll Buxton: We are contractually committed to connecting 84 per cent of premises.

The Convener: Sorry, I got the figure wrong—it is 84 per cent.

Carroll Buxton: However, that is only a starting point and we are committed to extending that. We are already considering how we can increase that percentage and extend the scheme to more premises. We are also looking at other methods of connectivity—new technologies that are coming on stream all the time. Our aim is to get to 100 per cent, and we must focus on that. However, to put it in context, without the project that is currently being rolled out in the Highlands and Islands only 21 per cent of premises would be covered. Although 84 per cent is not our ultimate aim, it is an incredibly big leap forward from where we would be without the project.

The Convener: Without a doubt, and the same is true of the south of Scotland scheme, we agree. Nevertheless, it will still be more expensive for people to hook up to the system from the most remote rural areas, and we are talking about accessibility. During our budget considerations, we took evidence on community broadband Scotland, which advises people but has only a very small pot of money. The cost of people accessing broadband is an added problem in those areas.

Carroll Buxton: I underline that addressing the last 16 per cent of premises in the Highlands and Islands is not the remit purely of community broadband Scotland. Our aim should be, as far as possible, to establish the core next-generation broadband project, which will allow people to access wholesale prices on a national pricing basis.

Dr Skerratt: We may return to the issue of affordability, as broadband is essential to the infrastructure that underpins the sustainability of rural Scotland. I am on a committee of the Royal Society of Edinburgh that has undertaken an inquiry into spreading the benefits of digital participation. The inquiry's findings will be published in the spring. Affordability and reliability are two key elements in ensuring that people have what is now seen as a right to access. It is about affording rights because if someone does not have access, they do not have access to certain rights as a citizen. Access to broadband has increasing implications according to the findings of the RSE report.

Claudia Beamish: I want to broaden out slightly this discussion of the needs of rural communities. One of the Government's 13 priorities for rural Scotland is more community control of assets and resources. I wonder how relevant that is in the conversation that we are having about empowering our rural communities through the provision of affordable housing and the ownership of assets in towns and villages and beyond.

The Convener: That might well be something that "energy man" here picks up.

Calum Davidson: From HIE's viewpoint, successful communities are those that control a lot of their assets. Gigha is a successful community that controls its assets and so has the ability to control money-generating activities. Particularly in places such as Gigha and Eigg, we are looking at

community renewable energy, which it is not just renewable energy, but something that gives a sustained, long-term income stream that allows the community to reinvest in a range of other activities, whether energy efficiency, housing or community facilities.

In some parts of Scotland, though, grid access is a major problem because communities cannot develop projects that connect to the grid. HIE is working with the Scottish and UK Governments on transmission issues. However, communities right at the end of the wire can have real problems.

I will touch on a point that I was going to make earlier. At the heart of a successful rural community is well-paid employment—everything else flows from that. If people are in well-paid employment, we get not outmigration but inmigration of young people. For example, there has been significant population growth over the past 10 years in Orkney on the back of the testing of marine renewables—in effect the development of whole new industries. That ties in to a really interesting physical infrastructure of ports and harbours and, crucially, into what from an urban area look like very small educational activities. For example, Heriot-Watt University and the University of the Highlands and Islands have quite small masters programmes in places such as Stromness, but they are churning out 20 to 30 high-quality graduates per year who are right at the heart of economic revival. Even if we look at that from somewhere like Glasgow, Edinburgh or Aberdeen, which have many thousands of students, we can see that a small location with high-quality education can be an important driver of employment opportunities and, crucially, getting young people back into the communities. As Rob Gibson knows, my son is now studying back up in Thurso and he intends to stay there, on the back of the development of community renewable energy.

The Convener: That is an interesting point. The maps in NPF3 show the growth points, to use the old Highlands and Islands Development Board term. John Mayhew has talked an awful lot about the bits in between, which seems to give a very different picture of Scotland.

John Mayhew: The point that we were trying to make was very much the one that Scott Dalgarno made, which is that it is best not only from a landscape point of view, which is our interest, but from a climate change point of view—that aspect is part of the committee's remit—to focus the housing development that is required in the towns and villages, if that is possible. I acknowledge what has been said about the lack of available land and that Highland Council and others are doing their best to identify land across Scotland. However, as Alex Fergusson said, it is important that housing development goes in the right place, which is where it is needed and not just to where the infrastructure can support it.

Paragraph 2.24 of NPF3 worries us a little because it states:

> "We do not wish to see development ... unnecessarily constrained."

If I was somebody wanting to build a one-off house, or quite a few of them, in the middle of the countryside, I would find some support in that statement and that might bring me into conflict with the planned approach that the local authorities are trying to take to encourage development in places that have public transport and schools, for example.

The Convener: It is the easy management of people that we are talking about, not the actual use of our natural resources, which are spread all over the place. When we talk about the countryside, we are going to have to be a little more focused in the way that we define it, because just to say that we cannot have houses in the countryside is to go against the whole way in which people have lived in these lands for millennia. The resources that we are talking about today are in small places as well as in larger ones. We are trying to achieve a balance of these things, which is why I am trying to explore the issue in a bit more detail just now. Sarah Skerratt was going to say something about that.

10:30

Dr Skerratt: I was going to come back to a point that was made earlier.

The Convener: Please carry on.

Dr Skerratt: You talked about community control of assets. In 2011, we carried out research on community land buyouts and found evidence that community ownership enhances community resilience.

However, let me qualify that a wee bit—although I am not qualifying that evidence. In our response to the proposed community empowerment bill, we said that a move towards asset ownership does not necessarily equate with empowerment of the community, because the processes are complex. There needs to be support in relation to governance and capacity building. Initiatives that run alongside the proposed bill offer guidance and support community learning and development, but we are concerned that in the bill there is a presumption of an immediate link between ownership of assets and empowerment of communities.

A flavour of that approach comes through in the national planning framework in relation to renewables, as we said in our submission. An

implicit link is made between a growth in renewables and community benefit. However, as we all know, the situation is much more nuanced and depends on who is involved in the process, the capacity of communities, the accrual and disbursement of benefits and so on. We are arguing that the situation is more complex—it is still mappable and navigable, but it is complex.

Carroll Buxton: I absolutely agree. Community ownership of assets is great and enhances the resilience of fragile communities, as Sarah Skerratt said, and in the Highlands and Islands we try to align the approach with community capacity building. In our community account management programme, we work with anchor organisations in communities to try to ensure that there is capacity to continue, so that assets have a sustainable future. We also try to bring in more people. In very rural communities, we tend to find that the same faces are involved in everything. We need to spread knowledge and capacity throughout communities.

Dr Skerratt: I am sorry; I do not want to hog this part of the discussion. We are also researching the role of the private sector in working with communities. Certainly in the field in which I research, rural communities are regarded as everything but the private sector. However, the private sector is integral to rural communities. We are interested in exploring how the private sector works with communities, whether we are talking about private landowners, micro-enterprises or small and medium-sized enterprises. I wanted to flag up that our research shows that the private sector is integral in the process.

The Convener: That is helpful; it would be interesting to see your report. We need to hone some ideas about how NPF3 accounts for rural communities.

Professor Thomas: Let me pick over a point that Sarah Skerratt has just made and that Calum Davidson made earlier. The key to all this is economic development. If there are not jobs and opportunities, such as better local opportunities for education, we simply create highways out of rural areas rather than highways into them.

A distinctive element of rural areas is, I think, that if the industries and activities that often come in as a result of inward investment are tied to the area, because they are somehow tied to the resources—be it forestry, agriculture, fish farming or whatever—those activities are less mobile. If we simply pilot in some manufacturing activity that does not really fit, there is always the risk that a shift in the economics will mean that the activity is piloted out and the area is left with a major problem. Rural areas need development that is tied to the rural resources and is on a scale that does not distort the rural community. You then start tying in education, housing and everything that goes with it, so you get clusters of activity in particular places. That is the model we should be trying to follow.

The Convener: That is certainly one model.

We want now to move to the infrastructure issues. The spatial strategy that is pursued in the draft NPF3 considers city regions, rural areas, coasts and islands. They all share particular issues, such as flooding and waste.

Jim Hume: As the convener said, issues such as low carbon and employment are important elements of the spatial strategy. It may be wise to look also at flooding and river basin management; obviously, river basins are generally not coterminous with local authority areas. It would be interesting to hear the panel's views about where we are with river basin management, specifically in relation to flooding, and about the framework's position on that. Are we seeing enough local authorities working on flood risk management? Is it a part of planning and the rural economy that everyone is thinking about? Are we seeing joint activity already, or do we need to work harder on that?

Scott Dalgarno: We are dealing adequately with flooding issues. Not only are we making sure that they are dealt with early in the planning application process, we are dealing with them through the development plan as well. The strategic environmental assessment process that we go through in preparing a development plan and interrogating each decision that we make on allocations for future development adequately addresses the potential for flood risk.

Jim Hume: Perhaps we need to think outside the Highland Council area and look at other local authority areas. Obviously, we are interested in the whole of Scotland. Do you have a view on Scotland as a whole, rather than just the Highlands?

Scott Dalgarno: I am not sure what to add, except that changes are coming nationally with the potentially vulnerable areas in the new mapping. We are keen to see how that might affect future development opportunities. Potentially it could impinge on options for the future, which is something that we need to be acutely aware of.

Graeme Dey: To develop the point that Jim Hume is trying to make, in previous work that the committee has done with NFU Scotland on climate change adaptation there were conversations about the need for dialogue between local authorities and farmers on what use certain fields might be put to. For instance, would low-value crops be planted in those fields because there is every chance that in the management of floods they would have to be used for water run-off? Are such

conversations with local authorities already happening, or do we need to put momentum into that nationally?

Scott Dalgarno: It would certainly be useful to have a long-term focus and to get a guide on those kinds of issues nationally. As I said, we have clear processes for minimising any risk of flooding in the future. We are also very aware of current flood alleviation schemes, but a longer-term view might be beneficial.

The Convener: We are dealing not just with new communities but with existing ones that have to deal with coastal flooding as well as inland flooding from rivers. How do we reflect that in our remarks about NPF3? It is often the older housing and older communities that Sarah Skerratt wants to build on that are extremely vulnerable, especially the coastal ones. I am sure that Alex Fergusson sees a similar situation in Dumfries, for example.

Jim Hume: Dr Skerratt, as head of the land economy and environment research group at Scotland's Rural College, do you think that a conversation is starting to happen with land users about river basin management further downstream?

Dr Skerratt: Yes, very much so.

Jim Hume: Is it in its infancy?

Dr Skerratt: Within our consulting division, we have a specialist unit that looks at the environment and environmental implications of different land-use activities. The unit works closely with our agricultural consultants. As Mr Hume has said, it is a relatively new field. There have been environmental specialists in the organisation for a number of years, but setting up the unit recognises the growing imperative of these issues, so we are integrating those into the advice that is given to farmers and land managers on larger estates with whom we work.

Professor Thomas: I can respond to this because, in a previous incarnation, I was chief executive of Scotland's Rural College for quite a long time. There has always been an issue with flooding on major rivers, such the Nith and the Tay. They might not necessarily express it in these terms, but farmers often acknowledge that they have land close to the river that is at greater risk, so they will plan around that. The bits that become difficult to manage are often simple things such as rabbit burrows that weaken the riverbank, so that the first time there is real spate, the bank is breached and the farmer has problems, and it is a major cost to re-establish the bank.

If there is a lesson to be learned that we might not have learned well enough—they are learning it pretty quickly in the south of England at the moment—it is that the irritating issue of constant maintenance has a habit of coming back and biting you if you do not do it, if I can put it that way. There is a lesson in there and farmers are probably responding to it already.

Jim Hume: I am from the farming community. We often hear that farmers cannot maintain some ditches, drains and burns. In the middle of Hawick, half of the river is backed up with gravel and the Hawick flood risk management group has been looking for the gravel to be extracted, as has always happened. We are seeing the same in the Somerset levels of course. According to what I hear, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency keeps saying no.

The Convener: Are you asking about the maintenance of rivers, such as we have seen with the diggers down on the Somerset levels, not being allowed for environmental reasons?

Jim Hume: Yes. Is that something that you recognise?

Professor Thomas: I could not comment on SEPA's budget for that.

Jim Hume: It is not necessarily about the budget but about the fact that people are not being allowed to dredge or take out gravel from the rivers as they would have done years ago. People now have to have a licence to do that.

Professor Thomas: Taking gravel out is certainly more controlled than it was; that is the better way to describe it. Historically, if we look back 30 or 40 years, farmers would work on riverbanks of their own volition and it is now much more difficult to do that.

There are restrictions and, just last year, SEPA took a landowner to court for doing unauthorised riverbank work. For a while, Scottish Natural Heritage had a policy, referred to as the wild rivers policy, that tried to encourage people in effect to allow rivers to take their course. Although that policy may still be in place, it is not as visible as it once was, so there are issues about the regulation of who can do what and where.

Jim Hume: It can also be an urban issue. As I mentioned, in the centre of Hawick half of the river is gravelled up, and we have continual flooding.

10:45

The Convener: On the same theme, there may be one or two other matters related to city regions, rural areas, coasts and islands that we want to look at in the spatial strategy. Dick Lyle has a question on one of those matters.

Richard Lyle: Professor Thomas touched on this issue when he talked about providing local jobs. The Scottish Government has a zero waste

strategy, but waste still passes by other waste as it travels from one part of the country to another. In fact, earlier this morning, I discovered that we are even exporting waste to Wales.

Viridor has recently opened a new glass-recycling plant in Newarthill, which is just up the road from where I live. The plant is providing 30 jobs. Should the Government return to what I believe was first done by the Scottish Executive and designate sites for waste, recycling or even heat generation? In particular, we have finally—I compliment the Government on this—designated Ravenscraig as a national development site. A lot of building work is going on at the site of the former steel plant thanks to the Scottish Government's approval of a tax increment financing project. We could also have a heat generation plant in the area, which would reduce our carbon footprint.

My question, after all that, is this: should the Government push designated sites? The problem is the nimby—not in my back yard—attitude, because some people would not like that, but should we have a concentrated programme in order to reduce our waste?

The Convener: The waste strategy undoubtedly has a spatial dimension. We must obviously think about that issue, given that creating waste is a major human activity. Does anyone wish to comment on waste?

Professor Thomas: I will comment because the aquaculture industry has been in discussion with the Scottish Government about that specific issue. We have encountered situations whereby waste has had to be tracked from sites over long distances. In fact, until recently, the nearest disposal site for some types of waste was Doncaster, which is a long way away. Developing a strategy that is regionally based, in order to reduce the distances that you have to travel, is something that we must take on board, but discussion on that matter has begun.

Calum Davidson: In many ways, there must be a refocus in rural Scotland, so that waste is seen not as a problem but as an opportunity. An example is up in Shetland, where it is very expensive to ship glass out of the island. Consequently, a company has been set up that turns glass into gravel and sand for the building industry. It is that kind of low-level focus and trying to get into industry the thought that one person's waste is another person's feedstock, that will have a significant impact.

Alex Fergusson: I will add to what is a hugely important point. A couple of weeks ago, I visited a scallop processing plant in my constituency. All the shells, which used to be disposed of in this country until SEPA decided that they should not be, are exported to Norway, where they are ground down for use in pet food. That is diabolical. We should be adding the value here—it is as simple as that. With a joined-up strategy we could do that.

The Convener: Those are good points.

Dr Skerratt: I have another example of joined-up use of waste. Last year—or the year before—I visited the North Harris Trust. It uses waste oil from restaurants to power the car that the ranger uses to go around the island. The trust also has a designated waste area where it recycles glass, waste oil and so on, so it is possible to designate sites. I am sure that there are numerous examples at that local level of seeing waste as an asset rather than a problem.

The Convener: We have always discussed waste in that way. With reference to the spatial strategy, we thought that rural areas might well be affected by the use of sites for processing waste in the way that we have just discussed. Other places are used as transit sites.

Nigel Don: We can perhaps consider these issues and move the debate on by thinking about wood. I am conscious that trees grow, and we could do with rather more of them, for all sorts of reasons that people will give us. The wood that we can get out of a sawmill is a useable and renewable source of housing material, and people might wish to comment on that. The waste wood is a wonderful resource for burning to generate heat, and perhaps power. Do we have a strategy for wood? I know that we are considering a spatial strategy, but wood is an enormous resource, and it could occupy a very large area of Scotland. Indeed, it already does: 18 per cent of Scotland is covered with wood, so it is rather important.

Stuart Goodall: Thank you for teeing up that question for me so well—I much appreciate it. I am very supportive of exploring that issue further. We view the forestry sector as the ultimate sustainable development sector, which provides renewable opportunities to deliver rural employment, to benefit the environment and to help the Government to achieve its carbon targets. We are keen for forestry to be able to expand beyond that 18 per cent in a sustainable way, working with other land uses.

We are not delivering enough of the commercial components of forestry. Successive Scottish Governments have wished to deliver 10,000 hectares of planting a year, using a mixture of productive, commercial forestry and native woodland. At the moment, and for the past six or seven years, we have not been delivering any of the commercial woodland. That creates a problem for us in the future. You might have seen stuff in the media recently about concerns over the

sector's ability to reinvest in the future if we do not plant now.

I wanted to make that plug. There is a recognition about planting, but there is not a recognition of the commercial element. It is important that the commercial element is pulled out in the committee's work.

Having made that plug, I return to the specific question. We are cautious around the use of the term "waste" in forestry. The industry had a lot of problems in the past with SEPA, which wanted to license the products from sawmills as waste. That would have resulted in additional costs and bureaucracy. The product does not have a great value. A sawmill produces sawn timber, which has a very high value, but the rest of the wood, which can be 40 to 50 per cent of the log that goes in, has a much lower value. Thankfully, however, that material is not waste and there have been traditional markets for it. It goes into panel boards. The production of MDF, which might end up in a kitchen, is one use. Animal bedding is another. There are all sorts of markets for it. Renewable energy is now arising as a market, and that is creating competition, both for the raw material and for the cold product—as we call it—from the sawmilling process.

The important thing for us is the approach that the Government takes in providing support for the renewable energy sector. We have been concerned at the simplistic support for large-scale electricity generation, especially at the UK Government level. That is a terribly inefficient way to use wood. Wood has energy locked up in it. If it is burned for electricity, that unlocks about 40 per cent of its latent energy. If it is burned in a combined heat and power plant or is used as a heat source to heat a swimming pool or a local community, we can get more than 90 per cent of the latent value from it. Losing more than half of it through an inefficient process is a crazy idea. We have been pleased that the Scottish Government has been very positive in working with us and asking how it can steer the energy sector towards using wood at a local scale and on a much smaller scale.

My main message is that forestry co-products should not be seen as waste. There is a market for them, so the best use should be made of that material. We want to ensure that we can continue to support the sawmilling sector. Putting wood into houses as a renewable, high-value material creates an awful lot of jobs, added value and carbon benefits. Where it is being used in the energy sector, it is very much at the local, small scale where it can provide a complementary benefit.

Calum Davidson: Renewable heat is the big issue in rural areas. Unlike urban areas, we can get large district heating schemes. The best way to do that is to replace the use of oil in businesses or domestic premises with biomass or wood. I fully support Stuart Goodall's comments.

The Convener: It is interesting that the Bank of Scotland survey about farmers found that the third most prevalent use of renewable resources is wood for burning. It is also interesting that a crisis has been raised by some farmers about land being taken over for growing trees. There seems to me to be a disconnect there, if farmers are using quite a lot of wood for burning in their premises and for their businesses.

Jim Hume: I concur with what Stuart Goodall said. Long before I was an MSP, I did some studies in Europe—in Austria, to be specific—on the use of wood products. There, the smaller community heating plants were purely about creating heat, and the slightly larger ones were for co-generation, so the electricity was almost a by-product of heating water.

The Convener: Those comments are fascinating. I would like to keep the issue of timber going for a minute; I know that Alex Fergusson wants to come back in.

On Sunday night, I saw a programme about Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall in Sweden. He went to Ikea, where they are building complete houses, mainly from timber and other resources; whole rooms can be patched together in a day to make houses that are much cheaper than the affordable houses that we are building by conventional means. With a lot of timber available, is it more important to use it for construction of that sort? We could be doing an awful lot more with our resource here, and that seems to me to be one way in which we could deal with the housing issue. Maybe people do not like living in little boxes, but on the other hand, they do, and those houses could be a good deal more climate friendly, too. Are we geared up to be able to think about using timber to that extent? Obviously, places such as Sweden have a heck of a lot more than we have.

Stuart Goodall: I totally agree with you. If you were looking at the raw materials available and asking how to achieve the best value for the economy, the environment and rural employment, you would decide that the timber should be used for construction purposes. It locks up the carbon, it displaces other materials that have a huge energy input in their construction, and it provides local employment, so it gives a big boost.

In Scotland, we are ahead of the rest of the UK when it comes to the acceptability of using timber—for example, in timber-framed housing—but we still encounter resistance to its use. There are a lot of misperceptions out there. For example, some people think of the story of the second

house being blown over by a wolf. That does not happen. Others may believe that a timber house would burst into flames the first time that somebody lit a cigarette nearby; that is rubbish as well. Wood burns predictably and is a far safer building material than steel is.

We need to get people to understand the facts, because Scotland is the engine house of the UK timber industry. We produce 50 per cent of the timber and 50 per cent of the sawn products. We then export that. It is a nice export story, if you call England an export market, and we are quite happy to look at it in that context. However, there are more opportunities for using timber here. Companies over in Troon, for example, are creating timber frames on site as panels that can be erected quickly. That allows building to happen very quickly and thermo-efficiently, which reduces the energy consumption of the life cycle of the property. It is about encouraging developers, architects and specifiers to understand the properties of timber and work with it.

11:00

The Convener: There are a number of points to raise. Alex Fergusson is next, to be followed by Claudia Beamish.

Alex Fergusson: I return to the biomass issue. I am a great believer in adding value locally wherever possible. To what extent is the fuel for biomass imported at the moment? To what extent are we self-sufficient? Are we capable of being 100 per cent self-sufficient?

Stuart Goodall: Scottish and Southern Energy has consent to build a wood energy plant at Grangemouth.

Angus MacDonald: And at Rosyth.

Stuart Goodall: Yes, it was looking at four plants.

The scale that it is looking at is hundreds of thousands of tonnes of wood. In Scotland we produce 6 million or 7 million tonnes of wood, so if someone comes along and says that they need half a million or a million tonnes of wood, that displaces other business. We have had concerns about that.

Companies such as Scottish and Southern Energy are looking to import from North America for two reasons. One is that they require huge volumes and it is difficult to aggregate that level of volume in one place without impacting on the existing sawmilling sector. The second is that they are able to buy the wood in wood-pellet form—ground-down sawdust that is reconstituted as a pellet—very cheaply from places such as North America, because there is not a ready market there. That is what is happening.

We have the opportunity to develop an awful lot more local-scale wood heat, because the amount of wood that is used to heat a swimming pool or an old folks home cheaply—especially if it is off the gas grid and the wood is replacing oil—is only hundreds of tonnes a year, as opposed to hundreds of thousands or millions of tonnes.

It comes back to the support that the Government provides and the signals that it sends to say, "We don't want to just let this thing develop as is." In this case, it should not be driven by the renewables obligation, which is a UK-based mechanism that will create real damage in terms of Scottish employment and hitting carbon targets. We would appeal for the Scottish Government to be very active in that regard.

Claudia Beamish: I want to focus on what I regard as a very interesting conversation about the opportunities from what is no longer waste but can be used in recycling. I am interested in the opportunities in wood—all sorts of opportunities exist. What changes should be made to the spatial strategy of NPF3 to facilitate these moves in rural Scotland? Do those opportunities exist already or are they separate to the NPF? Should new things be in the final version of NPF3?

Scott Dalgarno: I will respond to that and to the earlier point that was made about waste management in general. Obviously, it is a hugely contentious issue, but it has the potential to make the biggest shift in terms of benefits.

We are exploring two locations for energy-from-waste facilities. This is not necessarily a particularly rural issue. Naturally, such facilities are relabelled as "incinerators" and locally they are seen as being very destructive, bad things. Nimbyism really takes hold. We have not been able to develop any of those sites, although we are looking to do so through the local development plan. A steer from a national development would be hugely beneficial; indeed, we asked for that earlier in the process and we really want to see that included in NPF3.

Jim Hume: I return to Stuart Goodall's points on biomass. What I saw on the continent were community heating plants, where local wood is burnt—brashings and bark are probably used, for example—to heat water or, for slightly larger plants, to co-generate electricity. Would that be a better and more sustainable direction for Scotland than the importation of energy and the use of large-scale plants that we are starting to see?

Stuart Goodall: The great thing about a tree—apart from the fact that lots of carbon provides jobs in renewables—is that its different parts have many uses, and not only softwood but hardwood trees provide an opportunity for renewable energy. Moreover, by using trees, we help to bring back

management into a lot of woodland so that it is cared for, which is something that we are missing.

There is certainly scope to use local heating plants. However, there is more of an acceptance of district heating and shared reliance on the energy source elsewhere in Europe. That is difficult for us as a society in Scotland because although we have supported the idea of district heating using biomass, it can be difficult to retrofit that. In an example up near Aviemore, the developer wanted to offer district heating but a lot of the individual house owners did not want to be reliant on a shared resource; because of a lack of confidence in that, they preferred to stick in their own energy. Even when something that is green and cheaper is being offered, people are not making that choice.

Jim Hume: So the community has 50 boilers working at different levels compared with one very efficient boiler.

The Convener: We will take up a different theme and broaden out the discussion. What are the implications for rural Scotland of the proposed set of national developments and actions in the draft action programme? Are they positive or negative?

Professor Thomas: I will speak to one specific example. The central Scotland green network, as it is known, is a major and highly innovative approach. I must confess an interest because I chaired the Central Scotland Forest Trust for around 10 years, so I have been involved in the network.

The programme as it is now envisaged goes beyond the central forest area. We sometimes forget that a huge amount of rural Scotland is tucked away in the area between Glasgow and Edinburgh. Historically, that area has had very poor resources of the type that the green network will provide. That programme should be supported to the hilt.

The Convener: People have suggested extending that to a national green network. Should that point be stressed further? I know that some of the evidence has looked at the idea.

John Mayhew: We support the idea of a national ecological network to bring together all the green places, the biodiversity corridors and the landscape resources and to capitalise on them all in the same way that the central Scotland green network has done so successfully. We are delighted that the CSGN carries on as a national priority because it is an initiative that has done a lot of good work and I am sure that it will carry on doing so.

I am delighted to see the long-distance cycling and walking network in there. That is a very good initiative. Again, this brings together a lot of excellent local initiatives and identifies gaps or places where a bit of extra national support can make the difference and turn it into a genuine national network that will generate tourism, help people's health and wellbeing and reduce car journeys. That must be a good thing and we support it.

The Convener: I know that there is no one here from the Western Isles, but I notice that Comhairle nan Eilean Siar has noted that Lewis and Harris, but not the Uists or Barra, have been included on the map in relation to the long-distance route. Presumably, these things need to be joined up as well. Should we be making comments on that? It was raised in its written submission; I take it as read that we have to ask the question.

John Mayhew: It is a fair point. That is the environment map in the "A natural, resilient place" section. I do not know why the Uists and Barra have not been included; I have cycled through them and it was wonderful, so I definitely support that.

The Convener: Thank you. That might lead us to a question from Alex Fergusson.

Alex Fergusson: Talking of maps—well-spotted, convener.

The "Core areas of wild land in Scotland" map produced by Scottish Natural Heritage has been raised with the committee in written evidence. I am ambivalent about this issue, but it has been noted that the map was given quite a level of significance in Scottish planning policy but has not been mentioned in NPF3. I would be interested to hear comments from the panel on that omission. Should it be included? I understand that it is not a designation and is unlikely to become one, but nonetheless it is an issue that some feel strongly about.

John Mayhew: Yes, we feel that the "Core areas of wild land in Scotland" map—I have with me here, in case people are unfamiliar with it—should be included in NPF3 rather than just referenced in Scottish planning policy. It is a very spatial issue; it is about a map and about particular places that people value. We think that the best place for the information would be on this green map—the "A natural, resilient place" map, which shows national parks, national scenic areas and biosphere reserves—rather than on an additional map of wild land.

The question is controversial and still unresolved. The Scottish Government asked SNH to carry out an additional consultation on the issue. That has been done and the responses have been published, but the analysis is still going on. I assume that the Scottish Government is waiting for the results of that exercise and advice

from SNH before it decides what to do about the map.

That takes us back to my earlier point, which is that the national planning framework is the place in which some of the tensions between different Government policies can be resolved. For too long we have tried to say that we want to protect our national parks, scenic areas and wild land—which is something we would certainly support—while also saying that we need more renewable energy, which is another clear national priority. Those two issues come into conflict.

The Scottish Government is to be praised for trying to tackle the tension by saying that we will not have large-scale wind farms in our national parks and scenic areas. That has been broadly agreed; the issue comes down to the wild land map. We, too, think we should not have large-scale wind energy developments in those areas of wild land, although others disagree with us. The Scottish Government has shown leadership in resolving the issue and stating the appropriate balance between different Government objectives, but the issue is not resolved yet.

Graeme Dey: I welcome John Mayhew's comments on that specific point, although they fly in the face of the evidence submitted by APRS. That talks about the spatial guidance for onshore wind being extended to cover:

"Special Landscape Areas, historic gardens, designed landscapes, battlefields and the settings of historic towns".

There is also a reference to transmission grids. On renewables, your submission says:

"the sections on offshore renewable energy should also indicate where there are significant landscape constraints to large-scale development, in the same spirit as the onshore wind section".

Your submission suggests that you want the policy of exclusion to go much further. Earlier on you used the word "balance". How would your proposals strike the appropriate balance between the competing pressures that the Government faces?

John Mayhew: There is a continuum between those who would not have any areas excluded from renewable energy and organisations such as ours, which would rather have more areas excluded. Our members are concerned about the impact of large-scale wind turbines on the range of issues that we list in the submission, and we would very much like to see them excluded.

That is the decision that the Scottish Government will have to take. You are listening to views from a wide variety of sources, and it is up to you to advise the Government. Ultimately, it is up to the Scottish Government to decide where the balance lies. It has taken a good step forward on national parks and national scenic areas. I would like, as a minimum, the core areas of wild land to be excluded from renewables development.

In any area of public discourse, we do not get everything that we ask for. There are renewables developers who think that the policy of exclusion has gone too far already; we think that it has not gone far enough. That is the debate that is happening.

11:15

Graeme Dey: With respect, you are now talking about extending the policy to offshore renewables. I entirely accept that your members are entitled to take the view that they do, but they also have to be responsible and accept that there is a balance to be struck. How do we keep the lights on if we are going to have further exclusions?

John Mayhew: There are offshore renewables, and there are other offshore renewables. A lot of them are genuinely offshore and virtually invisible for most of the time from most of the land. The others include the Tiree proposal—which is not going ahead for the time being—and the proposed development off Islay, which is so close to onshore that the turbines are effectively onshore.

The turbines are wet—they are in the water—but they are highly visible, and they will really change the character of those special landscapes on the west coast. The turbines are so tall that the sheer scale of them has an impact far beyond the actual footprint at the site. That applies to some coastal areas as well as to some inland areas. That is the point that we were making. We would certainly not be arguing for no offshore renewables.

Graeme Dey: Thank you for clarifying that.

Scott Dalgarno: We raised an issue, mainly among our comments on SPP, regarding the methodology that is being used to draw up the core areas of wild land. We have concerns about that: the Highlands have characteristic features that make the area suitable for renewables development, so we seek clarity on the methodology used.

There is a danger that, in order to meet the Scottish Government's climate change targets, the methodology as it stands could push renewables developments, particularly onshore wind developments, and could squeeze them towards more confined areas. That might avoid areas of wild land, but the methodology might cover buffer areas that are not currently included. Therefore, the pressure on the remaining areas becomes much more pronounced.

Coupled with that issue is the increased 2.5km buffer around communities. There could be some very confined areas where future onshore wind development will be acceptable, based on the current methodology. We need clarity on that.

The Convener: The current methodology identifies some places that I can think of that are certainly not anything like wild land. I can think of areas that are not wild land, but there are other large areas, too. Thirteen of the 40 proposals are in my constituency, and most of them are not in areas where there is any likelihood of major development of that sort.

I would like clarity, too. Our overall view in Scotland is that, if wild land—as Alex Fergusson poses it—is going to be identified, we have to know what the impact will be on the areas next to the wild land. It seems to me that that is where the big crisis arises—and most of the letters in the newspapers.

I do not know whether Alex Fergusson wishes to come back on that point.

Alex Fergusson: Is that not the same issue that would appear to have arisen with national parks? It is stated that there will be no development in a national park and then all hell breaks loose when there is a development on the edge of that national park. It is the same issue, expanded to cover wild land.

It was not me who made the wild land proposals, however; it was SNH, I think.

The Convener: Sorry, I know that you did not propose that—I was not even suggesting that—but it is something that we will certainly have to comment on.

Claudia, is your question on the same issue? We can take your question and then Nigel's.

Claudia Beamish: I was going to move on to another of the 14 developments. I will wait.

The Convener: We had better get through them all.

Claudia Beamish: Perhaps Nigel Don was going to discuss—

Nigel Don: I was going to move on, too.

The Convener: Let us have Sarah Skerratt next, then.

Dr Skerratt: I was going to move on, too.

The Convener: This is combined tactics, is it? Well, we have dealt with wild land, so let us hear from Claudia Beamish.

Claudia Beamish: The point is connected. However, before I focus on the national long-distance cycling and walking network in the context of rural Scotland, I want to ask something about national parks.

Would any members of the panel have liked there to be a new national park as one of the 14 possible developments? There has been a members' business debate about it. We might not have time this morning to go into quite where it would be, but the debate was about—

Alex Fergusson: Timescale.

Claudia Beamish: It was about a general view, including the timescale, as Alex Fergusson has just highlighted in a helpful intervention. There was also a discussion about whether it should be rural or marine or indeed anything. I would like to know.

The Convener: That is an interesting thought—"anything". A marine national park is something that people have indeed talked about. I do not know whether that is part of our remit here, but it is on the table, without a doubt.

John Mayhew: We certainly think that there should be more national parks. The national planning framework gives a special place to our two national parks, and it quite rightly says that they are exemplars of excellent management, sustainable development and so on. It praises them, and rightly so. Our argument is simply that, if they are so good, should we not have some more?

I would not wish to comment on where the next one should be, but the Government should have a strategy involving all possible stakeholders so as to come to a national conclusion about where it should be.

The Convener: I wonder whether I can make an old comment of mine: what will happen to the bits in between?

John Mayhew: Fair enough. I could answer that if you like—but perhaps others wish to contribute.

The Convener: I think that we will move on.

John Mayhew: That is fine.

Professor Thomas: I will express the contrary view. The existing national parks have not been without their problems, but they have been quite successful.

We must recognise that we live in a pretty congested country. The more constraints there are on development, the more problems we have generating the jobs and activities in rural areas that we need in order to keep people there. To me, that is an important priority.

The finger lakes area in New York state is a very good example from North America. Someone who goes to that area gets a real feeling that they are in a national park, and yet there are no

national park designations and all the land is privately owned, operating on a wholly public-access basis. The authorities there have managed to build in a rural development policy with a green policy that we might think of in connection with a national park, and they have taken people along with them.

That is the model that seems to apply there, and I would apply the same model to the core wild land areas here. We must recognise that those areas become increasingly important to us as pressure on land throughout the world becomes greater and greater.

Alex Fergusson: I have a question about that. I understand what Phil Thomas is saying, but I would also argue that a designation of a national park could be an economic development on its own in many regards. That has been proved in the two national parks that we have now. I absolutely agree that we cannot have virtually the whole of Scotland as a national park—we could, but it would slightly destroy the point. Scotland is a smaller country, in any case. However, there is an argument that there is huge economic development potential in the creation of a national park.

It should be in Galloway—I had to get that in. It would be a combined land-based and marine national park. It has huge potential.

The Convener: We will hear from Claudia Beamish next and then Sarah Skerratt. We will then come on to Nigel Don's point.

Claudia Beamish: My question is about the national cycle network, which is one of the 14 developments. I wish to ask the panel how it can really be relevant in rural Scotland. I am not in any way criticising its tourism value, as it will obviously bring employment, but how does it relate to local connectivity?

I note the Spokes submission, which covers not only Edinburgh but the Lothians, part of which I represent, and I am keenly aware of plans in Dunbar and elsewhere, where there are possibilities for local cycling connecting with the national network. Spokes is concerned that the NPF3 adds "little urgency" to the development of cycling networks—for reasons of time, I will not go any further into the quote from the submission—but I wonder whether anyone could comment, particularly from a council perspective, on plans that are going forward.

Carroll Buxton: I shall say something first, to give Scott Dalgarno a chance to collect his thoughts.

You are right to say that, in some rural areas, it is more difficult to see how cycling networks could add to real improvements in local connectivity, because of the distances involved. With our out-of-town business park and enterprise park developments, we have tried to build in good connectivity for cycling and walking.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the tourism value is quite important in some rural areas. I live in Caithness, where we are fortunate to have one end of the Land's End to John O'Groats route in our patch. The number of cycle-based tourists has increased dramatically over the past 10 to 15 years and is likely to increase further. A number of significant developments have built on that growth, so the aspect is important. However, in terms of local connectivity, I have to be honest and say that I struggle to see how it adds a huge amount of value in a lot of places.

Scott Dalgarno: I back up what Carroll Buxton said. There is no doubt that the national cycling and walking network has a tourism value, but the value to local journeys—functional day-to-day journeys—is less.

Highland Council is trying to introduce walking and cycling routes and better standards for those routes, and a national steer on that would be helpful. We have parking standards for cycling and a lot of national road projects, but we need more of a steer on how we might deliver local walking and cycling networks that can help to cater for those day-to-day journeys and which have the potential to make a real difference for modal shift to more sustainable modes.

Graeme Dey: I have a brief follow-up question. You make a valid point and what I am about to say is not a criticism, but you have talked on a number of occasions about a steer from central Government. Is not it a two-way street and should we not be looking for local authorities that are doing good things to feed into whatever is happening and to inform the process? Does that happen?

Scott Dalgarno: Yes, and perhaps that is one way in which local authorities can learn from examples of good practice.

Graeme Dey: Do you have the opportunity to inform the process? The point that I am getting at is that you have talked about a steer for local government, but you are clearly delivering on the ground. You may have some good ideas, and local authorities in different parts of the country may have much to contribute. Is there an opportunity for them to feed into that process, so that the steer that comes from Government is well informed by local practice?

Scott Dalgarno: We currently get a steer through HITRANS, our regional transport partnership, which works closely with Sustrans. In fact, we have an officer in place who has a dual role with Sustrans and HITRANS and who is doing

well in the effort to introduce a stronger local focus on walking and cycling. That gives us an opportunity.

11:30

The Convener: Calum Davidson said that he wants to talk about these issues, so we shall hear from him before Sarah Skerratt comes back in. After that, Nigel Don has an entirely different line of questioning to move on to.

Calum Davidson: I return to one of the points raised earlier, because I would like to make an observation on the 14 proposals.

Aberdeen harbour is a crucial new development in the north-east, but if we are looking at a co-ordinated special plan across Scotland, as the oil industry moves north and west and to the other side of Scotland, we will need to take co-ordinated action across Scotland and invest significant sums of public money over the next five years in an already crowded location. If we are to help the oil industry to grow across Scotland, perhaps the focus should be on other ports and harbours that are nearer the resource and which perhaps do not require such a huge investment. That may be relevant.

The Convener: It certainly is. I know exactly what you are talking about. You recognise that there is a change in the way in which that industry is developing. In the past, hydro power was local and served a central market. We have turned electricity round the other way, because a lot more of it is being produced locally, but other kinds of energy are altering the spatial map of Scotland. That is recognised by hub developments, as we said earlier.

I believe that Sarah Skerratt wanted to address another of the 14 points.

Dr Skerratt: I want to follow up on the national parks discussion. In March, Scotland's Rural College is hosting a discussion on whether national parks are a generator of economic development. I realise that the paper that will be produced from that workshop will be outwith the 60 days of the committee's engagement on the issue, but we would be happy to furnish you with a copy.

I also want to flag up the fact that paragraph 5.28 of the draft national planning framework mentions mobile networks, but I am pretty sure that that is the only point at which mobile networks are mentioned in NPF3. The focus, rightly, is on the hard infrastructure—the digital fibre network—but, as we know, access to mobile connectivity is increasingly important, so I want to highlight that. To call it an omission is perhaps too strong or negative, but mobile gets a mention only minutely in the NPF3.

My other point relates to the further key actions on page 45 of the draft framework. I can talk about that now, convener, or I can wait until we have discussed the major issues.

The Convener: We will come back to that. Alex, is your question on the same point?

Alex Fergusson: No—it is on a slightly different point.

The Convener: Nigel Don has been waiting patiently, so I ask him to come in now.

Nigel Don: I am always patient, I hope. The comments about the national cycle network are helpful, because they lead me to my point about moving people around rural communities, one of which I represent.

One thought that emerged from the evidence was that we should perhaps be expanding the railways and undoing a little bit of what Dr Beeching did, not because we are suddenly going to build new main lines, but because some spurs along existing routes would be a useful way of taking a lot of cars off the road. Does the panel have any thoughts on whether that would be a sensible thing to pursue? By definition, they would be short lines in many different places, but there could be a national focus on doing that, because there might be a substantial national gain from it.

The Convener: Does anyone want to comment on extending the rail network?

Carroll Buxton: My comments are not so much about extending the network, although we have had some good examples of making better use of the existing rail network for commuter trains, particularly around the Inverness catchment area. More commuter services are now provided in and out of Inverness—for example, from Invergordon, Alness and Nairn—and there are more opportunities to use existing infrastructure better.

The Convener: Should we rule out Nigel Don's suggestion about extending rail. Do you have any particular examples, Nigel?

Nigel Don: I can always think of examples. In my area there is the example of the Forfar to Dundee line. Forfar is very much a dormitory town for Dundee. In Perth, the old railway line tended to go the Perth way, but that is not really the point. There are lots of dormitory places that could be connected without having to spend hundreds of millions on lots of miles of rail.

Graeme Dey: I will be equally parochial; I represent the neighbouring seat to Nigel Don's. Were we to extend the line that he mentioned across from Forfar to Montrose, there would be a full circuit line around the county of Angus, which

would have enormous benefits for our constituents. It would also allow people from that inland corridor to get by rail to Aberdeen, for example. With relatively little spend we could—if we can pitch parochially—do considerable good, I argue.

Nigel Don: My point is that while that might be interesting in Angus—and might or might not be a sensible thing to do—I suspect that there are a lot of places in Scotland where it might be sensible.

The Convener: That is worth flagging up.

Alex Fergusson: I will add to that last point. There is also potential for getting not just cars off the road but timber transport, by putting in rail heads in one or two places. When the Borders railway was being argued for, there was a strong case to be made that it should go all the way to Carlisle, which would have taken a lot of timber out of the Borders and from Kielder forest for points south and north.

There is another issue on which I have no fixed views and which was brought to our attention in written evidence. It is a proposed national development—namely, pumped-storage hydroelectricity. Despite the fact that pumped-storage hydro was not put forward as a main proposed development in the main issues report, it has now become one. As a result, it appears not to have been well consulted on. Do panel members feel that that is something to which we should draw attention as we deliberate on our final message? Is the panel happy with that?

Calum Davidson: Energy storage and pumped storage is by far the most efficient and effective way of storing large amounts of energy. It will be crucial over the next 10 years—especially given that we are moving to offshore wind, which is a significant resource that requires storage.

The Convener: Given the talk about pumped-storage hydro, what sort of schemes are being discussed just now? Are they existing ones or new ones?

Calum Davidson: There is one above Loch Lochy that the Scottish Government has consented to. Another one has been proposed above Loch Ness. I understand that there is an opportunity to retro-fit existing hydro schemes to be converted into pumped storage.

Alex Fergusson: Is the Cruachan dam one of them?

Calum Davidson: Loch Sloy is the one above Loch Lomond.

Alex Fergusson: Cruachan is a site in the development plan.

Calum Davidson: Yes.

The Convener: Can we get clarification on the Cruachan situation?

Calum Davidson: The development is an extension to the existing pumped storage at Cruachan.

The Convener: That is an interesting area.

How do the proposals in the draft NPF3 integrate with the Government's other key policies and priorities for rural areas? We have touched on one or two of those points, but this is a major point that we need to tackle now. We have identified conflicts, for instance in the wild land discussion, just then. On the question of whether national parks are economic generators, we await the report from Scotland's Rural College. Are there other things that might clash in the concept of ambition, opportunity and place?

Dr Skerratt: I would not say that there are clashes. We point out that the single outcome agreements and community planning partnerships are mentioned right at the beginning. They are in the overall diagram and page 2 of the overarching statement; they are not anywhere else in the whole document. I understand that differentiation needs to be made at different levels of visioning and operating, but our concern is that the realisation and feasibility of these elements will be reduced if there is no explicit indication of how the connections can be made—the "golden thread" that is referred to in other documents. I have other points to make.

The Convener: Does Phil Thomas want to throw something into that pot?

Professor Thomas: The document makes a good fist of trying to balance many problems, but we are concerned that there is a slight problem with the underlying policies, in that there are policy strands that interface in a way that is not entirely clear or comfortable. We have touched on that, and it is evident in the wider context.

We included a couple of examples in our written evidence. One is forestry and upland agriculture, for which there tends to be conflict for the same land. The other issue on which we commented, although it is not yet a problem, is that if there is to be more development of inshore renewable generation, it is probable that that will come into conflict with the fish-farming industry, in that development will be proposed in what that industry will regard as prime aquacultural waters, if I can use that term.

It seems to us that the bit that is missing from the equation is that Scotland does not have a policy about food security. That element of policy has fallen through the slats. Although we are all very exercised—rightly so—about the impact of climate change locally and globally, food security

issues, which parallel climate change issues absolutely, have not got into the consciousness in quite the same way.

I do not think that developed countries will face absolute food shortages, but we will see a large increase in prices as time goes on. That will have an impact on people's choices and the composition of their diet, and that will particularly affect the least well-off people in society. It is therefore a pretty central issue on which to do some forward thinking. We have identified a gap there.

The Convener: Are there other comments on spatial policy and food security? The point is well taken.

Stuart Goodall: Phil Thomas made an interesting point, although I am cautious about his first example, in that I think that many of the issues between forestry and agriculture have been sparked by conflict about high-value land rather than upland land use.

There is a danger that Government might perceive that there is a problem in a policy area and think, "Let's address that policy area by sweeping it into the discussion about national planning." However, during the past couple of years, the woodland expansion advisory group, which brought together agriculture and forestry interests and other stakeholders, with the Scottish Government mediating, has been able to come up with ways forward. The process of getting people round the table to talk is better than one in which Government looks to fix policy points through something like the national planning framework, so let us utilise that approach. There are plenty of opportunities for the forestry and agriculture sectors to address issues and work things out. We should allow that process to happen rather than try to put a fixed policy in the NPF.

The Convener: Does more forestry development happening on sheep hill ground affect our ability to feed ourselves?

11:45

Stuart Goodall: If it was decided that all the higher ground would be planted with trees, obviously that would affect our ability to feed ourselves, but we are looking at a relatively modest expansion of forestry. A lot of our conversations with the National Sheep Association and individuals farmers have been about integrated models. For example, a sheep farmer may have a large area of land that has no shelter on it; lots of farmers are interested in the idea of shelter belt. If you take a shelter belt and then slightly broaden it, it suddenly becomes a commercial-scale forest that allows you to harvest the trees, while maintaining it brings in income, provides shelter and increases land productivity.

I know that members of the National Sheep Association have applied to plant trees following our conversations with them. That suggests to me that people were previously looking at the situation in black and white terms—land is either one thing or the other—rather than considering the possibility of more integrated land use. Part of the problem is that, in the past, programmes such as the common agricultural policy have driven people apart in terms of their ability to have such discussions. That reinforces the point that, by getting round the table and looking at the issues, we can make progress.

Jim Hume: As a former trustee of the Borders Forest Trust and a hill sheep farmer, I concur. I have discussed the matter with Stuart Goodall outwith the committee, but I will put what was said on record. In my area around half the farms are tenanted farms. The land belongs to the landlord, so planting trees would be a problem. A tenant farmer planting trees could, however, be seen as the tenant improving the farm and be of value. It is in tenants' interest to plant trees, as long as the landlord is willing. A bit of work could be done to double the area that could be made available for planting—at least in my area. I do not know the facts for tenancies, landlords and owner-occupiers across Scotland, but it would make a huge difference if it could be pursued. Do the panellists have a view on that?

The Convener: The point is made.

Dr Skerratt: The next meeting to discuss the land use strategy is in May and the Scotland rural development programme is being formulated, so the committee's discussions on potential conflicts and how the other programmes could help to deliver the national planning framework are timely. The timeframe of that work is useful and you have opportunities to enter into dialogue on the land use strategy and the SRDP.

The Convener: The timeframe is timely, but we seem to have one set of guidelines after another to deal with. I thank you for making that point. Does anyone have a final point to make? We have been considering how rural Scotland is affected by the NPF3, but many other things are going on at the same time.

Stuart Goodall: I will make a quick point that follows on slightly from Alex Fergusson's point about trains and extracting timber. We are examining that in respect of where longer distances need to be travelled. A big timber harvest in Scotland is coming to market, which is allowing us to create rural employment and expand the industry. A problem arises, however, in that people who are not used to timber trucks

passing their houses do not often see that as the most attractive or welcome development on the roads. However, accessing the timber is a necessity.

Over the years, we have had some very good discussions with local authorities and the Scottish Government about agreed routes and ensuring that timber lorries can extract the timber with the least impact on the road structure and people. We would be really keen for that to be recognised and developed in the NPF process. It is a quid pro quo. We see that the sector is prepared to avoid certain roads and to identify agreed routes to help communities. That increases transport costs, which is a particular element that the industry must deal with. In response to those moves, we are looking for local authorities and the Government to say that they will maintain the agreed routes. It is frustrating to have to go round communities, thereby adding a lot of value to the product, only to find that the route is not being maintained. It is important to develop that as a process.

The Convener: Timber extraction is a network issue that fits in with the thoughts about a national spatial plan, so your point is well made.

We will draw the discussions to a close. I thank the witnesses for their comments. If you have follow-up points to make, we would be very happy to receive those in writing. Each of you has given us more food for thought—perhaps even timber for thought.

On 19 February, at our next meeting after the recess, the committee will hold its final NPF3 evidence session with Paul Wheelhouse, the Minister for Environment and Climate Change. We will also consider our paper on aquaculture and fisheries as agreed.

11:51

Meeting continued in private until 12:36.

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