



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Public Petitions Committee

Thursday 9 November 2017

Session 5



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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE
20th Meeting 2017, Session 5

CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con)

*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

*Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Commander Billy Adams (Royal Navy)

Gordon Askew MBE (International Foundation for Effective Reading Instruction)

Brigadier Paul Buttery (Ministry of Defence)

Wing Commander Ian Garnett (Royal Air Force)

Anne Glennie

Dr Sarah McGeown (University of Edinburgh)

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Major Deborah Scott (Army)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Catherine Fergusson

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Thursday 9 November 2017

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Continued Petition

Armed Forces (School Visits) (PE1603)

The Convener (Johann Lamont): I welcome everyone to the 20th meeting in 2017 of the Public Petitions Committee. I remind members and others in the room to switch phones and other devices to silent

Agenda item 1 is consideration of a continued petition. PE1603 calls for greater scrutiny of, and more guidance and consultation on, armed forces visits to schools in Scotland. I welcome Edward Mountain MSP, who joins us for this item. We are happy to be hearing from representatives of the armed forces in order to understand more about the work that they do in visiting schools in Scotland. I note for anyone who is viewing our proceedings that the witnesses for the first panel will not appear on screen. That is to reflect the wishes of the Ministry of Defence in relation to the personal safety of officers.

I welcome to the meeting Brigadier Paul Buttery, who is the head of training, education, skills, recruiting and resettlement at the Ministry of Defence; Wing Commander Ian Garnett, who is field force commander north at the Royal Air Force; Commander Billy Adams, who is commanding officer, recruiting field force, and area recruiting officer, Scotland and Northern Ireland, at the Royal Navy; and Major Deborah Scott, who is SO2 recruiting and engagement at the 51st Infantry Brigade and Headquarters Scotland.

I ask our witnesses to make an opening statement of around 15 minutes in total, after which members will have the opportunity to ask questions. Members will understand if there are any questions that the witnesses are not in a position to answer.

Brigadier Paul Buttery (Ministry of Defence): Convener, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much. Thank you for accepting the offer of the Minister of State for the Armed Forces and thus providing us with the opportunity to come here and give you this presentation, which I hope will help with your consideration of the petition.

As the convener mentioned, I am head of the training, education, skills, recruiting and

resettlement branch of the MOD. I work for chief of defence people and I am responsible, on behalf of chief of defence people, for the policy framework associated with training, education, skills, recruitment and resettlement. It is within that policy framework that we set in the MOD that the single services act.

I have with me Commander Billy Adams from the Royal Navy, Wing Commander Ian Garnett from the Royal Air Force and Major Deb Scott, who is representing the Army.

Our brief will consist of a number of sections. First, I will provide you with an overview of the policy that covers the outreach activity of the armed forces, after which my colleagues will explain their service's approach to outreach activity and describe the type and volume of activity as it relates to school visits. I will then expand the presentation to provide some broader context, after which we will be at your disposal to answer questions within our areas of responsibility.

Outreach activity, which includes the visits of armed forces personnel to schools and is the main topic of this brief, is covered in our policy and in joint service publication 545. Each of the armed services has its own outreach teams, which are represented here. The outreach teams bring the armed forces to the attention of the wider community through their outreach programmes of direct-to-public external events and community engagement, which fall into one or more of the following categories: raising awareness, recruiting events, support to education and community-based engagement. Outreach teams visit educational establishments only following a specific invitation. They are not to actively recruit in schools, and students cannot be signed up or otherwise make a commitment to become a recruit in the armed forces during the course of any such visit.

The purposes of those visits, which are agreed with the establishments beforehand, can range from raising awareness of the armed forces and their place in a democratic society to practical sessions that are aligned with the national curriculums and designed to enhance teamwork, communications and STEM skills—I apologise for the abbreviation; by “STEM”, I mean science, technology, engineering and maths. The visits also build interest in the services and, in some cases, explain the wide range of careers that are available. In accordance with defence legal advice, outreach activity in educational establishments is conducted only when a letter of agreement has been exchanged with the establishment or unit and a risk assessment has been carried out of the environment and the activities that are to be undertaken, and only with

a member of the establishment's staff present and once a copy of the MOD's insurance arrangements have been exchanged with the establishment that is being visited.

From a policy perspective, I emphasise three key points: armed forces outreach teams visit schools only in response to a specific invitation; no pupil or student is ever signed up or otherwise makes a commitment to become a recruit during a school visit; and the visits include a range of activities, such as career events, citizenship talks, raising awareness of the armed forces and their position in a democratic society, educational support—including on science and maths—that supports the national curriculums, and the team-building and leadership events that I have already mentioned.

With the convener's permission, I would like to hand over to my colleagues, starting with Billy Adams.

Commander Billy Adams (Royal Navy): Good morning, everybody. As the convener said in her introduction, I am the commanding officer for the naval service recruiting and outreach teams. The teams in Scotland are located in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee, Rosyth, Aberdeen and Inverness, and our approach to school visits is very much in line with the approach that Brigadier Buttery outlined in his brief. We do not target particular schools and we visit schools only at the invitation of the headteacher or the careers teacher.

The teams, which cover specific areas throughout the country, will offer secondary schools in the catchment area updated publications on career opportunities that are available in the naval service. The schools are requested to make that information available in public areas, such as libraries. We also offer headteachers and careers teachers a range of outreach activities that we might be able to conduct in support of the school. We offer various activities, such as practical team-building and leadership tasks, STEM-related activities, interview technique sessions, table-top problem-solving exercises and the promotion of health and wellbeing, which is achieved through physical training sessions and cookery demonstrations.

In addition to that range of curricular and supported activities, the teams offer bespoke presentations on the role of the naval service and operations that members of the service are or have been involved in. We also offer career opportunities information on those subjects. In addition, members of the teams attend bespoke school careers fairs—again, that is by invitation only.

Unfortunately for us, we have a limited number of people in our teams in Scotland. Although we cannot facilitate every request that we receive, we endeavour to fulfil as many as we can.

Wing Commander Ian Garnett (Royal Air Force): I am field force commander north. I am responsible for the delivery of processing and outreach activities for the east midlands, the north of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The RAF will only ever go into a school when we are invited by the headteacher, the careers master or some such personality. The RAF categorises schools according to previous application and intake history. Therefore, if a community has no record or history of RAF involvement—that is, applications to join us—we are less likely to go to that school. We will still contact the school and offer our activities, which I will come on to in a moment, but if the school does not want us to attend, we simply will not go there.

The activities that we offer are fivefold. First, we offer presentations and careers fairs. Our presentations are designed to raise awareness of the career opportunities in the RAF. We focus firmly on the apprenticeship opportunities that we offer. We can deliver an informal discussion or a formal presentation, depending on what the school requests. My personnel also attend schools and organise careers fairs along with other employer organisations.

Secondly, we offer personal development training, primarily to develop teamwork, leadership and communication skills and to allow students to assess their skills and qualities by undertaking alien tasks. Such training can enhance their employability, raise self-confidence, improve communication skills and encourage teamwork.

Thirdly, we offer interview skills workshops, in which we enhance students' job-seeking skills by providing instruction on how to prepare for an interview, delivery and post-interview actions. Sessions include demonstrations and role playing and, if requested, they can include mock interviews and constructive feedback to the students.

Fourthly, we offer STEM activities that help to develop hard and soft skills, such as following instructions, developing a plan, teamwork, effective communication, conflict resolution and peer negotiation. They also help with the understanding of STEM principles. As a adjunct to that, we sponsor a third party to carry out a STEM roadshow across the United Kingdom; one is being carried out in Scotland at the moment. It tours schools across the UK, giving demonstrations of science, engineering and cyber in an interactive and exciting way so as to encourage students to take up science and

engineering. Presenters wear RAF-branded polo shirts but are not RAF personnel. A member of the RAF is present but only to answer specific RAF questions at the end, not to give any specific presentations or careers briefs.

Other activities that we do include operation X, which is an interactive learning experience that uses multimedia platforms in a humanitarian aid mission to engage students in literacy, teamwork, communications and health and wellbeing. My personnel also visit schools to discuss visits and career opportunities with the careers masters and careers guidance staff.

Major Deborah Scott (Army): As the convener said in her introduction, I am Major Deb Scott. I am SO2 recruiting and engagement, based at the brigade in Stirling. As my title suggests, I am double-hatted: as well as being responsible for the oversight of Army reserve recruiting in Scotland, I am a fundamental part of the brigade engagement team.

The Army advertises the support that it can offer schools through various channels, including the Army website and direct emails, but it also does so through educational organisations, such as Skills Development Scotland and the energy skills partnership. In addition, we are able to network at many of the educational events that we attend to inform schools about the activities that we do. Some of the schools already know about them, but some of the teachers are very interested to find out more.

The Army proactively contacts schools to ensure that the information that is displayed in their careers information libraries is current; that is usually done annually. Once schools become aware of the activities that are available, they can book some activity through a central booking service, and local connections with military units can be and are used. All recruiting group-delivered activity is formally booked by schools through the headquarters of the recruiting group in Upavon. Other Army units in Scotland visit a school only once the visit has been co-ordinated through the brigade headquarters, in liaison with the recruiting group. That ensures that activity is de-conflicted. We have issued clear direction to our Army units in Scotland, which may be contacted directly by schools, to ensure that they understand and follow the policy regarding engagement with schools.

We have numerous relationships in existence with schools that have used our services over the years to support their activity. They often contact us following an initial engagement, as they see the value in what we are able to deliver to their pupils and want it to be repeated. At no point do we visit a school uninvited; we always do so through an invitation, and we confirm that our attendance is still appropriate with the school prior to the event,

if required. Reviewing whether our attendance is appropriate is an on-going process.

If a school requests our support in any form, we will try to support it if we can. We are not selective and do not look to include or exclude schools based on any set of criteria. We aim to support all schools, whether independent, state sector or special needs, and regardless of postcode area. We can deliver a range of activities, which can be tailored to meet the needs of the school's request, subject to our resources being available.

There are various types of activity that can be delivered by the Army or—as the committee has heard—the other two services. Some activity is formal and involves the delivery of a set lesson plan. Such activity has to be booked formally. The people who deliver those activities are all Disclosure Scotland cleared under the protecting vulnerable groups scheme in the appropriate ratios and have been selected by the Army to be part of the delivery team. Other activity is more informal; such activities are usually based on ad hoc requests from schools.

09:15

As far as the formalised activity that we do is concerned, BASE—British Army supporting education—is a range of resources and activities to support and enhance the learning experience of pupils in secondary 4 and above. It includes workshops on citizenship and science, in which pupils can design a ration pack snack. There is also a forensics lesson and a maths lesson. They are activities based on what we do in the Army. As you would expect, we use our areas of expertise to design and deliver lessons to support the curriculum. For example, the maths lesson is based on planning a skiing expedition to Norway.

Resilience, team building and leadership activity—known internally as the introductory personal development activity—are part of the BASE but, in addition, local contacts often ask us to provide them with team tasks. The Army's core values and standards include courage—physical and moral—loyalty and respect for others, all of which can be encouraged in pupils through the team tasks that we deliver. The team-building activity is requested time and again as a repeat activity by the same schools. We also deliver mock interview skills lessons that help people to prepare for the world of work.

The Army is continuing to supporting defence's contribution to Her Majesty's Government's STEM agenda. Race for the line season 3 will take place in 2017-18, following two successful years in which we ran it in conjunction with the energy skills partnership in Scotland. This year, we will run it with Scotland's Learning Partnership. The

Army—indeed, all three services—will act as hubs for local high schools that have entered the competition, which is aimed at 11 and 12-year-olds, and will assist in running race events ahead of regional and national finals. The Army was instrumental in bringing the bloodhound rocket car challenge competition to Scotland—it financed and organised the launch event at the Glasgow science centre and trained college staff to deliver the workshops. That led to the formation of college hubs and the holding of the rocket car challenge events, as well as long-term improvement in the collaboration between colleges and the local schools. We have been working closely and in direct partnership with the ESP for the past two years. In doing so, we have supported the ESP in the delivery of events—for example, big bang events and the science festivals.

The Army has a STEM youth engagement team, which has individuals based throughout the UK, and we have two personnel allocated to Scotland to support the Army in supporting defence's commitment to increase the take-up of STEM careers not just within the military but across the board.

Operation reflect is an Army initiative that commemorates the centenary of the first world war. Trained soldiers provide direct support to teacher-led delivery of first world war lessons. With 2018 marking the centennial anniversary and the end of op reflect, we have a fundamental part to play in assisting schools in commemorating the first world war.

We inform pupils of Army career opportunities through formalised internal school careers fairs or through externally organised fairs that a number of schools are invited to attend, at which we give advice on the bursaries, scholarships and apprenticeships—the Army is the largest employer of apprentices in the UK—that are available, as well as on the various career streams on offer.

Presentations on the Army as a careers option are delivered to small groups or to full year groups. We have a set presentation that is tailored to Scotland. The school will determine the audience composition and size. The Army also offers a five-day work experience course, which gives an insight to pupils who have indicated that they have an interest in the Army as a career. That course, which informs pupils of the various career opportunities that are available and the recruitment process, is aimed at pupils in S4 and above.

When it comes to careers fairs, presentations and work experience, the policy is that anyone who is over 14 but under 16 can be given a brochure, but any further contact with the Army is subject to them providing parental consent. Those who are over 16 but under 18 can register an

expression of interest at an event, but they must then attend a careers office or apply online to progress their application, which is also subject to parental consent and process checks.

The less formalised support that I have mentioned includes our attendance at events such as gala days, when we might take some of the personal kit and equipment that soldiers have. That helps pupils to understand the Army's purpose and increases awareness of the Army and our place in society.

We also receive specific requests to support the activities of individual schools. I will give some examples. During a school's health week, we took in the 10-man ration pack to show the pupils how it would be used. We also provided climbing walls and bouncy assault courses. At Loudoun academy, the police community support officer contacted us to ask us to assist with developing team-building skills for some troubled pupils at the school. In that instance, we worked closely with the police. In the same vein, the Army provides support to the youth advantage outreach programme in support of the violence reduction unit. That is a residential course that is aimed at teamwork and team building.

That concludes my brief on the Army's activity in schools.

Brigadier Buttery: Convener, ladies and gentlemen, the Ministry of Defence has provided a great deal of evidence about where the visits have taken place and I would like to put some of that in context. Over the period from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017, the Army made 8,635 visits to schools across the UK, and just under 8 per cent of those were to schools in Scotland. Based on the work that my team did, the Scottish population represents 8.2 per cent of the UK's population, so we are arguably underrepresenting our visits to Scotland, albeit by only a small fraction, but I hope that you will forgive us for that. I hope that that gives a little bit of context about the scale of the visits that the armed forces do across the whole of the UK and the proportion of those visits that take place here. Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I think that we found that very helpful. You have probably already answered some of the questions that we were going to ask you. The question that I was going to open up with was to ask you to confirm that you always have to be invited into schools, but it was quite interesting to hear how you let schools know that they can invite you in. Major Scott has indicated how the Army might do that, but what processes do the navy and RAF have for making schools aware that you exist and that this service is available?

Wing Commander Garnett: The RAF contacts schools by letter in the first instance, as we do across the UK, and they then come back and contact us. However, an awful lot of the schools are repeat schools, which like our products and what we offer, and then word spreads to other schools and they contact us. A lot of it is word of mouth; for example, at careers fairs teachers will come and ask us what we do for other schools. We always write a letter annually to all schools offering our services in case they change their minds or whatever, but that is the only time we will do it. Schools learn about us through word of mouth or by letter.

The Convener: A letter goes out every year to all schools across Scotland.

Wing Commander Garnett: Across Scotland and the UK.

The Convener: And for the navy?

Commander Adams: It is very much the same for us. We send an annual letter out with updates on careers information and activities available. We learn from the previous year what activities have been popular in certain schools, or we have new activities that we would like to offer. There is a range of ways but, generally, information is spread through word of mouth; it may be that we are in contact with careers teachers at specific events and they learn what is available to them then.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): Good morning to the panel. From the data that we have, and as you have touched on already in your opening remarks, it seems that the purposes of the visits can be split into two broad types: curriculum-related visits and careers-related visits. Are those visit types arranged separately or do the armed forces work with schools to offer a package of activities that might be delivered on a number of different dates? Could you expand on those processes and the discussions that you have?

Brigadier Buttery: I will start off and then I will ask my colleagues. As we said to start with, schools are made aware of what activities are available and the armed forces teams visit the schools on invitation from the headteacher. Then it is a case of trying to programme the visits that the school wants within the timeframe of the resources that the armed forces have. It is accurate to say that some schools are visited more than once in an academic year for different sorts of events, but I will ask Major Scott to expand on that.

Major Scott: As we said before, it is very much down to what the school wants. We have a leaflet that lists all the activities that we do. Usually, the schools will look at what they have in their timetable. We find that, at certain times of year, some activities are more popular than others. When it is coming up to exam periods and there is

a lot of revision time, schools often request us to come in for the personal development activity. It depends on what the school wants. If a school is doing a particular focus on world war one in history, it will request operation reflect. If a school requests something that is not on our list of activities, we look at whether we have the resources and capabilities to do it, and if we have, we will do it.

Angus MacDonald: Do you have figures for how many schools are visited twice or three times a year?

Major Scott: We have the data, but I do not have the statistics for you now. I have not calculated those numbers, but they are available.

Angus MacDonald: Is it possible to share those with the committee?

Major Scott: I would have to check.

Brigadier Buttery: From the work that we did last week, the number of schools receiving three or more visits from the Army team is 70, from the Royal Navy is 14, and from the RAF is 12. The number of schools that receive visits from two different services is 98. The number of schools receiving visits from all three services is 22. That is out of a total of just over 1,000 school visits from across the three services.

The Convener: That is across Scotland?

Brigadier Buttery: That is just Scotland, yes.

Angus MacDonald: Thanks. It is good to have it on record.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): One of the biggest concerns that I have—and I think that it lies behind the petition—is the potential targeting of schools in areas of higher economic deprivation. I know that those concerns are refuted, but the concerns remain. The figures that we have are that 83 per cent of state schools were visited, 50 per cent of independent schools were visited and all Army visits were made only to state schools, with one school being visited 31 times in an area. That seems extraordinary to me. Can you explain those figures?

Brigadier Buttery: Could I ask you what timeframe those figures are pulled from, please?

Rona Mackay: From 2010 to 2012.

Brigadier Buttery: The data that I have, which we have been sharing with the committee, is more recent than that, and our approach to engagement activities has matured and is quite different now. Since about 2014 we have had far more control—if that is the right word—of how our engagement activity is monitored, who actually engages and what messages are explained and delivered to the schools. I know that now there is no targeting of

schools based on gender, social background or the relative level of deprivation in the surrounding area or anything like that. There is absolutely no targeting on those grounds.

Rona Mackay: But there was previously?

Brigadier Buttery: I am afraid that I cannot comment on whether there was or not, as I genuinely do not know. It might be anecdotal, but I would be surprised if there was a deliberate policy to do that. I would find that surprising. Certainly the current policy is not that and has not been since about 2014.

09:30

Rona Mackay: How does that square with the Army visiting only state schools? Do you have a policy not to visit independent schools?

Brigadier Buttery: I do not believe that that is accurate either, I am afraid. There is no policy that says that—

Rona Mackay: No, I am asking you if you think there is, but that is according to the data.

Brigadier Buttery: I know there is not a policy.

Rona Mackay: So you do visit independent schools.

Brigadier Buttery: Yes.

Rona Mackay: All right. Thank you.

I am quite concerned that the data we have says that you visit primary and nursery schools. I am confused as to why you would do that. The MOD says that those visits are not careers visits, and yet a number of careers advisers have been visiting those schools. Can you comment on that, please?

Brigadier Buttery: Yes. Again, visits to any school, regardless of the age group of the school, will be only at the invitation of the headteacher. Major Scott may have details for those sorts of visits.

Major Scott: I do not have them to hand because we are focusing on high schools, but with visits to nursery schools and primary schools careers advisers might be double-hatted. They might have a title that says “careers adviser” but they are also part of the outreach team. For example, I work in recruiting and engagement, because we do not want to have too many people getting in touch with a lot of the places we go to, so it sits with one person to maintain control. The schools have only one point of contact as well, so it is less confusing. I have been into a primary school where I have shown my respirator and my webbing. That is the sort of thing we would do. It would not be a careers-based visit. It would be to talk about what the Army is about.

Rona Mackay: Do the navy and the RAF go into primary schools?

Wing Commander Garnett: Yes. My teams would never go anywhere near a primary or a junior school, as they simply do not have the resources. What does happen, though, is that parents of children in a school will get in touch or the school will have a “What do mummy and daddy do?” day or a careers day and will ask dad whether he wants to bring his pilot’s uniform in and tell stories of flying fast jets. Generally it is a parent, not one of my team, because, frankly, I do not have the time to cover those schools. The event will be a generic “What do daddy and mummy do at work?” day—obviously, we have female fast jet pilots too. The parent will be asked to say what they do at work and to come in and show their uniform. It is a show and tell, not any kind of formal or structured attempt to talk to children about careers or anything of that nature—not at all.

Commander Adams: We do not send any information, careers or otherwise, to primary schools, but an example that I can give you is that a member of my team went to a primary school in Rosyth last year at the school’s request to give a presentation for a project that the school was doing on the battle of Jutland. It was preceding a battlefield tour that the school had organised. That is the type of engagement that we have at primary level.

Rona Mackay: I am still confused as to why two schools were visited 31 times. Would that be by request from the schools?

Brigadier Buttery: Absolutely. I cannot think of a reason why that would be the case if it had not been for the school. I cannot imagine how an armed forces team would be entertained if it turned up at the school so many times and had not been invited. Surely the headteacher would have invited them to leave or not bother turning up any more. That is what I would do if they were becoming a nuisance.

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): Good morning. I am required to declare an interest before I ask a question. My husband was an Army officer, two of my sons have served in the Army and I was an RAF volunteer reserve training officer.

From the data that we have been provided, it is clear that armed forces in schools offer delivery to a wide range of year groups, but can you explain a little bit about how you address age-appropriate content and what presentations you do for different year groups?

Major Scott: I cannot comment on that. I am not the designer. It comes from the Army recruiting

and training division, which I presume has looked at the curriculum, so I cannot answer.

Wing Commander Garnett: From an RAF perspective, we will start engaging with pupils generally from about 14 years old with formal careers briefs and presentations; that is when we start doing the mock interviews and preparing them for life outside. The only initiative that is specifically targeted is our STEM—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—roadshow, which is for pupils from about 11 to 13. It has no careers input whatsoever. It is more to encourage STEM, because we are an entirely technological service and we want to encourage more people to do STEM—to do engineering, technology and cyber. That is the only predominantly targeted group. The rest is work with eligible personnel and eligible children. Again, by and large, it is to give them the skill sets and we do not promote the service. We merely wear a uniform. We wear a uniform when we do mock interviews, but the interview is generic. I have nothing specific to add to that.

Commander Adams: I have to start by saying that I am disappointed that there is no naval service history in your family.

Michelle Ballantyne: We are not near the sea.

Commander Adams: We do not have any specific policy on how we approach various age groups, but the general rule of thumb is that, for anybody who is not looking at leaving school and heading towards a career, presentations will generally be based around providing information only. It would be information on the naval service, operations that are being undertaken, what life is like being in the service and where we are. The schools are very good, though; they will invite us to give a specific presentation or activity, depending on the year group, the age and the theme of what the school is trying to achieve, and we collectively—the three services work together on many occasions—try to deliver exactly what it is that the school wishes us to achieve.

Brigadier Buttery: It is perhaps worth mentioning that civil service psychologists and professional educational staff are employed in the headquarters where the products are developed. They will be involved in the formulation of material, but I am afraid that we do not have the expertise here today to be able to answer the question about the exact process for you.

Michelle Ballantyne: The cadet forces play quite a big part, particularly with some of the younger pupils—those in their early teens and from 12 upwards. Can you explain to the committee how you relate to or work with the cadet forces? They have quite a bit of contact in schools as well and are promoting and recruiting

into cadet units? The combined cadet force is embedded in the independent school sector and it is active, often daily, because it is part of the school system. Would you like to explain to the committee how that works with careers advice and information in schools for children?

Brigadier Buttery: The cadets are a national youth organisation and, therefore, separate from the distinct British armed forces. They are a voluntary organisation with voluntary helpers. As I understand it, everything that the cadets do involves parental consent, either for their children to be cadets or for any of the activities that the cadets then undertake. The cadets are supported by the armed forces but, in the same way with schools, it is at the request of the cadets units; the armed forces then provide the support that has been requested.

None of us here works in the cadet space. There is a separate element of the MOD that covers cadets and reserved forces, and it might be more appropriate that that question is dealt with by them.

Michelle Ballantyne: When I was looking at some of the papers and data, particularly on the numbers of visits and that sort of thing, I wondered whether the information requests would have covered cadet visits, which would have a significant impact.

Major Scott: From an Army perspective, I do not think it would, because a unit going in to support the cadets training activity is part of our normal business. A unit is affiliated to a cadet organisation, so it would be doing requests on a weekly basis and that is normal business. From a careers presentation perspective, I know that the only time we brief the cadets is once a year at their annual camp. We do not go in on a more frequent basis than that.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Good morning. Another significant concern is how, in a presentation or visit, the balance is struck between the opportunities that may be offered in an armed forces career, and the risks that might be faced by individuals who join the armed forces. How is that balance struck?

Brigadier Buttery: I watched the careers video last night and I thought that it was very balanced. That might be a subjective assessment, but I suspect that any such thing that is watched is liable to subjective interpretation. The video showed a diverse range of opportunities—from human resources to combat, to engineering, to logistics and a range of other opportunities. As far as I could tell, there was no shying away from activities that individuals might be called on to do in the armed forces. Equally, because the armed forces are a career opportunity, the diverse and

broad opportunities that individuals have within the armed forces were highlighted.

The presentation that is given in careers fairs is just the first presentation. If an individual then wants to pursue their application to the armed forces, there are checks and balances along the way, and the risks and sorts of operations that they might be deployed upon are absolutely specifically brought to their attention.

My view is that presentations are balanced and are part of a journey. When a potential recruit expresses an interest in joining, the roles of the armed forces and what we are here to do are made very clear to them.

Brian Whittle: As a former air cadet, the question for me—it seems not to have been asked—is this: where are the armed forces getting the majority of recruits from? Are you looking to recruit predominantly through the cadet system or through schools?

Brigadier Buttery: We do not recruit from schools or from the cadets. That we do not do that is categorically part of our policy. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, it is written in joint service publication 545 that recruiting activity does not take place in schools. The same applies to cadets—cadet units are absolutely not recruiting grounds for the armed forces. Relative to the rest of the UK, far fewer cadets from Scottish cadet units join the armed forces than do cadets from units elsewhere in the UK.

Brian Whittle: I am not suggesting that you are actively recruiting. I am just wondering where you get recruits from.

Brigadier Buttery: Okay. About 16 per cent of Army recruits were cadets, so by definition 84 per cent were not. The cadets who choose to go on and join the armed forces are a minority.

Major Scott: That is the figure nationally in the UK. Only 10 per cent of those who join the Army from Scotland have been cadets—a lot less than the rest of the UK. The Northern Ireland percentage is the largest, at 22 per cent. I do not have a more specific geographical breakdown of where people have been recruited from or what their backgrounds are.

09:45

Brian Whittle: If 84 per cent are not coming from cadets, I am interested to know where they come from.

Brigadier Buttery: I am sorry: maybe I misled you—

Brian Whittle: If only 16 per cent of the recruits to the armed forces come through the cadet system, where are the other 84 per cent coming

from? Are there any figures on that? They are not walk-ins off the street.

Brigadier Buttery: I am sorry, but I do not have an exact breakdown. A good number of applicants start their application through the online process, and a good number are literally walk-ins to armed forces careers offices, who have a discussion with a careers officer and start their applications that way, so I think that is the two—

Wing Commander Garnett: People can apply only online for the RAF. They can come into a careers office and talk to us, but they cannot apply there and then, so we cannot cajole anybody into doing anything. People have to have that breathing space to go away, have a think and then they must apply online. The application then goes to a civilian company that processes it in the first instance. People can apply only from our website, and a civilian company handles that. There is no other way of applying to the RAF.

Commander Adams: I think that the question is partly to ask who are the people who are coming through the door at the moment. I will give an example from the Royal Navy; we do a new joiners survey. I believe that 44 per cent of new joiners in the navy have a family member who has previous service in one of the armed forces.

We attract a diverse range of people and we have two entry systems—one for rating entry and one for officer-level entry. We have graduates joining as ratings and we have non-graduates joining as officers because there is such a wide range of opportunities and specialisations, and people all the way up to the age cap are joining. At the moment, the age cap for regular service is 37, but that is being reviewed and the cap will, we hope, be increased slightly. We are getting lots more senior recruits, as we call them, through the door at the moment.

Wing Commander Garnett: A stat that you may be interested in is that the current average age of an airman entrant is 24, and the average age of an officer entrant is 28, which is down from what it was previously. Our demographic bell curve suggests that we are going towards the older end of the market, rather than towards the younger end.

Interestingly, 33 per cent of entrants into initial officer training at RAF Cranwell are from our ranks—one third of our officers come from within our own organisation: we breed them and grow them and develop them within the service. As I said, however, the average ages are 24 for airmen and 28 for officers, so they are coming from post-school and post-university jobs.

Brian Whittle: That is very helpful. Thank you.

Angus MacDonald: I will follow on from that line of questioning from Brian Whittle. During your recruitment process, do you capture information on whether the young people who join the armed forces previously participated in activities that you have run in schools, or attended careers presentations? Do you have any stats on that?

Brigadier Buttery: We do not, that I am aware of.

Commander Adams: The navy does that for new joiners—those who join the service note where their interest was born. I do not have the exact figures, but I know that some of that will be through previous engagement with the service at school, college or university, or at events such as armed forces day, for example.

Angus MacDonald: I would have thought that it would be easy just to ask whether they had been encouraged through the visits.

Wing Commander Garnett: We ask, when they apply, where they first became interested, or what inspired them to join. As Billy Adams said, people join for a wide variety of reasons. The problem is, from a psychological point of view—we have done analysis of this—it takes three contacts before a person looks at a particular job or career; it may not happen the first time. That first time is just the catalyst—for example, the person just walking past the careers office during a coffee break when they were bored in their job, or whatever.

There are many different reasons why people join. It may be just that they saw the armed forces day parade, saw an advert, or saw a jet flying overhead when they were on holiday. There are so many variations and the reasons are very difficult to pin down. Was it our outreach programme or an advert on TV, radio or whatever media we use? It is a difficult question to answer.

Rona Mackay: As part of our consideration of the petition, we asked the Scottish Youth Parliament for its views. One comment was from an LGBT person who commented that he found the stereotypical masculinity that was portrayed discomfiting. How can you ensure that the tone and content of your visits—regardless of whether what you do is curriculum based, careers advice or whatever—are inclusive and appeal to a diverse population?

Brigadier Buttery: We absolutely do that. Again, I would ask what timeframe the particular presentation and that data came from. Since 2014, our presentations and policies have been directed to make the armed forces more inclusive. In fact, in respect of the LGBT community, the armed forces are highly regarded by Stonewall as an inclusive employer. We are in their top 50 employers, so—

Rona Mackay: I understand that. I think there is a wider perception, however, and I am wondering how you specifically try to dispel that.

Brigadier Buttery: I watched the presentation last night for my own satisfaction, and my opinion—as I mentioned before—is that it portrays a diverse workforce across a diverse range of employment. It avoids gender stereotyping. Although it does not specifically mention LGBT, my opinion is that the material that is used, and has been used since 2014, is absolutely cognisant of wanting to portray the armed forces as a diverse and inclusive employer.

Rona Mackay: Are there any other comments?

Major Scott: In the outreach teams we send we try to get a cross-section of personnel from across the Army, which includes females and black and minority ethnic people. It is not always possible because we are after the most suitable people to go out with outreach teams. A female might want to speak only to a female, so we try to offer that where possible.

Wing Commander Garnett: The RAF attends pretty much every LGBT pride event across the UK. My team always goes in uniform. We have a number of LGBT people, BAME people and ladies. I have a wide range of people because we want to reflect to that community that our community is inclusive. We go to great lengths to say, “Come and join, come and have a go.” For us it is about the best athlete—if you pass the test, we will take you. We are an open organisation and we go to great lengths to be that way, so I think that what Rona Mackay described may be an old perception. All the material that we use is certainly inclusive and we are very careful in our use of language to make sure that we are inclusive.

Rona Mackay: That is encouraging to hear.

Commander Adams: One of the difficulties is in showing that there is a person behind the uniform and that those people come from every area of society. I completely agree with my colleagues: we are charged with working hard to attend as many outreach and engagement opportunities as possible, particularly pride and LGBT events. I hope that we are achieving that.

Michelle Ballantyne: Do you seek feedback from young people, parents and teachers on your presentations and activities in schools?

Wing Commander Garnett: The RAF at all times invites parents to briefings of youngsters, to answer their questions. At stands, or at events, parents regularly come and have a chat with me and almost ask the questions on behalf of their son or daughter, which gets quite entertaining sometimes. We always try to include parents and make sure that they have material. We will answer

any questions. We openly and positively invite parents to come and ask questions because we want them to be confident in their son's or daughter's decisions.

Michelle Ballantyne: Do you have any formal method of collating feedback on people's feelings and input about how an event went? You mentioned earlier that you continually review what you have done: what do you do to review it in order to decide whether to make changes and whether it is working?

Major Scott: We continually review our attendance and whether it is appropriate—perhaps based on the security situation at the time. I am not intimately involved in delivery, so I would have to consult colleagues to check whether or not we seek feedback. My view is that if we are asked back, that is positive feedback and the event has obviously been a success. If we do not get asked back, we would probably review the activity.

Michelle Ballantyne: There is a perception that when people join the armed forces they are going out to fight. Obviously, a high percentage do not: they work behind the scenes in a myriad of apprenticeships. Do you have data on how many youngsters who join the armed forces are doing dental nursing and those kinds of jobs?

Brigadier Buttery: I do not, off the top of my head, have that data, but the breakdown of trades would be very easy to get hold of. I do not know whether the other panel members have such data.

Witnesses *indicated disagreement.*

Brigadier Buttery: Of course, the armed forces are structured and hierarchical organisations, so the manpower limits are well known. Each of the trade branches and trade groups has a structure within which individuals can progress their career both personally and professionally. I mentioned, when talking about the video that I watched last night, that it explains the diverse range of opportunities from human resources, to logistic accounting, to medical and dental roles, and including combat roles. It does not show the whole range of jobs because the range is so significant. I will take this opportunity to say that the armed forces provide more than 40 apprenticeship programmes. There is a genuinely diverse employment base for people to go into.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Brigadier, I thank you and your team for coming here. If I can also make a declaration, I was 12 years in the Army with eight years in the volunteer reserve, and I have a son who is currently serving. It is interesting, as Brigadier Buttery highlighted, that democratic society needs an armed service, and not just for active service. For example, I worked in Cyprus and Uganda with relief agencies, my son helped the police at the

Olympics, and I was deployed to Heathrow on various occasions to do security there.

You have said that the reason for your visits to schools is clear: it happens at the request of the school and no recruiting takes place. Brigadier Buttery, could you and your team give us some indication of the costs of training somebody from the moment when they join the services to the moment when they pass out? Perhaps that would give the committee an indication of how it is important to get the right people, and not just a number of people.

Brigadier Buttery: I will, if I may, link back to the previous question. The range of careers that individuals can embark on in the armed forces means that the cost of training an individual varies, so the rather slippery answer is, "It depends." Training a fast jet pilot is expensive, because of the infrastructure and the equipment. Training a doctor is relatively expensive and training engineers is relatively expensive. There are differences in overall training costs that depend on the trade and the degree of specialisation.

10:00

Edward Mountain: I would never accuse a brigadier of being slippery, but we would probably accept that the costs are considerable and varied. Given the high costs and the huge investment that the armed services put into each individual that they train, do you agree that the quality of the individuals in a professional service matters more than the numbers? I think that that is the nub of the petition. The issue is not about trying to get numbers through the door, but about getting the right people with the right training.

Brigadier Buttery: I would agree that getting the right individual with the right skills and the right potential is hugely important to us. There are opportunities for individuals to gain technical qualifications, whether educational or professional, and to develop their personal soft skills, whether teamwork, communication or leadership skills—the valuable soft skills that they return to society with. Getting the right individual with the right potential to be able to train in those skills in is the predominant factor that we seek.

The Convener: I am of the generation that remembers the adverts where it was all about skiing. At the same time, people were being deployed to some quite difficult circumstances.

To me, what drives the petition is the sense that poverty is the greatest recruiting sergeant for the armed forces and that people do not get told about the reality. We have heard quite a lot of evidence against that argument. What is your response to the very strongly held view that people end up in the armed forces because of limited choices, that

the armed forces take advantage of that and that we are not honest about what those people might face? You talked about the pre-2014 period. In that period, was there a reflection on how the armed forces were recruiting that meant there was a change in policy, or was it something that developed over time?

Brigadier Buttery: We would say now that our recruiting process is honest and open and transparent. As I have alluded to, the realities of joining the armed forces are made very clear to a potential applicant once they have made an expression of interest. They are shown presentations that do not hide or shy away from what we might ultimately be required to do on behalf of the nation. That is not glossed over, glamorised or understated in any way whatsoever. We are a professional armed force and the nation would rely on us to do what was needed when it was needed.

As you mentioned, there are still on-going opportunities for individuals, which include skiing, for example, and enjoying playing sport and living a healthy lifestyle. That is part of being in the armed forces. Ultimately, however, we do not shy away from telling individuals about the sacrifice that they might have to make.

Our approach to our engagement has become more professional as the armed forces have evolved. We have had a more professional approach to our engagement activities since 2014. We have a methodology to track and record activity, and we use geomapping to help us with that process. As technology has evolved, we have embraced it to help us. Our approach has evolved to become more professional and co-ordinated, to better reflect the society with which we are trying to engage.

The Convener: The suggestion was that the biggest determinant for joining the navy and the RAF is family involvement. Is that true of the Army as well?

Brigadier Buttery: I do not know that figure.

Major Scott: I do not have the figures, but, as has been alluded to, the important thing is the quality of the individual. I have no military background—none of my family has. If an individual wants to join, an individual wants to join.

The Convener: I was meaning more what created the interest, rather than whether people were actively sought out. For the navy and the air force, it was previous family engagement.

Major Scott: I do not have the statistics for that. I would not be able to tell you.

The Convener: Michelle, did you want to say something?

Michelle Ballantyne: All of us in my family got to ski with the Army, so it still happens.

Brigadier Buttery: I know.

Michelle Ballantyne: Is it correct to say that the worst recruited regiment in the Army is actually the Royal Regiment of Scotland? Prior to the amalgamation of the Scottish regiments it was the best recruited regiment. There is something about allegiance and pals regiments that used to encourage youngsters. That could be one of the things that has impacted on recruitment in Scotland.

Brigadier Buttery: I cannot deny or confirm that hypothesis. I do not have the particular detail of which regiment in the British Army is recruited to a greater or lesser extent than others. I would agree with your hypothesis about the community feeling and the sense of belonging that individuals have when they join a unit. The teamwork piece is part of what we do. Our organisation relies strongly on cohesive teams working together. The soft skills that individuals develop within those teams bind the men and women together. We call the skiing and the sport adventurous training. It sounds glamorous to call it skiing, because it is not just skiing in the normal sense. The adventurous element of the sporting opportunities is designed to develop leadership, team cohesion and individual courage. The regimental system supports that, in that people belong to the small teams that they join and they make friends for life. I am agreeing with your hypothesis, but I do not have the evidence to say whether it is a fact or not.

The Convener: We have come to a conclusion with our questions and it is now for us to decide what our next steps are in relation to the petition. Do members have any comments or suggestions as to what those next steps should be?

Brian Whittle: That was a comprehensive evidence session. It would be a good idea to allow the petitioners to reflect and maybe come back to us with their feelings on the evidence that was given today.

Rona Mackay: I would like to ask local authorities for a geographical breakdown that names the schools that have been visited in their area, so that we can get a better picture of where the visits are taking place. I do not know whether that would be done through the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

The Convener: We need to establish whether we are able to do that in relation to data. The question is, if the forces do not come in until they are invited, are there some schools that are more likely to invite them than others? We have heard evidence that when there is already an interest in the RAF, for example, people are more likely to

become involved. We know that there are communities in Scotland that are connected to the Army or the Royal Air Force in a way that others are not. That would be useful information if we can get it.

Rona Mackay: It would be interesting to know.

Angus MacDonald: It would be good to know not just the number of schools that have been visited, but which schools have been visited two, three or four times.

The Convener: Are we moving into an area where we are looking at the policy of schools on engagement with the armed forces? Where there has been interest in engagement with the armed forces and it has been successful in terms of the curriculum, you can see the logic of why schools would invite them back. That would also be true of other groups, whether safety groups or whatever. If a school gets an interest and gets a contact, the school goes back to them.

Brian Whittle: If we are going to look at the schools that have been visited by the armed forces, it may be pertinent to overlay that with looking at armed forces communities.

The Convener: Yes.

Michelle Ballantyne: Albeit that I have declared an interest in this issue, in that I have been actively involved in going into schools, particularly with the cadet forces in direct conjunction with careers advisers, I do not see the point in pursuing the petition. I have always found engagement with schools to be extremely professional. Its purpose is not to persuade youngsters to join the armed forces by, I suppose, misrepresenting them as something that they are not. I have always found the approach to be very honest and balanced. I know a lot of youngsters who have decided to go into the armed forces and that certainly has not been as a result of visits to schools.

The reality is that a lot of the work that is done in schools is very much about building confidence and encouraging and improving children's engagement with their own abilities. We are in danger of going down routes that are not what that work is really about.

The Convener: We want to establish whether what people sense to be the case is in fact the case, in relation to the data. The committee clerk is saying that we have the data and we can analyse that in terms of schools and so on, to give confidence to the petitioners that precisely what you describe is what is happening.

Our colleagues who have come along today have sought to give that reassurance and it would be useful to get the petitioners' response to that. I do not want to prejudge that analysis. We want to test the sense of what is happening against what

the facts are. Today's session has been really useful in that regard. Might it be useful, therefore, for us to look further at the petition once we have had a response from the petitioners?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: In that case, I thank our witnesses very much for their attendance today. The session has been useful. It has been a longer session than we would normally have, but there has been a lot of interest in it from the petitioners. We also wanted to afford the witnesses the opportunity to respond to the committee's questions.

I suspend the meeting so that we can change to our next set of witnesses.

10:12

Meeting suspended.

10:17

On resuming—

New Petition

Literacy Standards (Schools) (PE1668)

The Convener: Under agenda item 2, we have one new petition for consideration. PE1668, by Anne Glennie, is on improving literacy standards in schools through research-informed reading instruction. Two written submissions in support of the petition, from Dr Marlynne Grant and Dr Sarah McGeown, are included with our papers.

I welcome Anne Glennie to the meeting along with Dr McGeown, who is a senior lecturer in development psychology from the University of Edinburgh, and Gordon Askew MBE from the International Foundation for Effective Reading Instruction. You may make a brief opening statement of up to five minutes, after which the committee will ask a few questions to help inform our consideration of the petition.

Anne Glennie: Thank you, convener. I am very grateful for the opportunity to present evidence to the committee. I would especially like to thank Gordon Askew and Dr Sarah McGeown for giving evidence alongside me today. We have chosen to share the five minutes for our opening statements.

I am concerned about Scotland's decline in literacy standards. Through no fault of their own, teachers in Scotland lack the necessary deep subject knowledge required to teach reading effectively. This assertion is not new. It was highlighted in the 2014 review of the Scottish Government literacy hub approach. Despite being supported by research and being recommended specifically in the Scottish Government's literacy action plan from October 2010, synthetic phonics is not supported by current curriculum for excellence documentation, nor is it covered adequately in initial teacher education. Reading research has moved on, but Scotland has not. We are around 12 years behind other countries on this. We cannot afford to wait any longer.

Dr Sarah McGeown (University of Edinburgh): This petition is about ensuring that teachers and teacher training institutions have access to and use research-informed reading instruction to ensure that all children in Scotland can achieve their potential in reading. This is not about removing teacher autonomy and it is not about implementing a prescriptive approach to the teaching of reading. This is about empowering teachers by ensuring that all teachers have access to the most up-to-date research on children's reading instruction and then allowing them to make decisions about how best to apply it based on the specific students that they teach.

I believe that synthetic phonics has the potential to achieve the Scottish Government's vision of narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap in reading. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds typically start school with weaker vocabularies than children from more affluent backgrounds. My research has shown that when children are taught by an eclectic approach to read—that is, they are taught a variety of strategies to read new words such as whole-word recognition or the use of context—their language skills predict how well they will learn to read. However, when children are taught by the synthetic phonics approach, vocabulary skills do not predict word-reading success. If you are committed to narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap in reading, surely it makes sense to educate teachers in a method of instruction that is not dependent on a good vocabulary for success.

Finally, I know of no research evidence to suggest that synthetic phonics undermines a love of reading. I believe that we are all passionate about ensuring that young children have a joy and interest in books, words and stories from a young age. What we know is that synthetic phonics needs to be positioned within a curriculum that develops broader oral language skills and a love of reading, too. Synthetic phonics allows children to become independent readers earlier on, and we know that more skilled and independent readers go on to have more positive attitudes towards reading and are more confident and motivated readers.

Gordon Askew MBE (International Foundation for Effective Reading Instruction): Good morning. It is good to be with you. Although I am an adviser to the Department for Education in England, I assure you that I am not here because I think you ought to do what England does. I am here as an individual to share my experience of what I know works with children reading the English language wherever they live.

One of the really remarkable things about reading over the past 50 or 60 years is that a lot of children learn to read and pick up reading almost however they are taught. However, and it is a very big however, there have always been a very significant number of children who do not pick up reading. Since we have had decent information, that has varied from 20 per cent up to about 40 per cent, but it has never really dropped below about 20 per cent regardless of how much attention has been given to reading. Very importantly, that 20 per cent always includes some of the most disadvantaged children in our society. That applies at the moment to a lot of schools in England. I know from my international work that it applies to a lot of English-speaking countries right across the world.

Yet we now have a very significant number of schools teaching synthetic phonics alongside comprehension, where year on year very high numbers of children—a percentage in the high 90s, or almost all children—are turning out as effective readers. These are not leafy suburb schools; in fact, they are quite the reverse in most cases. They cover a whole range of schools, including a lot of schools in disadvantaged and challenging areas. Those 20 per cent, which have for so long been failed by the system, are now learning to read alongside all the other children. This is not theory; it is not what I believe; it is what I know. I have been to a lot of these schools myself and if you did not believe me I could take you along to look for yourself.

These schools do not follow a single prescription. They do not all use the same programme or the same materials or books, but they share an understanding that children read most effectively by decoding unknown words rather than guessing at them. When I refer to children reading effectively, I mean that they read with full comprehension and are developing real enthusiasm for books. It is a totally unmerited slur to say that these schools' teaching of reading is arid and mechanistic. They teach comprehension and vocabulary just as strongly as they do phonics. They have teachers who really share enthusiasm and love for wonderful books and reading. By ensuring that teachers have access to the right sort of information and training, you could be encouraging and supporting a system that would ensure that almost all children in Scotland would learn to read regardless of their background.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that helpful introduction. In your petition, you indicate that you have written to the Scottish Government, Education Scotland, the Times Educational Supplement (Scotland), and the General Teaching Council for Scotland. Have you received responses from any of those organisations? If so, what sort of feedback have you received?

Anne Glennie: Yes, I have received responses. I can give you a flavour of them—generally, it has been to say, “Thank you very much but no thank you, we will not be pursuing it any further.” I have a lot of papers here. Jeff Maguire, a senior policy officer, said:

“Our understanding is that almost all Scottish primary schools use some form of synthetic phonics, and that this approach is combined with other strategies in the context of active literacy learning. Schools have a responsibility to respond to the needs of their own pupils.”

For me, however, that is a misunderstanding of what I am trying to achieve here. Yes, most schools in Scotland use some form of phonics, but they also use other strategies alongside it, such as

multi-cueing, which amounts to word guessing. They also use sight words and repetitive, predictable reading books. It looks as if children can be in primary 1 and primary 2 and reading well when they are reading those repetitive books, but in effect what has happened is that they are simply memorising the words. In primary 3 or primary 4, once we come away from those repetitive texts, children's skills can then break down because they do not have enough solid phonics knowledge to attack any new words that they come across.

I have also had a reply from John Swinney. This was very recently, on 9 August 2017. He stated:

“I am not convinced it would be helpful to prescribe one particular approach to teaching reading. It would also contradict the philosophy of Curriculum for Excellence, which empowers teachers to choose the methods best suited to the needs of each child.”

Again, I feel that this shows a misunderstanding. I am not asking for synthetic phonics to be mandated, or for it to be statutory as it is in England. I am simply asking that our teachers are given access to and are informed about the most current international research when it comes to reading. I also have a problem with the idea that synthetic phonics contradicts the philosophy of curriculum for excellence. I wonder whether we should be prioritising the philosophy of a curriculum that, in my eyes, has yet to deliver the goods, so to speak, or teachers' right to choose from a flawed range of strategies. For me, it is more important that children get the correct research-informed reading instruction and that should not be left to chance.

Michelle Ballantyne: You stated that other countries are getting better faster than Scotland, particularly in beginning reading instruction. Why do you think that is the case?

Anne Glennie: As of 2014, in England systematic synthetic phonics has been mandated as the sole method for reading instruction. In Australia, they are trialling the phonics screening check, which originated in England. For a long time, lots of countries have been taking note of the research, which ironically really began in Scotland with the Clackmannanshire research. Other countries seem to be learning the lessons from our research, whereas we have chosen to do nothing and to leave it up to teachers. We have been doing that for the last 12 years and, without having all the information they need, teachers, through no fault of their own, cannot make an informed decision because they are not in possession of all the facts or research. I am very concerned that we are falling behind other countries with our professionalism, our pedagogy.

Gordon Askew: May I pick up on something that Anne Glennie said? I am absolutely sure that synthetic phonics is not a method of teaching

reading. It is something that children need to know in order to be able to do it. There are lots of methods that can be used to learn reading. It is like saying that children need to count in mathematics. Of course, they need to learn to count to be able to do it well, but there are lots and lots of ways of teaching them how to count. That is not a method. Synthetic phonics is the same as learning to count. It is a basic skill that children need, and we know that when they have it, that enables them to read well as long as it is with all the other things. Synthetic phonics is not a restrictive method. Schools can use lots of methods to teach reading. It is content, not method.

Michelle Ballantyne: Would it be correct to say that synthetic phonics is not a new idea? I seem to remember that it is how I learnt to read, rather a long time ago.

Gordon Askew: There is an old way of teaching phonics, which has been around quite a long time. The thinking on synthetic phonics has now moved forward considerably from that. It is a much more complete, rounded system than the one that was used, although it has something in common with that, which is why training is so important. The understanding of synthetic phonics has moved forward quite considerably.

10:30

Angus MacDonald: Closing the attainment gap is very much on the radar of every political party in this Parliament. You state that there is now ample secure and compelling evidence that shows that, if children are taught to read, write and spell using a systematic synthetic phonics approach, the attainment gap and the gender gap can be closed. Could you expand on that a bit further, please?

Dr McGeown: There are a number of ways in which you can teach children to read. One of them involves encouraging children to use context in order to decipher an unfamiliar word: a child sees a sentence and there is a word that they do not understand and that they cannot read, so they use the context to work that out. A child needs to have good language skills and good vocabulary skills in order to do that effectively. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who typically have weak vocabulary skills, cannot do that.

Another approach to teaching children to read is through sight word recognition, where you show them a whole word and ask them to commit that word to memory and remember what that word is. A lot of children from disadvantaged backgrounds know almost no letter sounds whatsoever when they start school, so the way in which they remember those words is through visual cues. For example, in one school that I went into, children

were being taught the words “Biff”, “Chip” and “Floppy”. Children remembered the word “Floppy” because it was printed on the largest card and they remembered the word “Biff” because the last two letters were the same shape. These are just abstract, meaningless symbols to those students, whereas students from more affluent backgrounds who start school with the knowledge of letter sounds might see the words “Biff”, “Chip” and “Floppy” and make the connections between letter sounds and the sight word approach.

A third approach involves phonics. That approach redresses the inequalities in knowledge that exist when children start school because, right from the beginning of instruction, children are taught about the relationship between letters and sounds and are asked to apply that. For example, the first three letter sounds that they are taught might be “a”, “n” and “t” and they might be shown words such as “ant”, “at” or “tan”. They are then shown another letter sound, such as “i”, and learn to read the words that use it—in this case, “pin”, “in”, “it” and so on. What you are creating here is a situation where children from the more disadvantaged backgrounds get that critical letter sound knowledge right at the beginning and you are not teaching children to read by a method that is dependent on vocabulary for good word-reading success. That is the way in which you would be able to close the poverty-related rate-of-attainment gap in word reading. However, obviously, phonics needs to be placed within a curriculum where you are developing children’s oral language skills as well.

Gordon Askew: In more practical terms, I could take you to hundreds—not thousands but hundreds—of schools where that approach is being used and there is no gap in learning to read between children who get free school meals, children with English as an additional language, white working class boys, children from very difficult estates and children from any other background.

Anne Glennie: I would like to give you some school statistics from England so that you can compare and contrast what is happening there with what we have in Scotland.

In Elmhurst primary school in east London, 52 per cent of the pupils are disadvantaged and 96 per cent of the intake have English as a second language. However, despite the background and the circumstances of the children, 94 per cent of the children there gain the equivalent of our second level in reading by the end of primary 7. Compare that to our latest figure from teacher judgments, which was 72 per cent. Also, at St George’s primary school, again in east London, 71 per cent of the pupils are disadvantaged and 50 per cent have English as a second language.

However, 96 per cent of the pupils—despite background, despite circumstances—manage to achieve reading at a level that will allow them to flourish and access their secondary school curriculum.

Gordon Askew: I know both of those schools. A good number of the 6 per cent or so who do not read by the end are children who have arrived partway through school.

Angus MacDonald: Put like that, it is quite a compelling case. Thank you.

Brian Whittle: I am interested in the list of benefits that you believe would be achieved through the actions that you are calling for. I am particularly interested in the idea that you would be able to reduce the number of children being identified as dyslexic. Could you expand on that?

Anne Glennie: The headteacher at Elmhurst primary school states that, since the introduction of a synthetic phonics programme in 2014, the school has managed to eradicate dyslexia. Some of the schools in which this approach is being used are identifying fewer and fewer children with dyslexia. However, in my current experience, as I travel across Scotland and work with schools and teachers, we appear to be identifying more and more children with dyslexia. What you will find is that the intervention approaches that absolutely work if someone has been identified as dyslexic are actually based on systematic synthetic phonics. What we need to do is take the teaching that works with children who are struggling and apply that to everybody. It is harmful to no one in a class but beneficial to everyone.

Gordon Askew: There is a neurological condition that is best called dyslexia that I think applies to about 1 or 2 per cent of the population—nowhere near the 20 per cent or so who are labelled as dyslexic at the moment, a lot of whom could be taught to read if they were taught to read properly.

Brian Whittle: Is that opinion or is that fact? Is that fact you could deliver to—

Gordon Askew: That is fact. The schools that we are talking about, as Anne Glennie said, have very few dyslexic children because they all read.

Brian Whittle: Is the fact that you stated—that the actual number of dyslexic people is between 1 and 2 per cent as opposed to 20 per cent—evidence based?

Gordon Askew: It is evidence based, yes. Those are the ones who you can demonstrate clinically have some sort of neurological developmental condition. For most of the others, the only real diagnosis for them being dyslexic is that they cannot read.

Brian Whittle: I would be interested to see that data.

Gordon Askew: I do not have it with me, but we could find you some data on dyslexia.

Brian Whittle: That would be great. I would really appreciate that.

Gordon Askew: Remember, it is a controversial area so people's definition of it can change.

Brian Whittle: Okay. You also believe that the synthetic phonics approach would allow us to aim for 100 per cent of children reading in Scotland. That suggests that that is not the current aim. Is that correct?

Dr McGeown: From a research perspective, I believe that synthetic phonics has the potential to improve the literacy skills of children in Scotland. We know that, in relation to children with the most severe reading difficulties, even when they are given an intervention that aligns with best practice, about 10 to 25 per cent still do not respond. They have difficulties that we are not able to remediate, I suppose. Synthetic phonics is not a cure for all literacy problems; it is a way of ensuring that all children achieve better literacy skills and it particularly benefits children from disadvantaged communities. However, you cannot promise 100 per cent.

Gordon Askew: There will always be a few children who struggle, for good reasons, so 100 per cent is too high, but I think that a figure in the high 90 per cents is totally achievable.

Anne Glennie: I would like to clarify that I said that we should aim for 100 per cent—I think that we should be aiming for 100 per cent of our children to be able to read. To paraphrase Gordon Askew, we should expect to get very close to that. It will be only in relation to the 2 to 3 per cent of cases with real and severe difficulties that we will be unable to achieve that.

To go back to your question about whether we are already aiming for that, I can give you an illustration of what I am talking about. As part of the raising attainment for all meetings, conferences and so on that took place when Angela Constance was education secretary, teachers and schools were asked to sign up to a commitment that involved stretch aims. One of the stretch aims was for 85 per cent of our children to achieve second level in literacy before leaving primary school. My immediate reaction to that was, what about the 15 per cent? I thought that the policy was called raising attainment for all. If we are serious about raising attainment for all, we need to aim for 100 per cent literacy.

Gordon Askew: If you know that teaching is being done effectively, it is easier to identify those few children who have real problems.

Rona Mackay: This approach is being taken in England. You said that you do not want it to be mandatory here. I am interested to know what your perception of the national guidance on training for teachers, support and resources is in this regard. What information do you believe that teachers do not have here already to carry this out?

Anne Glennie: The current documentation that we have provides a mixed picture, and it is difficult to find real and concrete information. The experiences and outcomes documents, the actual curriculum, the building the curriculum documents that go along with curriculum for excellence and the primary 1 literacy assessment and action resource—POLAAR—all present contradictory things in relation to reading. Although it might appear that, at the moment, curriculum for excellence does not prescribe any particular method, the Es and Os documents mention sight vocabulary and context clues and POLAAR mentions letter names, which are all things that are part of a whole-language approach, which is the opposite of what synthetic phonics is. Even though we think that we are not prescribing anything, by including all of these things we are.

What is in the documents can be confusing. The “Curriculum for excellence: literacy and English—principles and practice” paper says:

“Teachers will balance play-based learning with more systematic development and learning of skills and techniques for reading, including phonics.”

However, the “Building the Curriculum 2—Active learning in the early years” document says:

“there is no long-term advantage to children when there is an over-emphasis on systematic teaching before 6 or 7 years of age.”

The actual documentation is therefore not helpful for teachers. Despite the size and scope of the curriculum for excellence documentation—if you are familiar with the green glossy folder, you will know that it is enormous and weighs 6.5 pounds—there are only a couple of lines on actual reading instruction there. We have:

“I explore sounds, letters and words, discovering how they work together”,

then,

“I can use my knowledge of sight vocabulary, phonics, context clues, punctuation and grammar to read with understanding and expression”

and

“I am learning to select and use strategies and resources before I read, and as I read, to help make the meaning of texts clear”

and that is your lot. Despite referring to “strategy” six times, the document does not outline what those strategies are. In many cases, they are

being interpreted as multi-cueing strategies. To give you an example—

Rona Mackay: Sorry, but can I stop you there? Could you answer this specific question: do you think that teachers are informed enough about this? Would they need special training?

Anne Glennie: Teachers need special training. In the course of my day-to-day work, I regularly speak to audiences of teachers, and, over the past three years, I have started asking every audience for a show of hands. I say, “Please put your hand up if, when you did your teacher training, you were taught how to teach reading”. I said that most recently to a big audience of 72 teachers, and there were three hands up. One of those teachers had trained in South Africa and one had trained at Moray house. I thought that I must have slept in on the day that teaching reading was covered.

I thought that it was a personal problem for me—something that I had missed, something that I lacked—but, through my research and through speaking to teachers, I have discovered that we all lacked access to that information.

Gordon Askew: When I said that achieving these levels of attainment was possible, I genuinely meant it. I never said that it was easy. It has been a real uphill struggle in England, partly because there is such an extensive need for training, often among the people who provide the training, which makes life difficult. There is also 30 years of ingrained prejudice and conservative thinking among teachers and teacher trainers, who have an anti-phonics attitude that it is not to do with comprehension or enjoyment of books, and that has been hard to deal with and get past.

Rona Mackay: That is one of the points that I was going to raise. Teachers often complain that they are subjected to too much change in curriculums and teaching methods, and I presume that this would be another change. Do you accept that resources are too stretched at the moment to allow the training of teachers to teach reading?

10:45

Gordon Askew: Yes, but we are talking about a change from 20 per cent of children not being able to read to almost all children being able to read. Do some changes not just have to happen? I know that the proposal is not popular with teachers—I know that they do not like it—but we are failing thousands of children who could be given the gift of reading, which opens the door to so many other things educationally and in life opportunities. There is a price, but my opinion is that it is a price that has to be paid.

Michelle Ballantyne: In your petition you suggest that, if teachers have national guidance to

follow, they will be able to adapt their classroom practice accordingly. How would you address the potential concern that having guidance to adhere to would restrict teachers' professional autonomy?

Dr McGeown: There are a number of different ways in which synthetic phonics programmes can be delivered. For example, they vary in the number of letter sound mappings that are taught, the speed and pace of delivery, the reading materials that accompany them and in many other ways. It is about teachers understanding synthetic phonics and the specific needs of the students that they are teaching, adjusting the pace of their delivery and the number of letter sound mappings that they teach on the basis of their knowledge of their students. It is about educating teachers in the subject so that they feel confident in adjusting it to suit their classes.

Gordon Askew: To be honest, I do not think that imposition has worked in England. Those teachers who are teaching synthetic phonics have been persuaded and shown all the evidence on why it works so well. You must remember that teachers are being asked to look at specific content, not at a particular method of delivery. It is what they are teaching, not how they are teaching it, that is important.

Michelle Ballantyne: Yes. It is interesting that you raise that issue. You have to show them, and they have to engage with it. Is your experience that, once you have shown a teacher synthetic phonics or a teacher has come with knowledge of it, their level of engagement is high and they find synthetic phonics the primary way in which they choose to teach?

Gordon Askew: I know of no teachers who are doing it well who would want to teach in any other way, because they can see that their children read with understanding, are enthusiastic and love books.

Michelle Ballantyne: It is about outcomes, ultimately.

Gordon Askew: Yes, but it is also about finding a way of getting people to understand and winning hearts and minds. The evidence is there, but it is really hard work to get people to look at it.

Michelle Ballantyne: How long does it take to train a teacher in synthetic phonics?

Anne Glennie: It can be done in a day.

Dr McGeown: Yes. I offer professional learning sessions that last for five hours. At the end, teachers feel confident that they understand it enough to be able to deliver it.

Michelle Ballantyne: It is a challenge, but it is not such a big challenge.

Dr McGeown: No, it is not.

Gordon Askew: Two days would be good, I think. A day is possible, but it is pushing it. A day with follow-up might be possible, or two days, but not a few hours.

Michelle Ballantyne: Then it is professional practice.

Gordon Askew: Yes.

The Convener: Thank you very much. That has been really interesting. My recollection is that, pre-2011, the Labour Party had a commission on literacy. It was headed up by Rhona Brankin and it talked about synthetic phonics, which was accepted by the Scottish Government at the time—I think that Mike Russell was the education minister. It is an issue that there has been a conversation on.

I sit on the Education and Skills Committee, which had an evidence session with a group of people who are in initial teacher education. They were concerned about the level of support they had in learning literacy and numeracy. That was very much a concern. It is an issue that people are alive to, and I think that members have found your presentation very interesting.

What should we do in terms of taking the petition forward?

Angus MacDonald: Following your comment about the work that Rhona Brankin's team did, convener, it is worth pointing out that, in 2010, Mike Russell, who was the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning at the time, said:

"I agree that synthetic phonics has had considerable success."—[*Official Report*, 7 January 2010; c 22562.]

If synthetic phonics was considered to have had considerable success way back in 2010, why has it not moved forward and become more commonplace?

The petitioners have made a very compelling case for synthetic phonics, particularly with regard to the evidence that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit from it. I think that we need to go back to the Scottish Government and ask what its current view is. We should also seek the opinion of the Educational Institute of Scotland and the GTC in Scotland.

The Convener: The opinions of the EIS, the Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association, the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers and other unions would also be useful.

Brian Whittle: If we write to the Scottish Government, we will get a generic response, and the petitioner has indicated that she has already received a response from the cabinet secretary. If we are going to ask the question, perhaps we

should ask it in reference to those comments from 2010.

Angus MacDonald: Yes, and we could include in the letter the evidence that we have heard today about there being a particular benefit to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Michelle Ballantyne: Could we also ask for the evidence against using and embedding synthetic phonics? There seems to be a suggestion that there is resistance from the cabinet secretary, and I would like to know what that is based on.

The Convener: The argument seems to be about autonomy in curriculum for excellence. However, that is autonomy in the context of professional responsibility and understanding; it is not completely random in that it allows teachers to do whatever they like, and I do not think any teacher would argue that that is what autonomy means. It feels as though the cabinet secretary's letter suggests that, but we can always explore that issue.

Michelle Ballantyne: There is also the issue—it was briefly mentioned by the petitioners—that, if those who deliver teacher training do not know how to do synthetic phonics, they cannot teach it. Some resistance might come from that. I think that we should explore that with the cabinet secretary as well.

Gordon Askew: Could I respectfully make a suggestion, convener? It might not be your way forward, but it might be for the future. Dissemination of good practice is more effective than imposing something on people. You might identify people who are already using synthetic phonics well and get them to share their practice with other schools, so that the practice is communicated from school to school rather than from the top down.

The Convener: The issue is partly about confidence. I am struck by the fact that we now have a strategy for teaching children to learn reading that enhances the opportunities for those who are already advantaged because they have those skills—a mechanistic approach that affords the opportunity to learn from the other stuff. I find it compelling that we have strategies that are based on existing success, not on understanding the disadvantage that some young people face.

I do not know whether there are other educationalists in Scotland, particularly in the colleges and universities, who are providing initial teacher education and who have a view on the matter. That may be something else that we could explore.

Thank you very much for your attendance today. That was a very interesting evidence session, and it will be useful to explore why there are concerns

about something that appears logical. I think that that is how we would want to take the petition forward.

10:53

Meeting suspended.

10:55

On resuming—

Continued Petitions

Alzheimer's and Dementia Awareness (PE1480)

Social Care (Charges) (PE1533)

The Convener: The third item on today's agenda is further consideration of continued petitions. I alert the committee to the fact that my sense is that we will not be able to get through the substantial number of petitions before us by 20 to 12. Rather than rattle through them, I would like us to take the time to consider each petition on its own merits. We will deal with any petitions that we do not manage to deal with today at our next meeting.

I intend to deviate slightly from the order of consideration in the agenda and take PE1591 last, so that Kate Forbes can attend the discussion on the petition, in which she has taken an interest. She must attend the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, which is meeting this morning, but it is hoped that she will be able to join us later, if we manage to get to that petition.

We turn to consideration of PE1480, on Alzheimer's and dementia awareness, and PE1533, on the abolition of non-residential social care charges for older and disabled people, which were previously joined together for consideration. At our most recent consideration of the petitions in May, members agreed to write to the Scottish Government for details of a feasibility study relating to the extension of free personal care to people under the age of 65. The committee also asked the Scottish Government to meet both petitioners to discuss their views on the study. The Scottish Government responses on the two petitions are provided in our meeting papers.

The petitioner for PE1480, Amanda Kopel, highlighted in her written submission to the committee the value of considering both petitions together. She recognised that, at the time of writing, work had begun to explore the extension of free personal care to under-65s, but she said that that would not address other services that people with dementia and other long-term conditions rely on, such as day services.

The Scottish Government's programme for government for 2017-18, which was published in September, outlines plans to implement Frank's law, which will provide free personal care to people under 65 who need it. Members will note that the Government provided a further update earlier this week, along with a link to the feasibility

study and information about the planned implementation of free personal care for under-65s.

Do members have any thoughts or suggestions for further action on the petitions?

Angus MacDonald: I am certainly pleased that the Scottish Government has engaged with and met Amanda Kopel on a number of occasions, and I am delighted that the programme for government includes a commitment to implement Frank's law. The work of the petitioner and the recent media interest in the issue have secured an end result that is welcomed by everyone. However, there is still the issue of the extension of provision to other services, such as day services, which do not currently come under the definition of free personal care, so I think that there are still aspects of the petition that need to be pursued.

Rona Mackay: The Government's feasibility study was due to be completed by the summer of this year. We do not know what the outcome of that is, so I think that we should write to the Government to ask it to give us an update.

The Convener: We have a link to that, which we could have a look at. The Government has given us an update.

There is another question that we could ask, which relates to PE1533. We should commend the petitioners on the fact that significant progress has been made, but although the Government is responding, there are issues to do with conditions other than dementia. There is anxiety about what the position is for other people who rely on such services. The scrap the care tax campaign is predicated on the idea that access to such services is a human rights issue and that people are being denied the opportunity to achieve their potential because they cannot access services. We could ask the Government what its intention is with regard to conditions other than dementia that have such an impact on people's lives.

11:00

Michelle Ballantyne: I agree that we should go back to the Government. As Angus MacDonald has said, we should commend the Government for its decision to support Frank's law, but we should probe the matter further. There are a number of conditions other than Alzheimer's that are in the same position, and I would like to know what the Government's thoughts on that are.

Brian Whittle: It is my understanding that the provision will extend beyond under-65s with dementia, but to what extent I am not sure. We ought to ask about that.

The Convener: Okay. We recognise that progress has been made, but we will write to the

Scottish Government to clarify what its plans are beyond the feasibility study. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Child Abuse (Mandatory Reporting) (PE1551)

The Convener: The next continued petition for consideration is PE1551, by Scott Pattinson, on mandatory reporting of child abuse. When we last considered the petition in June, we considered the Scottish Government's reason for not consulting on mandatory reporting. Members will recall that the Government's position was that, although it would be entirely within the Parliament's competence to take its own approach on the issue, it would be "prudent" to await the outcome of the UK Government's consultation.

The committee considered that the submissions from children's organisations on the petition demonstrated that there were people and organisations that wanted to engage in a discussion on the issue. We agreed that any discussion of the matter should take place in the context of the child protection system in Scotland, and we invited the Scottish Government to provide a response to those points once it had reflected on the committee's consideration.

An update had not been provided by the time our meeting papers were issued, but an update was provided on Tuesday of this week and has been circulated to members. In that response, the Scottish Government acknowledges that

"the context around matters of child protection in Scotland differs in a number of ways to that in England and Wales"

and recognises that any analysis of responses to the UK Government's consultation would require to be considered in a Scottish context.

The submission indicates that UK Government officials have confirmed with Scottish Government officials that responses to the UK Government consultation are currently being reviewed and that there is no indication of when the findings will be published. The Scottish Government indicates that it

"has had informal engagement with key stakeholders on the matter of mandatory reporting",

which it expects to continue. It indicates that it will provide the committee with an update on any outcomes from that informal engagement in February 2018.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for further action?

Michelle Ballantyne: I am not sure that we can do anything until we get that feedback. We have no idea when the UK Government is going to report, but we need to wait until we have the

feedback from the Scottish Government on its informal engagement. I am not sure what we could do in the interim.

Rona Mackay: I think that it would be sensible to write to the Minister for Childcare and Early Years to ask her to request information about the timeframe from the UK Government, as that would give us a steer.

The Convener: I am still at a loss to understand why that has anything to do with the petition. It has been accepted that there is a different regime in Scotland, as there is for many things. The child protection landscape is quite different, although many of the issues to do with child abuse and the reporting of child abuse are no respecters of boundaries or borders or anything else—I understand that.

Rona Mackay: I am sure that the Scottish Government just wants information on what direction the UK consultation is going in.

Michelle Ballantyne: The issue is the imposition of mandatory reporting and what the implications of that would be. Given that a proper study is being done, it would be useful to see what it finds. Ultimately, there might not be a natural fit, but we could certainly ask about that.

The Convener: Some progress has been made, in the sense that the Scottish Government is carrying out informal engagement, which it says that it will report back on in February. We could reflect on the matter further once it has done that. We could indicate to the Government that we are keen that that work is done. Although the delay is understandable, we feel that it is not grappling with the issues that the petitioner has identified.

Michelle Ballantyne: Although I have every sympathy with the petitioner, I do not think that mandatory reporting is something that we can rush, because it could have huge implications. It needs to be looked at carefully.

The Convener: Do members agree to get an update from the Scottish Government in February and to urge it to engage on the matter?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Adult Cerebral Palsy Services (PE1577)

The Convener: The next continued petition is PE1577, on adult cerebral palsy services. The committee last considered the petition in May, when it agreed to write to the Scottish Government to seek details on a pilot programme and a mapping exercise and to ask whether, based on that work, it would be minded to develop national guidance on adults with cerebral palsy.

In its response, the Scottish Government stated that the clinical standards for neurological health

services are currently under review by Healthcare Improvement Scotland and that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is developing guidance for the management and treatment of cerebral palsy in adults, which will be published in 2019. As such, the Scottish Government is not minded to develop separate guidance on adults with cerebral palsy.

In her submission, the petitioner welcomed the fact that guidelines are being developed but thought that there was an opportunity for the Scottish Government to provide leadership instead of waiting for guidelines to be developed. She also expressed concern that the Scottish Government had not contacted her, despite making a commitment to work with her.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Michelle Ballantyne: I think that we should take seriously the petitioner's request that we write to the minister to ask why there has not been any further engagement with her when it was specifically stated that there would be. There is obviously a gap in the system, but the first step is to ask why that further engagement has not taken place.

The Convener: That is an important question, because there seems to be a mismatch in the discussion.

Michelle Ballantyne: There is.

The Convener: The Government is saying, "You can do this," but the petitioner is saying that the transition to adult services does not apply. There are quite a number of examples in the briefing where it feels as if the dialogue is missing the point.

Michelle Ballantyne: The Government's response looks like a standard response as opposed to a response to a specific question. I think that that is the issue.

The Convener: Is there anything else that we could be doing?

Angus MacDonald: Should we not write to NICE to clarify whether there might be an opportunity for the petitioner to contribute to the work on developing the guidance?

The Convener: That would make sense. If there is a sense that the lived experience is not shaping the guidance, we need to ask how people who have such concerns can contribute to the development of the guidance. I think that that would be useful.

Michelle Ballantyne: I presume that NICE is engaging with people with cerebral palsy, if not the petitioner. It would be worth asking whether that is the case.

The Convener: Do members agree to write to the Scottish Government to ask it to ensure that it fulfils its commitment to the petitioner, because that would give confidence that the concerns are recognised?

Members indicated agreement.

School Libraries (PE1581)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE1581, which was lodged by Duncan Wright on behalf of Save Scotland's School Libraries. When we last considered the petition on 25 May, we agreed to ask the Deputy First Minister to respond to the petitioner's request for clarification of the development and delivery of the national strategy, and of when it would be in place.

In its submission at the end of June, the Scottish Government advised that the Scottish Library and Information Council will lead on the development of the strategy, but that it will engage with key stakeholders, including the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in Scotland and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland. It added that development and engagement would begin following publication of the fourth edition of "How good is our school?", with the aim of agreeing and publishing the strategy ahead of the 2018-19 school year. The clerk's note indicates that the guidance on school libraries has been published and refers to the Deputy First Minister's recent announcement of the school library improvement fund.

The petitioner considers that "significant progress" has been made, as there is a clear plan for development and delivery of the strategy to an appropriate timescale.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Michelle Ballantyne: I suggest that we close the petition. The petitioner seems quite happy—he thanks the committee. There does not seem to be any further work to do.

The Convener: Yes, I think that we can welcome the progress that has been made.

Rona Mackay: We can. The petition has been successful.

The Convener: It is good to recognise that the petition has achieved what the petitioner wanted, that the Government has responded to it and that there seems to be a clear line of action. On that basis, do members agree to close the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Excellent.

We will take the petition on health services later.

Pathological Demand Avoidance Syndrome (PE1625)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1625, by Patricia Hewitt and Mary Black, on wider awareness, acceptance and recognition of pathological demand avoidance syndrome. Submissions from the Scottish Government, integration joint boards and the petitioners are included in our papers.

At our meeting on 15 June we agreed to ask the Scottish Government whether it would look at policies, research or approaches elsewhere in the world. In its submission, the Scottish Government states that it is

“already committed to international standards of best practice”

in the form of ICD-10 and DSM-IV—“International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems”, 10th revision, and “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders”, fourth edition. It adds that the relevant national guidance, “SIGN 145—Assessment, diagnosis and interventions for autism spectrum disorders”, was published as recently as 2016 and reflects the most recent evidence covering children and young people following a systematic review and critical appraisal of the current scientific literature. As such, the Scottish Government is clear that it does not intend to look at policies, research or practice elsewhere.

The Scottish Government also addressed our question about how consistency in diagnosis and support can be delivered by local authorities. It notes that, under the Scottish strategy for autism, each local authority is required to have a published autism strategy and autism plan. The submission also refers to the availability and accessibility of a range of support tools and learning resources, including the autism training framework, an online learning space, and a guidance document entitled “Key Considerations in Promoting Positive Practice for Autism Spectrum Disorders”. That document advises all staff to be

“sensitive to differences in how individuals and their families or carers wish to view themselves and how they wish to describe their autism.”

The submissions from integration joint boards also refer to the national and international guidance as being the gold standard. They appear to indicate that they will adhere to this guidance but update any practices in the event of any changes being put in place based on any emerging evidence. The IJBs, particularly those in Orkney and Shetland, highlight the importance of developing individualised strategies, with child-centred and solution-oriented interventions, as

part of a positive behaviour support plan for the individual rather than as a label.

The petitioners consider that the Scottish Government has

“no willingness to address new developments”

and that the submissions from the IJBs reflect the varied handling of PDA across the country, where only those professionals with an awareness of the condition will respond accordingly. The petitioners present some proposals for further consideration.

Do members have any views on action to take on this petition?

Brian Whittle: I was particularly struck by the evidence that we took about the apparent postcode lottery around treatment being offered, with one council area recognising and treating the condition and another council area perhaps even sending people to good-parenting classes. I am still not convinced that we have a response that addresses that issue satisfactorily. I am not quite sure how we take that forward, but I am slightly disquieted by the fact that we have not got to where I hoped that we would get to.

The Convener: I felt a bit encouraged by some of the evidence that said that, regardless of what term is used, the focus must be on the child and on how they behave and how they are living. Even though people might not be prepared to give the condition the title that the petitioners use, the practice is that people’s focus should be on how the condition presents itself. I do not know whether that is of some comfort to people. It is quite difficult for us to adjudicate on the professional understanding of these conditions.

Rona Mackay: Exactly. I think that that is true.

Brian Whittle: I absolutely accept that. I am just voicing the fact that I am not convinced that we have addressed what was most disquieting to me, which is the fact that they are suggesting that some people are being sent to good-parenting classes rather than being able to access treatment for their child. I want reassurance that there is a child-centred focus on the condition, whether you call it PDA or whatever.

Michelle Ballantyne: I think that the complexity of the autism spectrum and the complexity of behaviours that you see on it makes the issue challenging. There is an emerging conversation around PDA, so you will see it in clinical notes in some places and, in other places, it will be denied as an existing condition on the autism spectrum.

11:15

Part of the problem is that some of the behaviours that are displayed under PDA can seem like poor behaviour in a child and, therefore,

are often determined to be just that and to be related to a parent's unwillingness to set boundaries and demand better behaviours, which is where some of the complexity comes in. That determination depends very much on the individuals who are making the assessment. That can be very challenging for parents and it can raise anxiety to quite a high level.

I think that the petitioners are asking for a conversation about this issue. It is quite important that there is such a conversation, particularly in a situation in which there is an emerging clinical diagnosis and there are disputes among clinicians about the existence of the condition. However, the condition is disputed only in the sense that we are still at an early stage of the learning curve and the evidence base is not universally accepted. That is going to be challenging and it is not something that we can push everybody on. We are perhaps asking for an open-minded approach to looking at the issue and to how we treat parents and individuals.

The issue here is about not slamming the door. There needs to be an on-going review of what this means for children and for families, because it is not just about parents; it is about siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles who are trying to cope with what can be quite extreme behaviour in some cases.

The Convener: The question that we have to ask is whether we, as the Public Petitions Committee can help that process by continuing to consider the petition. I would have thought that, because we have raised it with the integration joint boards, it is now an issue that they have had to respond to and that they are more aware of. I am comforted by what we have read about the focus on the child and the fact that there has been an airing of the condition, which is something that we can usefully do.

However, we have insufficient expertise or detailed understanding to be able to influence how practice develops to a great extent. I would argue that we have already influenced practice in what we have done. The judgment that we have to make now is whether our continuing to consider the petition adds anything or whether we have done our job in the sense that we have highlighted the issue and said that that conversation should be continuing. Certainly, if we were to close it, the petitioners could lodge another petition if they felt that there has not been progress.

Michelle Ballantyne: We obviously cannot change or influence directly the DSM-5 or ICD-10 diagnostics, but I suppose that we can make a recommendation, if we feel it appropriate, that professionals have an awareness of the issue and continue to look at where PDA sits on the autism spectrum. In my professional life, I have seen

awareness growing in that area. However, like all these things, it takes time, as well as research and so on that can confirm or deny the existence of the condition.

The Convener: If people have other suggestions, they can share them, but my suggestion is that, in closing the petition, we confirm to the Scottish Government that we believe there is an issue here; that we have received responses; that we believe that this conversation needs to continue; and that, because of the way in which autism and other conditions express themselves, it is essential that there is a focus on the child. I appreciate that we are talking to people who understand far more than us about this. I am not trying to teach somebody how to do their job when they clearly know an awful lot more of the detail than I do. Do members agree that, in closing the petition, we should make those points to the Scottish Government?

Rona Mackay: Brian Whittle's comments about the patchiness of approaches from different local authorities are particularly relevant. I do not know whether local authorities have been made sufficiently aware of the issue. Perhaps we could include that in our communication with the Scottish Government, as the petitioners want local authorities to be encouraged to provide training and education to social professionals, or at least to make them aware of the issue. If we close the petition, we should make that request. I do not know whether we have done that enough. If they are aware of the issue, why is there such a patchy response?

Michelle Ballantyne: Because of the small number of cases.

The Convener: I suggest that, in closing the petition, we flag up to the Scottish Government that the condition is something that it should be aware of in developing the Scottish strategy for autism, and say that it should be aware of the developing thinking around the condition. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank the petitioners very much for bringing the issue to the attention of the committee and, through us, the integration joint boards and for highlighting the specific concerns about a situation that is possibly ending up in people getting all sorts of varied recommendations on how the matter should be treated, because we would not want that to be the case.

Private Criminal Prosecutions (PE1633)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1633, on private criminal prosecution in Scotland, which we last considered at our meeting in June 2017. At

that meeting, we agreed to write to the Scottish Government, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and the Health and Safety Executive in Scotland to ask for their views on whether they considered there to be an accountability gap in relation to health and safety investigations in Scotland.

The Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service stated that it does not have the statutory authority to instruct the Health and Safety Executive in relation to its work. It went on to confirm that that relationship was no different from the relationship between it and all other agencies that report suspected criminality to the procurator fiscal.

The petitioner's written submission set out concerns in relation to the existing Health and Safety Executive guidelines, in the context of sports-related injuries. He stated that, as the guidelines currently stand, unless someone is killed at a sporting event, it is very unlikely that there will ever be an independent investigation into an injury. The petitioner's view is that there is a failure by the Health and Safety Executive and he identified three alternative options to address that perceived failure, as set out in our meeting papers.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for further action?

Rona Mackay: This petitioner is a constituent of mine. There is a very real issue here. The petition highlights a really important anomaly in the system. However, I am not sure that we can take it any further because I think that we have exhausted all avenues of inquiry on this one and we seem to be hitting a brick wall.

Brian Whittle: Is there a case for referring it to another committee?

The Convener: Which one?

Brian Whittle: Not the Health and Sport Committee—do not give it back to me. I am trying to give it to somebody else.

The Convener: I thought that there was a really interesting argument. Obviously, if there is a fatality, there is an inquiry. However, if somebody is seriously injured at a sporting event and there might be culpability—you will know more about this than me, Brian, but I was thinking of, for example, a gymnastics competition where someone has failed to ensure that the equipment is safe—that is not investigated. I was quite surprised by that.

Brian Whittle: I think that it is a legal issue. I am not sure that we can do anything.

Rona Mackay: That is why I do not know where we can go with it. There is an undoubted issue.

The Convener: When we—I mean the Labour Party—looked at which powers we would devolve

to the Scottish Government, there was an interesting issue about how the Health and Safety Executive in Scotland sits in relation to the UK body and in relation to accountability in Scotland. I am not sure that that is something that we could address but I am quite attracted by the idea of referring the petition to another committee. I know that that routinely happened in the past, but we rarely do it now.

Rona Mackay: I think that the issue merits further discussion and investigation, but I am just not sure that this is the vehicle for that.

The Convener: We would not want to mislead the petitioner that referring it to the Justice Committee would necessarily lead to the issue being addressed, as I know that that committee has a significant workload and might not be able to do anything with the petition.

Brian Whittle: I agree that this is not the place for it to be addressed. That leaves us the option of referring it to the Justice Committee.

The Convener: Do members have any other views?

Rona Mackay: I am on the Justice Committee. I am happy for it to go there.

The Convener: If anyone gives me a row about it, I will refer all concerns to you, Rona.

Brian Whittle: You have just dug a hole for yourself.

Rona Mackay: Exactly.

The Convener: I do not think that we want to create the impression that this is something that is easily solved. We think that the petition raises an interesting area but we do not feel the Petitions Committee can take it further.

Do we agree to refer the petition to the Justice Committee?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: In doing so, we thank the petitioner for highlighting the issue.

Business Rates (Nurseries) (PE1648)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1648, on nursery business rates, which calls for business rates for nurseries to be abolished or frozen. The committee last considered the petition in June and agreed to seek the views of the Scottish Government, Voice Union, the parenting across Scotland partnership and local authorities.

A number of submissions have been received, which have provided the committee with useful information. However, this appears to be an instance where consideration of the petition has been overtaken by events. Since we last

considered the petition, the report of the Barclay review of the non-domestic rates system has been published, and the Scottish Government has announced that childcare nurseries should benefit from a new 100 per cent rate relief from 2018-19, which will be subject to review after three years.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for further action?

Michelle Ballantyne: I am absolutely delighted that the decision has been made and that we can close the petition.

The Convener: And take credit for the decision.

Michelle Ballantyne: That might be a stretch.

Rona Mackay: It is sensible to close it.

The Convener: The petitioners have clearly been active, and not just with the Public Petitions Committee. There has been a campaign on the issue and the Scottish Government has responded to that.

Do we agree to close the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders, on the basis that the Scottish Government has agreed that childcare nurseries should benefit from a new 100 per cent rate relief from 2018-19?

Members indicated agreement.

Council Tax Bands (PE1649)

The Convener: Our next petition is PE1649, on council tax bands. The committee last considered this petition in June and agreed to write to the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to seek their views on the petition.

The Scottish Government stated that although it recognised the concerns that the petitioner raised, it has no plans to undertake a revaluation exercise for council tax purposes during the current parliamentary session. In contrast, COSLA is of the view that a wholesale revaluation of council tax bands is required, as part of a wider strategic review of the council tax system in Scotland to make it a fair and locally democratically accountable tax.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for further action?

Michelle Ballantyne: I took part in COSLA's review of local government taxation and we spent an awful lot of time on it.

It is a difficult issue. To some degree, we are where we are. The recommendations have been made and the Scottish Government made it clear that it is not going to look again at the issue at the moment. I am not sure where we can go at this

stage, because there has been such a huge amount of conversation about the issue already.

Angus MacDonald: Given Michelle Ballantyne's comments and the position in which we find ourselves—the Scottish Government has stated that it has no plans to undertake a revaluation exercise—I do not think that there is any option but to close the petition. If we were to ask the Scottish Government to comment on COSLA's submission we would get the same response. Rather than prolong the agony, we are probably better closing the petition, regretfully.

Michelle Ballantyne: It would be worth saying to the petitioner that it will be an on-going conversation between local government, COSLA and political parties. Just because we close the petition, it does not mean that the conversation dies. It is not a dead subject.

Brian Whittle: It is not going away.

The Convener: There are some petitions that highlight an issue to which nobody is paying any attention and on which there is no focus. The reality is that, on council tax, everyone is wrestling with how to have fair local taxation that is locally accountable. All parties in the Parliament and beyond are wrestling with that.

I would agree with members that we recognise it is a really important issue. We also recognise that people are wrestling with it as we speak. The committee has probably done as much as we can at this stage and we would be agreeing to close the petition on that basis.

The Scottish Government has no plans to undertake a revaluation exercise during the current parliamentary session, but we would highlight the fact that the issue remains—

Michelle Ballantyne: It is a live issue.

11:30

The Convener: It is a very live issue and it remains to be resolved. We thank the petitioners for bringing it to the committee's attention.

Do members agree to close the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

Postgraduate Degree Funding (Eligibility) (PE1650)

The Convener: The next petition for consideration is PE1650, on the Student Awards Agency Scotland's postgraduate eligibility criteria. We last considered the petition in June, when we agreed to write to the Scottish Government, the National Union of Students Scotland, the Student Awards Agency Scotland and Universities Scotland. Responses have now been received, as

well as a written submission from the petitioner, and that information is included in our meeting papers. The majority of written responses received do not support the action called for in the petition and argue that the current policies in place work well for the vast majority of students.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for further action?

Brian Whittle: Given the lack of support for the petition, it would be difficult to justify continuing it.

Rona Mackay: I agree. What is the point? I think that the petition should be closed. We have had all the responses and they are quite unequivocal, so it should be closed.

Michelle Ballantyne: The evidence is quite clear on this one. Although one might have empathy with what the petitioner is saying, the reality does support it.

The Convener: It comes down to the fact that the only students in Europe who do not have access to the same conditions as students from Scotland are those from England. The fact is that the qualification that the petitioner was seeking is of benefit only in Scotland, so you can see why it would not be funded elsewhere. The issue is probably part of a broader mix of issues regarding will happen with student support in the longer term.

Michelle Ballantyne: We are having the same conversation as the one that we had on the previous petition. The issue will be an on-going subject of debate. Closing the petition will not mean that it will never be discussed and looked at again, because it will be.

The Convener: Do we agree to close the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders, on the basis that there is not support for the action called for in the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We want to thank the petitioner and recognise their particular circumstances, which are clearly very frustrating. It is important to highlight the issue, but it should be seen in the broader context of student support.

Abusive and Threatening Communication (PE1652)

The Convener: The next petition for consideration, which might be the last one today, is PE1652, on abusive and threatening communication. The committee last considered this petition in June and agreed to write to relevant stakeholders. Responses have now been received and are included in our meeting papers.

Police Scotland and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service highlighted that the main challenge that exists in enforcing abusive and threatening communication offences is proving “beyond reasonable doubt” who sent an abusive or threatening communication.

The petition suggests that it would be easier to enforce such offences if it is set out in law that the owner of a mobile phone is responsible for any communication sent using the device. The responses received highlighted a number of practical difficulties with that approach, which are outlined in our meeting papers.

The committee asked the Scottish Government what action it was taking to review the operation of corroboration in the context of hate crime. The Government said that it was in the process of commissioning jury research and that any future consideration of corroboration reform would need to await the findings of that research. The Government has also commissioned an independent review of laws covering hate crime offences in Scotland, to ensure that they are fit for purpose. The review’s recommendations are expected to be considered by the Scottish Government in early 2018.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for further action?

Rona Mackay: I think that the petition should be deferred until Lord Bracadale’s review of hate crime is concluded. I see no merit in doing anything until that comes through. The issue will be included in that.

Angus MacDonald: I agree with Rona Mackay. Is it possible to make a further attempt to get the petitioner’s views on the responses that we have received from the Scottish Government, Police Scotland, Scottish Women’s Aid, Respect and Victim Support Scotland?

The Convener: That would be worth while. We have a concern—I certainly have a concern, since I am able to lose my phone fairly regularly—about the idea that the owner would be responsible. I understand the point and I think that there is quite an interesting message there about liability and so on, but there is a concern. Do we agree to defer consideration of the petition and ask the petitioner for their comments on the responses that we have had so far?

Members indicated agreement.

Healthcare Services (Skye, Lochalsh and South-west Ross) (PE1591)

The Convener: The last petition is on the major redesign of healthcare. We have Rhoda Grant and Kate Forbes here. However, we have only four minutes left and my sense is that, given the

seriousness of the issue, we want to make sure that it is given a bit more time. I am in the hands of the committee.

Time is ticking by while we decide whether we have time or not. I will make a judgment. Do we agree to defer consideration of the petition to our next meeting?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: There are some petitions that we could probably get through in four minutes, but I would not want the petitioners to think that we had not given this one due consideration.

I thank everybody for their attendance. We have got through a mighty amount of work and some very useful petitions today.

Meeting closed at 11:36.

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