



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Public Petitions Committee

Thursday 26 April 2018

Session 5



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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

6th Meeting 2018, 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:

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con) (Committee Substitute)

Roseanna Cunningham (Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform)

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Hugh Dignon (Scottish Government)

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab)

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)

Andrew Voas (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Catherine Fergusson

LOCATION

The Adam Smith Room (CR5)

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Thursday 26 April 2018

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:01]

Interests

The Convener (Johann Lamont): Welcome to the sixth meeting in 2018 of the Public Petitions Committee. I remind members and others in the room to switch phones and other devices to silent mode. We have received apologies from Angus MacDonald and Brian Whittle; Graeme Dey and Maurice Corry are attending as their substitutes, and I welcome both to the meeting. Maurice has been here before, both as a member of the committee and as a substitute. It is Graeme's first attendance, so I invite him to declare relevant interests.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): Thank you, convener. I do not think that there is anything in particular that I should declare, other than that, in respect of petition PE1632, I should perhaps confirm that I am a co-convener of the cross-party group on carers.

The Convener: Thank you.

Continued Petitions

Dog Breeding (PE1640)

09:02

The Convener: The first item on the agenda is consideration of two continued petitions on which we will take oral evidence from Roseanna Cunningham, the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, whom I welcome. The first of those two petitions is PE1640, on action against irresponsible dog breeding, which was lodged by Eileen Bryant.

The cabinet secretary is accompanied by Andrew Voas, who is the veterinary head of animal welfare at the Scottish Government. Thank you both for attending. We may be joined by Emma Harper and Christine Grahame for consideration of PE1640.

We have quite a range of topics to cover, cabinet secretary, but we will be happy to hear a brief opening statement, if you have one.

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): I did not come with a prepared statement, but you may want me to make one up now, convener.

The Convener: No. That is helpful, because there are, as you can imagine, a large number of questions. In your submission to the committee in October you said that "A Nation With Ambition: The Government's Programme for Scotland 2017-18"

"notes that improvements to the licensing and registration arrangements for dog, cat and rabbit breeding will follow the preparation of legislation for a modern system of registration and licensing of animal sanctuaries and rehoming activities"

and that its immediate priority

"is to establish the principles that can be included in legislation for that modern system".

Can you give me an update on progress in establishing those principles?

Roseanna Cunningham: Yes. Members of the committee might be aware that we have fairly recently consulted on animal sanctuaries and rehoming activities. We have not yet published the analysis of that consultation, but we expect to do so within the next couple of weeks.

Officials are drafting legislation that will include principles on, for example, the ability of local authorities to vary, suspend or revoke licences, risk-based frequency of inspection by independent third parties and setting of consistent fees to allow cost recovery.

There will be a detailed requirement for licence holders to follow specific guidance on how to care for animals, so there is quite a lot happening, and there is quite a dynamic process.

The Convener: I appreciate that the analysis has not been published yet, but do you have a sense of whether there was consensus around the key issues?

Roseanna Cunningham: Andrew Voas might be able to fill in the specifics. Most people think that what is being done is a good idea. As you would expect, however, there are questions about whether it will be appropriate for every size of establishment, so there might be different approaches depending on establishments' size. I understand that nobody is saying that they think that there should be no such scheme, so it is heartening that we do not have that division of opinion. We are confident that moving forward in this way is absolutely the right thing to do: most people would consider it to be the appropriate thing to do.

There might be questions about the burden that would be put on very small establishments, compared with very large ones. Should there be different approaches? There are issues around the detail, about which, I suspect, there will be conversations. However, as far as I know, no one is saying—Andrew Voas can correct me if I am wrong—that there should be no licensing or registration.

Andrew Voas (Scottish Government): That is correct. As the cabinet secretary said, there was general support among respondents to the consultation. There were a few queries about where thresholds for different licences should kick in. We came up with suggestions for consideration regarding the number of dogs or cats that could be kept.

Obviously, there is difficulty in equating other animals. Licensing will cover the full range of exotic animals, horses, reptiles and fish, so technical questions have been raised about, for example, how many fish would need to be kept before one would need a certain level of licence, and what will happen if different species are kept at the same premises. Those are the sorts of things that we are thinking through in drafting the legislation.

The Convener: Thank you.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Good morning, cabinet secretary. In relation to the arrangements that you have been talking about, and specifically for puppies, will there be a national register that includes unique breeder numbers and puppy identification numbers? Has the matter been gone into in such detail?

Roseanna Cunningham: We have not ruled out a national register and are looking at how one might operate. A national register would certainly allow easier access to information, but setting that up will take some consideration; it cannot be created overnight and we will have to think through how it would be managed.

I suppose that a register could include unique breeder identification numbers. However, as I understand it, all dogs already require unique microchip identification by the time they are eight weeks old, so perhaps there is already a base of information that we can use to begin that process.

I flag up that the Kennel Club has raised concerns around privacy, in respect of a national register, so we will need to engage with it to bottom out precisely what it thinks the problems might be. That is part of the ongoing process.

Those are the kinds of things that are coming up that we will deal with as we try to develop the best scheme.

Rona Mackay: Is there a general acceptance that there is a need to keep track of what is going on much more than is happening presently?

Roseanna Cunningham: As I said at the outset, we have not ruled out a national register. We are examining whether that would be practical and do what it would exist to do, which is to provide public information. We cannot overlook that there may be underlying technical problems. As I have flagged up, the Kennel Club has an issue about privacy as well, in particular because a lot of breeding is done domestically: where people do the breeding is also their home address. People do not necessarily live in one place and run a separate breeding establishment elsewhere, so the business address and the home or family address are the same. We need to consider whether that issue is serious enough to affect how we think a national register might look.

Rona Mackay: Okay. Thank you.

The Convener: I welcome Christine Grahame to the meeting. Committee members have questions to ask, then I will give Christine Grahame the opportunity to ask questions.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): This is a new thing for you, convener—me in listening mode.

The Convener: We like listening mode. [*Laughter.*]

Roseanna Cunningham: It is a rare thing.

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): I had thought that the Deputy Presiding Officer would have to do a lot of listening.

Good morning, cabinet secretary and Mr Voas. Thank you for coming.

In your submission to the committee in October, you provided an update on discussions between officials in the United Kingdom and in the Republic of Ireland on sharing intelligence about illegal imports. You mentioned discussions regarding Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs draft legislation on animal activity licensing, which had been proposed for introduction in England and Wales. Where do matters stand?

Roseanna Cunningham: We anticipated that question, so we checked. I can tell you that DEFRA has published the draft legislation. It is currently being taken through Westminster, and the current expectation is that it will come into force in October.

Michelle Ballantyne: That is good. At our previous consideration of the petition, Emma Harper mentioned that she had attended a meeting in March with stakeholders. She suggested that good progress was being made in closing routes for illegal transfer of puppies. Is that the case? Where has that got to?

Roseanna Cunningham: I think that Emma Harper was probably referring to the ongoing collaborative work between the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Dumfries and Galloway Council and counterparts from across the UK. This is a problem that goes beyond our boundaries and includes the Republic of Ireland, so various other agencies are involved.

There is evidence that operation Delphin, which is trying to tighten up enforcement, is beginning to have an impact. However, we know that there is profit in such activity, which is why people do it, so there is concern about trade displacement, as Michelle Ballantyne might imagine.

It is interesting—I have spoken about this at an SSPCA event—that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has taken what I call the Al Capone option. It is identifying undeclared income from puppy dealers and targeting it. It has recently launched a third task force to do that. That is to approach the matter from a slightly different angle, but it looks as though it is quite a fruitful way of tackling the issue, because the whole thing is about money.

I cannot tell you that a magic solution has been developed. What I can say—if this is what Emma Harper was referring to, as I suspect it is—is that we feel the consistent on-going collaboration is beginning to make a difference. We just have to check that we are not displacing the trade elsewhere. HMRC's involvement is probably very helpful.

Graeme Dey: In your submission, you also referred to the “early discussions” about the possibility of

“a co-ordinated public awareness raising campaign”.

Emma Harper mentioned that, at the meeting with stakeholders, there had been some discussion about a national programme of awareness, which might include a short video. Could you update us on how all of that is progressing and what the target audience is considered to be?

09:15

Roseanna Cunningham: Just last week, I tweeted as part of one of those campaigns, which involved the SSPCA, the Scottish Government and various leading animal welfare organisations, and which was publicising the message “say no to puppy dealers”. I think that I managed to do two out of the three tweets that I was asked to be involved in. If you were search “say no to puppy dealers”, you would be able see what was being done. The SSPCA is hosting a website under that name as well, giving advice to people who are thinking about buying a puppy. It is similar to what we were doing in the run-up to Christmas. Pretty much every year in the run-up to Christmas, we try to steer people away from buying puppies for Christmas because, inevitably, six to nine months down the line, those puppies are all being handed in because they do not stay puppies for long.

There were video clips attached to the more recent social media campaign. We are going to follow that up with our bigger marketing campaign, which we are in the process of developing. That campaign will be aimed at, in particular, those who are tempted by cute puppy images—and unfortunately social media is awash with those. We all look at them; they are great, but unfortunately they lead to some people buying in the wrong way. We just need them to stop and think before they do that. The interesting observation to make is that the research that the Scottish Government has done suggests that, when it comes to puppy-buying decision making, it is young women who make the buying decisions. That gives us an idea of where some of the specific targeting has to go and may lead to a change in where we put the advertising: if it is young women who are making those decisions, we need to be where young women are, whether that is online or elsewhere. We may seriously have to think about targeting first-time buyers, young people and—clearly, given the research— young women in particular.

Graeme Dey: Thank you. The research suggested that teaching children about animal welfare could be built into the curriculum. Is that more of a medium to long-term ambition? It is

targeted at youngsters, who will become the puppy-buying public.

My other question is related to that. What role do you see for local authorities, given that they are often left picking up the pieces when puppies are abandoned?

Roseanna Cunningham: Education through schools is very important—it is about the future generation's attitudes to animals. When we talk to young people, we talk about not just puppies but animal cruelty in general. I suppose that that is part of encouraging empathy in young people. We know that if people are able to express empathy to animals, they will also feel that way towards human beings; it is not an either/or.

The SSPCA already does tremendous work through schools. The work that it is doing reaches about 300,000 young people each year, so the approach is already quite an important part of what is put out there. At the end of the day, it is not mandatory to include the issue in schools, but local authorities or, in some cases, individual interested teachers are pulling in that aspect. We are reaching a pretty significant number of young people already.

Local authorities are already represented on the SSPCA group that is looking at the issue—they are actively engaged. Because they often end up picking up the pieces, it is important for them that they try to encourage anything that will help. I think that they were responsible for flagging up the notion of trusted traders, so they are involved in a two-way conversation with all other interested parties. They are not sitting back from the debate.

Rona Mackay: The scoping research that was published last November notes that key national and international animal welfare non-governmental organisations are very concerned about the escalating illegal puppy trade. The report recommends developing a process to accurately record both the legal and known illegal trade, with one suggestion being to copy the format of the European Union trade in wildlife information exchange. Can you explain a bit more about that and say how the Government might liaise with the rest of the UK to explore that suggestion?

Roseanna Cunningham: Yes. There is UK-based activity going on. The Animal and Plant Agency, or APHA, is in the process of gathering and collating intelligence about illegal imports. We have not yet discussed any formal mechanism for recording and reporting such activity. You will understand that one of the difficulties is that there are no restrictions on movement and trade across the various internal borders in the UK. That means that dogs that are illegally traded in any part of the UK could come from other regions in the UK. It is quite difficult to be able to track that, and we know

that illegally traded dogs can also come from the Republic of Ireland or Europe. Work is already happening, with APHA having taken on that role. In fairness, I do not think that we are yet at a point where I can describe a formal mechanism, but you can rest assured that the issue is being actively looked at. Again, it is just about some of the technical problems around managing the situation, given that, at least within the UK, there is complete freedom of movement.

Rona Mackay: I was going to ask whether any other options are being explored but it is clear that you are looking at the possibility of doing that.

Roseanna Cunningham: Yes, we are. It just makes sense for that to happen on a UK-wide basis.

Rona Mackay: Some illegal puppy traders, or the individuals involved, have been identified, and I assume that they will be on a record somewhere and will not be allowed just to carry on under another name or whatever. I know that that is probably more of a criminal matter, but some progress has been made in cracking down.

Roseanna Cunningham: In an earlier answer, I talked about some of the effort that is going in, including going after undeclared income. Things are happening on a number of fronts. We are not putting all our eggs in one basket—I do not think that that will ever be possible, because we will constantly have to be looking at taking a wide range of actions, and it will be the cumulative impact of those actions that will begin to have an overall impact.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): Good morning. I will follow up on my colleague Rona Mackay's question about the scoping research. The report recognises the different types of trade and the variety of offenders involved. It also recognises that different responses are required to tackle illegal domestic and international trade. Can you give us an update on exactly where the Scottish Government's work is with other jurisdictions and agencies on taking forward research in the area?

Roseanna Cunningham: I refer to my earlier answer about the on-going collaborative working that we are part of—I will not just repeat that, but it partly answers your question and is incredibly important. The Scottish Government is not taking forward any specific research in the area, but we are considering how best to monitor the marketing campaign to try to assess its effectiveness and impact. In a sense, that is all part of the much wider effort that is going on across the whole of the UK.

Maurice Corry: What exactly is the marketing campaign? How effective is it? How are you going about it?

Roseanna Cunningham: It is the marketing campaign that I just referred to.

Andrew Voas: I could expand on that a bit.

Maurice Corry: Could you give a bit more detail?

Andrew Voas: Yes. There was a week-long marketing campaign that involved the Scottish Government—

Roseanna Cunningham: Last week.

Andrew Voas: It was last week. The SSPCA and other NGOs agreed to co-operate to launch the say no to puppy dealers website that the SSPCA is hosting. You can google it—the website address is www.SayNoToPuppyDealers.co.uk, and you will find information there. We are trying to point people to that website who are thinking of buying a puppy or concerned about the risks. Everybody is trying to get people to go to the website.

That was just a lead-in to a longer-term marketing campaign that we are in the process of setting up and which we have now agreed will be part of the programme of Scottish Government-funded marketing campaigns over the next 12 months. We are establishing the scope of the campaign and, as members have heard, we have an idea of who the target audience will be. We are looking at the most effective way of reaching those people—they are the sort of people who would not necessarily look at a Government website to get information, but we are trying to find innovative ways of reaching them. The campaign may use things such as decoy advertisements. Someone who is looking for a popular breed online may see an advertisement that says, “Puppies at an attractive price”, to get them to look, but which then gives warnings about the health risks or the fact that they may be supporting illegal trade or left with a puppy that requires thousands of pounds to be spent on vet’s bills and might need to be put down a few weeks later. That is the sort of approach that we are thinking of taking. We have not decided exactly which approaches we will use, but those are the thoughts that we are developing as part of the longer-term marketing campaign.

Maurice Corry: How do you intend to monitor the campaign? You are talking about targeting the illegal international trade as well, so it is quite a complex exercise.

Roseanna Cunningham: The campaign is about targeting prospective buyers. Effectively, we are trying to remove the demand that ends up being satisfied by the illegal puppy trade, because people do not think through their decisions. It will come in on the demand side. A lot of the collaborative work that we have already discussed is about tackling the supply side. In effect, both

have to be happening at the same time for it to ultimately begin to work.

Maurice Corry: I am happy with that.

Michelle Ballantyne: That cuts across some of what I was about to ask.

Roseanna Cunningham: Sorry.

Michelle Ballantyne: No, no—not at all. From the report, it seems that, in relation to behaviour, although consumers say that they feel a bit overwhelmed and confused, they also think that the online trade is much more heavily regulated than it actually is and that their purchases are safer than they actually are. However, there are opportunities for interventions, and you have said what some of those might be. The report talks about the pet advertising advisory group’s minimum standards for advertising and the use of pop-ups and links—they are included in the recommendations section. Are you following up on some of that, or is that being done separately? Have you thought about how you can regulate websites in conjunction with other legislatures and agencies—or even if you can regulate, given that some of those websites are not based in the UK?

09:30

Roseanna Cunningham: That is one of our difficulties. Any attempt to regulate websites or other things on the internet can become, as we know, extremely difficult. We are considering legislating to require sellers to include unique identity numbers and other relevant information in any adverts that they place. However, we have to go back to consumers and what they know and understand. If we legislated in that way, we would need to think through how we could ensure that people understood that they should look for that information when they see an advert. Tackling consumer behaviour is a big issue across a whole range of issues, not just this one. It is not easy because people can remain unaware of a lot that is going on. They are not making decisions in any malicious or deliberately bad way; they are just not aware of what they should be looking out for. We see it as our job and the job of people such as those at the SSPCA—who regard it as their job too—to try to have the widest possible campaign so that the largest number of people know what they should be looking for when they see adverts.

We are looking at legislative requirements but the internet is almost impossible to police. I do not know that we can do anything in an interventionist way about that. For example, if we legislated to require each puppy to have a unique identifying number—it is a bit like the travel ads with the Association of British Travel Agents—

Michelle Ballantyne: That is what I was just going to ask; perhaps it is about approval.

Roseanna Cunningham: People would have to know to look out for that. As we know, even with the well-established ABTA scheme, there are still people who go through other ways of doing things.

Michelle Ballantyne: Let the buyer beware and so on.

Roseanna Cunningham: Yes, but that presumes that the buyer knows everything that there is to know, which I think is unfair. This is a process of educating consumers; in a sense, that is what a lot of marketing and social media campaigns are about. There will not be one easy answer; there will simply be, across a broad range of actions, the hope that we keep advancing that understanding. Andrew Voas has already flagged up some of the ideas that might come up in his answer to Maurice Corry. That is all part of this. We need to think through the practicalities very carefully, but we will be looking for ways in which we can ensure that consumers know more rather than less.

Michelle Ballantyne: The report makes a number of recommendations about regulation, but it suggests that that process needs to start with a review of all legislation that relates to the breeding, sale and international transit of dogs, which would require an

“analysis of domestic breeding regulation as well as international imports”.

It notes that such a review is “particularly necessary” in light of the UK leaving the EU. Can you tell us how that will be factored into the Government’s consideration of regulation? You mentioned that perhaps there would have to be a centralised UK database. Can you expand on your thinking in that regard?

Roseanna Cunningham: In a sense, we are in the process of modernising legislation, which is pretty much consistent with what is being done in England and Wales. We could consider changing the requirements for the international movement of dogs only if we did so alongside other UK Administrations. A lot of people benefit from things such as the pet travel scheme, but it is being abused so there are obviously issues around policing it.

Can things be made better? That is not something that we can do unilaterally. I do not want, at the Scottish Government level, to pause everything that we are doing to do some kind of separate broad analysis. We have identified things that we need to move on with and we are in the process of doing that. It is a question of managing and balancing those things. I appreciate that the call for that broad review has been made but, to

be perfectly honest, we would find it logistically difficult to add that into what we are already in the process of taking forward. I do not know whether Andrew Voas wants to say anything more about that, but it is a question of resources at this point. For us, it is of more immediate importance to ensure that we get right the action that we are in the middle of progressing.

Michelle Ballantyne: Do you want to add anything, Andrew?

Andrew Voas: Not particularly, no.

Michelle Ballantyne: You have taken the words out of his mouth, cabinet secretary.

Andrew Voas: It was a very good answer.

Michelle Ballantyne: You are in listening mode as well.

The Convener: What you say about consumers is very interesting, but the other side is dealing with the actions of those who are, in quite unpleasant ways, making the lives of puppies miserable and perhaps misrepresenting to consumers what they are buying. In terms of providing tougher sanctions and sentences, what is the Scottish Government’s position on having the facility to issue definitive legislation and sentencing guidelines for criminal justice and enforcement agencies?

Roseanna Cunningham: That is a criminal justice matter. Obviously, sentencing guidelines are useful but, regardless of sentencing guidelines, courts will always simply look at the facts and circumstances of the case that is in front of them before awarding a sentence. I would need to discuss issues to do with sentencing guidelines with my colleague.

The Convener: That discussion is beginning, is it?

Roseanna Cunningham: I do not know whether we are actively talking about sentencing guidelines on this.

Andrew Voas: Not at the moment. We will be shortly.

Roseanna Cunningham: Not at the moment, no.

I think that fixed-penalty notices would be useful, and it could be of use to amend the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 to allow for them, particularly once we do the title legislation on breeding and sale. The fixed-penalty method would save the enforcement authorities quite a lot of time and resources in dealing with issues that come up, particularly if they are just failures to comply with conditions or whatever that are easily identified. That whole area is a bigger, trickier area, because we are potentially moving

into criminal law, which carries with it all the requirements of proof that exist in criminal court cases. Clearly, it has to be part of what we do, but it cannot be the only thing.

The Convener: You referred to increasing the maximum penalty but also having fixed-penalty notices, which would give a broader range of options, but in your submission you had indicated that you would be consulting key stakeholders and enforcement agencies and that there would be wider consultation. Could you give us an update on that?

Roseanna Cunningham: Discussions are taking place with various key stakeholders—you could probably name them yourselves, but they will include the SSPCA—about potential amendments to the act. I remind everybody that amending the act would require primary legislation and, clearly, that would involve a much longer timescale. We would need to identify a legislative vehicle for that and there is not one over the next year, as far as I am aware. The minute we begin to talk about primary legislation, we are into a much longer timescale.

The Convener: I think that Parliament has shown itself to be very nimble in producing fast legislation on other issues, so it might be that you could get a consensus and be nimble on this one.

Roseanna Cunningham: I will pitch that to the Minister for Parliamentary Business, but I am not quite sure how he will take that.

The Convener: It is not the easiest defence when we manage to deal with something in a couple of weeks but, anyway, I understand that the normal process takes slightly longer.

Roseanna Cunningham: I do not think that you would want the same thing to be happening with every piece of legislation.

Christine Grahame: Good morning. As you know, cabinet secretary, I am pursuing a member's bill on responsible dog ownership.

Roseanna Cunningham: No, really?

Christine Grahame: Yes, really. As a wee trailer, I say that I am launching the consultation at Edinburgh Dog and Cat Home a week on Friday.

A lot of what you have said is important, but the important point that I pick up on is about cutting off the demand, because the rest is very tricky—the online activity and the stuff that comes from puppy farms. My bill will try to deal with that in statute and balance it with measures on breeders and dealing.

I have a couple of questions that follow on from what you said. I was interested in the idea of a national register of licensed breeders in Scotland. I understand what you said about the Kennel

Club—privacy and all that stuff—but do you have any timeline in mind for when your decision on whether to have a national register of licensed breeders will come to fruition? That would be terribly useful.

Roseanna Cunningham: We are considering that as part of the drafting process. It is an active part of it. We are already at the point of drafting for sanctuaries and rehoming.

Andrew Voas: We will come on to the breeders after.

Roseanna Cunningham: I do not know whether we have a timescale. I think that we said that we hoped that it would be sometime this year for the sanctuaries and rehoming.

Andrew Voas: That is right.

Roseanna Cunningham: That will be put through at some point this year, and then we will move on to the broader issues, including things such as the national register.

Andrew Voas: We hope to consult fairly soon on issues to do with breeders.

Roseanna Cunningham: It is a bit like asking how long a piece of string is. I am trying to think what the expected time lag might be for taking all this forward. Provisions on sanctuaries and rehoming should be done and dusted by the end of this year. When it comes to considering the things that might apply to a register, it will probably be the end of next year before we make a decision about that.

Andrew Voas: Yes, we hope to consult later this year on proposals on breeders and the selling of dogs, cats and rabbits. That is the commitment that we have made.

Roseanna Cunningham: Yes, but if the consultation took place this year, that means that the drafting would be take place next year.

Christine Grahame: I am obviously looking at this in the context of what I am doing.

Roseanna Cunningham: I understand.

Christine Grahame: I am trying to think what I need to put in.

Roseanna Cunningham: Yes. If we are consulting on that this year, any action will be another year down the line. We would probably talking about the end of 2019.

Andrew Voas: We would like to be a bit more ambitious than that.

Roseanna Cunningham: I do not want to give a timescale that then turns out not to be achievable.

Christine Grahame: I appreciate the difficulties.

The second point that I wish to raise is this. When you talked about a seller including a unique identity number, what is meant by the “seller”? Is that the dealer or the breeder?

Roseanna Cunningham: The numbers would be breeder identification numbers.

Christine Grahame: It is breeder identification, so it is not the dealer.

Roseanna Cunningham: No. In effect, we would be giving an ID number to a recognised breeder and then ensuring that, when the breeder was undertaking any commercial activity, that ID number was part of what they put out to advertise what they were doing.

Christine Grahame: Would that be on the microchip?

Roseanna Cunningham: That is one of the things that we have to think about because, in effect, all dogs have to be microchipped and there is a unique microchip identification number as it is. We have to look at the technicalities of whether we can build on the microchip base or whether we will require to do something separate.

09:45

Christine Grahame: I think that, now that we have microchipping in place, the more we can put on the microchip from the initial stages, the better for everyone concerned—the police, the SSPCA, vets and potential owners. I appreciate that there are difficulties. There is more than one microchipping company, which is another issue.

Roseanna Cunningham: I remind people about the privacy issues that the Kennel Club has raised.

Christine Grahame: I am not too bothered about them.

Graeme Dey: I have a brief point of clarification. There have been references to engagement and intelligence sharing with the Republic of Ireland. Is there a two-way trade in illegal imports and, if so, what is the balance in that trade?

Roseanna Cunningham: I am not sure that I can specifically answer that question. Yes, there is co-operation. I would hazard the opinion that it is not a two-way trade, but Andrew Voas might be in a better position to explain some of the detail.

Andrew Voas: Overwhelmingly, the puppies are coming from breeders in the Republic of Ireland into Scotland, England and Wales. We have good co-operation with my counterparts in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland, so we share intelligence at that level, and I am aware that the Irish Government has co-operated with enforcement campaigns on the movement of

puppies into England and Wales as well as into Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Graeme Dey: Thank you.

Rona Mackay: I flag up that the *Daily Record* is currently running a campaign against illegal puppy trading, which will help to raise public awareness.

Finally, how optimistic are you that we will eventually be able to crack down on this horrible trade?

Roseanna Cunningham: I have said on a couple of occasions that there will not be a single solution to this. I am pleased that the extensive collaboration that is going on is beginning to make a difference but, as we know only too well, criminal activity often just finds a different way of doing things. I do not think that we will ever be able to say that it has been completely eradicated. Anybody who said that would probably be misleading. As with any other activity, I think that we can reduce it, but I am not sure that I would want to commit myself to saying that we can eradicate it.

The Convener: We have reached the end of our questions—that has been very helpful.

I now welcome members’ comments on how we might take this forward.

Roseanna Cunningham: Looks around. [*Laughter.*]

Michelle Ballantyne: There seems to be an awful lot going on in different places, with Christine Grahame’s member’s bill, the work that the Government is doing, some of the combined UK and cross-water work that is going on. I suppose that at this stage I am slightly unclear how we can lend to that.

The Convener: It might be worth taking the opportunity to reflect on what we have heard today but also tasking the petitioner to provide a written submission on what they have heard today. We know that folk are really engaged with this across our communities. We want to reflect on what we have heard and then come back to think about how we might take this forward. It may be that, having aired all the issues—and there is work being done in different bits of the Parliament—we may decide not to continue in the Public Petitions Committee, but I think that we should afford the petitioner an opportunity to respond before then.

Michelle Ballantyne: That is quite reasonable.

The Convener: If that is agreed, we will reflect on the evidence at a future meeting and we will also invite the petitioner to provide a written submission.

I thank Andrew Voas for his attendance. I will suspend briefly for a change of witness.

09:49

Meeting suspended.

09:53

*On resuming—***Glue Traps (PE1671)**

The Convener: The next petition for consideration is PE1671, by Lisa Harvey and Andrea Goddard on behalf of Let's Get MAD for Wildlife, which is on the sale and use of glue traps. For this petition, the cabinet secretary is accompanied by Hugh Dignon, who is the head of wildlife management and protected areas at the Scottish Government. Again, we will go straight to questions.

In its submission to the committee in December, the Scottish Government outlined three options that it was considering regarding the use of glue trap boards. Does the Scottish Government have a clearer idea of which, if any, of those options it might take? How will it factor in the written submissions on the petition to its consideration?

Roseanna Cunningham: Obviously, we will await the Public Petitions Committee's determination on all the evidence that it has seen. As you said, we indicated that there were three ways forward. At present, the preferred option would be to allow the continued use of glue traps but by professional pest controllers only, which would mean their adhering to a code of practice.

Of the three options, we think that that is the one that we could progress in a reasonable period of time, which would be effective and which would not create difficulty if, in the future, we wanted to move to the higher level of control. In that sense, we are ruling out the idea of no further regulation. We think that we need to look at that.

In a sense, the production of a code of practice for general use could be part of that first option and could be put into practice quite quickly. We are back to differing timescales here for Government action, but we think that there are limitations to the approach, if you are talking about a code of practice across the board for the general public. That would be better than nothing, but we do not feel that it would actually take us very far forward.

At the moment, our view is that the option of a total ban would be difficult because there are certain situations—for example, where food is prepared—in which there may not be practical alternatives to what is being used currently. We need to think about that. I would not rule out looking at a ban further down the line, if the actions that we take as a preferred option do not produce the expected results.

Michelle Ballantyne: To clarify, one of the options was to

“Take no legislative action, but develop a code of practice”.

Is that the option that you are talking about? You started by saying that you wanted it to be for professional use rather than general public use.

Roseanna Cunningham: In a sense, there are two codes of practice. There could be a code of practice, which would be just for the general public, and we could try to find a way in which someone who bought a glue trap would be given a copy of the code. That could be done very quickly, but I am not sure that that option would take us any further forward because there would be too many occasions when it would not happen—people would just throw it away or whatever.

The option of moving towards use by pest control professionals would involve a different code of practice. That code of practice would be for professional use; it would form part of the professional training and would be part and parcel of the professional standards.

Codes of practice can be used in different ways, so we do not think that that first option—the weakest option—would be a particularly helpful thing to do. In the second option, which is about professional practice, the code of practice is a different code of practice.

Michelle Ballantyne: For clarification, again, you are talking about a code of practice for the professionals, but their submissions to the committee have identified that various codes of practice are already in place; that includes, for example, the Pest Management Alliance code, and the “Best Practice and Guidance for Rodent Control and the Safe Use of Rodenticides”. If you were to develop a code of practice, how would it differ from those codes? What would the difference be between your code and the self-regulation codes that already seem to exist? Would your code supersede all the existing codes of practice that the industry has referred to?

Roseanna Cunningham: The current codes of practice that are part of the industry set-up are aimed at the general UK-wide pest control industry. If we progress the idea of a new code, we could consult on a draft and be explicit that it would apply explicitly in Scotland; the consultation and development process would be part of the wider awareness issue that we have also talked about. We would also want to consult on things such as the frequency of checking glue trap boards. For example, the Pest Management Alliance suggests that checking every 12 hours is appropriate. From our perspective, that seems like a very long time when we are talking about a very small animal. That is the kind of thing that we would want to look at.

10:00

We have the capacity to make the professional standards in Scotland much more rigorous and tighter, if that aspect is taken forward. In fairness to the pest control sector, it is true that there are lots of different codes and things that they are doing. However, I think that the sector has flagged up that there is not currently a clear definition of a professional pest control operator. We would also want to look more closely at how that can be defined, and we would expect to consult on that too.

There are things that we could do with regard to the professional standards that would go beyond where we are at the moment. I could say a lot more, but that is the situation in general terms.

Michelle Ballantyne: To be clear, you are talking about potentially removing the traps from general public use and having a superseding code of practice for pest control in Scotland.

Roseanna Cunningham: Yes.

Michelle Ballantyne: That would not be legislated for, so in effect it would be done in guidance.

Roseanna Cunningham: We have not gone as far as thinking about which aspects of what we want to do would require legislative change and which would not because they could be taken forward on the back of existing legislation. I am now not speaking from a position of knowing the exact answer, but sometimes a statutory instrument can be progressed because we find that there is something in a previous piece of legislation. Sometimes we accept that new legislation is needed. Sometimes, it can be done in agreement with a professional body, where it is happy to adopt the measures that we are talking about.

In general terms, I have indicated where our thinking is at the moment but we have not bottomed out every aspect of that and we have not yet considered which aspects of what we are thinking about would require what action. This is also about timescales. Some things can be done quite quickly, but the minute that we talk about legislation, even subordinate legislation, we are into a slightly longer timescale. Primary legislation takes us even further down the line. I will leave it there rather than cut across everybody else.

Rona Mackay: I wanted to flag up the point about the pest control sector saying that there is no clear definition of professional operatives. I assume that that means that anybody could say that they were a pest control operative and that there would be nothing to prevent them from buying a glue trap. However, you said that you are

considering that in the consultation so you are aware of that point.

The petitioners have stated that if the glue traps remain available to pest control professionals, they would like to see those operatives being regulated in some way. A similar approach has been taken in New Zealand. Can you comment on that?

Roseanna Cunningham: My understanding is that pest controllers can apply for a licence from the New Zealand Government to use glue traps. Although glue traps are currently prohibited, in practice that is not strictly true because they are available under licence in New Zealand. I guess that that is the New Zealand solution to what I referred to earlier: there may be some circumstances in which there really is not a viable alternative. Clearly, I have not done enough work on the specific thinking behind the New Zealand approach, but saying that glue traps are prohibited but that they are available on licence seems an interesting use of language. To my mind, it means that they are not actually prohibited but that their use is very strictly controlled.

We will look at the New Zealand example in detail to see how it works in practice, but we will not just look at New Zealand because the traps will be in use in other countries. I know that the Republic of Ireland has attempted to ban them outright, without a huge amount of success. We need to look at what has been trialled in other countries and have that inform what we choose to do.

Maurice Corry: What effect will the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill have, and have you factored that into the Scottish Government's thinking on the best option to address the use of glue traps?

Roseanna Cunningham: The short answer is that I am not sure that the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill has a major impact in this area, and I do not think that we are factoring it in directly. There is a general issue about animal sentience that seems to have been flushed up with regard to the bill, but that is the only thing that I can think of that might have any relationship to this matter. I do not know whether that is what you are referring to. If it is, the Government's view is that it has always been an element of our policy; in that sense, the animal sentience issue does not really make much of a change to the options in front of us because they are all designed to improve animal welfare outcomes, even if there is a differential level of that. I am not 100 per cent certain whether that is what you mean.

Maurice Corry: But there is some cognisance; the issue has been flagged up. Perhaps Mr Dignon would like to comment.

Roseanna Cunningham: There is a philosophical debate about animal sentience and I am very interested in an old Scottish court case that suggests that it has already been understood in Scotland; I believe that the court case goes back as far as the 19th century. I will make sure that members are apprised of that, out of interest, because it is an interesting thing to read. It indicates that the notion of animal sentience, albeit in different language, is embedded in what has been happening in Scotland for over 100 years.

Maurice Corry: Mr Dignon, do you have any comments?

Hugh Dignon (Scottish Government): No. I would go with exactly what the cabinet secretary said on animal welfare and policy making, as well as in wildlife management, which is more my key area. The question of animal sentience is a given, really. We would consider that to be a key part of our thinking on policy in these areas.

Graeme Dey: In reality, could you prevent access to and general use of glue traps? As you alluded to earlier, a ban was introduced in the Republic of Ireland yet we are told that the traps continue to be sold and used, or are being bought online from other countries. Is that about a failure to enforce down to the scale of the problem, or does it come down to a perhaps understandable decision that the commitment of resource to what might be seen by some people as not that big a deal is not a particularly good use of public money?

Roseanna Cunningham: I would not want to put it in those terms, but resources will always be an issue whatever the jurisdiction, and I do not suppose that the Republic of Ireland has any less of an issue around resources for enforcement. Clearly, we have to think about the resource issues around this. My feeling would be that the resource would have to be focused on retailers and wholesalers. Greater minds than ours have tried to think how one might manage the internet trade. We see the evidence of failure to do that all round us in the news media every day. Enforcing and policing at the domestic and individual purchase level is probably extremely difficult, but a reasonable attempt at enforcement could be made through the retail and wholesale trade.

As I said earlier, we may never eradicate the traps but we can bring down the use and choke off some of the demand that might be out there. I would expect police and trading standards officers to have a role, but I am very aware that everyone is under pressure in terms of the demands that are made on them. The Republic of Ireland's ban is a cautionary tale: a ban can be introduced but if it cannot be enforced, perhaps a different approach might be better.

The Convener: It would be fair to say that the petitioners' evidence was very compelling; I certainly felt that. I did not know about the issue, and I found it quite disturbing that this could be happening. In the sense of the traps being cruel and of their having pretty horrible consequences for some wildlife—or domestic animals, for that matter—I found the evidence quite compelling.

I wonder whether there is an argument that, by banning something completely, we would concentrate the minds of the professional operators on finding an alternative. The petitioners suggested the use of catch-and-release trap systems or electronic acoustic deterrents. I understand that there may be some scepticism about the effectiveness of those alternatives. Is there an argument that if glue traps remain an option they will continue to be used, but that if they are banned, people in the profession will find other means by which they can do their jobs more humanely?

Roseanna Cunningham: The public awareness issue is a fair point. The practicality issue is where it begins to get a little bit more difficult. Yes, there are alternatives that might be available in some circumstances, but as I understand it—I have asked this question—the alternatives that are generally canvassed as being valid are physically not able to be placed in some of the places where people would want to be putting traps.

I return to the ban in New Zealand. They call it a ban. They say that glue traps are prohibited, but in fact, even in New Zealand, they can be used under licence where there is no viable alternative. For example, if someone is trying to deal with a vermin problem and they need to put traps underneath pipes and into very tight corners, the alternatives simply physically will not work. I suppose that there is an argument—I have said that, in the longer term, I would not necessarily rule out the idea of a ban—that one could announce and legislate for a ban but delay its implementation to give the professionals time to see whether they could develop alternatives that would be practical in some of those circumstances. However, I do not know whether that is a feasible way to go forward at the moment.

I understand people's distaste and I know that the case that, in effect, triggered the petition was pretty horrific. It looked to me as though perhaps a great deal of thought had not been given to where the trap had been put and so on. We feel that making the traps something that could be used only by professionals—as I understand it, professional pest controllers use them as a last resort anyway—would be a more effective mechanism than removing the ability to use them, which may then cause specific difficulties in

specific places. I have in mind the particular issue of places in which there is food production or food preparation; returning to the New Zealand example, the traps are still used.

The Convener: I suppose the question is how we develop the public finding the traps so abhorrent into pressure for them not to be used, and how we concentrate people's minds. History is littered with examples of people saying, "We can't do this safely in any other way", but when there has been movement against it, other ways have been found. I suppose that that would be useful.

We received correspondence from the Pest Management Alliance saying that it would be keen to engage with the committee, so it may be interested in responding on that.

10:15

Graeme Dey: In a different area of your remit, acoustic devices have been touted as a potential saviour for seal scaring around salmon farms and yet there is considerable concern about the impact that those deterrents have on other marine animals, and a lack of a robust body of evidence. If evidence is lacking in that area, it will be particularly lacking in the area that we are talking about today.

Roseanna Cunningham: There may be potential technical solutions to a lot of these things, so I would not want to rule out the possibility that the design and technical specifications and so on might, in future, be able to eradicate the need for glue traps. At the moment, the professionals use them only as a last resort. The issue is tackling the more widespread use of the traps by people who are just not using them in the way that they should be used.

In a sense, a ban is a kind of public awareness exercise. In terms of what that means for Government legislation, the lawyer in me comes out. Will that be viewed as an appropriate reason for a ban? I have been through the first little piece of legislation that we put through in my portfolio—a ban that was based on ethical considerations—and it did not work out to be as straightforward and simple as might be imagined. I do not want to rule out the notion of a ban, but evidencing the ban would have to be more than simply public awareness.

The Convener: History tells us that people have said that things are impossible, that something cannot possibly be banned and that there is no other way to do things; then, when something is banned, they discover that there are ways of doing things more humanely. Progress has been made in animal welfare over generations because we have recognised the importance of humane practice. I understand, however, that the lawyer in

a person very often comes out in these circumstances, and that is no bad thing, either.

Roseanna Cunningham: Having been through conversations about the difference between ethical, as opposed to animal welfare, considerations, I am concerned that evidencing this could be a little trickier than it first appears.

The Convener: Thank you very much. We have asked all our questions. Do members have any comments or suggestions for action on the petition?

Michelle Ballantyne: It has been very interesting to hear the Government's position today. It would be useful to take up the Pest Management Alliance's offer to come and speak to us, not least to explore some of that early part of the conversation about codes of practice, whether this is actually needed, and whether there are alternatives. It would be good to talk to the profession in detail.

The Convener: I get a sense that members are agreed that we should do that and, of course, we would also provide the petitioners with an opportunity to make a further submission in response to evidence that they have heard today. I thank the cabinet secretary for her double appearance, which is very much appreciated. There was loads of information that I think we and the petitioners will find very useful. I thank you, and your officials, for your attendance.

10:19

Meeting suspended.

10:20

On resuming—

Bus Services (Regulation) (PE1626)

The Convener: We move to further consideration of continued petitions on which we will not be taking oral evidence today. PE1626, by Pat Rafferty on behalf of Unite Scotland, is on the regulation of bus services. When we previously considered the petition in December, we decided to invite the petitioner to respond to submissions from the Scottish Government. The petitioner's response has now been received.

The petitioner seeks further information from the Scottish Government with regard to the issues of wholesale regulation and partnership. On wholesale regulation, the petitioner asks why the Scottish Government does not favour a regulatory approach. Unite Scotland's view is that franchising and municipal ownership are not necessarily mutually exclusive and that local authorities that have expressed a desire to set up municipal bus

companies should be supported by the Scottish Government to do so. The petitioner also considers that local authorities may have opportunities to bundle routes for franchising, and he refers to essential routes within a local community as an example of where that could be achieved.

On partnerships, and particularly quality partnerships and quality contracts, the petitioner seeks further information from the Scottish Government on its current position, expressing the view that the current statutory provisions came about as a result of failings in the previous approach to partnerships and contracts.

Do members have comments or suggestions for action?

Rona Mackay: The petitioner raises some valid questions and we should put them to the Government to see what its response is. There are still a lot of unanswered questions, so we need a full answer from the Government.

Graeme Dey: Far be it from me, as a substitute member of the committee, to create further work for the Public Petitions Committee—

The Convener: We will just refer the petition to your committee. [*Laughter.*]

Graeme Dey: I suspected that that might be your answer, convener.

It strikes me that the issue is an important one. It would perhaps be best teased out face to face with the Government, with an invitation to the Minister for Transport and the Islands.

The Convener: We did not have the minister here on the matter, did we?

Rona Mackay: I do not believe so.

The Convener: A range of organisations have an interest in the matter. I declare an interest, as the Scottish Co-operative Party has been running the people's bus campaign, which is trying to address what I think the petition is addressing. If a bus company is able to benefit from the very popular routes, how can we bring together a package that means that it is obliged to take some of the less popular routes? Those might be routes that serve rural communities, although some urban communities have the same problem.

Rona Mackay: I support my colleague's suggestion.

Maurice Corry: Another thing would be to bring in Strathclyde partnership for transport, because it has a big involvement in bus routes and what have you. Taking up the point about the model of operators having profitable routes and also less profitable ones and how we make that work—that includes hospital bus services and so on—I note

that there is an equivalent situation in the Highlands. It would be useful if you could bring the relevant agencies before your committee.

The Convener: We need to think about the order in which we do things. It may be that the way to deal with it is to have a round table with different organisations coming together, followed by a session with the transport minister.

I think you are right. There are important campaigns on community transport. I do not know whether this has changed yet, but community transport was unable to access the concessionary bus pass scheme, so it could not benefit from that. That would have helped services to thrive in some of the more rural areas.

Maurice Corry: You could include the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities as well, because there is some pressure on local authorities. We had a real problem on Mull, for example.

The Convener: There is no doubt that, when we considered the petition previously, the committee felt strongly that there were issues to be teased out about what can be done and what the options are. I am interested in what Unite says about the municipal option and the franchise option—that they are not mutually exclusive and that it is possible to have a bit of both.

I suggest that, with the clerks, we look at holding a round-table discussion on the subject, followed by a session with the transport minister. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: If the petitioner wants to respond and to participate in the round table, that would be very helpful.

Concessionary Transport (Carers) (PE1632)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1632, by Amanda Macdonald, on concessionary transport for carers. Members will recall that when we previously considered the petition, the petitioner had suggested that, if the Scottish Government considered concessionary transport for carers to be too expensive, a national flat rate for carers on public transport could be considered instead. In response, the Scottish Government has provided an estimate of the costs that would be associated with that suggestion. Its submission also comments that introducing a category of eligible persons who contribute to the cost of their travel would increase the complexity of the national concessionary travel scheme and incur further administrative costs.

Do members have comments?

Michelle Ballantyne: Although I have every sympathy and empathy with the petitioner, I think that what was proposed would be incredibly complicated and incredibly expensive to deliver. In reality, the best solution would probably be to create a better, cheaper bus service in the first place.

The figures for the costs that we have received from Transport Scotland are quite eye watering. We are talking about £100 million to provide the service, and then there are the issues of how we define a carer and how we would make sure that the people that we were giving concessions to did in fact meet whatever the criteria were, which would be quite a big administration job in itself. I do not know where we can go with the petition, to be honest.

The Convener: It may be that the conversation is more about how we support carers and ensure that they have an income that allows them to go and do the extra travel that they have to do to support people.

Michelle Ballantyne: Yes.

The Convener: It might be that what was proposed is not the solution, but there is a very big question here, which prompted the petition in the first place.

Michelle Ballantyne: We have probably reached the end of what we can do with the petition, but there is probably a different question that needs to be asked. With the Social Security (Scotland) Bill being passed yesterday, we will start to look at the matter in a different way. Maybe that is where we are going.

Graeme Dey: I hesitate to agree, but I think that I will have to. There are some practical issues. We talk about 600,000 carers in Scotland, but we have no real means of identifying many of those people. The only carers that we can identify are those who are on carers allowances and those who are identified in one or two other ways, and they make up a relatively small proportion of the 600,000. With considerable regret, therefore, I tend to agree with Michelle Ballantyne's point.

The Convener: I am getting a sense that people accept the need to close the petition but recognise that there is an issue behind it. The petitioner might want to reflect on whether they could lodge another petition. In closing the petition, we might flag up to the Scottish Government that we see a need here and an issue about how, in practical terms, we could deliver to meet it. We could ask the Scottish Government to think about how it might include the matter in its carers strategy. I think that new entitlements for carers are coming in, and it may be that this is something else that the Scottish Government could do. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Michelle Ballantyne: This year, Scottish Borders Council has decided to give young people concessionary travel. I think there is also an issue about area-to-area travel and the nature of movement for carers.

Maurice Corry: Before you close the petition, you could bring in COSLA to see what its view is, because these things are driven and funded by the local authorities.

The Convener: I am not sure that they are driven by the local authorities. We received a submission from COSLA, did we not?

Maurice Corry: Did you?

The Convener: Yes. It made a point about the administrative costs. My feeling is that the issue is about how we can ensure that carers are properly supported, and the petition is an attempt to address that. We can see that from the petitioner saying, "If it's too expensive, we could look at a flat rate."

If we are agreeing to close the petition and to write to the Scottish Government to flag up the issue, perhaps we can also address Maurice Corry's point by flagging it up to COSLA. In particular, we can say to the Scottish Government that we hope that it will be reflected in the context of any carers strategy.

10:30

Rona Mackay: Yes. It is an important petition; it is just that we cannot take it any further.

The Convener: We certainly want to thank the petitioner for lodging the petition and bringing to our attention the issue of how we can best support carers. If the petitioner feels that there is a different aspect that they could bring to the committee's attention, we will more than welcome that. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Council Tax (Payment Options) (PE1634)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1634, by Jessica Mason, on equality in council tax payment options. The petition calls for the option to pay council tax in 12 monthly instalments to be made mandatory in Scotland, as it is in England and Wales. Members will recall that some local authorities in Scotland interpret the relevant regulations as providing for payment over a 10-month period.

We sought views on the action called for in the petition from the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, with a response being received from the Scottish

Government. The Government considers that the present legislation already enables local authorities to reach agreements to allow individuals to pay over 12 months and, as such, the Government has no plans to amend the relevant regulations. The petitioner's view is that the response from the Government appears to miss the point of her petition. The petitioner considers that there are many instances of laws and regulations that have no clear black and white lines, where it is down to interpretation, or where mitigating circumstances can blur the lines between what is permissible and what is not. She goes on to argue that that is all the more reason to ensure that, where regulations can be clear and concise, they should be.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Michelle Ballantyne: I basically agree with the petitioner. It is another fine-line issue. Technically, councils can allow payment over 12 months but, for some odd reason, some of them seem to be choosing not to. Maybe we should write to the councils that choose not to and ask them why they are not allowing it. Fundamentally, it would make logical sense for everybody to pay over 12 months and be done with it.

Maurice Corry: I agree with Michelle Ballantyne. In my experience on Argyll and Bute Council, we saw no reason why it could not be done, but there is the historical issue about paying over 10 months.

The Convener: I am not sure what the reason for the 10-month thing is.

Michelle Ballantyne: Is it not to give councils time to chase non-payers at the end of the year? I think that that is where it came from.

Maurice Corry: That is right. That is where it came from in Argyll and Bute Council. We had those eight weeks to try to get the balance in and make sure that the figures looked as good as possible.

The Convener: I can understand that councils want to maximise their income. I used to think of it as a kind of two-month holiday from the council tax.

Michelle Ballantyne: So did I.

Rona Mackay: Until you got your next bill.

Michelle Ballantyne: I suppose that, if everybody paid over 12 months, councils would know early on in the year whether somebody was missing payments. Councils would not need that two months at the end to play catch-up; they would already know. If by month 8 or 9 somebody had not paid, the council would still have the two-

month catch-up period. There is something odd about the situation.

The Convener: Perhaps we should write to local authorities that do not allow 12 monthly payments to ask about that. I would be interested to know what their argument is and what COSLA's argument is. We know that local government budgets are under phenomenal pressure. What seems unjust and an inflexible interpretation of the regulations may in fact be driven by something else, so it is worth asking councils.

Michelle Ballantyne: Scottish Borders Council has very good collection of council tax, but it is still done over 10 months.

Maurice Corry: Do we know how many councils do not allow 12 monthly payments?

The Convener: There are 12.

Maurice Corry: Okay.

The Convener: Do members agree to write to the local authorities that the petitioner has identified as not allowing payment over 12 months to ask why they do not allow that and whether they will review their approach on the basis that the option has been widely interpreted as being permissible under the regulations?

Members indicated agreement.

Children (Scotland) Act 1995 (Section 11) (PE1635)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1635, by Emma McDonald, on a review of section 11 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. I welcome Neil Findlay MSP for our consideration of the petition. We last considered the petition in October 2017, when we heard evidence from Annabelle Ewing, the Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs. Members will recall that the minister reiterated the Government's commitment to consult on primary legislation in the area, including on issues raised in the petition. The minister indicated that the consultation was expected to be launched in spring and would include seeking views on the regulation of child contact centres; regulation and training of child welfare reporters; and ensuring that the child's voice is heard in contact cases.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action? It might be useful to ask Neil Findlay to come in at this point, if he has anything to say.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I am happy to hear the discussion first. Obviously, members will be looking at papers and you have the background of hearing from the minister. I am happy to come in after that.

Michelle Ballantyne: Having spoken to the minister, who told us that there was going to be a consultation that would include the areas covered in the petition, we really need to know the outcome of that consultation. Do we know whether it has kicked off yet?

The Convener: It has not started yet.

Michelle Ballantyne: On that basis, I suggest that there is not a lot that we can do until the consultation has been done, because it will I hope provide the platform for seeking change, if there is to be change. I suggest that we write to the Scottish Government and ask it to notify us as soon as it has those outcomes.

Rona Mackay: Do we have a timescale for the consultation? Do we know roughly how long it will last?

Michelle Ballantyne: It will be 12 weeks from when it starts.

The Convener: I imagine that the consultation will be standard but, as with many things, promising a consultation is one thing but enacting that promise any time soon is another thing. The length of a consultation is generally reasonable, but we would want to know from the Scottish Government what stage it is at in relation to the consultation.

Michelle Ballantyne: Maybe we should send a strongly worded letter saying that we are awaiting the outcome of the consultation.

Rona Mackay: I agree. It is a really important petition, with so much involved in it. While the consultation is on-going or is about to start, we cannot do an awful lot more, but we should write to the Government and say that we would like to be kept updated. We should find out exactly when it is starting, when it is expected to finish and how long it would take to implement any of the recommendations from it.

Neil Findlay: In this place, terms such as “spring” and “autumn” tend to have a different meaning from their meanings outside this place. I am keen for the committee to nail down a timetable for when the consultation will start and finish, and the process after that. Obviously, you would keep the petition open in the meantime.

The Convener: I think that we are agreed that we need to get information from the Government on the process of the consultation and, critically, the timetable for it, because we hope that the issue has not been kicked down the road. As Rona Mackay highlights, there are so many issues. The issue about contact centres, which has been quite a revelation to all of us, is only one of them. The round-table session that we had on the issue was certainly helpful. All those who attended, including those who are involved in

creating the space and providing support in contact centres, were very engaged. We would not want to lose that simply because the issue is not a critical priority for Government. I think that we are agreed to write to ask for a timetable and to be kept informed as the process goes on, to ensure that we engage with the issue fully.

Rona Mackay: I am trying to remember when the petition was first lodged. It was last considered in November last year, so I presume that it must have been lodged in the summer.

The Convener: It was lodged in January 2017, so we probably first considered it in the spring.

Rona Mackay: So it has been well over a year and we are not any further forward.

Michelle Ballantyne: There is also an issue about financing. For example, the contact centre money was administered by Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland, which has now become the Corra Foundation, and I do not know whether it is still doing that. There is a new foundation coming out involving the Bank of Scotland and Lloyds. The whole market is moving, so a bit of urgency is needed and the Government should look at the issue soon. The work is supported by a lot of charitable funding, and that is never guaranteed, year on year. We need to nail down some of that and ensure that we understand where the Government is going on the issue.

Neil Findlay: If the Government is going to change the model, we need to know what the funding model will be, because that funding can be withdrawn at a whim.

Michelle Ballantyne: Those agencies have changed and their priorities can change.

The Convener: At the same time, the courts have an expectation of what a contact centre should provide.

Michelle Ballantyne: Yes, and with the new legislation on domestic abuse and coercion, contact centres will be even more important, so we need that to be looked at.

Neil Findlay: If the Government is potentially going to have a more regulated system, there may be additional costs, which does not fit with the current financing model. There are a number of issues.

The Convener: The committee continues to take the view that this is an important issue. We welcome the commitment to a consultation, and we want to ensure that that is being carried through. Given the range of issues that people have highlighted, we would want some commitment on timescale and timetable.

I thank Neil Findlay for attending.

Neil Findlay: I assume that the petitioner is advised about the stages and processes.

The Convener: Yes. At each stage, the petitioner can of course respond. If she wants to make further comments as a consequence of this meeting, we are more than happy to receive them.

Risk-based Blood Donation (PE1643)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1643, by Jack Douglas, LGBT+ officer on behalf of the National Union of Students Scotland, which is on the introduction of individual risk-based blood donation in Scotland. We last considered the petition on 29 June 2017, when we noted support from HIV Scotland, Terrence Higgins Trust and the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service for the action called for in the petition. Members will recall that, when we took evidence from the petitioners in April last year, one of their key arguments was about the existing 12-month deferral period, which they considered to be outdated and due for review.

In July 2017, the Scottish Government confirmed that it had accepted all the recommendations of the standing advisory committee on the safety of blood, tissues and organs on the changes to the donor referral period. The clerk's note confirms that the changes came into effect in November 2017. The changes include a shorter deferral period for men who have had sex with another man, and for people who have had sex with partners who are at higher risk of blood-borne infections.

The petition also raised the issue of individualised risk assessments. The clerk's note refers to the minutes of the SaBTO meeting in June that indicated that the group had not been able to identify questions that could be used on a donor health check.

To date, the petitioners have not provided the committee with a further written submission on the progress made on the issues raised in the petition. However, I think that we received a note last night, indicating that the petitioners continue to campaign on the issue and are disappointed that the questions have not been identified.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Michelle Ballantyne: I understand their frustration but it is not just members of the LGBT community who have a blanket ban on giving blood. From my own family, I know that the issue also affects people who have lived, served or were born in certain countries where there are certain diseases, and so on. My husband is blanket-banned from giving blood. It is not just one category of donor.

The reality is that safety must come first. That is the priority. The situation is reviewed—it was reviewed last year. There is also a huge administrative cost in going through lots of individual processes. The Scottish Government has reduced some of the donor referral periods and we have to take that advice. I would always put that first. We are one of the safest countries in the world for blood donation and I do not want to see that jeopardised. We have gone as far as we can go with the petition, so I propose that we close it.

The Convener: Are there any other views?

Rona Mackay: The NUS and the petitioners recognise that progress has been made. I am also pleased that the donor referral period has been reduced from 12 months to three months and that people recognise that safety comes first. The petitioners intend to carry on campaigning on the individual risk element but that is not part of this petition. For that reason, it would be better to close the petition. There still is an issue with individual-risk based criteria and I wish the petitioners well in pursuing that.

The Convener: There is a question about what the assessment questions should be and I am sure that campaigners and others will, as we speak, be thinking about what those questions could be and feeding that into the system. We encourage everyone who is involved to be alive to finding a solution to that.

We agree to close the petition on the basis that progress has been made on the action called for in the petition and the Scottish Government has accepted and implemented the recommended changes to blood donation in Scotland. We thank the petitioners for highlighting an important issue, and remind them that, should they wish to petition further on this issue or on any other, that is their right. Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

10:45

Prescribed Drug Dependence and Withdrawal (PE1651)

The Convener: PE1651 is by Marion Brown, on behalf of Recovery and Renewal, on prescribed drug dependence and withdrawal. We have received what is possibly the largest number of written submissions for any petition, certainly since I have been involved, and we thank all those who have taken the time to make those submissions. I also thank the clerks for the massive job that they have had to do with the submissions to protect people's privacy.

The majority of submissions are from people sharing their stories about their experiences of taking certain medications and the range of symptoms they subsequently experienced. They include stories about on-going acute symptoms and the impact of those symptoms. As members know, we are not in a position to investigate or intervene in individual cases. However, it would be inappropriate not to recognise that there are in excess of a hundred individual cases behind the submissions. So, although we cannot look at individual cases, we can do something to signpost people to the places where they might find support.

Organisations that might be able to provide people with, or direct them to, appropriate professional support include the British Medical Association, which supports the aims of the petition and might therefore be a good point of contact, as might the Council for Evidence-based Psychiatry, which provides support to the all-party parliamentary group on prescribed drug dependence.

We will use all submissions that we receive as we go about our job of considering the policy action called for in the petition, which asks for the Scottish Government to take action to appropriately recognise and effectively support individuals who have been affected and harmed by prescribed drug dependence and withdrawal.

The clerks' note provides a summary of the evidence that we heard from the Minister for Mental Health in January, as well as recent developments in relation to the action called for in the petition.

In her written submission, the petitioner indicates that there is

"no informed support whatsoever for people in Scotland"

and urges the Scottish Government to support the introduction of a helpline, such as that supported by the BMA.

One development that the committee might wish to note is the announcement by Public Health England in January of a year-long review into the evidence on the scale and nature of problems with some prescription medicines and how they can be prevented and treated. Members might wish to note that the BMA held a prescribed drugs stakeholder round-table meeting last week. The petitioner was invited to attend that meeting and, in recent correspondence with the clerks, has indicated that the meeting was "generally positive and constructive".

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Graeme Dey: We have a number of recommendations in front of us. I support

recommendations 1, 2 and 3, in terms of taking the petition forward and getting more information. I am particularly interested in getting the views of general practitioners in Scotland. They are prescribing these drugs and they should be seeing any negative impact they are having in the longer term. It is really important to get an understanding of what they are encountering in their surgeries the length and breadth of Scotland. I am not entirely sure how you engage the views of GPs in general but it is particularly important in the recommendations.

The Convener: We agree to do that. We will speak to the GP professional body about how best that might be taken forward. Some individuals might be willing to engage with us, although it might be otherwise. We will certainly take advice on that.

Maurice Corry: Marion Brown is one of my constituents, although I am not personally dealing with the petition; Jackie Baillie is. I am just letting you know, convener, so that is on the record and I obviously know a bit about it.

I agree entirely with Graeme Dey. It is important to pursue recommendations 1, 2 and 3. There is so much evidence sitting here. A recent submission from Dr Terry Lynch is quite interesting.

Michelle Ballantyne: I declare an interest in that I used to head up the drug and alcohol service near where I live and my background is in nursing.

I find all this troubling and I found the evidence that we took at the evidence session very troubling. Perhaps we could add to that list of people to consult one of the drug and alcohol services because they see people who suffer from the consequences of prescribed-drug addiction. They also see people who use such drugs illegally from the black market, and they can talk about the impact. I felt that there was an element of saying, "Oh, there is not really a problem here" in our evidence session, but there clearly is a problem and anybody who thinks otherwise is really in denial.

Rona Mackay: That is just not in dispute; we all recognise that it is a huge and widespread problem.

Graeme Dey made a good point about GPs. They are in the front line and are prescribing and then seeing the effects, so it is important to get some feedback from them. It is also important to ask the BMA for its current position on the proposal for a national 24-hour helpline, and to ask the Government what engagement it has had with England on the issue. It is not just happening in Scotland; it is all over.

The Convener: We want to underline the point that there is a problem and that struck the committee during the evidence session with the minister. We agree that we will contact the Scottish Government about whether it is liaising with Public Health England. We will speak to the BMA about the question of a helpline and, critically, we will try to get the views of GPs in Scotland about their sense of this as an issue and maybe some reflection on how it can be addressed.

We thank again all those who have submitted evidence to the committee on this question.

Members *indicated agreement.*

Active Travel Infrastructure Strategy (PE1653)

The Convener: The next petition for consideration is PE1653 by Michaela Jackson, on behalf of Gorebridge Community Trust, on active travel infrastructure.

At our last consideration of the petition, we asked the Scottish Government for its views on the establishment of a legal framework for active travel in infrastructure projects in light of concerns raised by the petitioner and Sustrans. The Scottish Government's response states that a legal framework for including active travel in all infrastructure projects may not be appropriate in all circumstances, such as where a roads project is adjacent to an existing national cycle network or for special roads, which cyclists are not permitted to cycle along. The Scottish Government's submission also highlights its commitment to ensure suitable provision for all road users, including cyclists, in a range of documents and plans and provides examples of projects where that can be demonstrated. The petitioner remains of the view that, without appropriate legislation, there will be insufficient measures in place to address increasing levels of air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions and congestion.

The committee sought clarification from the Scottish Government about its trunk road walking and cycling strategy, which was due to be published in September 2017. The Government states that the strategy has been drafted but was put on hold to take cognisance of the findings of the active travel task force. The task force report and the strategy do not appear to have been published yet.

The Scottish Government has indicated that a review of the national transport strategy, which has a focus on active travel, is under way, and early work has begun on it.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Rona Mackay: Clearly, we need to get an update on when the active travel task force report will be published. It was due to be published in February, but we are now several months past that. That is probably the number 1 priority.

The Convener: That would be a reasonable way to take the petition forward. There is a commitment in relation to a deferred policy, which was due to be published in September 2017, and we are awaiting the review of the transport strategy, so it would be useful to know from the Scottish Government what the timetable is for that.

Graeme Dey: Can I perhaps add something, hopefully usefully? The Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee has been interested in active travel in the context of air quality and climate change. You might want to look at some evidence that was given to the committee by the acting chief executive of the UK Climate Change Committee around the contribution that cycling makes to tackling some of the issues we have. The issue is not quite as straightforward as it looks, and it might be relevant to your consideration. There are certain journeys where investment in cycling is not as effective a contributor in terms of impact on air quality and climate change as investment in other areas such as public transport, for example, although it has obvious health benefits. That might be something useful to have a look at.

The Convener: Yes, we can do that—that is helpful. We will get that information and we will also ask for an update from the Scottish Government.

Maurice Corry: One of things that I find in my area is that we invest lots in creating cycle tracks and we still have people not using them. That is something that should be considered in this. I know that, from Helensburgh to Balloch, lots of cyclists go along the main road, which is not a good road from the point of view of traffic—it has very heavy traffic—yet there is a lovely cycle track. It cost £1.5 million to lay it, but people are not using it. The same happens from Helensburgh to Faslane. We have accidents because of the cyclist situation. I know that one of the reasons on the Gareloch side road concerns the quality of the surface of the cycle track, which I know is being addressed, but I think that we need to have some form of enforcement or something so that, if there is a cycle track available, they must use it.

The Convener: That is opening up a range of issues—I feel a petition coming in.

Maurice Corry: I am just saying that it is a point that is raising its head, and I talk from a community safety point of view.

Michelle Ballantyne: Can I play devil's advocate? The petition

“calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to develop an active travel infrastructure strategy that will require active travel provision”

and so on. From what we have heard so far, the Government is already doing that. It has set up the active travel task force and is taking cognisance of it in its strategy. Are we just doubling up, if the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee is already dealing with that? Given the number of petitions that we have to deal with, should we not accept that that is already happening? Are we just checking up on the what that committee is doing?

The Convener: There is no harm in checking up on that—that is always a good thing, in itself. We should be informed by what that committee is doing. My sense of the petition is that it is about where the policy comes up against the real world. If you remember, it was specifically about a particular area where, as a result of congestion, it is quite frightening to be a cyclist and the fact that that sort of situation still happens even though we have all these strategies. I am quite interested in how that is balanced out.

Michelle Ballantyne: Yes, but I wonder whether this committee is the place for that to be dealt with, or whether the issue belongs in the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, which might already be looking at it. Are we duplicating work?

Graeme Dey: If it is helpful, I do not think that we are duplicating work. I think that it would be useful to have the Public Petitions Committee considering this issue as well. It is a hugely important issue. There is a serious question about housing developments springing up with no linkage to public transport and without active travel being automatically factored in. That is a really important issue that the Public Petitions Committee can look at.

Also, picking up Maurice Corry's point, there has been a doubling of the active travel budget, and yet it will take us decades to get to the target that we have for cycling. Might that be partly to do with infrastructure being put where it is least effective?

Michelle Ballantyne: Active travel is not just about cycling.

Graeme Dey: No, it is not.

Michelle Ballantyne: It is about the ability to walk and so on as well.

Graeme Dey: You can walk on a lot of those tracks.

From the perspective of my role in the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, it would be terribly useful for the Public Petitions Committee to continue this work.

The Convener: I suggest that, in the first instance, we ask the Scottish Government about the timescale for the publication of the active travel task force report and the trunk roads walking and cycling strategy, and ask whether members of the public can contribute to the work of the national working groups in the development of the new national transport strategy.

The petition certainly raised a number of interesting questions that we might want to pursue, but we should also liaise with the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee.

Do we agree to the suggested action?

Members indicated agreement.

Tick-borne Diseases (Treatment) (PE1662)

The Convener: The next petition, PE1662, by Janey Cringean and Lorraine Murray, calls on the Scottish Government to improve treatment for patients with Lyme disease and associated tick-borne diseases. I welcome Alexander Burnett to the meeting for this petition. We last considered this petition on 21 December 2017, when we agreed to consider options for taking evidence on the petition, subject to publication of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's guidance on Lyme disease. The NICE guideline was published earlier this month and the clerk's note summarises its recommendations. The guideline also includes recommendations for research to establish an improved evidence-base for the prevalence, presentation, diagnosis and treatment of Lyme disease.

Alexander Burnett, I know that you have an interest in this area. Have you been involved in any work on the issue?

11:00

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): Thank you for allowing me to attend the committee today. This petition has been on a very long journey and my sympathies are certainly with the petitioners, who have explained to me the process and the time that is being taken to get to where they want to get to. I feel that we are very nearly there, and that action could be taken today. There have been a number of changes on this committee. I know that Graeme Dey and Maurice Corry, who have now joined the committee, both represent areas where there will be a big knowledge of Lyme disease, so I do not see any issue with experience or knowledge on the Public Petitions Committee relating to this particular subject.

It is particularly disappointing that the need to wait for the NICE guidelines to come out and for

NICE to seem to be taking a lead down south has been used as reason for not doing anything in Scotland in relation to what is a serious issue.

On page 5 of the NICE guidelines—the opening page of the recommendations—point 1.1.1 mentions that the Scottish Highlands is a particularly high-risk area. That we have to have that pointed out to us by NICE before we take any action in Scotland is a travesty.

Further on, pages 22 and 23 of the guidelines talk about what will be the next stages and look at what information is not currently available and is of high priority, and what research and data needs to be collected. The guidelines talk about collecting that data on a UK-wide basis because it is a UK-wide issue. Again, I think that it is a travesty that we are having to wait for that to be pointed out to us by NICE before we take any action in Scotland.

I urge the committee to seek the Scottish Government's position on the guidelines as they relate to the petition and to call for some action.

Graeme Dey: I do not know that I necessarily agree entirely with Alexander Burnett, although I accept his greater knowledge of the background to this issue. Sometimes, for Government, it is practical to avoid duplication of effort. If there is a bigger body of evidence that can be brought together, sometimes it is sensible to wait for that.

That said, I agree about the seriousness of this issue, and I would certainly be supportive of the recommendations in our papers and of taking this petition forward.

Michelle Ballantyne: NICE has now released the guidelines, and we agreed previously that we would wait until that had happened before going back to the Government and the petitioner for their assessment of what NICE said and then seeing what the options are with regard to who else we need to hear from. It may be that the NICE guidelines will solve some of the issues but probably not—I can see some heads shaking in the public gallery. I think that we need to ask what the reaction is going to be to that because they are just guidelines and there is no onus on anybody to react, and there are still the issues of how people get tested and treated and what is done up here.

The Convener: I suggest that we write to the Scottish Government and the petitioners for their respective views on the NICE guidelines. We would be interested in taking oral evidence on the petition in the light of the NICE guidelines, particularly about the consequences of them in Scotland and what action is going to be taken. I think that our action should include seeking evidence from experts such as medical professionals in the area, representatives from outdoor organisations and, indeed, those who have had the misfortune to suffer from the

disease. My understanding is that the petitioners have provided a list of potential stakeholder witnesses, which the clerks can refer to in identifying potential witnesses. We can think about whether the best way of getting that input is through a round-table discussion, a series of question sessions or something else.

Alexander Burnett: On that point, we have a round-table discussion arranged for Thursday 10 May.

The Convener: Could you say that again?

Alexander Burnett: We have arranged a round-table discussion on Lyme disease and we have contributors from the medical health sector: Dr Anja Garritsen of Innatoss Laboratories; Dr Roger Evans of NHS Highland; and Professor Dominic Mellor of NHS National Services Scotland; as well as the petitioners.

The Convener: That is helpful to know.

Graeme Dey: Pardon my ignorance, but I presume that this is an issue that transcends national boundaries and will be an issue in other countries. Would it be useful to get the Scottish Parliament information centre to prepare a briefing on what has happened in other countries to address this issue and on where action has been effective and where it has been ineffective?

The Convener: SPICe is usually very helpful in relation to the briefings that it provides ahead of dealing with any petition, but we can perhaps ask it to look at that aspect.

Maurice Corry: I suggest that we bring in some spokespersons from livestock and land management as well—people who are actually on the ground.

Michelle Ballantyne: We should perhaps contact the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, as it is based very close to us. It may be the best organisation to ask.

Rona Mackay: For clarification, Alexander, when you said “we”, who were you referring to?

Alexander Burnett: Sorry. Donald Cameron and I are hosting a round-table discussion on Lyme disease.

The Convener: Will that be open to all MSPs?

Alexander Burnett: You have received an invitation.

The Convener: There we go; just checking, for others—I obviously already knew about the invitation.

Alexander Burnett: I will re-send the invitation to the committee.

Maurice Corry: I suggest that there should also be some representation from the National Farmers Union.

The Convener: Okay. If people have further suggestions about who we might want to have when we hold our session on this, they should refer them to the clerks. If it is agreeable, members can give me the authority to agree the format of the evidence-taking session with the clerks.

Michelle Ballantyne: If we attend the round-table discussion that has already been arranged, that will give us some knowledge of the basis of the discussion, and then we can hold an evidence session rather than repeating round-table discussions.

The Convener: If people wish to attend that round-table discussion, of course they can. However, in terms of the formal considerations of the committee, it would be important that we also had that information on record. It might be that the event that Alexander Burnett has mentioned will trigger suggestions for the format of our evidence-taking session. We would be happy to hear suggestions in that regard.

Again, in recognition that this is an important petition, I thank the petitioners for their continuing work. There has been some movement but, obviously, there is a great deal more to be done.

Do we agree to the suggested action?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: I thank Alexander Burnett for his attendance.

Countryside Ranger Services (National Strategic Framework) (PE1678)

The Convener: The final petition for consideration today is PE1678, by Robert Reid, on behalf of the Scottish Countryside Rangers Association, on a national strategic framework for countryside ranger services in Scotland.

At our first consideration of the petition in February, we heard evidence from the petitioners and agreed to write to a range of stakeholders. The submissions that we have received are included in the annex to the meeting paper. They include a submission from the petitioners, which, as well as responding to the stakeholder submissions, provides clarification on points that they raised during their evidence to the committee. It includes the findings of the in-house survey that was conducted by the petitioners.

All the submissions acknowledge the work and importance of Scotland's countryside rangers and highlight the valuable contribution that they make in helping to deliver a broad range of public policy

agendas, including education, health and wellbeing and implementing the Scottish biodiversity strategy.

The clerk's note summarises the responses from local authorities to the committee's questions about the number of rangers who are employed in their respective areas, including by any arm's-length external organisations, and the provision of three to five-year plans for their range of services.

The submission from Scottish Natural Heritage refers to meetings that it has had or plans to have with the Scottish Countryside Rangers Association. SNH also confirms that it does not monitor ranger numbers in Scotland but is aware of concerns that the numbers are decreasing.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Michelle Ballantyne: The problem that we have here—which is a massive one—is that the intentions are good, but the translation on the ground is impacted by everything else. By the time we get down to local authority level, which is where the work of the rangers is funded, the funding is disappearing. There are no two ways about that. To change that, we would probably have to look at changing the way in which the flow-through of finance and support is provided.

We undoubtedly have a problem, and the suggestion is that we invite Scottish Natural Heritage to give evidence. I think that that would be worth while, because we have to establish the need in an evidence-based way. If we establish an evidence-based need for rangers, as I think we will, we can consider where we go with the argument. The question then will be how we influence and protect their existence, and I think that that will be the real challenge.

Graeme Dey: I think that I am right in saying that the ranger programme is funded nationally. The moneys were previously ring fenced, but I think that they now form part of the block grant. The lack of ring fencing has led to the concerns that we all have.

All local authorities have a biodiversity duty, and if they are cutting ranger services—I am not having a dig at local authorities—I am not entirely sure how they are discharging their biodiversity duty. I would very much support inviting in SNH to question it on all those issues. As the convener of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, I know that the work that the rangers do is hugely important to Scotland, but I recognise the pressure on local government budgets.

Rona Mackay: I agree with that—having SNH in would be a valuable way of making progress on the petition. SNH says that it knows from

anecdotal evidence that ranger numbers in local authorities are decreasing, but that it does not monitor the numbers. There are a lot of questions that we could put to SNH that would help us to move forward.

Graeme Dey: There is an overlap here, which is that having a good ranger service, improving access to nature for the public and encouraging them to get out there has health benefits. The issue is not just about biodiversity and the environment. There is a much bigger picture here. In its budget report, the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee drew attention to the fact that, when budgets are constrained, if health benefits can be identified from expenditure in such an area, there is an argument for tapping into health budgets to help to fund that area, because of the challenges that local government faces.

Michelle Ballantyne: Health budgets are constrained, too.

Graeme Dey: Absolutely. I get that, but my point is that the issue is not siloed.

Rona Mackay: It encompasses education for youngsters as well.

Graeme Dey: That is true.

The Convener: I am struck by the fact that most people recognise the importance of the countryside rangers and the amount of passion and time and energy that people put into creating and nurturing a love of the countryside, yet it does not feel as though that work is anybody's responsibility. The work of countryside rangers is continuing despite rather than because of that situation.

We need to ask where Scottish Natural Heritage sees its role lying. We know that everybody's budgets are under pressure, but there is something quite precious here that I do not think we would want to lose. Graeme Dey is right to highlight that the work that the rangers do is not just about the countryside; it is about generating an interest in our young people in the countryside and encouraging them to be involved in it and to live healthier lives as a consequence.

Maurice Corry: I agree entirely with what you say about SNH. I know a little about the approach of Argyll and Bute Council, as I used to be a councillor there. It adopted the approach of working with various trusts, the RSPB, the National Trust for Scotland, the Forestry Commission, the Black Mount estate and the Mount Stuart estate on the Isle of Bute, for example. Our policy was to work with such bodies to share that responsibility. I think that that model could be encouraged.

We also involved young people. Through apprenticeships and so on, people got involved in gamekeeping and working as rangers. On the back of that, we have a large volunteer force for the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park. There are some active examples of what is happening. Resources were scarce, so we shared the load.

The Convener: The anxiety about that is that sharing responsibility can sometimes mean passing on responsibility. Nobody takes ownership of the fact that the number of rangers is going down, and I think that we should explore that with SNH.

Maurice Corry: I come back to Graeme Dey's point about biodiversity and local authorities' responsibility to meet their biodiversity duty. I think that it is important that we tie that in.

Michelle Ballantyne: I am not saying that I know the answer, but I suspect that the answer is that local authorities still have rangers—they probably just have 50 per fewer of them. They discharge their responsibility by going through a tick-box exercise of having things in place, if you like. I suspect that that is how they get away with it.

The Convener: It is clear that members regard that as an important area of the petition and that we want to take further evidence from Scottish Natural Heritage. We thank the petitioners for their work. Of course, they can respond to our considerations with any further suggestions that they might have at any point.

I thank Graeme Dey and Maurice Corry—whom I noticed that Alexander Burnett co-opted on to the committee—for attending. We are very appreciative of you performing the role of substitutes today.

I thank everyone for their attendance.

Meeting closed at 11:15.

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