



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Public Petitions Committee

Thursday 5 March 2020

Session 5



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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

4th Meeting 2020, Session 5

CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con)

*Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con)

*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)

Fiona Brown (Scottish Government)

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Michael Matheson (Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity)

Jonny Moran (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lynn Russell

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Thursday 5 March 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Interests

The Convener (Johann Lamont): I welcome everyone to the fourth meeting in 2020 of the Public Petitions Committee. The first item on our agenda is a declaration of interests.

We have a new committee member, Tom Mason, who is taking over from Brian Whittle. On behalf of the committee members and the clerks, I thank Brian Whittle for all his work in his time with the committee, for the energy that he brought to that work and, in particular, for his dedication to and focus on our mental health inquiry. We wish him well.

I welcome Tom Mason. Do you have any interests to declare?

Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con): Thank you, convener, for your welcome. I draw the committee's attention to my entry in the register of members' interests—in particular, to the fact that I am a councillor in Aberdeen City Council.

Continued Petitions

A83 (Rest and Be Thankful) (PE1540)

09:01

The Convener: The first continued petition for consideration is PE1540, on a permanent solution for the A83. The petition was lodged by Douglas Philand and calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that there is a permanent solution for the A83 at the Rest and Be Thankful, so that that vital lifeline route is not closed because of landslides.

I welcome Rhoda Grant MSP and Jackie Baillie MSP for this item.

As members will be aware, last year, we agreed to take evidence on the petition from the Scottish Government. I am pleased to welcome Michael Matheson, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity, and, from the Scottish Government, Fiona Brown, head of strategic transport planning, and Jonny Moran, operating company manager.

I invite the cabinet secretary to provide a brief opening statement before we move to questions.

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): Good morning, convener, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide you with an update on progress at the Rest and Be Thankful next to the A83.

I am acutely aware of the importance of the A83 trunk road to the communities and the economy of Argyll and Bute. We have continued to invest in this key route: since 2007, we have invested £79.2 million in the maintenance of the A83 trunk road.

Since the decision at the February 2013 task force meeting to progress with the red option measures, the Scottish Government has provided funds of £13 million on landslide mitigation measures and improvements to the local old military road diversion. Those measures have been successful in helping to keep the A83 open for 48 days when it would otherwise have been closed.

However, at my first A83 task force meeting, in November 2018, following concerns being raised by local stakeholders, I announced that the Argyll and Bute region would be one of the first to be reported on in the strategic transport projects review 2 process.

I am glad to report that we have recently reached the first major milestone of the review with the publication of the draft regional case for change report for Argyll and Bute. The publication

of the report is the first step in the appraisal process, and it sets out the evidence base that underpins the review. The next steps will see the development of a short list of interventions, which will then be taken through a detailed appraisal later this year.

We continue to explore ways to reduce the risk of impact from landslides in the area. I am glad to announce today that I have given approval for the construction of the next roadside catch pit at the Rest and Be Thankful in the coming financial year, which is valued at £1.9 million. Once it is complete, the phase 1 catch pit will provide an additional 4,600 tonnes of storage capacity to collect debris flow from landslides, to add to the 14,600 tonnes of capacity that is provided by the four existing catch pits.

I have asked my officials to discuss the timing of these works with Argyll and Bute Council, as we have the option to build the pit between June and December 2020 or to delay until after the tourist season and to build it between September 2020 and March 2021.

We have also progressed the programme of planting trees on the hillside, to reduce the risk of landslide. Land purchase at the Rest and Be Thankful has been concluded, and we are working closely with Forestry and Land Scotland to reintroduce the required local-provenance, native vegetation on the hillside. The erection of a deer fence is programmed to commence this summer, with planting due to commence early next year.

I am more than happy to respond to questions from committee members.

The Convener: Thank you. I should also have welcomed Donald Cameron MSP, who is here for our consideration of this petition.

Cabinet secretary, as you might be aware, the petition has been running for almost seven years—it predates many members' membership of this committee—but, as of yet, a permanent solution, which is called for in the petition, has not been provided. We understand that, over the years, work has been undertaken and substantial investment has been made to keep the A83 open at the Rest and Be Thankful. However, as recently as January, the road was closed again due to a landslip. Is it fair to say that the Scottish Government's response to this longstanding issue has been piecemeal?

Michael Matheson: No, because work was undertaken to ascertain what the long-term solution should be—the red option—back in 2013. The work that related to the red option was largely completed by 2014, with the exception of the tree planting, which is a long-term project. The principal options were assessed at that time, and

the red option, which seemed to be the most appropriate approach, was taken forward.

Since then, we have introduced additional mitigation measures—in particular, catch pits, the use of which will be extended, as I said.

Wider strategic transport interventions in Argyll and Bute will be required to go through the STPR2 process, which is exactly what is happening just now. Reporting on the Argyll and Bute area is being accelerated—I agreed in 2018 that Argyll and Bute would be the first region to be reported on in terms of the range of transport intervention options for the region.

I would not say that our approach has been piecemeal. The red option was agreed by the task force and the measures were completed by March 2014.

The Convener: You talk about mitigation, but that is not a permanent solution. You had meetings in the first half of last year to consult on the issue, and we are now meandering our way towards some kind of response to that. To me, it feels that unbelievably slow progress is being made around the review. People say that they have to look at this and then they have to look at that, and so on. I am sure that progress is slower than the traffic sometimes is on the A83.

Is there any way of accelerating the process? It does not seem to reflect the urgency of the issue for local people or the consequences for the local economy and its sustainability, which is something that Argyll and Bute Council has flagged up.

Michael Matheson: The wider mitigation measures will help to provide greater resilience, which is an issue that is highlighted in the petition. As a result of the mitigation measures that have been put in place, there has been greater resilience at the Rest and Be Thankful, but there remain risks, which is why further mitigation measures are being undertaken.

I presume that, when you mentioned a review, you were referring to the STPR2 process. That is a major strategic piece of work across the whole country—

The Convener: It can be major without being so slow that we do not deal with the problems that it is supposed to address. I find it astonishing that, although you consulted in the first half of last year, you are still pretty vague about when the conclusions will come.

Michael Matheson: The conclusions of STPR2—for the whole of the country—will be published in this parliamentary session, so they will be published by next spring.

The Convener: And that is it.

Michael Matheson: No. STPR2 is a major piece of work. It is being done differently from how it was last carried out, in 2008, when it was done just at a national level. In recognition of some of the regional issues, we have broken the work down so that there is a regional approach. To help to speed up the process for Argyll and Bute, the necessary work in that regard was brought forward to be undertaken earlier.

That is why the process started last year. The report “Initial appraisal: Case for Change - Edinburgh and South East Scotland - STPR2” was published last week. We are now entering the appraisal process, which will look at what the interventions should be. That information will then be fed into the recommendations for the STPR2 process for the whole country. That is happening at a regional level in the south-west, the Borders and the Highlands of Scotland to ensure that stakeholders have an opportunity to shape and feed into the process and identify the issues in each region.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): The STPR2 process will be reported on during this parliamentary term, but stakeholder workshops have taken place and the task force has been in operation for a number of years. What is the feedback from locals about how the process has gone so far?

Michael Matheson: Do you mean in relation to STPR2?

Gail Ross: I mean in relation to the mitigation measures and what has been happening.

Michael Matheson: There will be a variety of views. I chaired the most recent task force meeting, in January, when the principal focus was not on further mitigation measures as such but on issues relating to the bus stop at the top of the Rest and Be Thankful. A variety of stakeholders on the task force have different views on what they would like to see happening—some further mitigation work or alternative routes. I expect that some of them will feel frustration about not seeing further action being taken in a particular way at a certain time. However, broadly, at the most recent meeting, the focus was on public transport issues rather than on the mitigation works at the Rest and Be Thankful, although a full presentation was given on the work that had been done since the previous stakeholders’ meeting.

I ask Fiona Brown to give you a bit more of an insight into the STPR2 engagement process and the issues that that is starting to flush out in the feedback that we have had to date.

Fiona Brown (Scottish Government): As Gail Ross correctly said, we undertook workshops and stakeholder feedback sessions last year. There was also an online survey.

The feedback has largely been about the resilience of the strategic road network, and people clearly stated that they want something reliable. We are aware of the issues of depopulation around Argyll and Bute and perceptions of a lack of investment due the poor resilience of the network. Those issues came through in the stakeholder consultation.

We also held workshops on interventions based around discussion of a permanent solution for the Rest and Be Thankful and of other fixed-link and ferry options, public transport reliability with bus networks and enhancements to the rail network. A variety of interventions came forward as we looked at the Argyll and Bute region as a whole.

Michael Matheson: It is worth keeping in mind that STPR2 is not just about roads but about every form of transport—including ferries, public transport and aviation—which is why a substantial piece of work has to be undertaken. The Rest and Be Thankful element of it will be just one part of that wider review work.

Gail Ross: When you finally manage to get a solution, if the timescales are right—someone else will ask about those—will the latest mitigation—the catch pit that you told us about in your opening statement—form part of that solution? If it is going to cost £1.9 million, will that information be fed into the final cost of the solution, or does it stand alone? Do you have any idea of a final budget for a solution?

Michael Matheson: The mitigation work that has been undertaken and the additional catch pit that I announced today are separate from and not dependent on STPR2. If we did not have an issue with the Rest and Be Thankful, we would still undertake the STPR2 process in Argyll and Bute, because we are doing so across the country. The mitigation works stand on their own, as opposed to being dependent on any part of the STPR process.

09:15

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Good morning, panel. I visited the Rest and Be Thankful with the committee in a previous session of the Parliament to see the improvements to the old military road and the barriers that were put up. Given the condition of the hill and its level of instability, do you think that the catch pit that has been mentioned is enough, or are more barriers needed?

Michael Matheson: The original recommendation was to pursue the red option that was set out back in 2013-14, and the bit that is outstanding from that is tree planting on the hillside. It will be 10 to 15 years before we start to see the benefits that will come from that

programme. However, the land has now been purchased and the planting work will be progressed.

The geotechnical advisers have indicated that the hillside has a dynamic nature in that, over the course of the years, its behaviour has changed. As a result, areas that previously presented no issue now do. That is why further mitigation measures have been put in place, which are over and above those that are set out in the red option.

There is no doubt that the biggest recorded landslide on the hillside was back in October 2018, and the mitigation measures worked on that occasion. They delivered what they were intended to do, which was to divert the landslide and prevent the closure of the road. Therefore the benefits of using such measures, alongside catching debris with nets, have been identified. There are occasions when the mitigation measures have worked and have done their job, as I mentioned in my opening statement. However, greater resilience could be provided by establishing further catch pits, which is why I have announced that catch pit 1 will be introduced.

I have also asked officials to explore areas in which resilience could be improved even further by considering whether we should undertake further catch pit work on other aspects of the road. They are reviewing that at present, with advice from the geotechnical specialists on where any additional catch pits should be located so as to provide the greatest resilience. When incidents have occurred, the mitigation measures have delivered what they were intended to deliver, which is why I want to consider where we might undertake more of them if they could provide greater resilience in the future.

David Torrance: You mentioned that the land has been purchased, the deer fence is going up and tree planting is planned. How soon will that planting take place? You said that it would be a 15-year project.

Michael Matheson: Tree planting is due to start in the spring of next year, and we are working with teams from Forestry and Land Scotland to progress that work. Part of the challenge has been in procuring the land. Once the deer fence has been put in, the planting can take place. I understand that such work needs to be undertaken at certain times. For example, fencing is done largely during the summer months, whereas planting tends to be done in the spring.

Tom Mason: Another improvement that has been highlighted is the upgrading of the old military road, which serves as a diversion when the A83 is closed. Will you provide an update on that work and say how many times it has been successfully used as a diversion from the A83?

Michael Matheson: The old military road has been used as a diversion route on around 19 occasions. The upgrading work on it has been completed and the resurfacing has been carried out. I am not sure whether Jonny Moran has anything to add to that. Is there any outstanding work there?

Jonny Moran (Scottish Government): Nothing is outstanding just now. The last significant piece of work was undertaken at the Arrochar side of the old military road. We provided definitive improvements by widening the road by a significant amount, which cut down the journey time under convoy from 17 to 11 and a half minutes and gave better access and egress. As the cabinet secretary mentioned, the road is surfaced to a high degree and Police Scotland and Bear Scotland inspect it whenever it is brought into use.

Tom Mason: Is the forestry road still used as an alternative there as well?

Michael Matheson: Which forestry road are you referring to?

Tom Mason: The road on the other side.

Michael Matheson: Do you mean the one on the Lochgoilhead side? Has that been used as a diversion route, Jonny?

Jonny Moran: We identified a number of issues in the early stage of the study, in 2012-13, when we considered that road as a potential diversion. We undertook a pros and cons exercise and decided that the old military road was a better road to use.

Tom Mason: Is the forestry road out of the picture altogether?

Jonny Moran: Yes. That road has not been used as a diversion.

Michael Matheson: It is just a forestry road, so it is substandard as a trunk road.

Tom Mason: It is a way through, though.

The Convener: Michael Russell had suggested that road.

Michael Matheson: Yes. It was one of the options that were considered in 2013.

Tom Mason: You are saying that the military road will be the alternative, if it is needed.

Michael Matheson: Yes, that is the road that is used.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): When I was a councillor in Argyll and Bute Council, I served from 2012 to 2016 on the committee that had oversight of roads and infrastructure, so I know a lot about the matter. Argyll and Bute

Council decided at the time to look more seriously at the blue option, which involved a road on the south side of the Croe. The Scottish Government overrode that option, but I still think that it would be sensible to move the main road across to the south side of Glen Croe.

The whole issue had an enormous impact on the Argyll and Bute area, particularly on the economy and the businesses, on tourism and so on. There is concern about the old military road—the pre-planned diversion route. For health and safety reasons, that road has been deemed an old hill climb route, which I remember well. It will no longer be that, but has been considered safe enough for a relief road. However, people still feel that a number of issues remain around it.

Can you reassure those who feel that economic impact that the problem with the A83 is a priority and that you agree that the Argyll and Bute area must be kept open for business? The feeling is that the Scottish Government is not giving enough priority to the issue. As the convener has said, despite what is in STPR2, the Government needs to consider it a major issue. We are not getting anywhere at all by adopting a sticking-plaster approach and repairing the road. Other options should be considered.

Michael Matheson: Are you referring to work that needs to be done on the old military road, or in Argyll and Bute in general?

Maurice Corry: First, there is a question about the old military road, which could not be put in operation the last time a landslip happened, with 1,000 tonnes of rock and earth coming down on the Arrochar side of the Rest and Be Thankful. The hydrology had changed, because the trees had been harvested, which created a problem. Will we ever solve it? To do what you say is to take a sticking-plaster approach. The relief road is insufficient to satisfy the business community in the Argyll and Bute area that is reliant on economic activity and is trying to stem the depopulation.

Michael Matheson: I am trying to understand—are you referring to the incident that took place at the end of January?

Maurice Corry: That was one incident, but there is a general feeling—

Michael Matheson: I am trying to understand the specific point that you would like me to address.

Maurice Corry: The point is that the relief road is insufficient to meet the demands of a closure of the A83 main road and to take the resulting traffic, which causes problems for our communities. That is the point.

Michael Matheson: I appreciate that that is the case, which is why we are undertaking further mitigation works on the Rest and Be Thankful in order to provide greater resilience on the main road itself. The ultimate objective needs to be that we are not reliant on the relief road. It should be used only when it is required and it has been upgraded to enable that to happen as efficiently as possible. For example, works have been undertaken to widen the road at the lower end to assist in speeding up the convoy system, which has been successful. The temporary measure is certainly not a long-term solution, which is why further mitigation works are necessary, in order to provide greater resilience on the main trunk route.

Maurice Corry: Thank you.

David Torrance: I am going to put you on the spot here, cabinet secretary. Measures have been put in place and additional measures will be put in place to mitigate landslides, but given the condition of the hill, can there be a permanent solution?

Michael Matheson: I think that we can get greater resilience. I cannot assure you that we will not have problems in the trunk road network with landslides. I will give you an example. Fairly recently, on the A82 north of Ardlui, I was caught up in the impact of a landslip on to the road. There was debris on the road in October last year as well, just north of Tyndrum, and the Highland main rail line was also washed away. All of that took place within a short period of time due to intense rainfall, and those landslips required significant work to be undertaken.

Just the other week, up on the A82 in Glencoe, there was a landslip on an area of the road. We have had landslips during intense rainfall where debris has gone on to the road and work has required to be undertaken. The advice that I receive from engineers, geotechnical specialists and meteorologists is that we should expect more of the types of intense weather periods that we have had. As a result, we might start to experience problems in areas of our transport network where we historically we have not had any. Part of the work that we are doing with STPR2 involves thinking about measures that we can put in place to mitigate some of those problems, which affect rail as well as road. For example, there have been significant problems on a number of occasions on the Highland line to Fort William with landslips and wash-away caused by the unprecedented intense rain.

We will have to manage such problems as best we can, but I cannot give the kind of guarantee that Mr Torrance implied. We have a trunk road network of over 2,000 miles and some areas are more vulnerable than others, so we need to take forward mitigation in those areas. However, the

weather changes that we have been experiencing are having an impact on our transport network. Some committee members will have experienced that in their constituencies. We have to look to manage that as effectively as we can.

The Convener: I want to go back to the point about timescales. We received a submission from Argyll and Bute Council in which the council stated:

“There is ... no commitment from the Scottish Government to deliver that permanent solution or on timescales. Our understanding is that decisions on the funding of regional and national projects has not been accelerated. If a project is identified for the Rest and Be Thankful it will have to compete for inclusion in the project programme which will span 10 years. The funding decisions, we are led to believe, are at least 2 years away.”

Is that right?

Michael Matheson: The decisions around funding will be part of the capital spending review, which will take place this year and feed into the STPR2 process.

The Convener: So the STPR will report next year, just before the Parliament closes down for the election.

Michael Matheson: Yes.

The Convener: Is Argyll and Bute Council wrong in thinking that the funding has not been accelerated?

Michael Matheson: I think that the council is confused if it is talking about funding being accelerated. The STPR2 assessment process has been accelerated and the report will be published as a complete review. Decisions will then be made about where funding is to be prioritised and what projects will be taken forward over the course of STPR2.

The Convener: That is a process over which you have complete control, so it is not something that you are at the mercy of. As cabinet secretary, you have control over the timescales.

Michael Matheson: Yes, we have control of the timescales, but I think that Argyll and Bute Council, in its submission to the committee, is wrong or has misunderstood the process. The STPR—

The Convener: Has the council perhaps misunderstood what “accelerated” means?

Michael Matheson: Yes, because the process was to assess what is required in Argyll and Bute. That was very clear.

09:30

The Convener: So you have accelerated the assessment but not the funding that would deliver the change. Is that right?

Michael Matheson: No, because STPR2 was always due to be published in this parliamentary session—nothing has changed in that timeframe.

The Convener: So nothing has changed in terms of accelerating the funding that would make a difference to the A83.

Michael Matheson: We have not completed the assessment yet. Once STPR2 has been completed, the funding decisions will be made.

The Convener: I will invite some of our guest members to ask questions. The first member to indicate was Jackie Baillie.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I welcome the fact that the cabinet secretary got stuck on the A82 because, as he will know, I have been pursuing investment in the A82 and the A83, both of which are in my constituency.

Michael Matheson: I should point out that I did not get stuck—I got past.

Jackie Baillie: Oh, you got past—but my point stands nevertheless.

I was at the task force meeting in June 2019 at which we considered the STPR2 process. It would be fair to say that we heard from local people about the need for a permanent solution, and that the majority of them favoured a completely different trunk road being established. I am keen to pursue with you and your officials whether the permanent solution is likely to be mitigation on the existing route, given that you have invested so much in it already, or whether you are open to developing a completely new trunk road.

Michael Matheson: The STPR2 process will involve looking at all options, including alternative routes into Argyll and Bute, and we will not rule out options because of the mitigation work that we are undertaking on the A83 at the Rest and Be Thankful. That mitigation work stands on its own two feet and is being undertaken in its own right. If the STPR2 appraisal identifies that we should look at other options for Argyll and Bute, that process will stand on its own two feet as well. I assure the member that the mitigation work does not mean that we will not look at other options for Argyll and Bute.

Jackie Baillie: That is helpful.

I want to pursue the issue of lead-in times, which the convener asked about. People who are often stuck at the Rest and Be Thankful or who have to use other routes will want to know when the process is going to end. Whatever option you

land on, when is it likely to be realised? I understand the timescale that you have outlined, but I am keen to know, if you approve a particular course of action, when it will happen. Will you prioritise funding for the project, given the obvious need?

Michael Matheson: We are still implementing provisions in the first STPR, which was introduced in 2008. Largely, it is a 10-year programme of work, but some of the projects can take longer than 10 years for delivery, just because of construction. For example, if the STPR2 process identified the need for an alternative trunk road route to the existing route through the Rest and Be Thankful—not just because of the challenges that we have had there but because of wider economic and population issues in Argyll and Bute—and even a fixed link to the Cowal peninsula, which has been proposed, it would take an extended period of time to introduce that. A major trunk road project of such scale can take eight to 12 years to go through the assessment process and the technical phase and into the actual execution and delivery.

That is why, even if we accept that something else should be undertaken, the A83 at the Rest and Be Thankful will remain critically important to maintaining access to Argyll and Bute, and that is why I have asked for further consideration to be given to additional mitigation measures that can be put in over and above what has been planned to date. For example, that might mean further catch pits, which have been successful where they have been installed. Even if we agree to an alternative route, we will still be dependent on the A83 for an extended period.

Jackie Baillie: I want to push you on the funding prioritisation. I accept everything that you have said about the delivery times of major projects, but the economic impact and the rate of depopulation of Argyll and Bute is worrying and I am therefore concerned that 10 years seems like quite a long timeframe for a permanent solution to be found.

Michael Matheson: I recognise that, but identifying the rate at which various projects progress will be looked at a national level. I suspect that, if I asked you whether the priority should be the A82 or the A83, you would say that it is both.

Jackie Baillie: It is both, cabinet secretary.

Michael Matheson: If I asked people in the south-west of Scotland whether the A77 or the A75 should be the priority, they would say that both should be prioritised. We have to look at all of those competing issues. When the process is accelerated, the identified projects for Argyll and Bute will be the first to come to me for

consideration for inclusion within the STPR2. The projects will have to be looked at against all the other competing demands and the risks that have to be taken into account.

The Convener: Will the STPR2, which will be announced before the election, identify what is going to be done, as well as timescales?

Michael Matheson: It will identify the projects that will be taken forward in those respective areas.

The Convener: So it will be like a wish list, but I presume that it will not identify timescales until later on.

Michael Matheson: No, it is not a wish list. The wish list is the process before that, if you like. I will ask Fiona Brown to say a bit more about that. The next phase of that will bring all the different types of interventions through and we will then consult on them. As part of that appraisal, we will work that into a shortlist of projects that could realistically be taken forward to meet the purpose for which they are intended. That is what will be contained within STPR2. Those are the projects that we would be looking to take forward. It is not a wish list.

The Convener: That is the core work that you will be doing over the next period.

Michael Matheson: Yes.

The Convener: That is helpful. Please forgive my ignorance.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I will push you on the STPR2. You have said that the Rest and Be Thankful has priority within the local Argyll STPR2 plan. Where will the Argyll plan sit within the national STPR2 plan? It may be project number 1 within Argyll, but it could be project number 8 within the whole of Scotland.

Michael Matheson: I cannot tell you that until the process has been completed and all the different competing interests and issues have been highlighted. We will then have to assess which projects to prioritise and on what basis. I cannot tell you whether it will be the top priority in both the Argyll and Bute plan and the national STPR2 plan, because we will have to consider all the various interventions that will be highlighted in Argyll and Bute and across the country.

Rhoda Grant: There are no real guarantees.

Michael Matheson: It is not that there are no guarantees; I am just saying that I cannot tell you what the priorities are until the process has been undertaken and we have completed a review of all the options across the country. As I say, I am sure that people would say to me that the A82 and a bypass at Fort William are priorities, or the work that needs to be done on the A82 between Taret

and Ardlui. Those are all priorities but, once we have carried out the process and we have identified all the different priorities, we will have to assess which of those projects to progress earlier in the programme.

Rhoda Grant: I am really trying to get some information for the petitioner. This petition is probably one of the longest-running petitions in the Parliament. From the evidence that we have heard in today's meeting, we are no further forward. I can just imagine not only the petitioner's frustration, but the frustration of everyone who uses that road regularly.

Michael Matheson: I would not accept that, because one of the things that the petition was looking for was greater resilience on the A83 at the Rest and Be Thankful. A significant amount of work has been undertaken to deliver that. It has not given them the permanent solution that they believe is the best option, but the red option has delivered greater resilience on the route.

Rhoda Grant: Can you tell me which alternative routes are being seriously considered and appraised under STPR2?

Michael Matheson: The case for change report that was published last week sets out that it has been agreed that there is a case for further change in a range of areas in Argyll and Bute. The appraisal process will start to look at what those options are, and there will then be a public consultation on those options to arrive at the final shortlist. Can you explain a bit more about that, Fiona?

Fiona Brown: At the moment, we are sifting the long list of options to arrive at a manageable list of options that we will appraise. We are looking to publish the shortlists in May, and they will include the options for Argyll and Bute. We could share the long list with the committee if that would be helpful. We are undertaking that process across the country in relation to thousands of interventions, and we are getting that number down to the hundreds. Those will be sifted against the objectives that we set out in the case for change reports. That work follows on from the national transport strategy and the sustainable investment hierarchy, the objectives that we have for the country, what has come through from engagement and the strategic transport investment.

We imagine that, of the hundreds of interventions that we arrive at after we narrow down the thousands that are on the long list, there might be 20-plus interventions relating to Argyll and Bute. That is a similar figure to other regions. That is what we will be looking to publish in May. We will then appraise those options to determine

which ones deliver us the best outcomes, as the cabinet secretary outlined.

Rhoda Grant: When do you expect that the tree planting that has been done will make a material difference?

Michael Matheson: Well, I am not a forester. I was going to study forestry, actually, but I chose not to, believe it or not—there is a bit of useless information for you, convener.

It is a long-term project. I am told that the benefits that we will get tend to occur in the 10 to 12-year period, when the trees start to take real root and hold the ground much more effectively. It tends to be a long-term project to give greater stability to the hillside as a whole.

Rhoda Grant: That is a very long-term project.

The Convener: Anybody who wants to study forestry goes up in my estimation.

Michael Matheson: I am pleased to hear that.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Good morning. I am sorry that I arrived late.

I am glad to hear that you are looking at the totality of the travel options into Argyll and Bute, because one of the issues that I come across is that the extreme weather that closes the Rest and Be Thankful can also have a knock-on effect on ferries—for instance, those to Rothesay or Dunoon. It is hugely important to consider everything, because people can be literally cut off.

I echo the frustration that I have heard when I talk to people about the issue. I am going to Dunoon tomorrow and one of the things that I will be asked is when there will be a permanent solution. It strikes me from what we have heard that that appears to be as remote as ever. Can you give any reassurance that a permanent solution will be found?

Michael Matheson: In terms of an alternative route or in relation to the mitigation on the Rest and Be Thankful?

Donald Cameron: I am talking about any permanent solution.

Michael Matheson: The STPR process is designed to flush that out in greater detail and to identify, if there is need for a permanent solution, what that solution should be. To do that, in the holistic way that you just outlined, we would need to consider all the issues in Argyll and Bute around all modes of transport in order to provide greater connectivity in the region as a whole.

I say to people in Dunoon that the STPR process is a thorough, detailed and evidence-based one. It is open to the community to engage

with it to shape what the findings and recommendations are for Argyll and Bute. I give an assurance that it is an open and established process that should identify whether any permanent solution is necessary and what that should be.

09:45

Donald Cameron: People see big infrastructure projects in central Scotland, such as the Queensferry crossing, or in the north, where the A9 is being dualled, and they feel—I think with some justification—that smaller, less significant projects such as the A83 and the A82 perhaps get less focus from the Government. How do you respond to that?

Michael Matheson: I do not accept that, although I understand it, because I hear it in most parts of the country. If I go to the north-east, people tell me that there is not enough infrastructure spend in the area. Local authorities in the Edinburgh area tell me that there is a need for greater infrastructure investment in the roads here. In every part of the country to which I go, there is a perception that other parts of the country are getting more infrastructure investment.

When we undertake major infrastructure projects, we must do so in an evidence-based way and target resources to deliver the best outcomes for the investment that we make. I appreciate and recognise the frustrations that you describe, but I would not say that one area is favoured over any other. I receive challenges regularly—almost weekly—from local elected members, including members of this Parliament, about the need for further investment in particular constituencies or regions of the country. We try to use the STPR process as the means by which we can identify the issues and challenges and the most effective way to address them, in an open, fair and transparent way.

The Convener: I am conscious of time. There are two final, brief questions.

Maurice Corry: My question is for Fiona Brown. In your review of the options, how strong an option is, first, a new road up the middle of Glen Croe, and secondly, a tunnel through the shoulder? Those options were discussed in 2013.

Fiona Brown: At the moment, in the long list of interventions, there is an intervention to improve the A83 alongside its existing alignment, that is, in the glen itself—

Maurice Corry: Right. Is that a strong option?

Fiona Brown: I cannot say whether it is strong at the moment; it is an option. There are also options to the north of the glen and to the south, across the Cowal.

Maurice Corry: Thank you.

Gail Ross: I will end the discussion on a slightly different note. We have had feedback from Argyll and Bute Council that digital connectivity in the area is very poor. The council says that that impedes the response to landslides, when they happen, as well as the ability of members of the public to access traffic reports. What plans are there to upgrade the digital connectivity in the area?

Michael Matheson: Argyll and Bute has benefited from the digital Scotland superfast broadband programme, which has significantly improved digital connectivity in the area. However, there is much more still to do, which is why the reaching 100 per cent programme is being taken forward.

Argyll and Bute is in the northern lot of the R100 programme, which is the subject of challenge from one of the bidders. There is a process in that regard, and I am limited in what I can say about the matter. The commitment in the R100 programme is that people who do not have full access to fibre broadband to premises by the end of 2021 will be entitled to make use of a voucher scheme, to support them in getting something to their premises—we set that out recently in Parliament.

We are making progress, but there is still more to do. The R100 programme should help to close the gap significantly in the years ahead.

The Convener: Thank you. We have reached the end of our questions for the cabinet secretary.

The committee needs to consider where we go with the petition. We have heard a lot today, and we should perhaps take an opportunity to reflect on what we have heard, and give the petitioner and others a chance to respond to what has been said, before we make a final decision. Do members agree that, at a future meeting, we will reflect on the evidence that we have heard?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank the cabinet secretary and his colleagues very much for their attendance.

09:49

Meeting suspended.

09:52

On resuming—

Countryside Ranger Services (National Strategic Framework) (PE1678)

The Convener: The second continued petition for consideration today is PE1678, which has been

lodged by Robert Reid on behalf of the Scottish Countryside Rangers Association. It calls on Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to implement the strategic framework for the network of countryside ranger services that is set out in the document “Rangers in Scotland”, which was published by Scottish Natural Heritage in 2008. The clerk’s note provides a summary of the submissions that we have received since our previous consideration of the petition.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Gail Ross: I just want to say that the committee’s evidence session on the petition was brilliant. I gained a lot of valuable knowledge from the people who were at the table.

I was interested to see that the petitioners’ submission welcomes the proposed partnership and engagement with SNH. However, the SCRA has noted a couple of further points—for example, it would like the opportunity to agree the wording that is to be added in support of development of the memorandum of understanding, verbal agreement on which was reached at the round-table meeting.

I congratulate the petitioners, who have really pushed their case and have achieved a positive outcome. I simply advise them to work closely with SNH on development of the guidance. On the basis that we have pretty much implemented the request in the petition, I feel that we could successfully close it.

David Torrance: All aspects of the petition have been met. We are waiting for the report from SNH to the Scottish Government, but the petition has achieved a positive result, so I would be quite happy to close it.

The Convener: Do other members have any views?

Maurice Corry: I agree that we should close the petition. As Gail Ross said, we simply need to ensure that SNH will continue to work positively with the SCRA and the Government. There is not really much more that we can do. We know that things are now going the right way; it is just a matter of encouraging that to continue.

Tom Mason: I have no additional comments. I take what the petitioners have said at face value, and simply endorse what other members have said.

The Convener: There remains an issue on the means by which the plans can be delivered—for example, there will be issues in respect of local government funding and achievement of a coherent national service. I agree with other members that a lot of positive elements have resulted from the petition. The potential for the

parties to work together is important. I agree that we should close the petition, but I also suggest that we flag up to SNH the issues that Gail Ross highlighted.

Gail Ross: Yes.

The Convener: I thank the petitioners for engaging with the committee. I found the evidence fascinating. Such work is an example of the interesting things that are happening and making a difference in our communities, and it is great to provide a platform for that.

However, I also flag up to the petitioners that if there is no progress, or if they are concerned that there is a falling back from the commitments that have been made, they have the opportunity to submit another petition in a year’s time.

Does the committee agree to close the petition under standing orders rule 15.7, on the basis that Scottish Natural Heritage has progressed the development of a statement on rangering in Scotland in conjunction with key partners, and to advise SNH to continue to work positively with the SCRA and other members of the ranger development partnership? Does the committee also agree to thank the petitioners for everything that they have done to highlight the issues that were raised in the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

Human Right to Food (PE1733)

The Convener: The third continued petition is PE1733, which was lodged by Peter Ritchie on behalf of the Scottish Food Coalition, and calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to make the right to food part of Scots law.

Rhoda Grant MSP has joined us to hear our consideration of the petition. Elaine Smith MSP and Sarah Boyack MSP were present the first time we considered the petition, and Elaine Smith has highlighted that she intends to explore introducing a member’s bill on the issues that are raised.

In its consultation on proposals for a good food nation bill, the Scottish Government proposed a statutory requirement on Scottish ministers and specified public authorities to have regard to relevant international obligations and guidance in developing statements of policy on food. However, in his submission, the petitioner states that he remains of the belief that the right to food should be incorporated in Scots law through such a bill

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Gail Ross: As I said when we first considered the petition, I have been supportive of the issue right from the start and have spoken on it in the

chamber a number of times. The difficulty that we have is that, for a while, we did not know whether the proposed good food nation bill would ever happen. We now have a commitment to it. We do not know what will be in it, but the Government has told us that the right to food will not be in it, which I find slightly disappointing. I note that the petitioner has welcomed the national task force and the human rights framework. The First Minister's task force has also said that human rights will underpin all our policy.

The Government has said that the right to food will not be in the good food nation bill, so I am not sure that the committee can do any more with the petition. However, I am reluctant to let it go. There certainly needs to be a watching brief kept on the issue in some shape or form. I know that other committees might not always thank us for doing so, but I wonder whether we should pass the petition on to one of them to do that. I know that the rural committee has considered the concept of a good food nation bill. However, if the issue is seen as being more of a human rights one, perhaps the Equalities and Human Rights Committee should consider it. The matter is too important for us simply to close the petition and let it go.

The Convener: I think that the bill will go to the rural committee.

Gail Ross: It will.

The Convener: I never know what that committee's proper title is.

Gail Ross: It is the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee.

10:00

The Convener: Thank you. I am sure that the official reporters will write that into the record.

We acknowledge the issues, and there is clearly interest in the petition, not least that of the deputy convener, but I agree that the committee cannot do much more with it. There is no doubt that the subject will be debated in Parliament, so we urge the campaigners to recognise that they will have a role through engaging in the consultation. In addition, a number of MSPs have expressed an interest in the subject. The question is whether we should close the petition or refer it to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, which would have it while dealing with the good food nation bill.

Rhoda Grant: I very much support the petition. I welcome the idea of a good food nation bill, but I am disappointed that the Government has ruled out including in it the right to food that the petitioner proposes, because what we do around food is not adequate under human rights

legislation. That said, it will be open to members to seek to amend the bill to include such a right.

I agree with Gail Ross that if we refer the petition to the committee that will take the lead on the bill, that will, at the very least, encourage it to take evidence on the right to food and consider whether it should be included in the bill. I think that the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee will, if it takes such evidence, be convinced that it should support an amendment to include the right to food in the bill. If this committee can do no more on the petition, referring it to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee would ensure consideration of including in the bill what the petitioner is looking for.

Gail Ross: I agree.

The Convener: We will refer the petition to the rural committee—with its Sunday title—and highlight to it the issues that have been flagged up, recognising that the subject will be addressed through legislation from the Scottish Government. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Hysterectomies (NHS Guidance on Age) (PE1734)

The Convener: The fourth continued petition is PE1734, by Megan Archibald, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to urgently review current national health service guidance on the age and status at which women are considered for hysterectomies for chronic medical reasons. Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Maurice Corry: I propose that we close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders because, basically, there is no set age; it is for health teams to make clinical decisions on the basis of the best advice. There is a fallback, in that people can seek a second opinion and a third opinion, so I think that the matter is adequately covered.

Gail Ross: The fact that the chief medical officer has given us that assurance means that we have taken the petition as far as we can.

The Convener: If I remember correctly, the petitioner's argument was that some women who have seen a hysterectomy as an option have been told that it is not allowed. In fact, it has been suggested to the committee that although the decision is so significant that the precautionary principle will be applied, it is not the case that the NHS does not allow that. That will, perhaps, give the petitioner some reassurance.

We will close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders, as we have agreed that there is

reassurance in what the chief medical officer has said. We thank the petitioner for raising the issue, which is clearly important for a number of women, and remind her that it will be possible for her to lodge another petition on the subject in a year's time if she feels that that is necessary. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Baby Box Scheme (Pelvic Floor Education) (PE1735)

The Convener: The next continued petition for consideration is PE1735, by Elaine Miller, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to include pelvic floor education in baby boxes, in order to reduce stress incontinence among new mothers and to improve women's lifelong health and wellbeing.

Since we last considered the petition in September 2019, the committee has received a submission from the Scottish Government. Although the petitioner has not provided a submission, she has highlighted to the clerks that she is not advocating that there be a leaflet in the baby box but that there be a babygrow with a printed slogan to encourage new mums to do pelvic floor exercises.

Do members have comments or suggestions for action?

David Torrance: We should close the petition under standing orders rule 15.7, because the Scottish Government is not going to do what the petitioner is calling for, but will give additional information in a number of forms. That will, in part, meet what the petitioner is asking for.

Gail Ross: As we said the last time we discussed the petition, the information is already in the "Ready Steady Baby!" guide, which goes to every new family, whereas people have to apply for the baby box and it does not go to everyone. I like the thought of wee babygrows with advice slogans for mums on them, but that is maybe an opportunity for a baby clothing company rather than for the Scottish Government. I sympathise with what the petition is trying to achieve, but the Scottish Government is providing information in other—and possibly more successful—ways.

The Convener: We are talking about creative ways of supporting new mums, but I think that my capacity even to read slogans completely deserted me when I was in that position. I very much agree with what Gail Ross said about the petitioner's motivations. It is important to support mums and to give them good health advice. Our sense is that the baby box is probably not the right vehicle through which to provide that advice, but we underline the importance of such information being

given to women through their journey as new mums.

We thank the petitioner for highlighting the important issues that she has raised, and we recognise that there is a need to ensure that new mums get the best possible health advice because, for some, that will have consequences for a long time through their lives. Do members agree to close the petition?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Vehicle Collisions Involving Cats (Reporting) (PE1736)

The Convener: The next continued petition is PE1736, which was lodged by Mandy Hobbis on behalf of CatsMatter, on vehicle collisions involving cats being made a reportable offence. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce legislation to make the driver of a vehicle that is involved in an accident that results in injury or death to a cat stop and report the accident to the police. The clerks' note summarises the submissions from the Scottish Government, Cats Protection, Police Scotland and the petitioner.

Do members have comments or suggestions for action?

Maurice Corry: I suggest that we close the petition under standing orders rule 15.7, on the basis that road traffic legislation is reserved to the United Kingdom Government, which has a bill that seeks to achieve the action that is called for in the petition. The petitioner should keep working with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the matter and could, by all means, input into that process.

Gail Ross: The Scottish Government's submission says that there are already

"arrangements for animals found dead on trunk roads"

and that

"Transport Scotland employs Operating Companies"

to carry out the work. I found that quite interesting.

There is another dimension—microchipping of cats—which we have not considered with the petition, although we considered it with a different petition relating to cats. The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform has said that the Scottish Government does not currently have any plans to introduce compulsory microchipping of cats, but Cats Protection, in its submission, is quite vocal in its support for that. If we are to report on cats, it would be sensible to ensure that they are microchipped, so that we can find out where their families are.

There might be other options. I agree with Maurice Corry that the matter is for Westminster, and our papers say that the petitioner is working with DEFRA on the issue, which is good. There are other avenues for her to go down, in that respect.

David Torrance: I am happy to close the petition. As a cat owner, I am very sympathetic to it, but I do not think that there is anything that we can do, because it is on a reserved matter.

The Convener: It is a reserved matter, but we are discussing it because the petition flags up options for what the Scottish Government could do.

Gail Ross has made an important point about microchipping and scanning. Local authorities and Transport Scotland could do that. The petition notes the low level of microchipping of cats in comparison with dogs, and makes a comment about how cats live—for example, one cannot take them for a walk.

We should close the petition. We recognise that the petitioner is working with DEFRA, but we should flag to the Scottish Government the desirability of promoting microchipping of cats.

Maurice Corry: I absolutely agree. We also need to bear it in mind that cats are companions to people who are on their own. It is very important for the committee to note that. I encourage microchipping, notwithstanding what I said earlier.

The Convener: There is a sense among cat lovers that dogs are protected more than cats. The idea that people do not have to report a vehicle collision involving cats reflects a view of the role that cats play in family life.

We thank the petitioner for highlighting the issue and we acknowledge the significant response from groups that are interested in the petition. They have played an important role in highlighting how to keep cats safe through microchipping and so on.

Do members agree to close the petition, recognising that road traffic legislation is reserved, and to flag to the Scottish Government its responsibility to discuss microchipping of cats?

Members indicated agreement.

Hate Crime (Security Funding Scheme) (PE1737)

The Convener: The next continued petition for consideration is PE1737, on a review of hate crime legislation and a security funding scheme in Scotland. The petition, which was lodged by Puneet Dwivedi on behalf of the Hindu Forum of Britain, calls on the Scottish Government to address increasing levels of hate crime in

Scotland by providing security funding similar to the scheme that is in place in England and Wales.

In its submission of 18 October 2019, the Scottish Government said that, although no security funding scheme was currently in place for places of worship in Scotland, ministers were considering what more could be done. The Government has subsequently announced a £500,000 fund for security measures at places of worship.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

David Torrance: I congratulate the petitioner, because the petition has achieved what it set out to do. The Government has agreed to provide such a funding scheme, so I am happy to close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders.

Maurice Corry: I agree.

The Convener: The Scottish Government has responded to the profoundly depressing issue that people need security at their places of worship. That reflects some of the challenges that communities face now.

The issue has been recognised, the Government has responded and funding is in place. We should therefore close the petition on that basis. Do members agree to do so?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We thank the petitioner for lodging the petition and engaging with the committee. We recognise their success. If sustaining the fund becomes an issue, obviously, that would be an opportunity for the petitioner to come back to us.

Full-time Placement Student Teachers (Bursaries) (PE1738)

The Convener: The next continued petition for consideration is PE1738, on student teacher bursaries for full-time placement students, which was lodged by David Molloy on behalf of future teachers of Scotland. It calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide bursaries to undergraduate teaching students who are undertaking full-time work placements.

Since the previous consideration of the petition in September 2019, the committee has received submissions from the Scottish Council of Deans of Education and the Deputy First Minister. Those submissions are summarised in our meeting papers.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

David Torrance: I do not think that there is anywhere else for the petition to go. The Scottish

Government does not support it and neither does the SCDE. There is no alternative but that we close the petition.

The Convener: We did not receive any responses from student unions or other groups, although we wrote to a number of them.

Our papers highlight an interesting distinction between the nature of the placements and nurse bursaries, for example, and set out a compelling argument about the difference, although there is no doubt that, as I know from my past, the pressures that teaching placements bring are significant.

Gail Ross: Yes.

The Convener: However, I think that we agree that we should close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders, as it is clear that neither the Scottish Government nor the SCDE supports the principle behind it and we have not received evidence to the contrary. Do members agree to close the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We thank the petitioner very much for engaging with the committee and bringing to our attention general issues to do with work placements, what is expected of young people and how anyone engaging in those placement processes might be supported.

Public Services (Complaints) (PE1740)

10:15

The Convener: PE1740, on improving the handling of complaints about public services, which was lodged by Rachel Lowther on behalf of Accountability Scotland, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to improve complaints handling by allowing the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman to take complaints in any format; and requiring the SPSO and bodies under its jurisdiction to permit complainants to audio record meetings and phone calls, and to use those as evidence in any subsequent complaint.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Gail Ross: We see from our submissions that the Scottish Government is supportive of the technical amendments but that it is not progressing matters at this time, which makes it very difficult for the committee to progress the actions that the petitioner asks for. Even though the Scottish Government is not progressing the matter now, I suggest that we write to ask it whether it has a timescale in mind or whether it intends to progress the matter when it is more able

to do so. We could also ask the Government whether it knows when it will be able to express a view on the audio recording of meetings.

Separately, the SPSO suggests that we contact the Information Commissioner's Office. We should definitely follow up that.

The Convener: Those seem to be commonsense proposals. Clearly, the SPSO thinks that they are quite important in respect of people having confidence in how their complaints are being handled. The ideas are not revolutionary.

The Scottish Government says that it is supportive of most of the proposals, but that they are not a priority. However, these issues are a priority for people who are pursuing a complaint and who consider that there are barriers to their doing so.

As I said, asking for those changes is not massively revolutionary. I agree with Gail Ross that we should write to the Scottish Government and the Information Commissioner's Office in the terms that she outlined. Do we agree to do that?

Members indicated agreement.

10:18

Meeting suspended.

10:23

On resuming—

New Petitions

Written Constitution for Scotland (PE1781)

The Convener: Item 3 is consideration of new petitions. The first new petition is PE1781, on a written constitution for Scotland, which was lodged by Denis Agnew. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to consider a written constitution for Scotland. There is no written constitution in the United Kingdom. The constitution has evolved, which means that it comprises numerous statutes, which are laws passed by Parliament; conventions, which are unwritten practices developed over time; and judicial decisions made by the courts.

The issue of a written constitution for Scotland was widely debated in the independence referendum campaign of 2014. Those who favour having a written constitution argue that it would provide clarity on issues from citizens' rights to the checks and balances that are in place among the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. Those who favour leaving the constitution as it is often argue that its unwritten nature provides greater flexibility.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

David Torrance: Could we write to the Scottish Government to seek its views on the petition?

Gail Ross: I support that proposal. As you said, convener, there are views on both sides. It would be helpful to hear the Scottish Government's view.

Maurice Corry: I agree—it would be good to hear from all the parties involved.

The Convener: It would be fair to say that the Government's position has been that, should Scotland become independent, it would prefer that we have a written constitution. However, I am not sure whether we could have one while we remain part of the United Kingdom. We could certainly write to the Scottish Government to seek its views on the petition and ask whether its position has changed from 2014. Do members agree to do so?

Members indicated agreement.

Stocking of Salmon Rivers (Consultation) (PE1782)

The Convener: The second new petition for consideration is PE1782, on full consultation on stocking of salmon rivers, which was lodged by Robert White on behalf of the Scottish Gamekeepers Association's fishing group. It calls

on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that a full stakeholder consultation is carried out before Marine Scotland formalises policy on the stocking of Scotland's salmon rivers.

Our comprehensive Scottish Parliament information centre briefing details that, since 1 August 2008, it has been illegal to stock live salmon or trout, or spawn, into Scottish inland waters without the written consent of a district salmon fishery board, or from Marine Scotland where no such board operates. Since May 2019, Marine Scotland's policy position has been to operate a presumption against stocking of salmon rivers.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Gail Ross: A very interesting article on the Scottish Gamekeepers Association's website outlines the position on this issue. It seems to me to be entirely sensible for stakeholder involvement and consultation to take place before such decisions are made.

I would want the committee to write to the Scottish Government to clarify its actions. Because Marine Scotland is part of the Scottish Government, perhaps we need not write to it separately, unless the Government would prefer that we did so, or indicated that it would represent Marine Scotland in its response.

The Convener: We can ask our clerks to check the position, so that there is no duplication. However, the point is that we should raise the question.

I would want to ask why Marine Scotland would not consult with people. Perhaps there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for that.

Maurice Corry: I agree entirely with Gail Ross. It is important to widen out the consultation, which I hope the Scottish Government will agree to do when we seek its views. We might have to come back to the matter and ask it to approach specific organisations, if it has failed to do so. I think that we need to be fairly open about that.

The Convener: In our letter, we could flag up that we are trying to establish who has been consulted.

Maurice Corry: Yes, exactly.

Tom Mason: It is such an important subject, so it should be consulted on as widely as possible.

Gail Ross: Yes, it is hugely important.

Tom Mason: We have to get this right for the future.

The Convener: Are we agreed that we recognise the importance of the issue and that we will write to the Scottish Government to seek its views on the action that is called for in the petition?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: As ever, we are grateful to the petitioners for raising the issue with us.

Childhood Cancers (PE1783)

The Convener: The third new petition is PE1783, by Fiona Govan, on public awareness of and funding for childhood cancers with low survival rates. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to raise public awareness of harder-to-treat childhood cancers and to provide additional funding for finding cures. The petitioner is concerned that there is a lack of focus on research on, and treatment for, childhood cancers in Scotland.

The SPICe briefing provides wide-ranging background and highlights that the Scottish Government and the managed service network for children and young people with cancer is working on the next children and young people's cancer plan, for 2020 to 2025, which will be available this year.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

David Torrance: We should write to the Scottish Government to seek its views, but we should also consider the views of stakeholders, of whom there are a large number, so we should write to them, too.

Gail Ross: It is a really emotive petition and I found some of it quite difficult to read. I thank the petitioner for her bravery in coming forward. If we can get feedback from anyone on the petition, we must do that.

10:30

The Convener: A theme in the work of the Public Petitions Committee has been that, where petitions have been lodged about medical conditions that do not have a high prevalence, there is a fear that the condition will not be a focus for the Government. We remember PE1629, on melanoma in the eye. That theme is part of what we are exploring here, because the petitioner wants childhood cancers to be a focus.

I agree with the deputy convener about the powerful nature of the petition. We recognise the emotion behind it, and lodging it will not have been an easy thing to do.

I think that we want to get a sense of how we can ensure that, when someone has a cancer that is not as well known as others, the research is nevertheless there and funding is available. If members agree, we will write to the Scottish Government and identified stakeholders to raise questions on those issues. We will allow the committee clerks to explore the possible stakeholders for us. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Again, we thank the petitioner.

Sheriff Court Fees Order 2018 (Review) (PE1784)

The Convener: The next new petition is PE1784, by Gordon Edwardson. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to conduct a review of the Sheriff Court Fees Order 2018 in order to make self-litigation more accessible to disabled people. Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Maurice Corry: We should write to the Scottish Government to ask it what its views are and what actions it will take. We should write to the key stakeholders, such as the Faculty of Advocates, the Law Society of Scotland and the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service—the organisations that are actually implementing these things. We should also write to the Scottish Human Rights Commission to get some views on the whether the action that is called for is appropriate and would represent the right balance. We need to ensure that we get the best outcome for all the parties.

The Convener: I was not aware of the issue. The petitioner flags up differences between the system in Scotland and the system in England and Wales. I suspect that there will be trade-offs, with issues and benefits on both sides. One question is whether the fact that somebody has a low income means that their access to someone who can litigate on their behalf is reduced. That is an issue of fairness and equality. The petitioner has highlighted the important issue of access to justice for disabled people, and I think it is worth exploring whether there is discrimination here.

Tom Mason: To my mind, there is a problem for disabled people, but there is a problem with court case fees in general, for everybody, at all levels. In the end, we will probably have to take it more widely than the petition.

The Convener: The petition probably highlights a broader issue for us to deal with. We know that there is general concern about access to justice, legal aid and so on. However, if there is discrimination in the process, we will want to explore that.

Tom Mason: Yes. There is a bigger issue, and we need to get it right.

The Convener: Do we agree to write to the Scottish Government to seek its views on the action that is called for in the petition, and to write to the key stakeholders that will have views on the matter, including the Faculty of Advocates, the Law Society of Scotland and the Scottish Human Rights Commission?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Again, we thank the petitioner for highlighting the issue to the committee.

Social Work Powers (Review) (PE1785)

The Convener: The next new petition is PE1785, by Shane Hepburn. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review and reduce the powers of social work departments. Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

David Torrance: We should write to the Scottish Government to seek its views, and we should also write to the key stakeholders. Various stakeholders are listed in the note by the clerk, but can we add the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to the list?

I thank the petitioner for raising the issue.

The Convener: It is an interesting issue. I must be honest and say that, instinctively, I would not want to reduce the powers of social work departments. However, the issue might be how their powers are exercised against particular groups. How young people in care are treated is an important element of the petition.

We should acknowledge that the independent review of the care system, which the Scottish Government has accepted, has raised huge issues, and we perhaps need to see the petition in parallel with the on-going work around what has been a significant commitment to real change.

As David Torrance suggested, it would be worth while to write to the Scottish Government, to key stakeholders who have an interest and will have views on the issue and the care system, and to COSLA. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Again, we thank the petitioner for bringing the issue to our attention. We recognise its importance.

Makaton Sign Language (Legal System) (PE1787)

The Convener: The final new petition for consideration today is PE1787, by Sandra Docherty. The petition calls on the Scottish

Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that all parts of the legal system use Makaton sign language. Makaton is a language programme that uses symbols, signs and speech to enable people to communicate. It is estimated that over 100,000 children and adults in the UK use Makaton symbols and signs either as their main method of communication or to support speech. The language is also used by teachers, health professionals and public sector bodies.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Gail Ross: As you said, convener, Makaton is widely used in a lot of sectors. My son is given a sign a week and we practise it at home. It is fun and also useful. However, the petition goes to the heart of what it is for—communication. As we see in the committee papers, Mark McDonald MSP has been vocal on the subject.

We should write to the Scottish Government to seek its views on the actions that the petition calls for. There might be other stakeholders that we should include—for example, the petition mentions the criminal justice system and the police.

The Convener: Perhaps we should include the courts as well.

Gail Ross: Yes.

The Convener: There is a question about access to justice, as is reflected in the previous petition. If people have communication systems that allow their voices to be heard, it is really important that the systems of the state recognise that. I have been involved with organisations that support people with learning disabilities to engage in processes at the council and local levels so that, rather than things being done to them, they can put forward their views. Makaton is an important part of that.

Tom Mason: One of the difficulties with such languages is that they can have local dialects. That is certainly true of British Sign Language. I do not know whether Makaton has the same problem.

The Convener: The thing about Makaton is that it uses symbols and signs, but that is certainly worth exploring. If it is used in a localised way and that is a barrier to its use, people will flag that up. However, my sense is that the Makaton system is pretty rigorous. It is really important that, whichever system people are engaged with, their voices can be heard in the process, where possible. If there are limitations to Makaton, we hope to identify them by asking the question.

Maurice Corry: Another important group to include is advocates who speak for people. They would have to understand it, too, so their views are important.

The Convener: I suggest that we ask the clerks to look at umbrella bodies and organisations that represent people with learning disabilities. I know from my experience that it is an issue that groups that support people with learning disabilities will advocate on.

Does the committee agree that we should take those actions?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Again, we thank the petitioner for bringing the issue to our attention. The petition will come back to the committee and the petitioner will have an opportunity to respond to any submissions that are made.

I thank everyone for their attendance.

Meeting closed at 10:39.

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