



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 26 August 2020

Session 5



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

10th 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:

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lynn Russell

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 26 August 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

New Petitions

Access to Piers and Harbours (PE1792)

The Convener (Johann Lamont): Good morning and welcome, everyone, to the 10th meeting in 2020 of the Public Petitions Committee, which is being held virtually.

The first petition for consideration is PE1792, on access to Scottish piers and harbours, which was lodged by Thomas Butler. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that local authorities and service providers provide access for those with disabilities to public facilities such as piers and harbours.

We have received a written submission from the Scottish Government stating that, as ports are a commercial interest, it is not for the Scottish Government to decide how they should operate, including in relation to accessibility issues. The submission also states that a port could be said to provide a public function under the Equality Act 2010. Compliance with the act rests with individual organisations—in this case, Highland Council, which owns Uig port. Responsibility for oversight of compliance with the 2010 act rests with the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

I think that there is an issue here. I am not sure that it is good enough for the Scottish Government to say that ports are commercial propositions, because all businesses have to comply with the law. There are important issues relating to accessibility and the rights of people with disabilities, so I think that we want to look at the issue further.

I ask members for their comments.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): It is important that we get access to piers and harbours correct. After all, Network Rail has to enable disabled passengers to travel on our railways, and it certainly provides access to trains and stations throughout the United Kingdom by means of lifts and ramps. There is clear guidance in building regulations to ensure that sufficient access is provided for those with disabilities—indeed, the Equality Act 2010 requires it.

We must also consider issues relating to private and public ownership of our piers and how such

measures will be implemented. It is not just the state or the local authorities that deal with such issues; it is incumbent on owners of harbours and piers around Scotland to do so, too.

I suggest that we write to Highland Council to ask for its reaction to the issue that the petitioner has raised in relation to Uig port. It is clear that there are some fundamental issues that we need to consider.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I agree with Maurice Corry about writing to Highland Council. We should also write to the Equality and Human Rights Commission to ask for its stance on the issue.

Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con): It is certainly very important that we get access right. The issue is more to do with enforcement than with the regulations. It is clear who is responsible and what has to be done. We need to get views from Highland Council and the Equality and Human Rights Commission to ensure that we get all the information together. If enforcement is required, that will be the outcome of the petition.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): I agree with everything that has been said so far. It is worth stating that the petitioner is trying to highlight access to the water, rather than to the ferry. The new pier is being built to accommodate the new ferry. A quote in our papers says that there will continue to be gangway access, and that people who cannot use that can access the vessel through the car doors. That is a separate issue from what the petitioner is asking for, which is for there to be a ramp, rather than steps, to the water. He is absolutely right to ask why on earth, if there is to be a £60 million investment in a new pier, we not letting disabled people access the water for things such as water tourism, which, as he correctly states, is big business now.

Coming from the coast, I know that access to water, boats and various things connected to water tourism can be extremely important to people. We should write to Highland Council and to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission. I would also like to know whether an equality impact assessment has been done, because I think that we are cutting off our nose to spite our face by not putting in a ramp with access to the water, given that we are spending so much money. I would like to see answers to the question why that is not happening.

The Convener: I think that there is general consensus that we should write to the EHRC and Highland Council. Who do you envisage being involved in conducting an equality impact assessment, Gail? I was quite struck by the fact that, in its response, the Scottish Government said it did not think that it was its job to opine on

equality issues—I would have thought that it might be.

Gail Ross: This is an infrastructure project of scale, and it is owned by Highland Council, so I imagine that Highland Council would have to carry out an equality impact assessment. From my experience as a councillor, I know that there is always an equality impact assessment at the end of various papers to do with a project. Unfortunately, it nearly always says that the project has no adverse impacts on equalities. I think that that is not good enough, and that we need to start thinking about what positive impacts these things have on equalities. It might be for the Scottish Government and Highland Council to fight that one out with regards to who is responsible for the equality impact assessment but I would say that is probably the council's responsibility.

The Convener: As I said, I think that there is a general consensus that we should write to Highland Council, including in our letter the question that has been raised by Gail Ross, and to the EHRC to ask its view on the matter. We should note the fact that the issue concerns not only access to the pier but access to the water.

As no members are indicating that they disagree with that approach, I confirm that that will be the action that we take. We will consider the responses when they are received.

Small Business Bonus Scheme (PE1794)

The Convener: The second new petition for consideration is PE1794, on new eligibility criteria for the small business bonus scheme, lodged by Christopher Walls. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to expand the eligibility criteria for the small business bonus scheme to ensure that small businesses can benefit from it, no matter their location.

We have received submissions from the Scottish Government and the petitioner, which are included in the clerk's note. The Scottish Government's submission explains that it has commissioned the Fraser of Allander institute to carry out an independent review of the scheme. The institute is set to report in spring 2021 and the Government advises that it would be inappropriate to introduce significant reforms in advance of that report.

There is quite an interesting issue here. I am not sure whether this particular petition addresses a lot of the questions that are in my mind but, during the pandemic, I have been struck by what businesses that have contacted me have said about the fact that they are not eligible for loans or grants because, although they are a small business, they are operating out of an area where the rates are high. The petition perhaps flags up a

bigger issue. I understand that the Scottish Government is agreeing to review the small business bonus scheme, and we might want to flag up to it that we think that this issue is one that it should consider in that context. Do members have any comments?

Maurice Corry: You made an important point about what has come out of the Covid emergency, because I too have had questions raised with me by small businesses in my region. It is good news to hear that a Fraser of Allander report is being prepared. We need to await the outcome of that, but we also need to feed in the new factors that you and I have discussed about the Covid emergency. Those are new things that local authorities need to be aware of.

I am also keen that localism is very important. Local authorities know their own areas best and should obviously be applying nuances to what needs to be done. However, we need first to wait for the result of the Fraser of Allander report and, secondly, to find a way in which the committee can suggest to that review and to the Scottish Government that they take cognisance of the points that have been raised so far.

We must be very careful that we do not get into a position in which the Scottish Government looks at the result of that report and then talks about a one-size-fits-all approach for all areas around Scotland. That is wrong. We need to take a lot of cognisance of localism and the situations of local authorities.

David Torrance: I have sympathy with the petitioner. However, like Maurice, I think that we have to wait on the results of the Fraser of Allander report. Until that comes, I do not think that we can do anything. I suggest that we close the petition under rule 15.7, because the Scottish Government will not change the criteria for the scheme now. I would also like to let the petitioner know that if he is unhappy with the report and any changes that come up in the spring, he is allowed to come back to the committee and resubmit his petition.

Tom Mason: Remember that although it is called the small business bonus scheme, it is in fact a taxation scheme. It is a reduction in taxation, not a bonus. As such, it affects companies differently in different parts of the country. In areas of high rental value, it could jeopardise marginal businesses in important areas. However, if a review is taking place we must wait on that before taking action.

Gail Ross: The overall view is that, as there is a review already under way, any action that we ask for could be subsumed when it comes out. I was interested to hear Maurice Corry say that one size does not fit all. We have been pushing for different

approaches in the Highlands for a lot of things for a lot of years; I agree with him on that.

We need to wait and see what the Fraser of Allander review comes up with for terms for reference. I wonder whether the petitioner could feed into that? The convener mentioned that they could put forward some views and flag them up to the review, and I think that that would be very useful.

I agree with David that we should move to close the petition, thank the petitioner and invite their views in a year's time if they feel that the issue has not been addressed.

The Convener: I think that there is consensus that there is an issue around the functioning of the small business bonus scheme. The particular issue that is flagged up by the petitioner is about having a small business in the context of a large shopping centre. I am not sure whether the small business bonus scheme in itself will address that, so my sense is that there is an issue here.

However, the question is whether holding the petition open until the review is complete adds anything. I think that it is more important to ensure that the petitioner is aware that they could feed into the review. We hope that, in its consideration of what the review says, the Scottish Government is aware that there are some people who end up being excluded from the scheme when, perhaps, they are in a group that the scheme was originally intended to address.

My sense is that members recognise an issue here but want to close the petition because the review is under way and the Scottish Government will respond to it in due course. At that point, we would hope that the Scottish Government would be aware of a lot of the issues that have been highlighted by the pandemic.

09:45

We thank the petitioner for bringing the petition forward and highlighting the issue. We emphasise that they will be able to resubmit the petition in September 2021 if they want to focus on the issue again, and the Public Petitions Committee could make a decision at that stage about how to take it forward.

I propose that we close the petition, but recognise that there will be routes for the petitioner to take it forward subsequent to the review by Fraser of Allander. Does anybody disagree with that course of action? As no one does, that is agreed.

We thank the petitioner, recognise the issue that has been highlighted and assure the petitioner that there will be an opportunity in the future to bring the petition back to the Public Petitions Committee

if that were seen to be useful and, of course, in the meantime to engage the Scottish Government in order to highlight the issue.

Spòrs Gàidhlig Funding (PE1795)

The Convener: The next petition for consideration is PE1795, on funding for Spòrs Gàidhlig. The petition, which was lodged by Màrtainn Mac a' Bhàillidh on behalf of Misneachd, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to meet Bòrd na Gàidhlig to discuss longer-term and sustainable funding for Spòrs Gàidhlig, which is a social enterprise that delivers outdoor learning to young people through the medium of Gaelic.

The written submission that we have received from the Scottish Government highlights that Spòrs Gàidhlig did not realise sufficient interest from local authorities, which it had hoped to do, and that that led to the financial problems that are discussed in the petition. Bòrd na Gàidhlig agreed to an additional funding package for the period up to March 2021 once it had received income projections from Spòrs Gàidhlig that demonstrated viability. The board plans to support the Spòrs team in discussions with sportsScotland to seek other funders for longer-term sustainability.

I recognise that, for any group that is trying to do such work in the current circumstances, relying on local government is going to be very difficult, because funding is so stretched. Personally, I feel that the Scottish Government is being a bit hands-off, and perhaps Bòrd na Gàidhlig too, in that it is saying that the group has to find a way to make itself viable.

I think that we need to decide whether supporting Gaelic through sport is something that we value and, if so, whether we should look to support it, although we recognise that short-term funding has been provided. The longer-term question is how to provide sustainability. Is that down to Spòrs Gàidhlig or does it fit into the context of an approach to Gaelic to be taken by local government and the Scottish Government?

Perhaps I should declare an interest as someone whose family are Gaelic speakers, although it has been lost to me. I also have family who are young enough to engage in sport through the medium of Gaelic.

I will be interested to hear members' views.

Maurice Corry: As it is such a specialised subject, I think that we need to get more information from the Gaelic board to see exactly where it wants to go with this. I am very keen on involving young people, sport and the traditions of the Gaelic community, and I would hate to see that lost. Asking for more information from the board

will put us in a better position to decide how to take the petition forward, so I ask that we write to the board. There might also be things that we should ask for from the local authorities in the Gaelic-speaking areas; if we feel that it is appropriate, that might not be a bad thing to do.

David Torrance: I agree with everything that Maurice Corry said. Funding is difficult for any group to find at this time. I think that we should seek the Scottish Government's views as well and write to it to ask whether it is going to meet Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

Tom Mason: I have difficulty understanding the connection between outdoor sport and Gaelic, not having any detailed information on that. The petition is essentially a request for funding. If there is no interest from local authorities, Spòrs Gàidhlig will have some difficulties, because local authorities determine what happens in their localities.

We need more information. The Government should be asked whether the initiative fits in with its overall policy on Gaelic. It is essential that, before we move forward, we write to Spòrs Gàidhlig, the Gaelic board and the Government.

Gail Ross: It is a shame that the uptake from local authorities has been low, although Spòrs Gàidhlig is open to other groups and individuals coming forward.

We need to write to Bòrd na Gàidhlig. From our papers, it seems that there are on-going meetings, as the Scottish Government meets the board regularly, and sportsScotland is also involved. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to meet the board, which it is already doing.

We should keep the petition open and seek comments from Bòrd na Gàidhlig to find out what the lie of the land is. It might also be beneficial to write to the local authorities that have an interest to find out what level of engagement they have had with Spòrs Gàidhlig.

The Convener: I think that we agree that there is an issue. We also recognise the context with regard to whether local authorities have any funding to make available. We want to write to Bòrd na Gàidhlig and Spòrs Gàidhlig, and to the Scottish Government to ask whether it has a role in the context of its commitment to the language.

On the question of which local authorities we should write to, we should perhaps write to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, because it will have the best idea of where the relevant areas are. There are Gaelic-speaking areas, but there are also Gaelic schools and Gaelic-medium education in places such as Glasgow. I suppose the issue would be the extent to which there is an

understanding of the value of what is being offered.

My sense is that we agree that there is an issue and that we should write, as I highlighted, to Bòrd na Gàidhlig and Spòrs Gàidhlig, and perhaps to COSLA. Does any member disagree with that approach?

I see that no member disagrees. In that case, it is agreed, and we will look forward to the responses to our letters.

Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 (PE1796)

The Convener: The next new petition for consideration is PE1796, on equality, inclusion and minority languages, which has also been lodged by Màrtainn Mac a' Bhàillidh on behalf of Misneachd. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review whether public bodies are complying with the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 and ensuring that the Gaelic language and therefore linguistic diversity are fully recognised and promoted in Scotland.

We have received a written submission from the Scottish Government, which states that Bòrd na Gàidhlig monitors the

"delivery and effectiveness of Gaelic Language Plans",

which it supports public authorities to deliver under the 2005 act. The submission notes that the 2005 act includes a requirement for authorities

"to submit an annual monitoring report",

and that that process is now under way. It goes on to state that

"The Bòrd ... commissioned independent research on some of the Gaelic Language Plans"

and that it did not indicate that there were any issues.

The submission also reflects on the challenge of resources for both the board and the authorities. It notes that the Scottish Government has responded by bringing relevant

"organisations together ... under the initiative Faster Rate of Progress for Gaelic",

with the aim of ensuring that Gaelic is more efficiently embedded in policy developments.

The issue is about monitoring and understanding trends to get a sense of whether the 2005 act is effective. I ask members for their comments.

Maurice Corry: This interesting petition follows on from the previous one. The main issue is that the Scottish Government, to be fair, has

recognised the challenge and has really backed the 2005 act.

I cannot see any further work that can be done by keeping the petition open. The Scottish Government has confirmed that it is monitoring the situation with the Gaelic board and the respective bodies to ensure that there is linguistic diversity and that Gaelic is fully recognised and promoted in Scotland, as we all know it is. We need to let the Scottish Government's actions take effect.

We should certainly suggest that, if the petitioner is not satisfied with the closing of the petition, he should come back in due course to see what progress the Scottish Government has made.

David Torrance: I agree with everything that Maurice Corry said. We should probably close the petition, because the Scottish Government has listened to the concerns that were raised and it is monitoring progress. The Scottish Government is doing everything that it can do at this time.

Tom Mason: Again, it is about ensuring that funds are going in this direction. It seems that enough monitoring and assessment are going on, so we should not interfere with that process at the moment. Closing the petition would be advantageous in this case.

Gail Ross: I agree. I do not have much to add. Monitoring is in place. I thank the petitioner, and we should close the petition. The petitioner is free to come back if he feels that the monitoring that is in place is insufficient.

The Convener: I wondered what prompted the petition. There seems to be something about emphasising the right to invest in Gaelic. I do not know whether the petitioner is concerned that there is some suggestion that the approach is excluding other people.

We want to confirm that we support an approach that supports Gaelic and that the Scottish Government is taking such an approach. People recognise the importance of Gaelic and a petition that highlights the issue. Monitoring needs to be effective.

We could agree to close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders, given that the Scottish Government has said that public bodies are complying with the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, which is what the petition asks for. If there are issues that suggest that that is not happening, the petitioner will have the opportunity to bring a petition back in a year's time to ensure that the matter is considered further.

Does any member disagree with that approach? It seems not, so we agree to close the petition. We thank the petitioner for highlighting the issue and

we recognise the importance of on-going monitoring of work to support Gaelic.

Live Chick Culling (PE1797)

The Convener: The final new petition for consideration today is PE1797, from Kirsten MacQuarrie, on an end to live chick culling in the egg industry. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ban the maceration of newborn male chicks and set a deadline to end all live chick culling in the egg industry.

According to our papers for the meeting,

"there are currently no hatcheries located in Scotland producing laying hens for egg production; therefore there is no maceration of newborn male chicks."

Since our meeting papers were circulated, we have received a written submission in support of the petition from Dr Lizzie Rowe, who is a research associate in farm animal welfare at the University of Bristol veterinary school. The submission was sent to committee members separately, for our information.

The petition raises interesting issues. They say that every day is a school day, and I have learned more than I expected to learn about what is happening in the egg industry. I am very sympathetic to the petitioner's wish to find a way of feeding people that does not involve animal cruelty.

I am struck by the benefits of our getting an early response from the Scottish Government. The response flags up that there are currently no such hatcheries in Scotland. I invite comments from members.

Maurice Corry: It is interesting that other countries have moved to ban the maceration of male chicks. The paper from the Scottish Government is helpful. As there are currently no hatcheries in Scotland that produce laying hens for egg production and there is therefore no maceration of newborn male chicks, I suggest that we close the petition. There is no point in carrying on with it, given the information that we have from the Scottish Government.

David Torrance: I, too, think that we should close the petition, given the information from the Scottish Government.

10:00

Tom Mason: I agree. If there is not an actual problem here in Scotland, there is no point in keeping the petition open. If the Government continues to monitor developments in other places in determining the sex of eggs—if that is the way to describe it—that will be good, and I hope that

that will be achieved in due course. It is appropriate to close the petition at this stage.

Gail Ross: I think that the Scottish Government is aware of the situation. I was pleased to note from its submission that it will work towards a more humane solution. The fact that no maceration is taking place in Scotland is important, but the petitioner's point is that it is still referred to in guidance and it is still permissible, even if the method is not actually being used.

I am happy that the Scottish Government is working on the matter. I hate to think of maceration happening, but various organisations say that it is instantaneous and a humane way to dispatch male chicks. I am not sure that I entirely agree, but I am not going to argue against the professionals. The situation is monitored by various organisations and I know that the cross-party group on animal welfare has been looking into the matter, too. It is not just a single issue.

I have much sympathy for the petition, but I have to consider where the Public Petitions Committee is on the matter, and I do not think that there would be any benefit in our keeping the petition open. I completely understand where the petitioner is coming from and where she seeks to go, but I think that we need to close the petition. Many people will keep monitoring where we are with the in-ovo sexing of eggs, and the industry is aware of the matter.

I agree with our closing the petition, but I thank the petitioner.

The Convener: Based on our discussion, I think that we recognise that there is an issue here. We are reassured by the fact that there are no such hatcheries in Scotland, but we recognise that the practice is still something that could happen.

I note the points that Gail Ross made about the Scottish Government's role and its understanding that there is an issue, and other bits of the parliamentary system are aware of the matter, such as the cross-party group and so on. I hope that that will reassure the petitioner that the issue is recognised as being important and that there are ways to deal with the matter, and options available. It is not a question of the process just continuing; there is recognition that people want to move away from it, given concerns about animal welfare.

Nevertheless, it seems that we agree to close the petition on the basis that there are currently no such hatcheries located in Scotland, so there is no maceration of newborn male chicks. We hope that the Scottish Government will continue to monitor developments in this area of research.

As there is no disagreement, that course of action is agreed. We again thank the petitioner for

highlighting the issue. In considering the matter, the Public Petitions Committee has perhaps created a bit of general awareness of something that some of us did not know about before.

10:04

Meeting suspended.

10:11

On resuming—

Continued Petitions

In Care Survivors Service (PE1596)

The Convener: The next item on our agenda is consideration of continued petitions, the first of which is PE1596 on the In Care Survivors Service Scotland, which was lodged by Paul Anderson, James McDermot and Chris Daly.

The petition was last considered at our meeting on 19 December 2019, when we took evidence from the Deputy First Minister. He has since provided a written submission with more information regarding data sharing and referrals. Submissions have also been received from Helen Holland, who is chair of In Care Abuse Survivors, and from the petitioner.

In her submission, Helen Holland argues that the concerns behind the petition have been proven to be unfounded, and she states that survivors can access the support that they need either through Future Pathways or by continuing with their current provision.

In his submission, the petitioner explains that Future Pathways has amended its support agreement in response to concerns that he has raised. The petitioner also highlights the importance to him of the Deputy First Minister's confirmation that survivors can register with Future Pathways by using a pseudonym and that they do not have to provide a home address.

Members will be aware that I have a particular interest in this issue and that I consider that the petition flagged up important matters. I would be concerned if anyone were to see the committee's interest in it as being either aggressive or excluding of survivors. I take on board the response from Helen Holland and others that they believe that matters have been resolved. It certainly was never my intention—nor that of the committee—to exclude anybody. We are always alive to the fact that there are problems with funding that might be played out in our discussions, as has already been flagged up.

It is essential that Future Pathways, or whichever other organisation works with survivors, does so in a way that expresses and meets their needs. I, for one, am reassured that there has been some progress in that regard.

Do members have any comments?

Maurice Corry: [*Inaudible.*] previous submission of a petition. It is interesting that the petitioner's response highlights that amendments to Future Pathways' support agreement have been

made, in recognition of and following on from the concerns that he has raised. That is important, because we can see that there has been flow through from the petitioner's highlighting of issues to some action being taken.

From the information that we have received, the Scottish Government's position on the recommendation for Future Pathways is quite clear, but we need to follow up on that. I advocate that, in closing the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders, we should highlight that survivors can access a level of support through Future Pathways.

Issues have been addressed, but I am of the opinion that we are always learning, so it is important that, if people have issues, they bring them forward in due time through the petition process. However, I advocate closing the petition, because the Scottish Government has made good progress and has certainly addressed the petitioner's main points and the amendments that he has requested.

10:15

David Torrance: Like Maurice Corry, I would like to close the petition, because the Scottish Government has made progress, actions have been taken and reassurance has been given that people can still get support. It is key that not only can people get support through Future Pathways but they can continue to receive their current provision. I am reassured that people will still get the support that they need, so I am quite happy to close the petition.

Tom Mason: I came to the petition quite late, but it is obvious to me that the differences have been resolved by talking, so the petition process has achieved the objective that it set out to achieve. Having got understanding across the board, I think that closing the petition is the right thing to do.

Gail Ross: I agree. The substantive points in the petition have been addressed. I, too, do not want there to be the perception in any community that the committee was in any way missing out a group or doing anything against another part of a group that was seen to be detrimental or negative. The petitioner has achieved quite a lot of positives through the petition, and we have received a lot of answers from everyone who has come before the committee, including the Deputy First Minister. I agree with David Torrance that one of the most important things is the continuation of current provision, on which we have had reassurance. Taking all those things into account, I agree that it is time to close the petition and to thank the petitioners.

The Convener: Through consideration of the petition, every member of the committee has been aware that there have been discussions about how support is delivered, the nature of that support and the importance of survivors being at the centre of the process. One issue related to the decision to move to what is called a brokerage system, whereby people are signposted to different kinds of support, which might have led to group support and individual counselling being lost. However, there have been reassurances that that has not happened. As Gail Ross said, progress has been made.

We know that survivors continue to battle on and to define their needs, so it is essential that the Government and everyone else who has a role in supporting people are alive to that and listen to survivors. The petition has achieved that, and I have no doubt whatsoever that campaigners will continue to highlight those important issues.

We agree to close the petition, given that progress has been made. However, it is fair to say that we recognise that survivors still face many struggles and battles. We certainly want to ensure that survivors—wherever they are—feel that the Public Petitions Committee is a means by which they can highlight some of those issues.

We agree to close the petition under standing orders rule 15.7, on the basis that survivors can access the level of support that they require through Future Pathways and can continue to receive their current provision. If evidence changes, there is always the opportunity for petitioners to come back and raise issues in the normal way through elected members. We thank the petitioners for pursuing such issues, which I know comes at a personal cost and is very challenging for them.

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (Treatment) (PE1690)

The Convener: PE1690 is on reviewing treatment of people with myalgic encephalomyelitis in Scotland. It was lodged by Emma Shorter on behalf of #MEAction Scotland and it calls on the Scottish Government to review the level of support for people with ME in Scotland, with a view to investing in biomedical research and creating a centre of excellence for ME, ensuring that healthcare professionals' training and education materials reflect the latest scientific evidence, providing specialist care for patients and discontinuing the harmful treatments graded exercise therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy.

The petition was last considered by the committee at its meeting on 19 December 2019, when it took evidence from the Cabinet Secretary

for Health and Sport and her officials, including the then chief medical officer. Since that meeting, the committee has received submissions from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport and the former chief medical officer that provided the further information that the committee requested during the evidence session. The committee has also received three submissions from the petitioner that are summarised in our clerk's note.

The committee recognises that the submissions from the cabinet secretary and then chief medical officer—and the timescales that were outlined within them—were provided before the Covid-19 public health emergency. The committee acknowledges that those timescales will have been affected by the focus on Covid-19 that the crisis has demanded.

A further late submission from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport that was made available to the committee yesterday includes helpful information about progress by the Scottish Government. I had concerns that the research was minimal but the letter from the cabinet secretary reassures us about that. I am conscious that everything is influenced by Covid-19, but the experience of people with ME is such that it is important that there is a focus on it. I have also heard some discussions about the fact that understanding the long-term impact of Covid-19 might be similar to understanding the experience of people with ME. In taking that work forward, I hope that the Scottish Government recognises that there is learning to be done and understanding to be had by looking at the experience of people with ME.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Maurice Corry: It is a very interesting petition. Sadly, ME is a fairly large issue in Scotland. With regard to the request for the Scottish Government to create a centre of excellence, the good thing is that the Government has really tried to dive into that issue, and the level of research into ME in Scotland has definitely increased. In the papers that we have received, it is interesting and heartening to see that awareness is now being raised in the medical schools and, therefore, in the foundation teaching to the medical students who are our future doctors and clinicians. In her recent letter, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport confirmed that. We also await with interest the publication of the revised guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in December 2020.

Because the actions are all going in the right direction, at this stage, we could close the petition under standing order rule 15.7, because we believe that the level of research into ME has increased, that the Scottish Government is

committed to ensuring that health professionals' training and education, and the Scottish Government are going further by advising that people should not be pressed into accepting unwanted GET or CBT treatments. I am therefore happy to close the petition and recommend that that happens.

David Torrance: [*Inaudible.*] The Government is improving and making progress on all those points, so I congratulate the petitioner on raising those concerns and for how effectively they have been dealt with.

Tom Mason: ME is a difficult disease—or whatever—to understand; even the most qualified doctors struggle. The work that being done in research, as well as the attention in medical schools, is a good thing. A lot of attention is now being paid to most of the areas around ME and to some of the treatments, so I think that the petition has refocused a lot of the misunderstandings and provided us with the knowledge that we need to go forward. As long as that level of activity is kept up, sufferers will benefit greatly. I think that we have done enough on this petition, so I support the idea of closing it at this stage.

Gail Ross: We owe a huge vote of thanks to the petitioner, as does everyone who suffers from this condition. We cannot underestimate what the petition has achieved, and the petitioner should be extremely proud of herself.

I have had close contact with representatives of people with ME for quite a while now, and I am alert to their issues. The submission from the health secretary that we received last night addresses a lot of the points. Work is being done with the office of the chief scientist, the neurological framework was launched last December, and work is being done with NHS Education Scotland.

The work that has been done as a result of the petition and the submissions that we have received from health boards have also raised regional issues. I am referring in particular to the submission from NHS Forth Valley, and I note that the issue that it raises has been addressed and corrected.

What you say about the Covid-19 situation is correct, convener, and the health secretary also specifically referenced that in her most recent submission. That is an important point. However, given the remit of this committee, I think that we have taken this petition as far as we can. I know that the petitioner is keen for it to stay open, but we need to see where all the various pieces of work lead to. Obviously, the petitioner has the option of lodging a new petition in a year's time, and I think that that is a long enough time to see what has changed. We are looking for big

changes, and the production of the NICE guidelines in April will be a big turning point.

Again, I give my heartfelt thanks to the petitioner and everyone who has helped her with the petition. I hope that we will see big changes, but I am minded to agree with the rest of the committee that we should close the petition today.

The Convener: I am struck by the fact that the most recent correspondence from the health secretary says that there is a recognition of the issue of inappropriate treatments and that there has been a rapid review of that. I also note that she flags up that her department continues to work closely with the petitioner and third sector organisations that support people with ME. It is important that we are certain that, if the petition is closed, that work will not be lost. The health secretary has given us a strong reassurance that that will not happen.

My sense is that we are agreeing to close the petition under standing orders rule 15.7, given that the level of research into ME has increased—it is important that that is kept under review—and that the Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that healthcare professionals' training and education materials reflect the latest scientific evidence in light of the forthcoming NICE review. One of the concerns is about people being treated as if they are not to be believed, and I think that there has been progress on that. Further, the Scottish Government has flagged up that people should not be pressed into accepting unwanted GET or CBT treatments. All of that is important. However, I emphasise again the importance that we place upon continued dialogue between the Scottish Government and the petitioner, the people who support her and people who have had direct experience of ME.

As no member is indicating that they do not agree with the proposal to close the petition, I confirm that that will be our action. Once again, I thank the petitioner for the work that has been done and recognise that important work remains to be done.

Space Sector (Non-departmental Public Body) (PE1746)

10:30

The Convener: PE1746, by Andrew Paliwoda, calls on the Scottish Government to create a non-departmental public body with responsibility for space technology and to work in partnership with other relevant organisations to ensure that Scotland's space sector potential is fulfilled. The petition was last considered in October 2019, when the committee agreed to write to the Scottish Government and key stakeholders. The clerk's

note summarises the responses that have been received since that meeting.

This is an interesting area, although it is not one that I know a great deal about. From looking at the submissions and reflecting on the matter, I would say that simply creating a non-departmental public body is not necessarily the way forward. It is important to have co-ordination and to harness people's energy and capacity in this regard in order to ensure that people are working together across different areas, but I think that I would take a bit of persuading that we need another NDPB to do that.

Do members have any comments?

Maurice Corry: I agree whole-heartedly with you. From the submissions, it is clear that we do not want to create another body on top of what is already going on. We are very much at the beginning stages of this area of work. The Scottish Government needs to keep a close eye on progress and support needs to be provided, whether nationally or through local authorities, particularly in the Highlands and Islands, where things seem to be hotting up, but we ought to agree to close the petition under standing orders rule 15.7, on the basis that we do not want to duplicate the work that is already going on. What we want is for the Scottish Government to encourage the harnessing of skills and experience that exist on this matter.

David Torrance: I agree that we should close the petition, because there is no point in duplicating work that is being done. I have nothing else to say on the matter.

Tom Mason: The prospect of the development of space activities in Scotland is going well at the moment. The creation of an additional body might actually confuse the issue and unnecessarily set us back on a course of rivalry with the rest of the United Kingdom. As things are going well, they are best left going in the direction that they are going. We have sufficient agencies to look after Scotland's interests in this area, and I think that we should let them get on with it. I agree that it is appropriate to close the petition.

Gail Ross: As the constituency member for the far north of Scotland, I am extremely excited that we are getting the UK's first spaceport. I have seen at first hand how the agencies and bodies involved—Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the UK Government, Highland Council, the UK Space Agency and private companies—have worked together collaboratively to get us to this stage.

Like other members, I see the creation of another body as leading to duplication of work. I think that it could bring confusion to the issue rather than clarity. The people who are working in this sector are getting on with it quite well already,

so I agree that we should close the petition. In doing so, I thank the petitioner for his interest.

The Convener: I was particularly struck by what Highlands and Islands Enterprise said. The fact that the enterprise body concerned did not feel that another body was necessary was quite compelling.

It is essential that the co-ordination of effort continues. We need to facilitate people who are trying to work together in an area that is extremely creative and has a lot of potential. We do not want to be sitting in a few years' time saying that we did not achieve that potential because we did not recognise it sufficiently, which, I think, might be the underlying concern of the petitioner. We must recognise how important the work that is being done is.

However, we are agreeing to close the petition, while recognising the importance of the issues that have been highlighted and the importance of co-ordination and people working together. We take the view that a non-departmental public body with responsibility for space technology would duplicate work and perhaps create a pause, because the body could not be created overnight. In closing the petition under standing orders rule 15.7, though, we look forward to the excitement and energy that the space industry will bring to Gail Ross's neck of the woods and maybe elsewhere—we never know.

I thank the petitioner again for their interest in highlighting an important area of development for Scotland's future.

Additional Support Needs (Funding) (PE1747)

The Convener: The next continued petition is PE1747, on adequate funding to support children with additional support needs in all Scottish schools, which was lodged by Alison Thomson. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to provide adequate funding to support children with additional support needs in all Scottish schools: primary, secondary and special.

The petition was last considered in October 2019, when the committee agreed to write to the Scottish Government, Education Scotland, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and Enable Scotland. The committee received responses from the Scottish Government, Education Scotland and COSLA, and it also received a response from Royal Blind. Those submissions are summarised in our briefing papers.

Again, I have a great deal of interest in this area. My great fear is that there is a gap between the theoretical support of children with additional

support needs and the reality of their experience. Funding to local government might theoretically have been increased—its responsibilities have increased as well—but there is a lot of anecdotal evidence that young people are not being appropriately supported. We wonder what needs to be done post Covid-19 to ensure that those young people who have been perhaps the most disadvantaged by lockdown do not continue to be so. My view is that budget questions are involved and that there are questions about support being available not just in mainstream education, as Royal Blind has flagged up.

The petition deals with an important area. The question is whether the committee continues to deal with the petition or whether it should be passed to the Education and Skills Committee, which has done work on the area in the past. I hope that the Education and Skills Committee and the Scottish Parliament continue to be alive to the lived experience of families of young people with additional support needs and the gap between what they might reasonably expect and what they actually receive, which is important.

Maurice Corry: The petition addresses an extremely important issue. I agree with the convener's points and that we need to refer the petition to the Education and Skills Committee, because we know that it is working on issues such as this one. I am extremely grateful for and commend the Royal Blind submission, which highlights an important issue about further and higher education and the employment of people with additional support needs, particularly given the post-Covid problems that will be highlighted going forward.

I declare an interest in that my wife works in this area in the education sector in the west of Scotland, so I hear at first hand about the issue and how pupils and students improve enormously if they get the right support. After all, we are looking for people with skills, and there are many talented people with additional support needs whom we need to encourage. I fully endorse submitting the petition to the Education and Skills Committee for further examination.

The Convener: I call David Torrance, but ask him to wait until his microphone is on before he starts speaking. We have not been picking up everything that you have been saying, Mr Torrance.

David Torrance: Thank you for that, convener. I will not come in too early.

I am very sympathetic to the petition. As somebody who in the past has worked with people with additional needs, I know about the concerns that the petition has raised and that there is often a lack of support for those people. I am happy to

pass the petition over to the Education and Skills Committee, because it has done a lot of work in this area and I would like to see its response on whether it will take the petition on. I would therefore definitely like to pass the petition over to the Education and Skills Committee under standing orders rule 15.6.2.

Tom Mason: The issue is too important to be considered a minority issue—it should be mainstream, and should be dealt with by the Education and Skills Committee. It is a major issue, and if a gap has been identified, that committee should pick up the issue and run with it.

I am disappointed that we have had evidence only from Royal Blind, as there are many other types of needs that must be addressed. The most suitable body for monitoring, cajoling and pushing those matters along would be the Education and Skills Committee, and I agree that we should refer the petition to it.

Gail Ross: I agree that the petition raises a lot of important issues. As a member of the Education and Skills Committee, I am aware that ASN is an on-going part of our work programme. We on that committee would find the petition useful in informing our work, so I agree that this committee should pass it on.

The Convener: I think that all members agree on the importance of the issue. With regard to the flagging up of funding, the presumption of mainstream education has to be effectively funded. As Royal Blind highlights, if local authorities feel that they cannot afford to make placements in that way, some young people may lose out on the specialist support that they require.

There is a clear general consensus that the best place for continued serious consideration of the issue over a longer period is the Education and Skills Committee. I propose that, under rule 15.6.2 of standing orders, we refer the petition to that committee for it to consider in the context of its work on additional support for learning.

In doing so, we would want to highlight to that committee that, although we recognise that it has already looked at the issue, we are concerned—I am perhaps putting words in other people's mouths here—that, post Covid, it will be an even greater challenge to ensure that young people who have additional support needs are supported through the education system.

Does any member disagree with that proposal? I see that no one disagrees. In that case, we are agreed. We will refer the petition to the Education and Skills Committee so that we can be confident that these matters will be considered further. I thank the petitioner for highlighting these important issues.

Planning Policy (Small Communities) (PE1748)

The Convener: The next continued petition for consideration is PE1748, on providing protection for small communities in Scottish planning policy. It has been lodged by Isobel Kelly on behalf of Gartcosh Tenants and Residents Association. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to develop, in national planning framework 3 and the Scottish planning policy, provision for small communities on pre-development community assets and infrastructure audits when an area is identified as being able to accommodate large-scale, urban growth, and for protection of areas that are considered by the community to be high-value scenic assets that would be at risk from coalescence of communities.

I welcome to the committee Fulton MacGregor MSP, who is in attendance for consideration of the petition. The committee first considered the petition in October 2019, when we agreed to write to the Scottish Government and key stakeholders.

The clerk's note summarises the responses that have been received. It explains that the Scottish Government is developing national planning framework 4 and initially aimed to publish its draft framework in September 2020 but that the timescale has been impacted by Covid-19. The draft framework is now expected in September 2021, and the finalised framework will be adopted in September 2022. The Scottish Government will consult widely on the draft framework.

Ahead of that work, the Scottish Government is consulting on interim changes to the Scottish planning policy, which aim to clarify the parts of the policy that relate to planning for housing. Once those changes are finalised, they will apply during the interim period ahead of the adoption of the new framework.

I ask Fulton McGregor MSP to comment on the issues that the petition flags up.

10:45

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I thank the convener and all committee members for allowing me to speak to you again about the petition, which was lodged by my constituent Isobel Kelly on behalf of the Gartcosh Tenants and Residents Association. I thank Isobel and everyone in the association for their work on the issue.

I promise to be brief, convener. As you know, when the petition came before the committee last October, we discussed and agreed on the need for housing development. We also agreed that robust legislation must be in place to protect the natural environment, places of local interest and the rights

of people who live in small communities to make valued input into planning applications and decisions that will affect their lives and communities.

Thank you for passing on the extensive responses that you have received. It took me a while to read through them, and having done so I am satisfied that the issues that are raised in the petition will be fairly and robustly addressed by new legislation. Isobel Kelly and the association can be proud of their role in that.

In the context of local planning, lessons have been learned in North Lanarkshire Council as a result of the Gartcosh and Glenboig example: the local authority has acknowledged that the community growth area model is unlikely to be repeated.

Our population is ever growing and development is much needed. However, as I have said, development requires to be sympathetic to the needs of existing communities and the people who will become part of those communities. I am satisfied that new legislation and guidance will be robust enough to address the issues that are raised in the petition.

On the committee's possible courses of action, I recommend that you raise the issue with the Local Government and Communities Committee for consideration as part of its scrutiny of the draft national planning framework 4.

This is a good outcome for the petitioner. The issues that affect Gartcosh and Glenboig affect the whole country and should be highlighted at national level.

I reassure the association and the "Save Stepps green belt" campaign group in the north of my constituency, which I mentioned when the committee discussed the petition previously, that, as restrictions to do with the pandemic are eased, I am looking at how we can set up a cross-party round-table event on the issues that both groups have raised with me.

I hope that that was helpful to the committee.

The Convener: Thank you, Fulton, and I forgive you for advertising your local constituency work.

The role of the Public Petitions Committee is to consider the general, national issues that are flagged up by people's experiences. We recognise that the petitioner has been given the opportunity to flag up the issue at an individual level; we must consider whether we can ensure that such concerns and experiences are addressed at national level.

I welcome your view that it is intended that new legislation and guidance will address such direct experience, and I agree that we want the Local

Government and Communities Committee to be aware of the issues as it progresses its work, particularly its scrutiny of the draft NPF4.

I invite members' comments.

Maurice Corry: I thank Fulton MacGregor for his input, which was interesting. I am seeing more such action from local communities in the West Scotland region, as sizeable planning applications come in. I welcome the petitioner's submission and all the comments that have been made.

I suggest that the committee write to the Local Government and Communities Committee to propose that it gives the matter consideration in the context of the preparation of NPF4. I also welcome Fulton MacGregor's suggestion of a cross-party round table on the matter; it is an excellent idea, which I support.

Developments in communities are an issue that will come up more as a result of the Covid emergency. I welcome the comments and I implore that we submit the matter further up the line, to the Local Government and Communities Committee.

David Torrance: This is an issue for all local communities. Anyone who is an MSP has come across such matters, especially when planning applications have come through some of the small communities that we represent.

However, I would like to close the petition under standing orders rule 15.7, on the basis that new legislation and guidance are likely to tackle many of the issues that are highlighted in the petition. Like Maurice Corry, I think that we should write to the Local Government and Communities Committee to ensure that, in its scrutiny of the draft NPF4, it looks at and highlights all the issues that are raised by the petition.

Tom Mason: I remind the committee that, as well as being an MSP, I am a local councillor in Aberdeen, so I get involved in planning, one way or another.

My knowledge of planning goes back many years. One thing that I have found is that the population's involvement at early stages of the planning process to make frameworks well discussed and robust is lacking, which means that people end up rebelling against the planning decisions—[Inaudible.]—when the applications come in. Anything that enhances the process of consultation at an early stage is advantageous.

Any points raised by the petition should be notified through and discussed by local government. Therefore, writing to the Local Government and Communities Committee to highlight the issues is important. It is also important to make sure that all the issues are

continuously kept in high profile as the planning process takes place.

It is a very useful petition for having raised those issues. Notification of the petition to the Local Government and Communities Committee is important at this stage.

Gail Ross: I have little to add. I want to thank the petitioners and Fulton MacGregor. If the local MSP is satisfied, that is good enough for me. The petitioners have done a lot of good work.

I am content to write to the Local Government and Communities Committee to highlight the issues in the petition and to ensure that they are included in consideration of national planning framework 4, which is being worked towards. I am also content to close the petition.

The Convener: We thank Fulton MacGregor for his contribution. We recognise the role of the petitioners and the broader context of planning and its impact on people's lives.

It feels like a million years ago when I was a planning minister who took legislation through Parliament. The big issue then was how to balance the interests of development against the rights of local communities. All these years later, it is clear that there is still lots to learn.

I think that we as a committee agree to close the petition, on the basis that new legislation and guidance are likely to tackle many of the issues that are raised and highlighted in the petition. We encourage the petitioner to engage in the Scottish Government's consultation on planning policy, as well as the consultation on NPF4, when it is published.

We will write to the Local Government and Communities Committee to flag up the issues that are raised by the petition, in the hope that it will be helpful to the committee in the scrutiny of NPF4 that it will undertake.

As no members are indicating otherwise, it is agreed that we take that approach. We thank the petitioner for all they have done to highlight the issues.

No Wild Camping Zones (PE1751)

The Convener: The final continued petition for consideration is PE1751, on creating no wild camping zones, which was lodged by Kirsteen Currie. The petition calls on the Scottish Government

"to create legislation to enable local authorities to create no wild camp zones in Scotland".

Given current circumstances, this petition has generated even more interest than we might have expected in the past. I am sure I am not the only person who is disturbed that one of the

consequences of people not travelling abroad for holidays but travelling to other parts of Scotland—which is wonderful—is a general disregard and disrespect for local communities.

I have certainly seen that in our local parks, where people seem to be incapable of taking away their litter with them. It has become an issue because of the circumstances of lockdown, but it is clear from the submissions that there is a longer-term problem. It is my sense that there has been a reaction to the petition among those people who have been the most concerned about the landscape and who have been the most respectful of the countryside, who might have believed that the petition sought to close down respectful wild camping, as opposed to what is now being described as “dirty camping”.

The petition raises important issues. I invite comments from members. This time, we will start with Gail Ross.

Gail Ross: We have considered the petition previously and, as I stated then, it was lodged by a member of my team at the Scottish Parliament, so I will excuse myself from commenting on the petition and its merits or otherwise.

However, as the constituency member for one of the most spectacular parts of Scotland and one of the places that many people have wanted to visit this summer—who can blame them?—I must make a general input, because things have moved on somewhat since the petition was submitted last year.

Since 15 July, when the tourism restrictions were lifted, as the convener said, many people have taken advantage of staycations and have holidayed in Scotland. Unfortunately, I have been inundated with reports of what the convener correctly said is now being called dirty camping, which involves people leaving litter, waste, excrement and so on in various locations. That is not happening only in my area; on the basis of what was said at topical question time on 10 August, it is clear that it is happening in many others all over Scotland.

The issue is now too important for us to take it at face value and simply close the petition. I think that there is a lot more work to be done on the topic. Therefore, I recommend that we pass the petition on to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee for consideration. It could take evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism, which would be important.

Members of the public should feel comfortable submitting petitions to our committee in a safe and open manner. Although we encourage disagreement and debate—debate is welcome—I put it on record that harassment and intimidation

of petitioners by members of the public is never acceptable, nor should it be tolerated.

The Convener: I think that the rest of the committee would want to underline that last point. I would be very concerned if any petitioner felt inhibited from lodging a petition or wished that they had not submitted a petition because of the reaction that they had received. It is one thing for us to be firm and robust in our views if we disagree with a petition—that is why we call for submissions and responses. However, as Gail Ross said, it must be done in such a way that people do not feel harassed or intimidated. Harassment and intimidation are unacceptable.

Perhaps we need to relearn the difference between robust debate and simply being hostile to people when they disagree with us.

Maurice Corry: I agree with Gail Ross's suggestion that we refer the petition up to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. It deals with a big issue. I, too, live in a beautiful part of Scotland. I have the Loch Lomond national park in my area, where we now have many problems with wild camping and, in particular, with dirty camping. New issues have arisen as a result of people simply not understanding how to look after the countryside. I absolutely support Gail Ross's proposal.

I think that it is important that we also write to the Scottish Government about how the matter can be progressed, because the issue is coming up more and more. If we want to encourage people to practise healthy living, go outdoors and have staycations, we need to do something about it. I reinforce the idea that we refer the petition to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee.

David Torrance: This is a topical issue. The subject has been raised with me, as I come from the kingdom of Fife, which has some beautiful beaches where visitors have left a mess. I speak as somebody who loves the Cairngorms, and especially the national park—I was on holiday there three or four weeks ago. The damage that was done at Loch Morlich by what are now classed as dirty campers was incredible. I am therefore very supportive of the petition.

Many people who go wild camping are responsible and take all their rubbish home with them. However, there are people who do not do that and who have no respect for the countryside or the communities in it. That is a real concern for me.

I, too, consider that we should pass on the petition to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. However, many of the submissions have mentioned the need for a working group on the issue. I would like us to try to progress that,

and write to the Scottish Government to ask whether it will create such a working group.

11:00

Tom Mason: The great wild landscape of Scotland was why I chose Scotland as my home 40-odd years ago, and I have enjoyed it ever since. It distresses me that a minority of people are destroying the great Highlands and other landscapes that we possess. However, I am aware that any actions that are taken could have unintended consequences. If we banned camping in certain areas, we might immediately get displacement to other areas. That needs to be thought through carefully.

In the end, it will be a question of deep education over time to get people in line again. There was a time when the thought of littering in any form was frowned on, but now it seems to be common practice. Over the years, we have let slip our education of the population in good behaviour in the countryside in general.

If the way to resolve the issue is to form some sort of committee to consider the issues, that is what we must do. We need the Scottish Government to apply itself to the best way of handling the issue. I guess that we need to fully involve the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee to get the right evidence so that we get a solution that really works and does not cause too many unintended consequences that we then have to deal with later. I certainly agree that we should proceed on the basis that has been suggested.

The Convener: I think that there is agreement that we want to close the petition on the basis that the actions that are proposed in it are not widely supported by stakeholders. Some of the submissions flagged up the question of facilities for visitors and mentioned that, if there is to be an increase in tourism and visitors, there should be facilities for those people. There is an issue about behaviour, but we recognise the reaction from some stakeholders who are thoughtful and considerate in the way in which they camp. We would want to make a distinction in that regard.

My sense is that the committee is agreeing to refer the petition to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. I suggest that we simply flag up to that committee the issue of the working group and ask it to explore the matter with the Scottish Government, because we will not be able to deal with a response from the Government if we are no longer dealing with the petition.

As no member has indicated otherwise, we will refer the petition across to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee—I point out to Maurice Corry that we will refer it “across” and not “up”,

since the Public Petitions Committee is every bit as important as any other committee.

I again thank the petitioner and emphasise the importance of the committee being a space where we can have honest disagreement and robust discussions.

I thank members for participating in this first virtual meeting of the committee. I also thank the clerks for all their support and the broadcasting team. I look forward to getting back into a committee room at some point, but we have managed effectively to get through a lot of important business in the virtual sphere.

Meeting closed at 11:04.

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