



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Public Petitions Committee

Thursday 1 October 2020

Session 5



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE
15th 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:

John Doig

Peter Henderson

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lynn Russell

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Thursday 1 October 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

New Petitions

Air Traffic Management Strategy Project (PE1804)

The Convener (Johann Lamont): Good morning, and welcome to the 15th meeting in 2020 of the Public Petitions Committee. This meeting is being held virtually.

Agenda item 1 is consideration of new petitions. The first new petition for consideration today is PE1804, which was lodged by Alasdair MacEachen, John Doig and Peter Henderson on behalf of Benbecula community council. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to halt Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd's air traffic management strategy project in order to conduct an independent assessment of the decisions and the decision-making process for the project.

At today's meeting, we will take evidence from petitioners John Doig and Peter Henderson. I welcome John and Peter and thank them for joining us. I will invite John to make a brief opening statement, and will then turn to Peter. We will then move on to questions. I will direct questions to John, but will ensure that Peter has the opportunity to speak, subject to our available time, of course.

John Doig: The Benbecula community is familiar with the term "remote control". The QinetiQ Hebrides range on the Uists and Benbecula once considered a proposal to remotely control the firing range from a centre in Wales. We know that that option was not taken up and that local staff from QinetiQ were involved in making that decision.

We are particularly concerned with HIAL's remote air traffic control proposal regarding downgrading of the ATC services at Benbecula and Wick airports to aerodrome flight information services. HIAL has stated that a flight information service is the norm for such airports, based on traffic levels. However, we see no reference to a safety case for the proposals in published board minutes. We note that the Scottish Government is silent regarding HIAL's downgrading statements in its reply to our petition.

The legal norm for airports such as Benbecula and Wick, where there are facilities for an aircraft's pilot who is making an approach to land in bad weather, is the provision of an ATC approach-control service. That is stated in legislation under the UK Air Navigation Order 2016—the ANO—at article 183.

HIAL appears to compare activity at Benbecula and Wick with its airports at Islay, Tiree, Campbeltown and Barra in order to justify the proposed downgrade based purely on the number of flights. In the case of Benbecula, HIAL fails to mention that the airport can have concurrent movements of aircraft—mainly scheduled or mail flights—that can conflict with each other. The local airspace restrictions around the airport when the QinetiQ ranges are firing is also a factor in air traffic management.

The reason for those omissions appears to be the lack of any local consultation or understanding by HIAL's consultants, who are working remotely and advising the HIAL board. At present, ATC is the mitigation to avoid airborne conflicts between aircraft. ATC also gives approval to pilots under the Rules of the Air Regulations 2015 as to when they can commence an instrument approach to the airport, as well as the landing and departure order.

An aerodrome flight information service is restricted by the law and licensing under the ANO to providing generic information on other aircraft to pilots. From the information that is provided, pilots take their own course of action. With an aerodrome flight information service, the safety mitigations that are required in bad weather are likely to cause significant delays to scheduled or mail flights, and to stop them from arriving and/or departing at the same time. In addition, ad-hoc charter flights—flights in support of the QinetiQ range at Benbecula, or technical fuel stops in the case of Wick—might be not be possible, unless the aircraft can be operated visually in good weather.

The potential for new scheduled operators to be attracted to Benbecula and Wick might lessen due to the extra safety-related restrictions that will be required at the airport to mitigate the lack of an ATC service. Air operators might, for flight regularity reasons, find it difficult to comply with such restrictive mitigations. We are aware that Wick lost its scheduled services in March.

On controlled airspace, HIAL's policy appears to be at odds with the Scottish Government's policy. Linking the provision of ATC to controlled airspace is a future European Union Aviation Safety Agency directive. The United Kingdom Secretary of State for Transport has announced that the UK will leave the agency at the end of 2020.

In addition, we can find no Civil Aviation Authority reference for controlled airspace being a future legal requirement to operate an airport ATC service. CAA has an extensive consultation process on airspace changes. That is somewhat glossed over in HIAL's plans. For example, an application for controlled airspace at Inverness airport was started in 2014, and Inverness still does not have controlled airspace six years later. Realising that this a big project, HIAL's consultants appear to have persuaded the board to forget about Benbecula and Wick.

HIAL states that its aim is

"To provide and operate safe, secure and efficient airports which support the communities we serve."

The proposals are neither efficient, nor do they support local remote communities.

I will hand over to Peter Henderson.

Peter Henderson: The HIAL air traffic management strategy has, since its conception, been built on wishful thinking, misleading arguments and unsound assumptions.

Every report that is associated with the project is heavily redacted, which is hampering public scrutiny. Staff concerns about the project have been dismissed; most staff have stopped trying to get HIAL to listen to their professional views on the safety, suitability and reliability of the remote towers project.

HIAL company policy forbids staff from contacting the press or posting on social media anything that is deemed by HIAL to bring it into disrepute. Staff have had to turn down invitations to attend community council meetings because HIAL has refused them permission to attend. All HIAL air traffic services staff are highly trained experts; it is vital that the public hear from them.

The legitimate concerns of MSPs, MPs, local authorities, community councils and newspapers have all been dismissed, and the project juggernaut rolls on unchecked and unaccountable.

HIAL is on the record as having said that the Islands (Scotland) Bill consultation would not alter the direction of travel for the project. So much for the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018—it has been pushed aside at its first test.

HIAL is promoting our lifeline airports to the Westminster Government to be used as a living laboratory for testing projects using emergent technologies. The remote tower project is an example of that. Who asked the people of the Highlands and Islands whether they are willing to be guinea pigs?

At the convention of the Highlands and Islands at Millport in March 2018, HIAL's managing director gave a presentation on the HIAL strategy.

It was highly misleading and needs to be publicly challenged. Also in need of challenge is the data that HIAL has supplied, and which has been used in all the consultations that have been held so far, as are the claims that are made in the business case.

Costs are growing and the original plan has changed significantly from that which was originally approved by the then HIAL board. It is also of note that all members of the previous and present HIAL board are based south of the Inverness area. Board members should be selected for their business skills, but surely at least one member should be recruited from the remote parts of the areas that are served by HIAL.

I hope that the work of the committee will today help to shed light on what has been, until now, a one-sided story about the need for the HIAL ATMS project. There are other more robust, tried and tested and cost-effective solutions that can be applied to safeguard the future of these lifeline—life or death—aviation links, so that the vital needs of the remoter parts of Scotland can be looked after.

The Convener: Thank you very much for those helpful opening statements.

What direct engagement have you had with the Scottish Government? What has been the outcome of that? I know that the Government says that many of the issues are operational matters.

Peter Henderson: My colleagues and I have had meetings with MPs and MSPs. That is as far as we can get.

We have tried raising all our concerns about safety with HIAL. Indeed, when the project was first mooted, the board, the managing director and several senior staff and a representative from Transport Scotland were up in Kirkwall and agreed to meet us. We made all our concerns very clear right at the beginning. HIAL has done nothing to prove that any of what is proposed is in any way acceptable and safe.

My main concern is safety. I worked at Kirkwall for 18 years as an air traffic assistant and flight information service officer. I was part of the team that opened the airport at night and which got the ambulance and emergency search and rescue flights in and out. Two of my colleagues have been taken on category A blue-light ambulance flights from Kirkwall to Aberdeen for life or death treatment and, fortunately, survived.

I cannot with a clear conscience in any way accept that the proposal is safe. I do not want the people in my community to be made more ill or to die because of remote links that are highly unstable. I can also question in detail the scoping

document by FarrPoint Ltd on the suitability of the links.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): In its submission, the Scottish Government asserts that this path is the right one because it brings long-term security to services, and that centralisation will lead to more reliability. It is almost hard to argue against those important objectives, so if not this option, what other option will deliver those objectives?

Peter Henderson: The success of local recruitment has been completely hidden in most of the documentation that has been supplied by HIAL. Every time adverts have been put in the local press for people to train from scratch, we have managed to train up 100 per cent of them. They all then stay in the area, which solves the recruitment and reliability problem.

In the first of its most recent two recruitment drives, in 2015, HIAL went to Sweden for six controllers who came direct from a college, and whom we had to train up. By 2018, all six had gone back to Sweden, which was terrible because they were really good. For the second recruitment drive, HIAL went to Finland. It used a separate website that was not connected to the HIAL website—atc.hial.co.uk—and it held a recruiting session in a hotel, from which it got three people. There is no problem with Finnish controllers, when they are trained. But will they stay? Probably not.

Most recruiting is done by trying to get hold of people who are fully or partly trained. There are just so many things to talk about—I could talk about this for five hours—but HIAL has given a one-sided argument that is loaded in favour of remote towers.

The link that we are talking on just now is very weak. If I look out the windows of a control tower, I have a 360° view of everything; I can see aircraft at 15 miles away. The controllers who went to see the Swedish system said that, using it, eight people could not see a big aeroplane the size of a 737 at 3 miles. We rely on being able to see things. Why send all the information 100 miles through cables throughout the Highlands for a compressed view?

It is just wrong. It is unsafe, untested, and we are being experimented on. I cannot accept that, and neither can my colleagues. If you want to hear the real voice, get HIAL to bring together all the controllers and let them give their views free and unfettered. At the moment, we are silenced. I left after working there for 18 years because I got to the stage at which I could not cope with how the service was being run.

David Torrance: You suggest that modernising each airport is a better alternative to HIAL's current plan. Have you costed that proposal?

Peter Henderson: I have not costed it and neither has HIAL. It has a whole project team that is focused on the remote towers project. If I were to ask them to focus on systems that are more effective, they could switch their focus to that.

Radar now has to be used that could easily double the cost of the project, but HIAL has cut the number of airfields that house air traffic control purely to save costs and make it simpler.

Radar is known, tried and tested, and it has proven costs. It is not difficult to put a radar on the islands and have direct links into that. It is far simpler and cheaper and has been proved to be effective. I cannot defend the HIAL remote towers project. I am not an expert on costing—if you want an expert to cost it, you find one—but it will be cheaper. HIAL's manning levels for radar in the station are just made up. You do not need 27 people to operate radar at a remote station in Kirkwall, Stornoway or Benbecula.

09:45

David Torrance: Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd commissioned Helios to assess options for the development of its air traffic control service, as part of the development of its air traffic management 2030 strategy. Helios assessed four options and recommended that HIAL pursue a "remote tower and centralised APS option".

In your petition, you suggest that there were some errors in the Helios report. What were those errors and what were the consequences?

John Doig: The HIAL board now wishes to downgrade Benbecula and Wick airports and substitute the air traffic control service with a flight information service. That is not air traffic control but just what it says—flight information. That is being moved on from Helios. I will hand you back over to Peter to speak about the rest of it.

Peter Henderson: Considering that Transport Scotland documentation already said in 2016 that emerging technologies and remote towers were a great idea and that things could be centralised in Inverness, I think that the decision had already been made anyway. Most of the information on Helios is redacted.

Deciding to go for the most complex system—you do not do that. There are errors, but I am nervous at the moment and I cannot come up with anything. If you want me to write them down and submit them as evidence, I will. I can guarantee you that the vast majority of professional expert controllers can see right through it.

The Convener: If you want to add anything to your evidence following the meeting, feel free to write to us. I appreciate that you will not have all

the information immediately to hand, so that would be very helpful.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Good morning, Peter and John. Thanks for joining us.

In your petition, you state that using flight information service officers at Benbecula and Wick “in non-visual conditions ... would cause a significant increase in the number of ... delays” compared to the present air traffic control service.

I have used Wick airport for the past four and a half years to get back and forward, so I am pretty au fait with it. FISOs are currently used at Barra, Campbeltown, Islay and Tiree, I believe. You might not be able to answer this question now, so you might need to follow it up. Do you know when FISOs were introduced at those airports? Have they contributed to considerable delays, which you say we might see in Wick and Benbecula?

John Doig: I think that I am the best person to answer that, because I can go back to the mid-1970s. At the time, the Civil Aviation Authority was the licensed provider, regulator and service provider in the Highlands and Islands. It must have done some kind of pre-safety case on Islay and Tiree, where there were air traffic controllers for scheduled services. That came about when British Airways decided to hand over the routes amicably to Loganair, which flew much smaller planes. The smaller planes did not conflict with any other flights, as those places had one flight a day to and from Glasgow. By then, the air ambulance had also been taken over by Loganair. There was one operator and controller, which was a mobile grade and was easily deployed in the rest of the CAA system as it was. I do not have documentary evidence for this, because it was the mid-1970s, but there is no doubt that it would have gone through the other airports—Sumburgh, Kirkwall, Wick, Inverness, Stornoway and Benbecula—at the same time, and they were considered not suitable.

Around 2000, there was muttering at HIAL head office about downgrading Benbecula to a FISO. At that point, there were discussions between HIAL and the regulator—the CAA—but it did not get any further, because it really was not a suitable proposal. There are still conflicting flights but, at that stage, there was a flight to and from Barra that deliberately connected at the same time of day as a flight to and from Stornoway. Therefore, that was a non-starter, not to mention all the present flights that there are.

As you probably know, up to the end of March, there were two scheduled operators flying to and from Wick. Towards the end of their period of operation, they were getting towards a similar

time—the Aberdeen flight was in the early afternoon and the Edinburgh flight was at lunch time. Those were potentially conflicting. It only needed a flight to be late or early—flights sometimes run early because of tail winds on a good day—and the flights would conflict.

That is where we are. The present system allows for conflicts, plus the air ambulance, to be handled safely. With a flight information service, it really would be one at a time on a bad weather day.

Gail Ross: That is interesting. The feedback that we have had is about flight numbers rather than conflicting flights. Obviously, as Wick has no scheduled commercial airlines just now, we have no numbers going through the airport, apart from, as Peter Henderson mentioned, the fuel stops and medical flights. If Wick went to a FISO and we got the flights back up and running, would that be unsafe in your opinion? It is quite something to accuse a body such as HIAL, which deals with air travel, of doing something that is unsafe and has the potential to cost lives, so I am very concerned about that. What should HIAL do to address that?

John Doig: I will use Campbeltown as an example. I did not work there, but I was working at head office when Campbeltown came on board. It is a former military aerodrome that was taken over by HIAL. To operate there with a FISO, it had to put in place a process for restricting the number of flights so that no flights that conflicted with one another would operate in bad weather. The published documentation basically still states today, because it has not moved on, that flights can potentially be allocated arrival and departure times.

I do not know what will happen in Wick. I am of the opinion that HIAL will try to get the Edinburgh and Aberdeen flights back, and they might be run by different operators. There is no guarantee—one operator might not accept a FISO at all. When I was at Benbecula, where we had British Airways until not that long ago, it would not fly there even if the training of FISOs was in progress. If we mentioned a FISO, the reply would be, “We’re not coming today.” Unfortunately, I cannot produce evidence of that but, no doubt, if there was to be a proper safety case and people were invited to come along to debate that, that point might come out.

At Wick, there would be a problem if there were two operators and they both wanted to fly at roughly the same time. That does not happen at, say, Islay, where there is one flight in the morning and one in the afternoon. It does not happen at Barra, because the flight is the same Twin Otter that comes in and goes out again. It used to go on to Benbecula, but it was the same aircraft that

came in and then returned. That was managed by very reduced numbers.

Another factor is that we cannot really compare those airports with 24-hour operational airports. The numbers are low, because the airports are not open all day, and particularly at weekends.

Gail Ross: Thank you. I have one final question. You have said that you want HIAL to suspend its policy until the CAA guidance is produced. Do you know when that is due?

John Doig: I cannot give you the answer to that. HIAL has to produce safety cases for all aspects of the project. The ATC service will be at a remote centre at Inverness; that will be a huge safety case. Let alone the controlling side of it, there is an air traffic engineering safety case, which has never really been mentioned. The downgrading proposal will need to have a proper safety case. These days, the CAA operates on the basis that the provider of the service—in this case, HIAL—has to prove that it is overwhelmingly safe for operation; part of that is the reversion and transition plan. Those are big aspects and I do not know how the CAA will proceed on that. For some of the safety cases, it should invite people from other walks of life, but we cannot have non-pilots discussing pilot-related requirements. Air traffic engineers will deal with the engineering side and controllers and advisers will deal with the service on the ground. That sounds fair enough; it is how it worked when I left. It might have moved on slightly, but the ball is in HIAL's court.

Gail Ross: Thank you.

The Convener: So that people are aware, can you confirm the relationship between the Scottish Government and HIAL? I understand that HIAL is wholly owned by Scottish ministers. The Scottish Government states that an islands impact assessment has been undertaken "by an independent consultant". Has that assessment been concluded? Do you have a view on whether it should have been undertaken by an independent consultant, HIAL or the Scottish Government?

Peter Henderson: The consultation document was sent out to local councils and community councils; I had to do a bit of digging to find out what was in it. I cannot see how an islands impact assessment can be carried out independently if the consultant is being paid by Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd, which is also 100 per cent funded by the Scottish Government. The information that was supplied in that consultation was highly questionable; there were costings and assumptions of numbers of people; it was a purely economic driver. It has already been 100 per cent dismissed by HIAL as a box-ticking exercise; it will not change anything, so it is meaningless. However, if you want the Islands (Scotland) Act

2018, which has been set aside, to be 100 per cent successful, no company or organisation that is proposing changes should be responsible for funding or finding consultants to carry that work out. People from HIAL should not be present at the consultation phone calls with those community councils; as far as I have been told, they were being influenced.

The Convener: That is helpful. Thank you.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): In its written submission, the Scottish Government explains that recruitment for HIAL is challenging, which impacts on the resilience of its services. The Scottish Government states that it is trying to find a solution that improves resilience by

"having a larger number of controllers ... to cover staff absences"

from a centralised centre. In your statement, you referred to recruitment, so my question follows on from that. In your petition, you acknowledge that

"difficulties with resilience, recruitment and retention have, in some instances, led to airport closures",

but you do not agree with the solution that has been proposed. From your experience, what can be done to improve resilience in that specialised field?

Peter Henderson: All the units know that advertising locally to train people from scratch is highly successful. Those people compete against applicants who can come from anywhere, so they are selected on their ability. The managing director of HIAL is on record as saying that the pool of skilled people in the islands is low. He also said that—he referred to this at Millport, which is why I am quite annoyed—at the previous recruitment exercise, it had only five applicants, one of whom would definitely pass the course and four whose prospects were iffy. They all passed; they are all still with us.

10:00

The majority of controllers who have carried HIAL on their backs throughout this period are trained locals who will always remain at its aerodromes. The wages that HIAL pays are highly uncompetitive, which the managing director acknowledged at Millport.

Say that everyone is centralised to Inverness and they are paid two thirds of the industry norm. If they have no ties to the communities in the Highlands and Islands, when business picks up they will go where the money is in the vast majority of cases.

When HIAL went to Sweden and took six controllers, that was done to save money. That has been its main driver throughout. In my opinion,

and in that of many controllers, every time HIAL has recruited people, it either wants fully or part-trained people, so that it can save money, which is a weak approach in the long term.

Even the controllers in Inverness are not buying into HIAL's project. They do not want to end up controlling two or three airports simultaneously, which has never been done before. They all perceive that as being very dangerous. Would you fly in an aeroplane that was being piloted remotely by someone who was flying three other aeroplanes? No, you would not—you would not even fly in an aeroplane that was being piloted remotely by one person. HIAL has got the bit between its teeth with this project.

Many of us—the majority of controllers and the professional bodies that represent controllers—do not support how HIAL wants to proceed. All that is required could be carried out by targeted local recruitment and training people from scratch. They could be paid a lower rate, because they will be happy to stay with their communities. HIAL knows that. It hid the success of its training of local people in the statistics. I cannot understand why HIAL is totally focused on the project, given the high risks.

Furthermore, in the Helios report, when staff were asked a question about HIAL's ability, they could not name a single project that it had carried out successfully. That is pretty damning.

I am disappointed in how the situation is going, and public scrutiny needs to be brought to bear on the matter. There are many documents and sources of information that are publicly available that question most of HIAL's claims about the whole project.

John Doig: I was the manager of ATS in HIAL's head office. I was involved in interviewing candidates for local recruitment on the technical side. I can say that, 15 years on, the people who were recruited for Kirkwall, Stornoway and Benbecula are still there. They have no intentions of moving. They wanted local jobs; they did not want to leave the islands. That is where we are.

Peter Henderson mentioned pay. HIAL paid lots of allowances for different things. I am not sure how it works now, but it used to pay for weekends and shift work and things like that. However, for example, Benbecula was not a shift-working station—as I have mentioned, the hours are short, so the staff did not qualify. The staff were well aware of that, but they did not want to move on; they were happy to stay at Benbecula. The same is true of Stornoway. The Sunday services are fairly recent—they happened in my time. The staff did not get any extra money for working on a Sunday, because the airport was closed on a

Sunday until about 12 years ago. Again, they had a lower wage to take home.

Maurice Corry: Obviously, people largely want to work locally, so there is the potential that they might accept a lower salary. Do you think that HIAL is playing on that?

John Doig: When I was there, that was a fact—the folk who worked in Inverness got more because it was a full shift-working station. Eventually, night shifts were introduced, which meant that there was even more cash flowing. HIAL used to pay people for weekend and public holiday working by giving them supplements to their pay, whereas staff in Benbecula would get only Saturday and Sunday money and money for the public holidays, but there was no shift. I mentioned the situation in Stornoway—there was no money for Sundays, because the airport was not open. That has changed now, because it is a seven-day-a-week operation everywhere.

I remember two potential recruits for Stornoway saying that they did not want to work in Benbecula, even though it was in the same islands group. The reverse was true, as well—the folk in Benbecula were not interested in taking a job that would have meant going to Stornoway. They were employed on non-mobile grades to work at the airport, in the same way as the firefighters, the cleaners and the admin staff were. They were all locally recruited. That goes back to the Civil Aviation Authority days. HIAL has come out of that; that is how it was.

Maurice Corry: I understand the problems that you highlight, because I was involved with the management of Oban airport, albeit that it is not part of HIAL.

Have you had any discussions with Highlands and Islands Enterprise about the grow-your-own model? You both have a lot of experience, and that model seems very opportune.

Peter Henderson: As far as I am aware, there have been no such discussions, but the flow of information in HIAL between the people at the top who make the decisions and the people who do the job is very limited.

In the past, it has been stated by HIAL that the grow-your-own model has been successful, but HIAL seems to think that the pool of skills among people in the Highlands and Islands is highly limited and has been exhausted, and that is totally untrue. I do not know where it gets those ideas from. There is a definite disconnect between the local level of service and way of thinking and the managerial way of thinking. The managerial way of thinking is, "We've just made a great decision—this is what we're doing." The management say that they are engaging with staff, but they are not.

They say what they are doing after they have done it; you cannot do that.

I cannot answer the question—I do not know whether HIE has been consulted in any way about the grow-your-own model.

Maurice Corry: John, do you agree?

John Doig: When I was the manager of BTS 15 years ago, we successfully grew our own. We nurtured people and put them through courses—we even gave them free courses to help them on their way, because it was a steep learning curve. Basically, they were all recruited for the airports in the local places that they came from. Those people have been retained; they are still there today.

I am curious about what is proposed but, of course, I have been retired for 10 years plus, so I am not quite up to date on how things are now. I apologise for that.

Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con): Welcome, John and Peter. In its written submission, the Scottish Government states that remote digital towers are being used increasingly across the industry. It cites examples in Sweden and Germany, and says that there are plans for them to be used in several countries, including the Netherlands, Norway and Denmark.

Are you aware of any concerns that have been raised about the use of remote digital towers in locations where they are already operating?

Peter Henderson: Copenhagen Economics did a study that looked at the difference between the savings using remote towers and the savings using competition, and the argument that remote towers save money cannot in any way be justified.

Where remote tower systems are used in Sweden, controlled air space and the necessary communications facilities were already in place. The situation in Sweden involves a partnership between Saab, which manufactures the systems, and LFV, which is the state-sponsored supplier of air traffic services; it is almost a monopoly. In other words, it is a sales pitch out there.

London City is in the process of moving to a remote tower system, because the space taken up by the control towers is needed for other uses on the aerodrome. It only has instrument flight rules traffic, which means that it only has scheduled aircraft, so it is like a sausage factory—it is simple to slot them in one after the other. It also has extremely robust systems of communication between the aerodrome and the remote tower centre—it only does one aerodrome at a time. The remote tower was meant to be running this year, but that has not happened. There are different drivers. America has been mentioned, and there

are aerodromes in America with no air traffic service whatsoever.

The problem that we have with our aerodromes is that they are used by a mixture of visual flight rules aircraft and instrument flight rules aircraft. IFR aircraft are mainly the scheduled larger flights; the VFR ones are the small flights—the helicopters and the Islander aircraft that go around Kirkwall.

Integrating those two types of aircraft into the environment around the aerodrome relies heavily on people being able to see them. The study that was carried out to support the idea of one person controlling two towers at once highlighted that using remote towers to supply a service that uses cameras to see a mixture of VFR and IFR traffic is a highly complex exercise, because you cannot see the smaller traffic well enough.

The study highlighted a number of issues, but they have been put to one side. I suspect that that difficulty of using remote towers with VFR aircraft while being able to see all around you is why Dundee airport, which is probably the busiest airport in HIAL in terms of aircraft movements, has been pushed to the back of the queue when it comes to being made to change to remote tower control. The technology is not at the level that it should be at.

As I said, our controllers were sent to Sweden, where they could not see a big aircraft at 3 miles. I can see an Islander, which is a 10-seat, small aircraft, taking off from an aerodrome 15 miles away on an averagely clear day.

We have significantly worse weather and a lot of severe weather. I used to work for the Met Office, so I understand the impact of weather on traffic. Our weather patterns are completely different from those in areas where remote towers are used. The Norway model is mainly to replace flight information services with air traffic services; in Norway, they have already got all the connections and controlled air space. The Norwegian employer is almost the monopoly provider of services. It is not like for like—you cannot compare them.

John Doig: Am I allowed to come in?

The Convener: Yes, briefly. I am conscious of time, but you can respond and then I will go back to Tom Mason.

John Doig: I will be quick. I will deal with the engineering side. This is a huge engineering project, but the number of engineers has not been costed at all, and how many of them are needed and where they will be based has not been considered.

As Peter said, there are problems with the weather, which can have a bad effect on the equipment, as can saltwater. All the airports that

we are talking about, apart from Inverness, are on the western seaboard of the Atlantic Ocean and in winter time storms can blow up salt spray and what have you, so all the moving parts, the cameras, lenses and everything to do with them, and a lot of other equipment will require a lot of extra maintenance compared with what is on the ground at the moment.

Apart from Sumburgh airport in Shetland, the island airports do not have air traffic engineers, but people have been silent about that—nobody has made any comment about engineering at all. They may have to re-employ engineers, as happened in the good old CAA days, at each place to maintain the integrity of the service, or it will be lost. I am no longer current, so that was just an observation—it could become engineering heavy.

Tom Mason: I will change the subject slightly. The Government states in its submission that if airports in the Highlands are not modernised, they will be left behind on the global stage. Do you have any concerns about that?

John Doig: The issue is that fewer and fewer places in the UK as a whole combine procedural approach control and tower to provide a service for scheduled services.

However, the issue is not quite specific to HIAL. I did a little bit of research and it is the same on the Isles of Scilly. Carlisle, which came online only a year past in July and came offline at the start of Covid, spent months trying to get the approach service back up and running to operate scheduled services. That is another example. In Northern Ireland, the City of Derry airport—or Londonderry or Eglinton airport, whichever persuasion you are from and whatever you want to call it—had a procedural approach with tower, and quite big jets go in there.

The service that HIAL provides is not strictly for HIAL's purposes only. It is used throughout the United Kingdom, and there are no real plans to change that. There are no issues with improving the equipment that is provided, but the manner in how that has been done is upsetting people.

10:15

Peter Henderson: May I speak?

The Convener: Go ahead.

Peter Henderson: HIAL's main task is to provide lifeline services—services that mean life or death to the people of the Highlands and Islands. We are the only supplier and operator of the aerodromes; we have no competition. We should not be at the cutting edge of technology because cutting-edge technology can wound you quite badly if it goes wrong. We should be focusing on

methods of doing this that are tried, tested and sensible, and which can be achieved.

I admit that I am not an expert in costings but I know that all of these things have been done time and again and can be costed accurately. Why do we try to be world leaders when what we should be doing is doing our best? I believe, and all our staff believe, in doing our best to make travelling with us as safe and reliable as possible. As a company, HIAL has lost sight of where it should be looking and is trying to branch out into other areas in which it has no expertise, no skills and no abilities.

Yes, by all means, you should do the best that you can for the people you serve, but do not ignore their interests and offer them up as living laboratories for experiments in technology that is in its infancy. What we do now has been tried and tested and is 100 per cent safe, and it has been learnt the hard way. We are only in the infancy of remote towers.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that. We are coming to the point at which we want to draw the evidence session to a conclusion. We have found it to be extremely useful.

I should declare an interest as someone who has family in the islands. They travel by ferry more often—that is a whole other set of stories—but I understand the importance of being able to access safe travel out of the islands.

I am quite struck by a couple of things that have been said. First, I would like to see this new world of remote working as an opportunity to build the local economy in our communities and remote communities, and what the witnesses have described seems to be the opposite. I do not think that centralisation of anything is terribly positive, and building good, high-quality, skilled jobs in remote communities is essential to the sustainability of those communities. I would want us to reflect on that and ask the Scottish Government about it.

I am concerned that the Government has not done an island impact assessment, and that the suggestion is that, even if it were done, HIAL would go ahead anyway. The whole point of an impact assessment is to inform decisions; such assessments are not to be done as a tick-box exercise after the decisions have been made. I found the arguments that I have heard to be quite powerful.

The other point that I was interested in relates to efficiency. One of the papers includes the point that controllers who operate remotely cannot understand the weather. In my experience, if you can see the way that the crosswinds are blowing, you might still get a flight in; as the paper suggests, however, you cannot do that if you

cannot see the weather. It feels as if the service that will be provided will be poorer and more inefficient—again, that is counterintuitive. I certainly want to write to the cabinet secretary about that.

I am also interested in the points about employment opportunities and high-quality jobs in remote areas, so it may be worth contacting HIE about that.

I will go around the committee members and ask for their views before we come to a conclusion. I will start with David Torrance.

David Torrance: I agree with you, convener. We should write to ask the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity for his take on the petition. We should also write to the relevant stakeholders, including HIAL, anybody who uses the airports and local authorities.

Gail Ross: I agree. There are many issues to do with not just the jobs but the families associated with those jobs. There is the safety aspect and there is the untested aspect. I would definitely write to HIAL; it would also be good to write to HIE and to local authorities, as well as to Loganair—as has been said, there are the pilots to consider. I would also write to Prospect, the union; we need to get its views on the petition as well.

It would also be interesting to get the views of the managers of the individual airports, because they know about the running of the airports, the numbers and everything else that is involved, including the staffing issues. I would be quite interested in any feedback from them.

This has been a troubling evidence session—certainly for me, as a local. I would write to all the relevant stakeholders, and I thank Peter Henderson and John Doig profusely for their interesting evidence.

Tom Mason: There seems to be a complete conflict between what HIAL wants to achieve and what the local community actually needs. Those elements have not been properly set out against each other to rationalise the process. There is no doubt that technology can improve in various ways. There seems to be a lack of confidence in the technology, with it not being totally proven or even suitable for the location. We need to get information and a better understanding of the position of the Government and the cabinet secretary on that. We need more information from the various stakeholders—Prospect, Loganair, other operators and the airports—and we need to bring that all together to get a much better picture of what is going on. Following on from your comments, convener, I think that we should keep the petition open and get more information in.

Maurice Corry: I agree with what my colleagues have said. Also, the convener's point that the Scottish Government has not done an island communities impact assessment should be included. We should ask the Government where that assessment is and say that it should be done. I absolutely agree with everybody that we should keep the petition going. I thank John Doig and Peter Henderson for their excellent contributions this morning. They have made an interesting case and we need to keep the petition open and push it on.

The Convener: Thank you—I think that we are in agreement.

I have a couple of points to add. I have no doubt that the Scottish Government will say that these are all operational matters, but I think that the petitioners have shown today that it is about more than just operational matters; it is about local communities, safety, employment, secure work and so on. Where does the Scottish Government make the distinction? I know that it has said that the relevant bit of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 has not been brought into force yet, but the question is, why not? This is the second occasion on which we have had to deal with the fact that, where an assessment would have helped in testing some of the arguments, it has not been put in place.

I do not think that there is that distinction that the Scottish Government has tried to make in saying, "This is not really anything to do with us. HIAL is an independent body, and it's an operational matter." HIAL is a subsidiary that is wholly owned by the Scottish ministers, and it delivers not just commercial services but lifeline services, which are obviously important in those communities. There is quite a lot for us to look at in the petition.

Again, I thank our petitioners very much for their useful evidence. If they want to make any follow-up points, they should feel free to do so. They have provided us with a huge amount of information but if there is anything further that they want to add, we would be more than happy to hear from them.

With that, we are agreeing to continue the petition and to take action as outlined. Of course, the petitioners will be afforded the opportunity to respond to any further submissions that we receive. This is a dialogue that we hope that we can partly facilitate because it seems as though there has not been the kind of conversation that the petitioners wanted. It has simply been said that this is a done deal and nothing can be done about it, and I do not think that we are convinced that that is an effective approach.

I thank the petitioners again. I suspend the meeting briefly.

10:25

Meeting suspended.

10:30

On resuming—

Protected Beavers (Translocation) (PE1815)

The Convener: The next new petition for consideration is PE1815, on translocating protected beavers to reduce licensed killing, which was lodged by Steve Micklewright on behalf of Trees for Life. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to initiate a programme to translocate protected beavers to suitable habitat outside existing beaver range, to minimise the need to kill animals that adversely impact arable farmland.

The Scottish Government's submission states that it is not minded to translocate beavers to further areas outside the existing range at present, because of the need to consult local stakeholders and obtain their agreement on the wider area that beavers may spread to. It also states:

"The decision to issue licences for lethal control of beavers in such situations is not taken lightly and is only used as a last resort."

The petitioner has highlighted that 20 per cent of the Scottish beaver population was killed under licence in 2019 despite the protection measures and that, if the beavers were situated in less agricultural areas, their management would be easier. He has also highlighted concerns about the management of the lethal control licences.

The petition is very interesting, and I was concerned by some of the figures. The petitioner has told us that

"trapping has been by-passed as an option because lethal control licences are too easy to obtain"

and that

"there is only one beaver trapping consultant employed in Scotland, but SNH has trained 139 accredited beaver shooters."

It seems to me that the petitioner's argument is that, although beavers are protected, the way in which the matter has been dealt with means that something that should have been done as an exception is potentially being regarded as the norm. There is also the example that there are not a number of site visits so, when people say that there is no alternative, it does not look like that argument has been tested.

I am interested in committee members' views on the matter. We may want to refer the petition to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee as one that raises an important issue, but I am interested in what colleagues have to say.

Maurice Corry: We need to gather more information. As you have rightly said, we may need to refer the petition to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee under rule 15.6.2 of the standing orders on the basis that that committee could consider the issues that are raised in the petition in the wider context of its work.

We should write to NatureScot and NFU Scotland to seek their views on the action that the petition calls for. There is a wider issue, and many stakeholders are involved.

The Convener: If we are going to refer the petition to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, we cannot write the letters, but we could flag up to that committee that we think that the issue is important. We can come back to that.

David Torrance: I am quite happy to agree with Maurice Corry and to pass the petition on to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee. The petition would be better dealt with by that committee.

Gail Ross: We quite often come across emotive animal issues, and I have great sympathy for the petition. There is a huge gap between what the Scottish Government's submission tells us and what the petitioner sees in that evidence.

As the convener said in her opening statement, the Scottish Government's submission makes it clear that shooting is

"only used as a last resort."

However, the petitioner has made the point that the number of beavers that have been killed seems excessive. As the convener has said, decisions are being made without site visits having been undertaken. It seems that there is a desktop exercise.

The Scottish Government also says that it is difficult to translocate Beavers into new areas because a wide ranging consultation with stakeholders in that area would be required. However, NatureScot says that there are 105,000 hectares of core beaver woodland, which could be seen to be waiting to be repopulated. There are opposing views here.

I note that the NFUS issued a press release this week about a consultation that begins on 1 October—today. It is encouraging its members to respond to that, and I hope that that will be helpful.

The petition possibly belongs with the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, and the Scottish animal welfare commission should perhaps have the issue in its remit, too. I am happy to refer the petition to the ECCLR Committee.

Tom Mason: I agree with what has been said. There will be an increasing need for getting a sensible strategy for this type of problem. Beavers are just one of several species that might well need to be used in reforestation and other developments in Scotland. If we do not get this right, we will continue to fight individual battles, which is not a constructive way to proceed. It is important to refer the petition to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee and get information from the NFUS and NatureScot, so that the petition can be kept open and progressed.

The Convener: It seems that people believe that there is an issue to be addressed here and that it should be dealt with in the broader context within which the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee would view it. If we refer the petition to another committee, it is not possible for us to continue to seek evidence on it. However, it might be that, in referring it, we could suggest that it would be a good idea for that committee to write to NatureScot and the NFUS, because they are already doing work on the issue, and we could write to the animal welfare commission. Forgive me, I do not know whether the commission is in place yet, but we should at least flag up that the issue should be on its radar once it is operating.

I think that there is a general agreement that we want to refer the petition, and I think that people agree that, in referring it, we should flag up the importance of talking to those particular stakeholders and write to the animal welfare commission. Is that acceptable?

I get a sense that everyone is content with that. We thank the petitioner for engaging with the committee and for the interesting and challenging information that was provided. We hope that they find the decision to refer the petition to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee a productive way of taking the petition forward.

Local Authority Financial Powers (Reform) (PE1816)

The Convener: The next new petition for consideration is PE1816, lodged by Lewis McCathie. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to reform the financial powers of local authorities by reforming the council tax and devolving more tax powers to local authorities.

In his written submission, the Minister for Public Finance and Migration states that the Scottish Government agrees that the present system of council tax must end, but says that, at present, there is not a cross-party consensus on what should replace it. He explains that efforts are under way to redevelop such a consensus and that, although the work was paused as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, he hopes that those efforts will recommence in the autumn.

The committee has also received a written submission from Patricia Brown, who considers the present system to be unfair. As the assessment of council tax liability is based on property valuations from 1991, Mrs Brown states that properties built after 1991 are not being treated equally.

There are, clearly, important issues here. There is political consensus that the council tax is problematic, but there is no consensus on the way forward. At this stage, the Scottish Government seems to be focused on building political consensus rather than on taking a position and seeing whether people will support it. I think that the matter will be discussed—it is an issue that we are aware of. People have been positive about the devolution of additional taxes. The tourist tax, for example, has certainly been welcomed; others have been slightly more contentious.

The idea of giving local authorities more control over raising revenue is important. In the recent period, the approach has gone in the other direction, partly because of the council tax freeze.

I certainly consider that there should be more autonomy at a local level. In cities such as Glasgow, where I live, the idea of the city region seems to have fallen out of favour, but the idea of individual cities being economic generators and needing powers in order to develop is a whole other matter.

All those issues are politically important. However, my sense is that, although the petition highlights the issues, when it comes to considering what we can do, it simply provides us with the argument that there is a problem. Obviously, politically and much more broadly, the Parliament will need to find solutions to the issue. My view is that we should close the petition. The issue is not going away and it is one that all the political parties will continue to wrestle with.

What are members' views?

David Torrance: I agree with you, convener. We should close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders on the basis that the Scottish Government agrees that the present council tax system must end; that cross-party talks to identify an alternative have begun; and that the Scottish Government is working with the Convention of

Scottish Local Authorities to develop a rules-based framework for local government funding.

If the petitioner is not happy with progress, they can always bring the issue back in a year's time.

Gail Ross: I agree with David Torrance and you, convener. It is good that there are cross-party talks, rather than something being forced through. On this issue, everyone must agree the solution to be workable and fair. I agree that we should close the petition.

Tom Mason: I basically agree with what has been said. We need to get rid of the council tax, because it is not working for a whole load of reasons. My only hope is that when the discussions happen, the options for a localised tax are far wider than those that have been volunteered so far, as they are limiting in what they can do.

I would welcome a city region process taking place, but I will probably be in my box by the time that happens, unfortunately. *[Laughter.]*

The Convener: Do not be so pessimistic.

Maurice Corry: I agree with most of Tom Mason's points, and everyone else's, so I would be happy to close the petition.

The Convener: In that case, we agree to close the position under rule 15.7 of standing orders. We know that the Government agrees that the present council tax system must end and that cross-party talks are taking place.

The matter is one that will have to be resolved politically. As David Torrance highlighted, if the petitioner feels that, in a year's time, there has not been any progress, there will be an opportunity to bring the petition back to the committee.

In closing the petition, we thank the petitioner very much for their engagement with us on the important issues that have been raised.

Conversion Therapy (PE1817)

The Convener: The next new petition for consideration is PE1817, on the ending of conversion therapy, which was lodged by Tristan Gray, Ely Kearney, Erin Lux, Benjamin Butler and Sophie Duncan. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to ban the provision or promotion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender plus conversion therapy in Scotland.

The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing and the Scottish Government's written submission explain that the UK and Scottish Governments are committed to ending conversion therapy. In its written submission, the Scottish Government highlights that it fully supports the UK Government's intention to introduce proposals to

end conversion therapy and is engaging with the UK Government to develop the proposals.

The committee has also received a joint submission from Stonewall Scotland, the Equality Network, the Scottish Trans Alliance and LGBT Youth Scotland. In their submission, the organisations urge the Scottish Government to take measures, within its devolved competence, to end conversion therapy in Scotland, should the UK Government fail to make timely progress; or to top up any measures that the UK Government introduces, should they be insufficient to effectively root out conversion therapy in all its forms.

Since our papers were published, the committee has received correspondence from the Equality Network on behalf of Scotland's national LGBTI organisations. The correspondence requests that the committee writes to the Scottish Government to ask it to commit to taking those measures and to express its concern about and condemnation of the practice of conversion therapy.

10:45

I am certainly clear that I oppose conversion therapy. I think that the Scottish Parliament has a good record in taking forward LGBT issues around equality and the rights of the LGBT community, and I very much welcome the fact that the Scottish and UK Governments have indicated that they do not support the approach. It has caused great distress in the past and I would be very concerned if there were any evidence of it continuing.

I would welcome members' comments on how the petition should be taken forward.

Gail Ross: A lot of the information in both the petition and the submissions is seriously concerning, and like you, convener, I would be absolutely shocked and disgusted if the practice was taking place in our modern-day Scotland.

I can see the benefit of working with the UK Government for action across all four countries of the UK, but the petition states that the majority of the commitments that have been made will have effect in England only. To be completely honest, I am a bit wary of waiting on the UK Government to take action on the matter, given the time that we have already waited to see action come forward. I am certain that there must be something that the Scottish Government can do in a devolved sense.

I have many questions on the subject, but I am not sure that the committee is the right place to pursue them. I think that the matter needs to be looked into a little bit further, so I suggest that the petition is referred to the Equalities and Human Rights Committee for action there.

Tom Mason: I am certainly attracted to the fact that the issue is being handled on a UK-wide basis, as there are cross-border issues involved. Whether we keep the petition open or close it on the understanding that the issue is being dealt with, I do not mind. If other members of the committee want to go along with what Gail Ross suggested, I am happy to go along with that as well.

Maurice Corry: I agree with Tom Mason and Gail Ross. I think that we should refer the petition to the Equalities and Human Rights Committee because, although I am aware that there is a joint approach to the matter with the UK Government, which we should pursue, I see the petition as being more suited to consideration by that committee. I propose that we refer it there.

David Torrance: As a former member of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, I would be happy for the petition to be referred there. I agree with other members of the committee.

The Convener: Thank you. I think that there is a general consensus that we want to be convinced on the matter, because there are clearly concerns in the petitioners' minds that conversion therapy may still be seen as a credible option.

It seems to me to make perfect sense for the issue to be considered in the context of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, because it is a human rights issue. It is about respect. We can flag up to that committee the evidence that the petitioners have presented to us.

I think that we recognise that important progress has been made with the UK and Scottish Governments working together, but we want the Scottish Government to look at whether there is anything within its area of competence that it could act on, and we think that that could be explored most usefully through the work of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee. We agree to refer the petition to that committee and we thank the petitioners for their engagement with us.

Homelessness (Redevelopment of Unused Buildings) (PE1821)

The Convener: The next new petition is PE1821, by Darren Cush, on renovating unused buildings to create homes for homeless people. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to fund the redevelopment of unused buildings to tackle homelessness in Scotland. The Scottish Government's written submission outlines the work that it is doing to tackle homelessness and highlights policies that seek to repurpose unused buildings. The submission also highlights a number of policies that are currently being developed and states that the Government is

encouraging participation by all stakeholders in its policy development.

It is an interesting petition. We all recognise that homelessness continues to be a real issue and that we are not talking only about rough sleeping. We recognise that giving people accommodation in itself is not sufficient, although we have seen during the pandemic that finding accommodation for some people who were rough sleeping has made a huge difference. The petition addresses an important issue. The Scottish Government has certainly given us a lot of information on what it is trying to do, including on its empty homes initiative, which is bringing buildings back into use. The use of empty or unused buildings will not, in itself, solve the homelessness challenge, because some of that challenge is about mental health, some of it is about addiction and some of it is about simply not being able to access accommodation. From the evidence that the Scottish Government has given us, I think that it has an understanding of that.

The petition has been helpful in giving us an opportunity to reflect on the issues, but we should probably close it at this stage. However, I ask members for their views.

Tom Mason: [*Inaudible.*—in the homelessness area. The Government has an obligation to get any empty building that is capable of use back into use. That might not necessarily be for homeless people, but it could add to the general housing stock. The petitioner has raised and identified an issue, but the Government is fairly clear that it is sort of on the right track, although it could do substantially more. However, our involvement would not necessarily make it go any faster. Therefore, it is appropriate to close the petition on the understanding that the Government is already progressing with the use of buildings where it can do so.

Maurice Corry: As a former councillor with Argyll and Bute Council, I am very aware of the issue of bringing buildings into use for people who are homeless or who need housing. Obviously, there is a move on that among local authorities in Scotland.

I agree with my colleague Tom Mason that we should close the petition on the basis that the Government is working on the issue, although we need to quicken the pace.

David Torrance: I am happy to agree with my colleagues on the committee that we should close the petition.

Gail Ross: I agree with the points that have been made and that we should close the petition. I have nothing further to add.

The Convener: We are agreeing to close the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders, on the basis that the Scottish Government is continuing to develop measures to address homelessness and to redevelop unused buildings through the homelessness and rough sleeping action group, the housing to 2040 strategy, the empty homes policy, the fourth national planning framework and the town centre action plan. There is a question about whether the pace is right. We recognise the issue that the petitioner has raised as one area of work and we hope that the Scottish Government will pursue that.

We thank the petitioner very much for his engagement with the committee and remind him that if, in a year's time, the progress that has been suggested is not evident, the petition can return to the committee. I thank the petitioner again for his involvement.

National Health Service Funding (Hospital Bed Capacity) (PE1822)

The Convener: The final new petition for consideration is PE1822, on the provision of more NHS money for hospital beds, which was lodged by Colin Stewart. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to provide increased funding to the NHS to enable hospitals in Scotland to increase bed capacity.

We received a submission from the Scottish Government and we provided that to the petitioner for comment, but we have not received any response from them. In its submission, the Scottish Government says that

“the current approach for the NHS in Scotland”

is

“based on a twin approach of investment and reform,”

which it feels

“is appropriate to address the requests of the petition.”

Iain Gray MSP wished to attend to speak to the petition, but he was unable to do so due to another engagement. We have received his written views for consideration alongside our other papers. I was struck by his comments about the fact that, although the policy might be to move to a community service, meaning that we do not need so many beds, the evidence from the petitioner is that that appears not to be working. To me, it is not good enough simply to point to the policy if people are flagging up issues with the way in which it is being carried out.

It is also true—as Iain Gray flagged up in his paperwork—that we have far fewer beds here than there are in other parts of Europe. The Royal College of Emergency Medicine has flagged up

that it believes that we need 200 more beds than we have at the moment.

There might be an explanation for that, but the Scottish Government has just said that it is the policy; it has not really engaged with what the petitioner is saying. His lived experience is that he could not access a bed and that nurses were spending their time looking for beds rather than doing what they should have been doing, which is caring for patients.

I think that we should pursue the petition with the Scottish Government further and perhaps ask it about the points that Iain Gray and the petitioner have flagged up.

Maurice Corry: I endorse the points that you, Iain Gray and the petitioner have made. We need further evidence on the issues that the petitioner has raised, and it needs to be more specific about services offered, acute beds, et cetera. I would be minded to write to NHS Scotland and get feedback from it directly, because the Scottish Government has been too glib on the issue. We need to get more evidence, so I request that we keep the petition open.

David Torrance: I agree with Maurice Corry. We definitely have to write to NHS Scotland and keep the petition open. I would also like us to write to the cabinet secretary, to seek her view on the petition.

Gail Ross: Members in my local area have some sympathy with the petition. NHS hospital beds is an issue that has come up for me time and again, so I would be happy to write to the cabinet secretary and NHS Scotland. With the shift from hospital-based care to community-based care, there will always be a middle point where funding needs to be checked. We are always going to need hospital beds—there is no getting away from that. I agree that we should keep the petition open.

Tom Mason: The general policy has been to shift from hospitals to community care, but there are two parts to that. Unfortunately, we started getting rid of hospital beds before community care was fully capable of taking the volume. We have ended up in a situation that causes chaos on occasion.

The experience that the petitioner has gone through is not unusual. I have had similar experiences of care. You can tear your hair out in desperation sometimes.

We need to keep the petition open, and we need to do more questioning and prompting of the Government. If that could be done, I would go along with that.

The Convener: Okay. Thank you. There is a consensus that there is exploring to be done in order to test the position of the Scottish

Government, because the petitioner's experience suggests that there might be an issue, and all members have reflected that the issue has been flagged up to them. We agree to write to NHS Scotland and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, to ask how that is managed. Even if we agree with the policy in theory, how do we ensure that, in practice, people are not waiting for beds and nursing staff are not being redirected from their core purpose in order to find available beds? As no one has any comments to make, that course of action is agreed.

Continued Petitions

Primary Hyperparathyroidism (PE1726)

11:00

The Convener: The first continued petition is PE1726. The petition, which was lodged by Fiona Killen, calls on the Scottish Government to raise awareness, particularly among general practitioners and other medical practitioners, of the symptoms, diagnosis and effective treatment of primary hyperparathyroidism, or PHPT, caused by adenoma; provide access to minimally invasive surgery in Scotland for the treatment of the condition; and provide funding for research into PHPT caused by adenoma.

The petition was last considered by the committee on 20 February 2020. At that meeting, the committee agreed to write to the Scottish Government, and a response has been received. The petitioner was invited to respond to the Scottish Government's submission, but no response has been received. Our letter to the Scottish Government requested details of the work that it is undertaking, beyond the published National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines, to increase awareness of PHPT; of whether it will help to initiate a survey for GPs to assess current understanding of the condition, in order to set up a standard management protocol and a learning module; and of whether it will provide funding for research into PHPT caused by adenoma. The Scottish Government's response outlines the range of work that is currently being undertaken in those areas, which is summarised in the clerk's note.

It is an interesting argument, and we have wrestled with it before. To what extent do conditions that are not well known get the attention that they deserve? To what extent does the system respond to issues that have been flagged up by the petitioner?

I am not sure whether we can do further work in relation to the petition, but the idea has struck me that neither the Scottish Government nor NHS Scotland can commission research, because it is for other people to propose it. I feel that something more proactive than that should be possible. I am interested in members' views on whether we should close the petition or whether we might want to explore other issues.

David Torrance: I thank the petitioner for bringing the petition to the committee and highlighting the points around the petition, because it has got the Scottish Government to listen to those points. The Scottish Government is undertaking work, through NICE guidelines, to

raise awareness of PHPT caused by adenoma. It is also highlighting PHPT as a topic for NHS Education for Scotland to explore, and it is open to applications for funding via the chief scientist office.

The Scottish Government is trying to accommodate everything that the petitioner has called for, so I am happy to close the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders.

Gail Ross: The Scottish endocrine interest group has agreed to explore how health boards can raise awareness of the condition, and David Torrance is right that NHS Education for Scotland is working with the endocrine clinical community to consider how a digital platform could enable more real-world assessment of the condition. That work is very interesting.

I am not sure where else we can take the petition as a committee. We need to see how the work progresses. If we agree to close it today, the petitioner has the option to come back in a year's time, if they believe that those actions are not being progressed as they would like. I agree to thank the petitioner and close the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders.

Tom Mason: Like you, convener, I was worried about the research aspect. Research proposals are welcome, and there is no strategy for achieving that research. It is a very self-indulgent process for academics or whatever. It is far too random. On the other hand, in the context of this petition, I am not sure how we can progress that particular issue. I guess that closing the petition is the only thing to do. If the petitioner feels strongly about the research part, they can address it in another petition, which might be useful.

Maurice Corry: I agree entirely with what Tom Mason has said. I know someone who has this condition, and I have seen its serious effects. Although I am reluctant to close the petition, I do not see what more we can do. At least we have the comfort that the Government is looking at the issue and, through the NHS, is working with the appropriate society for this condition. It is important that the work of the metabolic and endocrine research network is continued. Like Tom Mason, I am concerned about whether delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are holding things up.

If the petitioner does not feel that any progress has been made in the months to come, she is free to lodge another petition. Of course, as Tom Mason suggested, she is also free to lodge another petition highlighting the research part of the issue.

With those issues in mind, I agree to close the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders.

The Convener: I think that there is agreement that will close the petition. We recognise that this is an important issue and that there has been progress. We want to ensure that that progress is continued despite the challenges of the current situation in which we find ourselves. Further, we flag up to the petitioner that, in a year's time, it will be possible to lodge a further petition on the issue or, as has been suggested, to lodge a petition that deals more specifically with research. We thank the petitioner for engaging with the committee and for raising this important issue on behalf of everyone who has the condition.

Allergy Care Legislation (Nurseries and Schools) (PE1775)

The Convener: The next continued petition for consideration is PE1775, lodged by Catrina Drummond. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to pass legislation that will make an allergy care policy statutory for every nursery and school and to establish for nursery and school staff appropriate standards of medical training, education and care for children with anaphylaxis. Responses have been received from the Scottish Government, COSLA and the petitioner.

The committee asked the Scottish Government whether staff should have a statutory responsibility to undertake the training that the petitioner suggests as part of their overall training, and whether a consistent approach is being applied across Scottish local authorities on this issue.

The Scottish Government states that it does not intend to introduce a statutory requirement for mandatory training, as it believes that there is sufficient provision through the legislation on the provision of emergency medication and through specific guidance.

COSLA's response states that every local authority has detailed guidance for each school, which is informed by the Scottish Government's guidance.

The petitioner has responded to COSLA and the Scottish Government, and states that the guidance is not sufficient, that implementation is poor and that there is a lack of clear training arrangements or funding, resulting in ad hoc policies and procedures. She recommends that school training should be Government led, so that it becomes widely available and mandatory for all schools and creates a less stressful and pressured situation for school staff.

I think that the policy is probably right, but the petitioner is telling us that the policy is not her lived experience. She is concerned that there is not sufficient understanding in our childcare settings of how to deal with a child with anaphylaxis. When I was a teacher—which is a

long time ago—I was well aware of the lack of awareness of how teachers should respond to some kind of medical crisis. There is a working assumption that there will be a designated first aider within every education setting, but do they have the information around the treatment of these conditions and how confident are they that they would be able to handle the situation? I am also conscious that the petitioner flags up that there is a focus on EpiPens and so on, but that is only one small part of the petition.

There are a few questions to do with the petition that we might still want to ask, because anaphylaxis can be very frightening in any circumstances, but I imagine that that is particularly the case in a classroom or a nursery if people feel that they do not have sufficient knowledge of how to respond.

Gail Ross: What we have here is a prime example of the fact that, unfortunately, having procedures and policy in place does not necessarily mean that they will be followed and implemented in every setting in which they should be. In fact, that is more than unfortunate—it is actually dangerous. In some situations, it could mean the difference between life and death.

I think that the convener is right. Given that the petitioner has first-hand knowledge of the situation and that she states that implementation is poor, there is a lack of training and the policy is not being followed, I believe that we are duty bound to follow that up with the Scottish Government. The petitioner also cites the recent inquest into the sad case of a young person's death, following which several recommendations were made, and I would like us to hear from the Scottish Government on that, too. It would be advantageous for us to reference that and to seek a direct response from the Scottish Government.

Tom Mason: I agree with Gail Ross. It is very important that people have confidence in their ability to deal with such cases in their own working time. If they do not have such confidence, they will not do what is necessary, even if they have the knowledge. It is essential that people have the necessary confidence.

We need to know how well the policy is being implemented throughout the various organisations in which it needs to be implemented. Therefore, at this stage, it is important that we request more information from the Government on the matter.

Maurice Corry: I must declare an interest, in that my wife is trained in how to administer anaphylaxis treatment in her primary school. It has an equipped and trained first aider, but although training certainly seems to be provided in the Argyll and Bute Council area, there is an inconsistency of approach—different levels of

training are provided across the Scottish local authorities.

I agree with other members. We should do some more digging into the issue and seek consistency across the local authorities.

David Torrance: I agree with my colleagues. We should write to the Scottish Government to ask about the points that have been raised by the petitioner.

The Convener: We think that it would worth while doing a bit more testing of the Scottish Government's position, so we will write to it to ask it to respond to the variety of points that have been made by the petitioner and committee members about the question of confidence and the need for people to be able to take the right approach if they are faced with such circumstances. Once we have received a response from the Scottish Government, the petitioner will be able to make a further response.

The committee agrees to write to the Scottish Government to pursue the issues that have been raised in our discussion.

Dog Theft (PE1776)

The Convener: Our next continued petition for consideration is PE1776, "Dogs are not inanimate objects", by Maryann Parry-Jones. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to change the classification of dogs from inanimate objects to sentient beings for the purposes of legal action on dog theft.

We have received a response from the Scottish Government, but no response has been received from the petitioner. The Scottish Government's response explains that although dog or pet theft is not a specific criminal offence in Scots law, the existing common-law offence of theft would include the theft of a pet. Therefore, the theft of a pet would mean that the maximum penalties could be imposed, with the highest level of sentence being life imprisonment. That being the case, the Scottish Government has no specific plans to introduce new legislation at this time.

This is another petition that raises important issues about animal welfare and the rights of animals.

I find the Scottish Government's argument quite convincing. If somebody stole a pet, that will be taken seriously. It will be regarded as a serious matter and it could end up in the criminal courts. I am interested to hear the views of other members, but I wonder whether we can take the petition any further.

11:15

Tom Mason: I have an interest to declare in that I have a 45kg pet who already thinks he is a people and I do not want him to be confirmed as such. The Government has clearly stated that the theft of such pets is a criminal offence and there is sufficient penalty for doing so. It is clear enough.

What does not happen enough are prosecutions: they do not always take place when they should do. As in many situations, we have the mechanism, but we do not apply it nearly enough.

Closing the petition at this stage, on the understanding that the Government is doing enough already, is okay by me.

Maurice Corry: I agree with my colleague Tom Mason on all the points that he makes. I also own a dog and he is a valuable member of the family.

There is sufficient law there; it is about its application and how it is operated. There are sufficient effective safeguards to cover to cover dog theft. It is a question of putting the law into effect.

I propose that we close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders, on the basis of what I have said.

David Torrance: I also have two dogs in my household, and they are greatly loved by the family, but I also think that the law covers the theft of dogs. I am therefore quite happy to close petition.

Gail Ross: Until May of this year, I would have been totally left out, having only four cats and a bearded dragon, but I am also now a dog owner so I completely understand where the petitioner is coming from.

The Scottish Government's response has covered the petitioner's points and I am pleased to see that quite stiff penalties will be imposed for dog theft. I am therefore happy to close the petition.

The Convener: I am feeling completely left out as I have no pets of any sort whatsoever, although my family has had dogs in its time. That does not mean that I am completely without empathy, I hope.

There seems to be agreement among the committee members that we recognise the importance of the issue, but we are satisfied with the Scottish Government's response that the theft of a dog is regarded as an offence, and potentially a serious offence. We therefore agree to close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders.

We thank the petitioner for their engagement with the committee.

School Curriculum (British Sign Language) (PE1777)

The Convener: The final continued petition for consideration is PE1777, which calls on the Scottish Government to introduce British Sign Language into the curriculum for excellence, and was lodged by Scott Macmillan. The petition was last considered in January 2020. Since that meeting, the committee has received written submissions from the Scottish Government and the petitioner.

In his written submission, the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills confirms that BSL can already be part of the curriculum in schools as the second additional language, or L3, being taught.

In his response, the petitioner states that BSL should be an essential language to learn. He therefore suggests that the Scottish Government should consider designating BSL as a first additional language—L2—which can be taught from P1.

The petition is really interesting. Ever since I was young, it has seemed to me that we should all be taught how to speak to people who use British Sign Language and that it should be much more universally understood. The Parliament has already made progress in legislating in that field and I find the argument quite compelling that, as the petitioner suggests, BSL should be a first additional language. I found it to be an important argument that relates to the issue of access and people's ability to engage completely in their communities.

I welcome members' comments.

Maurice Corry: I am certainly of a mind to keep the petition open. I know people who have a deafness issue, and I think that it is important that we write to the Scottish Government to ask it to consider designating British Sign Language as an L2 rather than an L3 additional language under its one plus two approach. We should write to the Scottish Government to seek further information to push forward on the petition.

David Torrance: I fully support what Maurice Corry has said. We should write to the Scottish Government to ask if it will consider designating British Sign Language as an L2 rather than an L3 language. I am happy for the committee to do that.

The Convener: Gail Ross is next.

Gail Ross: I will now sign "Thank you" in British Sign Language, convener, as I have actually been learning some BSL during lockdown. It was one of the things that I challenged myself to do and it has been extremely interesting and challenging.

I agree that we should write to the Scottish Government. For the life of me, I cannot see a reason why BSL is designated as an L3 rather than an L2 language, and I would like to get an explanation of that and push for it to be included from a very early age.

The Convener: Thank you, Gail—I am glad to see that somebody used lockdown more productively than I perhaps did.

Tom Mason: Sign language is important. However, I can see some problems with the various dialects within the language. That causes problems even across the UK, let alone on an international basis. However, bringing British Sign Language up the league to L2 should be considered and a discussion with the Government about that would be worth while. Therefore, we should write to the Scottish Government to that end.

The Convener: Obviously, challenges of dialect are not unique to British Sign Language. In many areas of development in language, it is about how a language is lived as well as how it is taught in some circumstances.

I think that the committee is agreed that there is an issue and that we will write to the Scottish Government simply to ask whether it will consider redesignating British Sign Language in recognition of the fact that it is an important part of communication for many people. We look forward to receiving a response. The petitioner will of course be able to comment on any submission from the Scottish Government.

We have reached the end of our consideration of petitions. I note that my technology has managed to stick with it for the whole meeting and that I have not dropped out of the system—whether that is for good or ill, it is progress for me. I thank everybody, including the petitioners, for their engagement with the committee and I thank broadcasting and the clerks for facilitating the challenging work of a virtual committee meeting.

Meeting closed at 11:23.

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