



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Public Petitions Committee

**Wednesday 10 March 2021**

**Session 5**



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - [www.parliament.scot](http://www.parliament.scot) or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

---

**Wednesday 10 March 2021**

**CONTENTS**

	<b>Col.</b>
<b>DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE</b> .....	1
<b>CONTINUED PETITIONS</b> .....	2
Essential Tremor (Treatment) (PE1723) .....	2
Ancient, Native and Semi-native Woodlands (Protection) (PE1812) .....	4
Non-statutory Child Advocacy Services (Regulation) (PE1838) .....	6
Professional Dog Walking Industry (Regulation) (PE1842) .....	8
Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland (Review) (PE1843) .....	9
National Health Service Boards (Regulatory Complaints Body) (PE1844) .....	11
Rural Scotland (Healthcare Needs) (PE1845) .....	13
Snooker and Pool Venues (Covid Restrictions) (PE1848) .....	16

---

**PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE**  
**6<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2021, 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:**

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Lynn Russell

**LOCATION**

Virtual Meeting



## Scottish Parliament

### Public Petitions Committee

*Wednesday 10 March 2021*

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]*

### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Johann Lamont):** Good morning and welcome to the sixth meeting in 2021 of the Public Petitions Committee. The meeting is being held virtually.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take item 3 in private. Are we agreed? No member has objected, so that is agreed.

## Continued Petitions

### Essential Tremor (Treatment) (PE1723)

09:30

**The Convener:** Item 2 is the consideration of continued petitions. The first petition, PE1723, which was lodged by Mary Ramsay, calls on the Scottish Government to raise awareness of essential tremor and to support the introduction and use of a focused ultrasound scanner for treating people in Scotland who have the condition. I welcome Rhoda Grant MSP, who is in attendance for the hearing of the petition.

Since the committee last considered the petition, submissions have been received from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport and from NHS Tayside. The petitioner was invited to respond to the cabinet secretary's submission but has not done so to date.

NHS Tayside has advised that it has achieved its fundraising target for acquiring the magnetic resonance-guided focused ultrasound equipment and hopes that the system will be ready to treat the first patients in Scotland in 2021.

The cabinet secretary has confirmed that NHS National Services Scotland continues to engage with clinicians in Dundee and commissioning colleagues in England to assess how the treatment might be made available to Scottish patients. However, in light of Covid-19, new applications through the national specialist services committee are paused. The submission advises that clinicians in Dundee have charitable funding in place to begin treating one patient on a trial basis for six months.

Since our meeting papers were published, we have received a submission from the umbrella organisation, the Neurological Alliance of Scotland, expressing its support for the action that has been called for in the petition.

Before I ask committee members for comments, I call Rhoda Grant.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** I thank the committee for the work that it has done on the petition.

I cannot help feeling that progress, although it is being made, is not fast enough. It does not appear that the Scottish Government has done anything to assist in the process of bringing what is a groundbreaking technology to Scotland. I have spoken to Mary Ramsay, the petitioner, who shares my frustration.

We all understand that the pandemic has slowed things down. There is a concern that those

who require treatment are now suffering because of the delay. The treatment will be available in Scotland from the summer. As you said, convener, the cabinet secretary has told us that, although National Services Scotland has continued to engage with the clinicians, the national specialist services committee has paused things because of the pandemic. That is disappointing because, as we have heard before in the committee, the technology offers faster, safer treatment and is therefore more cost effective as well as being better for the patients involved.

If this treatment is available in the summer, that will be a huge game changer for those who suffer from essential tremor. Knowing that there is a delay is of no comfort at all to those who are waiting for treatment. Knowing that the treatment is available in other parts of the United Kingdom, and that it could be available in Scotland, adds to their frustration.

I know that there is pressure on the committee at this stage in the parliamentary session to close petitions, but I hope that it will not close this one and that it will pass it on to the successor committee in the new session as part of its legacy, because it is important that we continue to push for the treatment to be available in Scotland, as it will make a huge difference for people who suffer from essential tremor or from other conditions that could be treated in that way.

I know that Mary Ramsay will continue to campaign for the treatment to be available in Scotland; she is not going to stop. She is determined to make sure that others do not have to go to England in order to access the treatment, as she had to, and I hope very much that the committee will back her and join her and keep the petition alive and moving forward until we can ensure that the treatment is available in Scotland.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much.

**Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP):** I want to thank Mary Ramsay for her tenacity and determination with the petition.

I agree with Rhoda Grant. I do not think that there is any need for us to close the petition now. I believe that more input is required from NHS Scotland and from the Scottish Government. Now that we have managed—I say “we”, but it is really nothing to do with us; it is the campaigners, who include people such as Mary Ramsay, who have managed to get the pilot going in NHS Tayside. That is a fantastic thing but, as Rhoda Grant said, there is so much more to do. If we are to make the treatment widely available around Scotland, the Scottish Government needs to back it.

I agree that we should mention the petition in our legacy paper and keep it open so that it can be dealt with in the next parliamentary session.

**Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con):** I agree with my colleague Gail Ross. I also very much agree with what Rhoda Grant said. I would like the petition to be continued into the new parliamentary session so that our successor committee can keep a check on progress.

**Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con):** I agree with what my colleagues have said. A start has been made, but we should keep the pressure on until the treatment that is advocated becomes mainstream. There are thousands of sufferers in Scotland and they need some relief. If we take the pressure off now, that might never happen, so keeping the petition open into the next parliamentary session is the right thing to do.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much. I, too, think that there is a strong argument for keeping the petition open. I felt that the Government’s response was a bit half-hearted, and it did not give me confidence that the issue that the petition addresses would be a focus of the Government’s attention. We heard compelling evidence about the effectiveness of the treatment that the petitioner advocates.

I do not know whether Rhoda Grant has any final comments to make, but my sense is that there is a consensus for us to keep the petition open, given the case that the petitioner has made and the evidence that we have heard.

That being the case, we agree to keep the petition open, to include it in our legacy paper and to suggest that our successor committee seeks an update from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport—whoever that might be in the new session—on plans to make an application to the national specialist services committee for such a service. We agree to take forward the aims of the petition in that way.

### **Ancient, Native and Semi-native Woodlands (Protection) (PE1812)**

**The Convener:** PE1812 was lodged by Audrey Baird and Fiona Baker on behalf of Help Trees Help Us. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to deliver world-leading legislation to give Scotland’s remaining fragments of ancient, native and semi-native woodlands and woodland floors full legal protection before the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—takes place in Glasgow in November 2021.

Since our most recent consideration of the petition, submissions have been received from the Scottish Government and the petitioner. The Scottish Government’s submission responds to the questions that the committee asked in previous correspondence and outlines the action

that it is taking to achieve its climate change and biodiversity targets.

The petitioners explain that they are unhappy with the Scottish Government's response and state that they believe that most of the objectives of their petition have been ignored. They are also concerned that the target to keep global warming to 1.5° will not be achieved and that more can be done through legislation.

Since our meeting papers were published, the committee has received a submission from the Woodland Trust, which stresses the importance of ancient woodland to biodiversity and carbon sequestration. It also states that not enough action has been taken to address the main threats to the condition of our woodlands.

The petitioners and the group around them are not satisfied with the action that has been taken, so my instinct is that we might want to continue the petition, but I will call members for their views.

**Maurice Corry:** I thank Audrey Baird and Fiona Baker, who are constituents of mine. I know the project and the petition very well from the excellent work that they have done in bringing the issue to our attention and to the attention of the public. I ask that we continue the petition. I do not think that the Scottish Government has done enough. It is too loose. There is clear evidence that the Government needs to do a lot more to pay credence to the petition. I welcome all the comments from those at the Woodland Trust and others, including the petitioners, and I congratulate them on bringing the petition forward.

I would like the committee to keep the petition open, to be picked up by the new committee in the new parliamentary session.

**Tom Mason:** I agree with Maurice Corry. There is no obvious sign that the Government has developed a definitive strategy for these woodlands and there are a few issues still to be discussed with the deer working group. I think that we should keep the petition open and pass it on to the next parliamentary session.

**Gail Ross:** There has been some progress on this in the Scottish biodiversity strategy and other initiatives. However, I agree with my colleagues. The issues in the petition are gaining more and more public interest. I noticed that they were in one of the Sunday papers last weekend. I certainly agree that more can be done.

I would also like to see where the Scottish Government is going to go with the response to the deer management paper. There is a lot more needing to be done than just sticking up a couple of deer fences and having another deer cull. I therefore agree with keeping the petition open,

putting it into the legacy paper and asking our successor committee to pick it up.

**The Convener:** Again, there is consensus in the committee. We agree to continue the petition. It is fair to point out, as Gail Ross has, that some work has been done, but we think that there is an issue with the focus on and interest in these issues in the run-up to the event in Glasgow, and that people are clearly concerned about it, so we want to flag it up to our successor committee. Gail Ross's suggestions about the deer working group should also be part of that consideration. Is that agreed? We seem to be agreed on that.

### **Non-statutory Child Advocacy Services (Regulation) (PE1838)**

**The Convener:** PE1838 was lodged by Martin Baker and Katherine Bailey. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that non-statutory child advocacy services are properly regulated to ensure competence, transparency and accountability.

Since the committee's most recent consideration of the petition, submissions have been received from the Minister for Community Safety, the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance, Who Cares? Scotland, Children 1st, Scottish Women's Aid, Shared Parenting Scotland, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, ASSIST and The Court Said (Scotland), as well as two from the petitioners. They are summarised in the clerk's note.

Submissions advise that, at present, there is no formal regulatory body that oversees independent advocacy practice in Scotland, but the sector as a whole has a suite of guiding documents that inform practice, as well as elements of accountability and transparency. Several of the submissions support the idea of discussions on the regulation and accountability of child advocacy workers. The Minister for Community Safety advises that the establishment of any form of registration scheme would be likely to require primary legislation following prior consultation on proposals and that it would be for any new Government to consider.

Again, this is an interesting issue. Clearly, it was an issue that people wanted to respond on and had a great deal to say about. There is some reassurance that there are guidelines and that the situation is not entirely unregulated, with people working to guidance. The question is whether the guidance should be on a more established level than that. My feeling is that there is quite an interesting area to explore here, and that, perhaps, the next Public Petitions Committee and the next Government could consider it.

09:45

**Tom Mason:** We can see that there is a great deal of material on the petition. To bring some sort of rational process into the situation, there needs to be legislation to get the regulation right, so that everybody is dealing with a similar pattern. If that does not happen, there will be irregular activity in different places. I think that we should keep the petition open into the next parliamentary session and charge the Government to come back with a detailed strategy that involves primary legislation.

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** I apologise for missing the beginning of the meeting due to my poor internet connection.

I agree with Tom Mason that we should keep the petition open and include it in our legacy paper. I think that a lot of work remains to be done on this and that we should write to the relevant minister to ask whether they will undertake the necessary work to introduce legislation to regulate non-statutory child advocacy services.

**The Convener:** I should have said welcome, David. Thank you for that comment.

**Gail Ross:** I think that the petitioners make a lot of good points in their response. There certainly seems to be a need for change, as a lot of the organisations have stated.

I was surprised to find that the people who are involved in child advocacy do not require a protection of vulnerable groups check. However, that will change under the Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020, which is positive.

I agree that we should include the petition in our legacy paper and ask the Government to follow up on it. If so many professional organisations are telling us that something needs to change, we should pay attention to that. We should keep the petition open and ask the Government for that work to be done.

**Maurice Corry:** I fully agree with what my colleagues have said. In particular, I agree with what Gail Ross said about the alarming fact that no PVG checks are required. Of course, as she said, that will be addressed under the 2020 act. I advocate that we keep the petition open and include it in our legacy paper, so that we can get this sorted out.

**The Convener:** I think that there is clearly a consensus that this is a petition that we want to consider further. Clearly, good work is being done in supporting young people, but there is a question about the extent to which people can have confidence in that provision. As has already been noted, there has been a lot of interest in this issue. We are agreed to continue the petition and include it in our legacy paper, with a suggestion for our successor committee that it should write to the

relevant minister, when they are appointed, to ask them whether they are going to take up that work.

### **Professional Dog Walking Industry (Regulation) (PE1842)**

**The Convener:** PE1842, lodged by Valerie Deerin-Morris, calls on the Scottish Government to regulate and license the professional dog walking industry.

A response has been received from the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment. The minister states that new regulations that have been laid and approved by the Parliament will provide a framework for a risk-based licensing system that could be extended to activities such as dog walking. However, he explains that there is not yet a timetable for when additional licensing provisions might be put forward to the Parliament.

I found that response encouraging, as it shows that the issue is on the minister's radar, so we can be hopeful that a future minister will continue to consider the fact that there are issues around the welfare of dogs.

In the past, there would not have been a great issue, but there has been a growth in the number of businesses that offer dog walking services. I would have confidence in closing the petition on the basis that the Government can work on the issue and that there is a vehicle through which it can do so.

**Tom Mason:** I declare an interest, in that I have a dog and occasionally use dog walking services.

Legislation and licensing are possible, and the issue just needs detailed attention in future. I think that we have gone as far as we can with the petition, so we should close it, recognising that licensing situation can be considered in future.

**Gail Ross:** It is positive that there is a mechanism for licensing to be introduced in future, and I hope that that is done. Quite a lot of people got a dog during lockdown; they will be going back to work at some point and will possibly engage the services of a dog walker. Therefore, convener, you are right when you say that the issue will probably grow and grow.

I thank the petitioner. The issue is pertinent, but I am content that we can close the petition. I am also content that the petitioner can bring back the petition if she does not see the action that she seeks. However, I hope that whoever makes up the Scottish Government in the next parliamentary session will introduce licensing. I am content for us to close the petition.

**Maurice Corry:** I agree with my colleagues. Gail Ross has hit the nail on the head, in that there has been a significant increase in the ownership of



dogs during the Covid lockdown, and we have to think about what will happen when people go back to work. She made a good point on that.

I am content for us to close the petition, on the basis that legislation is coming forward. We need to ensure that we keep an eye on the issue. We might slip the matter into our legacy report, just as a note to ensure that our successor committee keeps an eye on the issue and is aware that it might come back in a new petition. As Gail Ross did, I encourage the petitioner to do that. I am content for us to close the petition.

**David Torrance:** I am happy to go with the recommendations of my colleagues and close the petition.

**The Convener:** As has been said, there are important issues here. If there is growth in the sector, the service might be delivered by some businesses in a way that does not serve the best interests of dogs. That raises animal welfare issues, and people are interested in those issues. The committee, the Parliament and, to be fair, the minister have shown a commitment in that area of work.

We are agreeing to close the petition. As Gail Ross said, the petitioner might wish to return to the issue to try to push for the Government to use the vehicle that has been identified to create a regulatory framework and licensing.

At this stage, we agree to close the petition. I thank the petitioner for bringing this interesting and timely petition to the committee's attention. We certainly hope that the need to address the issue that she has highlighted will continue to be recognised. I thank her for the petition, and I emphasise her entitlement to bring it back in the new parliamentary session, if she wishes to do so.

### **Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland (Review) (PE1843)**

**The Convener:** PE1843, by Ewen Cameron, calls on the Scottish Government to review and consider revision of the governance, accountability and integrity of the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland and ensure that the commissioner adheres to the seven principles of public life as stipulated in the Nolan principles: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

Since we last considered the petition, submissions have been received from the Scottish Parliament's Presiding Officer, on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, and the petitioner. The SPCB's submission notes that, at this time, it has no plans to ask the Scottish Government to undertake a review as requested by the petitioner. In his submission, the petitioner

states that he believes that the Presiding Officer has passed up an opportunity to examine and learn from past issues and inequities as highlighted in his petition. Following the publication of our meeting papers, the petitioner provided a further submission to express his disappointment that the committee might close his petition, suggesting that it be referred to another committee instead.

My view is that the best course would probably be to close the petition. We know that the commissioner is not subject to the direction or control of any member of the Parliament, the Scottish Government or the SPCB. I also note that the SPCB has indicated that it does not wish to pursue the issue at this stage.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

**Gail Ross:** I do not think that there is anything else that we can do with the petition. As you have said, convener, the commissioner is not subject to the control of any member of the Parliament. There are procedures in place—for example, a report is submitted annually. The corporate body also has no plans to undertake a review.

I do not see that referring the petition to another committee would get us any further along the line. Given the responses that we have had, I do not think that another committee would be able to do anything further. I also note from our committee papers that a review was undertaken in 2019. I feel quite uncomfortable with questioning someone's integrity and openness. I believe that anyone who was appointed to the post would uphold those principles anyway.

I therefore think that we have taken the petition as far as we can, and I am content to close it under rule 15.7 of standing orders.

**Maurice Corry:** I agree with everything that Gail Ross has said. At this stage I am quite content to recommend that we close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders.

**David Torrance:** Considering that the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body will not ask the Scottish Government for a review and take the petition further, I do not think that the committee could do so. Therefore, like my colleagues, I am quite happy to close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders.

**Tom Mason:** I agree with my colleagues that we have explored the issues. I do not recognise any way in which we could really make the progress that the petitioner wants, so closing the petition is our only option.

**The Convener:** In that case, the committee is agreed that we have seriously explored the issues and that we have concluded that it would be best

to close the petition. We note the independence of the commissioner and the fact that there are procedures for the commissioner to report to the Parliament. The issue has been raised with the SPCB, which has clearly considered it, but at this stage it has no plans for a review of the role.

We are agreeing that we will close the petition. We thank the petitioner for bringing it before the Parliament and remind him that he has the right, should he wish to do so, to submit a new petition in the new parliamentary session. I thank him for his engagement with the committee.

### **National Health Service Boards (Regulatory Complaints Body) (PE1844)**

**The Convener:** The next continued petition, PE1844, lodged by Jennifer Greenhorn, calls on the Scottish Government to introduce an external regulatory complaints body to improve complaints procedures in national health service boards.

Since we last considered the petition, submissions have been received from the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, Healthcare Improvement Scotland, the patient advice and support service and the petitioner. The submissions are summarised in the clerk's note. The SPSO and HIS have advised that they do not support the petition's call for an external regulatory complaints body. However, the patient advice and support service sees value in the central collation of complaints received by health boards and Care Opinion.

10:00

This is an interesting petition. During the period that we have been together as a committee, there has been a question about complaints, how people feel about certain issues concerning the NHS and whether their complaints are taken seriously. That applies to other public bodies as well. People have been aware of that. However, I am not convinced that adding another layer to the system that is already there is the way forward.

My reflection is that we should probably close the petition, but I recognise that there is an issue around how we become aware of a series—an accumulation—of complaints about particular areas and what systems are in place to address that.

In closing the petition, we could flag up the question that the patient advice and support service has flagged up.

Care Opinion is an interesting organisation: it gives a sense of the complaints that people are making, the response to them and the engagement and dialogue on them. I have found

that to be quite an interesting process, and I think that, for some people, it is quite a satisfactory one.

However, people making complaints about their own health and treatment or that of a loved one means that this is a sensitive area. We should understand that people engage strongly with it.

**Maurice Corry:** It is an interesting petition. I thank the petitioner for lodging it. I declare an interest. When I was a councillor on Argyll and Bute Council, I was the chair of the integration joint board and oversaw its operation throughout Argyll and Bute, which is, of course, a very rural area.

I am aware that a review of the progress and operations of IJBs over the past six years is going to be done by the Scottish Government during the next year. I think—

**The Convener:** I am sorry to interrupt you, but we are dealing with the petition on the complaints body, not the one on the provision of rural healthcare.

**Maurice Corry:** I beg your pardon; I slipped up.

As you said, convener, through the SPSO, there is already an external regulatory body for the NHS. Further, the ombudsman is seeking additional powers anyway, which would be welcomed by the Scottish Government. Changes to NHS oversight are already under way through the Scottish Government. Therefore, I feel that the Scottish Government is playing its part and recognises the facts.

There is not much more that the committee can do at this stage, and I recommend that we close the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders.

**David Torrance:** I agree with my colleague that we should close the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders. However, in closing the petition, we should write to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport to highlight the issues raised in the patient advice and support service submission.

**Tom Mason:** There is some progress, in that certain reviews are taking place and there is improvement in oversight. Therefore, it would be sensible to close the petition at this stage and see whether those improvements make a difference. The petitioner can always come back with another petition, should the improvements not take place.

The process is always going to be a series of steady movements forward. As long as we go in the right direction, we are making progress.

**Gail Ross:** I agree with the course of action suggested and that we should write to the cabinet secretary. I have nothing further to add.

**The Convener:** I think that members agree that we want to close the petition. We recognise the

progress that has been made, but we want to write to the cabinet secretary on the collation of information and the other matters that were highlighted in the submission from the patient advice and support service.

We thank the petitioner very much for engaging with the committee and highlighting such an important issue. We know how important it is for people to have confidence in the health service and the confidence to raise concerns when that is appropriate.

### **Rural Scotland (Healthcare Needs) (PE1845)**

**The Convener:** PE1845 was lodged by Gordon Baird on behalf of Galloway Community Hospital Action Group. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to create an agency to ensure that health boards offer “fair” and “reasonable” management of rural and remote healthcare issues.

We last considered the petition in January 2021. Our clerk’s note summarises the written submissions that the committee received from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, the Scottish rural health partnership and the petitioner. We have also received several submissions from rural general practitioners, the Rural GP Association of Scotland, Karen Murphy on behalf of patients, Professor Philip Wilson and Councillor Willie Scobie.

Finlay Carson is with us for our consideration of the petition. I should also highlight that we received a letter from Colin Smyth, who is unable to attend the meeting but who is very supportive of the proposed action on the issues that have been highlighted in the petition and is aware of what he describes as the fantastic work of the Galloway Community Hospital Action Group. In addition, we have received a submission from Emma Harper, in which she highlights the significant journeys that people in Stranraer and across Wigtownshire must currently take to access treatment in Edinburgh or Dumfries. She asks that the committee keeps the petition open to be further considered and debated in the next parliamentary session.

Before I seek the views of committee members, I invite Finlay Carson to comment on the petition.

**Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con):** Thank you very much, convener. I appreciate you allowing me to contribute to the discussion on the petition.

I was disappointed by the cabinet secretary’s response. I am not sure how anybody, at any time, could argue against a proposition that would deliver fairness and reasonableness of provision, particularly given that those conditions would

apply to both parties. No member of the public or, indeed, of a health board should reject the idea of an agency that is entirely based on being fair and reasonable. The proposed agency would act on behalf of any board that faced unfairness or unreasonable public demands or concerns.

The cabinet secretary might be correct to say that a number of organisations perform such a role, but why has the issue not been sorted? Why do the problems that the petitioner outlined still exist? The cabinet secretary was quite dismissive of the concept of such an agency, despite the problems having existed for decades without resolution and despite a number of professional and lay groups offering support in trying to address the situation.

The responses seem to have missed the point somewhat. We are not talking about an issue to do with GP recruitment or GPs. For once, it is not even a problem that is solely about funding. It is all about ensuring equity and fairness in the provision of rural health services. We have already heard the views of Colin Smyth and Emma Harper on the petition. Such equity covers appropriate cancer treatment pathways, with patients being fully informed of the choices that are available to them. At the moment, the choices that are available to patients are simply not clear. As we have heard, some have to travel hundreds of miles, when a closer option might be available.

The cost of patient transport is a concern to many constituents. Patients who face potentially life-ending conditions should not have to be concerned about providing proof of their reliance on financial support.

In rural areas, there is uncertainty about the reopening of cottage hospitals and the restart of non-essential operations and health services post-Covid. We need to ensure that decisions on the future of services in rural areas are made on the basis not of available budgets but of patient outcomes. An agency to advocate for the healthcare needs of rural Scotland could be critical in achieving that, and I urge the committee to continue the petition into the new parliamentary session.

**The Convener:** Thank you for that.

**David Torrance:** The petition raises a very important issue for rural communities in not just the south of Scotland, but the Highlands. The situation that it addresses has been on-going for a long time.

I would be happy for us to keep the petition open, as I think that there is a lot of work still to be done on it. I would like us to include it in our legacy paper, but I also suggest that we write to the remote and rural general practice short-life working group and to the rural NHS boards to find

out their views. We should also ask the Scottish Government to request an update from the National Centre for Rural Health and Care.

**Tom Mason:** I agree with my colleagues. There are issues that need to be resolved, and the petition should be kept open until that happens. Some of the issues might be misunderstandings, but misunderstandings need to be resolved and, until they are, it should be kept open, to ensure that rural areas get the treatment that they want and expect and until the gap between expectation and delivery is satisfactorily closed. Therefore, it is important to keep it open and to pass it on to the next Parliament.

**Gail Ross:** This is an important petition and, as I said when we last discussed it, it is something that my proposed member's bill for remote rural communities would have covered, had it been able to progress. Therefore, I hope that somebody takes that up in the next parliamentary session or that the Government makes a commitment to giving more attention to remote rural communities. The petition has a lot of support from the organisations that contacted us, as we also heard from Finlay Carson, Emma Harper and Colin Smyth. I am sure that more MSPs who cover rural areas would have supported it as well, had they been asked. I agree absolutely that it should be kept open and put in the legacy paper and that we should write to the stakeholders, as David Torrance suggested.

**Maurice Corry:** I agree with my colleagues' comments, and I agree particularly with what Finlay Carson said. I picked up on the point about cottage hospitals, because I am involved with one of ours in my area. Its reopening is so important for the delivery of care. As a councillor, I was chairman of an IJB in NHS Argyll and Bute, so I know about their operations in rural areas. There will be a review of the operations of IJBs in the next year or so by the Scottish Government, as part of the modus operandi of setting them up. I hope that that will include the issues that the petitioner has raised. I want to see the petition continued, because the work is not complete by any means. We need to hear from more people, such as the remote and rural general practice working group. I propose that the petition is continued into the next session and the work of the successor committee.

**The Convener:** There is a consensus that we continue the petition and recognise the important issues involved. The committee has spent a significant amount of time looking at the question of GP contracts in rural areas, and there is a sense that there is a lack of understanding about how health services are delivered in rural and remote areas. The petition also reflects that lack of awareness of the challenges around travel and the

delivery of services that need to be addressed. The committee is agreed that the petition should continue and that we should seek the views of a range of organisations, as has been identified in our papers and by committee colleagues. We hope that it is an issue that a future Public Petitions Committee will look at.

### **Snooker and Pool Venues (Covid Restrictions) (PE1848)**

**The Convener:** The final continued petition, PE1848, which was lodged by Paul Marinello, calls on the Scottish Government to allow snooker and pool venues to open at all levels of the five-level system of coronavirus restrictions, except level 4. Responses have been received from the Minister for Public Health and Sport, Scottish Snooker and the petitioner. In her response, the minister states that

"decisions on what sectors and activities to re-open ... are guided by our Framework for Decision Making."

The minister confirms that she will

"ensure these points are considered in a further review of the Strategic Framework."

Scottish Snooker raises concerns that the sector has previously been told by the Scottish Government that these issues would be looked at and, to date, no changes appear to have been made. It requests that snooker and pool halls are classed alongside other indoor non-contact sports to ensure that businesses can reopen should tier 3 lockdown be implemented.

10:15

The petitioner also highlights that the change must be made to the sector that has been allocated to snooker and pool halls before the strategic framework is reviewed to ensure that businesses are able to reopen as soon as possible. He also highlights that, taking into account the submissions that have previously been received on the petition, and the fact that snooker is a non-contact indoor sport, it would be reasonable to assess that snooker is no less safe than any other non-contact indoor sport.

My feeling on this is that a compelling case is being made, and the frustration seems to be that, when decisions are being made, although there is an acceptance that the points are well made, the sector is not being taken into account. As has been indicated, businesses need notice if there is going to be a change so that they can prepare for it.

I share the petitioner's frustration. Therefore, on one level, I am reluctant to close the petition, because I think that timing is important with regard to this issue, as we are talking about something

that is pretty immediate. Whether we close the petition or not, we need to find some way of highlighting this issue so that something can be done. Unless pressure is applied, it will not be looked at. It seems to me that there is a lack of understanding about what snooker and pool halls might be. Clearly, snooker and pool are not being counted as non-contact sports and are perceived to be less safe. However, I think that a strong case has been made that they are as safe as other non-contact indoor sports.

I am interested in the views of the committee on this, but I certainly think that there is a degree of urgency involved in making sure that the Scottish Government understands that it will need to be clear on the situation prior to any changes in lockdown.

**Tom Mason:** I agree with what you have said, convener. However, having identified the problem, I am not sure what the Public Petitions Committee can do about it.

I think it would be right to close the petition but, in doing so, we should write to the Government to remind it that it has undertaken to review in detail the attributes and so on of snooker and pool halls.

It is always difficult to deal with such situations. There is a need for an immediacy of decision making but, on the other hand, we need to be open about what the restrictions are.

Again, we should write to the Government to remind it of its undertakings and the procedures that are to be followed as the pandemic progresses.

**Gail Ross:** This was a difficult position to deal with, as I found myself going along one line of thought and then another. I know what the petitioner is saying about snooker being a non-contact sport. However, I suppose that there are concerns about people touching the balls, the chalk, the table and so on, and the need to be absolutely assured that the venue is completely ventilated and cleaned. It is a difficult issue.

I am going to be no help here, because I am going to say that I would be happy to keep the petition open, but I would also be happy to close it. I really cannot make up my mind. I have sympathy with the sector, but I also have reservations about making any kind of decision that might interfere with the restrictions and what has already been decided.

If we decide to close the petition, we should do what Tom Mason suggested and write to the Government to ensure that it considers points that have been made. I know what you are saying about continuing the petition in order to ensure that action is taken, and I understand the points that the petitioner made about the fact that the

review of the strategic framework is probably going to come too late for the sector, because it is working from the framework that we have now.

I will wait to hear the opinions of the members of the committee who have not yet spoken, but at the moment I am in two minds, unfortunately.

**Maurice Corry:** I understand and agree with the points that my colleagues have made. Gail Ross raised some pertinent points.

The establishments that we are discussing promote health and wellbeing. People come together. They have not seen each other for ages and may be lonely at the moment because of Covid. I should declare an interest as I am on the COVID-19 Committee. We are conscious of the risks of close-proximity indoor sport and of contact with surfaces. Gail Ross mentioned the use of cues, billiard balls and tables, and that is a major issue. We must be careful.

I am in two minds about this. Tom Mason also made some good points. I would like to close some elements of the petition but to continue certain parts.

If snooker halls were to open, there would have to be strict rules. I know that the Scottish Government and health experts are considering all sorts of sports. We must go along with that. The Government does not want to see businesses fail due to Covid. I advocate closing the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders but writing to the Scottish Government to ask it to ensure that there is sufficient funding for those clubs to open at the earliest opportunity when they are allowed to do so, to protect them from going out of business. I suggest that we put that in our legacy paper and that we write to the Scottish Government in that vein.

**David Torrance:** Like my colleagues, I find this difficult, but I think that we should close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders.

**The Convener:** I understand why people are torn by this, because they can see that there is an issue here.

If we keep the petition open, it will not be considered until the Parliament reconvenes and the committee is re-established. That might be in June. My instinct is to keep the petition open because I want the Government to look at the subject seriously, but I would be misrepresenting to the petitioner what is likely to happen if we keep the petition open. Who knows where we will be with lockdown by June?

The solution is for the Government to understand the case that the snooker halls are making and to look at that now. It might be different in areas where there is a high risk, but many areas will move to tier 3 as infection rates

decrease. Snooker should be considered alongside the other non-contact sports that will take the necessary measures to reopen. Maurice Corry made an important point about places for people to go. We know the importance of sporting and social activity, which we should allow if we can.

My sense is that the Scottish Government does not understand the sector and has not listened. The Government has said that it will do something, but it has not done it. If we are to be honest with the petitioners, keeping the petition open is not the solution. We should close it, but we should write in strong terms to the Scottish Government to say that it is important that the Government looks at this now. It has misunderstood what is involved and the sector is seeking reassurance. The worst of all possible worlds would be for the Government to think that it has already made a decision and therefore not to look at this. It would then be too late for clubs to get ready.

Of course, there are other ways, via individual MSPs, that pressure can be brought to bear on the Government, and that might have a cumulative effect. I feel the frustration of the sector, which has been told that the Government is listening but nothing has changed. The issue is time sensitive, because, with any luck, restrictions will soon start to be lifted. However, if people are not given time to prepare their businesses, which are already under massive pressure, those businesses will be put under even more pressure.

**Gail Ross:** The timescales that you mentioned have made things much clearer for me, so I am happy to close the petition. As someone mentioned, in closing the petition, we should write to the Minister for Public Health and Sport to bring all the points to her attention. I am sure that she has played a few games of pool herself. We should do that to reiterate everything that we have spoken about.

**The Convener:** I note from the chat box that Maurice Corry has said that he will raise the issue at this week's COVID-19 Committee meeting. If he is able to do that, that would be helpful.

**Maurice Corry:** Yes, I intend to do that either today or tomorrow—we have two meetings this week. Such issues are discussed weekly, and we can get the message right to the top of the house by raising the issue with Professor Leitch, the adviser to the Scottish Government, and the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, Michael Russell. I will take that on board.

**The Convener:** That would be very useful. You can refer them to the discussion that has taken place in this committee. The issue is not on the margins; it is about people feeling that their

businesses have not been properly categorised. They fear that, even when the lockdown restrictions are lifted, because the Government has not thought about the issue—if it had thought about it, it would agree—their businesses will be disadvantaged.

We agree to close the petition. In closing it, we recognise that it raises serious issues and that it is a matter of timing. Even keeping the petition open would not allow for what the petitioner is seeking. As we have highlighted, we can write to the Scottish Government. As a member of the COVID-19 Committee, Maurice Corry is committed to flagging up the issue to that committee and to highlighting our discussion.

We very much thank the petitioner for bringing the petition to us. We trust that such matters can be resolved when we move out of the restrictions safely, as we all hope and pray will happen. We hope that people will be able to re-establish their businesses and that people will be able to return to doing things that enrich their lives, whether that is in sport or in any other area.

We have reached the end of the public session of the meeting. I thank broadcasting staff, the clerks, committee members, the petitioners and MSPs who are not committee members but have attended the meeting today.

10:28

*Meeting continued in private until 10:47.*

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

---

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

---

All documents are available on  
the Scottish Parliament website at:

[www.parliament.scot](http://www.parliament.scot)

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers  
is available here:

[www.parliament.scot/documents](http://www.parliament.scot/documents)

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact  
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: [sp.info@parliament.scot](mailto:sp.info@parliament.scot)

---



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba