

# **PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE**

Monday 21 September 2009

Session 3

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# **PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE**

## **13<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2009, Session 3**

### **CONVENER**

\*Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)

### **DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)

### **COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)

Nigel Don (North East Scotland) (SNP)

\*Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow) (SNP)

\*Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)

\*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

### **COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES**

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Nicol Stephen (Aberdeen South) (LD)

\*attended

### **THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED :**

Kirsty Adamson (Alness Academy)

Andrew Danet (Alness Academy)

Emma Danet (Alness Academy)

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Ben Jones (Alness Academy)

William MacDonald

John Mackay (Dornoch Academy)

Marilyn Murray

Andrew Page (Alness Academy)

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

### **CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Fergus Cochrane

### **ASSISTANT CLERKS**

Franck David

Linda Smith

### **LOCATION**

Alness Academy, Alness

# Scottish Parliament

## Public Petitions Committee

*Monday 21 September 2009*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:48*]

**The Convener (Mr Frank McAveety):** Good morning. I thank everyone for coming along to what is scarily titled our 13<sup>th</sup> meeting of the year. Hopefully, it will be of benefit to us all.

I am Frank McAveety, the convener of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee. To my right is John Farquhar Munro, the deputy convener, who kindly invited the committee to come to his constituency this morning.

**John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD):** Good morning. The idea of bringing the Public Petitions Committee to Alness grew from the fact that everyone considers the Public Petitions Committee to be the A team of the Parliament. This is it; you have got us here.

I am glad to see such a good turnout, and I hope that we will have a series of useful and constructive debates on the documents that are before us. For my part, I am proud that the Public Petitions Committee agreed to come and hold this meeting in Alness. This is historic—we are making history today. It is not often that something like this happens. You do not hear of Westminster taking its committees around the country to meet the public. We are delighted to do so, and we are glad to be here.

**The Convener:** I think that John Farquhar Munro is deliberately trying to ensure that we get a warm welcome, just in case things get a bit more heated during the discussions.

For the benefit of members of the public, the committee members will now introduce themselves. As I said, I am Frank McAveety. I am a member of the Labour Party and I represent Glasgow Shettleston. My deputy convener is a member of the Liberal Democrats and represents this parliamentary constituency.

**Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab):** I am the Labour and Co-operative Party member for Glasgow Anniesland.

**Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab):** I am a member for North East Scotland, and I am also a member of the Labour Party.

**Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):** I am a member of the Conservative party. Like Marlyn Glen, I represent North East Scotland.

I should say that I really appreciated getting the

Highland welcome, with the pipes and everything, this morning. If we got that everywhere, we would develop delusions of grandeur.

**John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP):** I am a Scottish National Party member for Central Scotland.

**The Convener:** Beside John Wilson is Mary Scanlon, an MSP who is not a member of the committee but is interested in some of the issues that the committee will deal with today.

**Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I am a Highlands and Islands MSP. I am on the Health and Sport Committee, but the Public Petitions Committee has kindly allowed me to sit in on today's meeting—anonymously, of course.

**The Convener:** I never say anonymously where you are concerned, Mary.

I want to put on record our thanks for the support that we have received from the academy. I particularly acknowledge the work of the headmaster, Mr MacIver, and the principal teacher of modern studies, Alex Ferrie, who have been keenly involved in some of the petitions that are before us today.

Later today, a number of pupils from other high schools will join us. With us already are representatives from schools in Dornoch, Dingwall, Tain and Invergordon. We welcome all the young people who have expressed an interest, as well as other residents of the areas around Alness who are keenly interested in the committee's business.

After a short lunch break, there will be a question-and-answer session. All of the members of the committee—as well as Mary Scanlon, if she is available—will be present for that.

All mobile phones and electronic devices should be switched off in case they interfere with the electronics and the broadcasting. I remind everyone that this meeting is being formally recorded by the Parliament. All contributions during the meeting will be published in the *Official Report*, and the question-and-answer session will also be recorded for the benefit of future years.

## New Petitions

### Police Informants (PE1260)

09:52

**The Convener:** The first item of business concerns six new petitions that have been lodged with the committee.

The first new petition, PE1260, is by Derek Cooney. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to advise all police forces to discontinue the practice of entering into agreements with police informants.

I invite comments from members of the committee.

**Bill Butler:** Let us be frank: whether we like it or not, police informants play a part in bringing serious criminals to justice. However, the petitioner has a point, in that they should be used as sparingly as possible, and agreements with informants should not overly benefit people who are criminals or are on the fringes of the criminal world.

We should write to the Scottish Government to ask whether it will advise all police forces to discontinue this practice and, if not, why not. We should also ask what offences or crimes that are carried out by police informants it considers cannot be excused from prosecution. That is a central point to the petition. We should ask the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland the same questions.

**Marlyn Glen:** The point is that there have to be boundaries, checks and monitoring. In addition to the questions that Bill Butler suggested, we have to ask how the process is managed; how the standards are maintained; whether, when and how the system is reviewed and analysed; and—this is important from our point of view as the Public Petitions Committee—what public involvement and consultation there is.

**John Farquhar Munro:** In the first place, we need some clarification about what is meant by police informants, particularly in relation to the petition. The petition seems to concentrate on one particular section of the criminal world. I know that some of the serious crime that goes on in the country is solved because of information that has come to the police from one source or another, but that is quite a different picture from the one that the petition presents.

The petition seems to imply that, when two or three people are involved in some sort of crime and one of the group is prepared to give information to the police, a lot of wheeling and dealing goes on and the person who gives the

information is perhaps allowed to walk free. I do not think that that should be allowed to continue; there should be more scrutiny of such situations. I am not against having police informants in the sense that we understand it but, in circumstances such as the petition describes, the practice certainly needs to be investigated.

**John Wilson:** I agree with the other members of the committee that we should write to the Scottish Government to ask the questions that members have suggested. We should also write to Victim Support Scotland and the Scottish Police Federation. It would be useful to find out what individual officers think about the use of police informants, how they would use them, what issues might arise in any deals with or payments to police informants and how all that operates in Scotland today.

**The Convener:** Nanette, do you have any comments to add?

**Nanette Milne:** No. I agree with what has been said so far, so I have nothing to add.

**The Convener:** Okay. We will take on board the points raised by members of the committee. We will pursue the issues identified with the appropriate organisations and return to the petition at a future meeting.

### Small-scale Redundancies (Government Support) (PE1265)

**The Convener:** The next petition is PE1265, by Matthew Goundry, calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Government to deliver the same level of responsiveness and support to individuals who are part of small-scale redundancy as it does to those who face large-scale redundancy. That is a relevant issue, given what is happening in the wider economic world, which we are all experiencing. How do members wish to handle the petition?

**Nanette Milne:** At this time—in a period of recession—redundancy is affecting a lot of people. Whether someone is part of a large-scale or small-scale redundancy, how they are affected as an individual is every bit as important. We should investigate the issue a bit further. Perhaps we should hear from the Scottish Government how it does, or will, provide support to people who are involved in small-scale redundancy. We know that the Government has the PACE organisation—partnership action for continuing employment—to help people involved in large-scale redundancy. It would be relevant to scale that down and to find out what the Government will do.

**John Wilson:** As well as writing to the Scottish Government to seek its views, we could write to the Scottish Trades Union Congress and to

individual unions, such as Unite and the GMB, which might be involved in advising members in small workplaces. It might also be useful to write to the National Union of Journalists, which has suffered a massive loss, given how many of its members have been affected by small-scale closures or redundancies in local newspapers. It might be useful to write to those organisations, as well as to the Federation of Small Businesses to find out what advice it gives its members about redundancies in small businesses.

**Bill Butler:** I agree with what members have said, but we should also write to the Scottish Government to ask whether there is a difference in the level of support that it and PACE give to workers who are involved in a small-scale redundancy and those in a large-scale redundancy. A redundancy is a redundancy, and the effect that it has on the person made redundant is severe. I echo what Nanette Milne said. If a different level of support is given, we should also ask what the reason for that is. Should the same criteria not be applied?

John Wilson said that we should write to the STUC. To be fair—I always like to be fair, convener, as do you—we should also write to the Confederation of British Industry.

10:00

**Nanette Milne:** We should write to the Federation of Small Businesses as well.

**The Convener:** I understand where the petitioner is coming from on the scale of support that he feels he could have received when he lost his job. Understandably, he contrasts that with the high-profile campaigns that take place when a larger employer leaves an area. The loss of two or three jobs in a small place can be as detrimental as the loss of 200 or 300 in other parts of the country. Let us explore that issue and see whether we can find some better ways to address it.

I thank members for their suggestions on that petition.

### **A96 Safety Improvements (Mosstodloch) (PE1271)**

**The Convener:** PE1271 is by Councillor Anita McDonald and calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to investigate the case for a reduced speed limit and other road safety measures, such as crossing points, on the A96 trunk road in Mosstodloch to improve road safety for schoolchildren and the wider public. Do members have any comments?

**Nanette Milne:** I imagine that Mary Scanlon might have views on the petition too. I travelled the A96 yesterday on the way up to Forres. It was

very quiet and there were no problems, but it is normally an extremely busy road. There have been issues in Mosstodloch and fatalities in the past. Work is on-going there, so the case should be considered to determine what safety measures can be incorporated in the built-up area. I am strongly in favour of that being investigated. We should ask Transport Scotland to investigate the case for a reduced speed limit and other road safety measures. If it is not willing to do so, I would like to know why.

**The Convener:** I invite Mary Scanlon to comment on the petition, as she will have an awareness of the journeys concerned.

**Mary Scanlon:** We are all familiar with the hold-ups on the A96. In Fochabers, next door to Mosstodloch, the bypass is about to begin construction, so quite a lot of work is going on and, at the time of considerable change in the area, it seems eminently sensible to ensure that adequate school crossing and road safety measures are put in place for children.

**The Convener:** We will raise the issues that are raised in the petition with the likes of Transport Scotland and the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change. There is always an issue there. Perhaps it would also be helpful to contact the local authority to find out what its assessment is of community safety around the road. Do we approve those recommendations?

*Members indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** We will bring the petition back once we have the responses.

### **Out-of-hours GP Services (Remote and Rural Areas) (PE1272)**

**The Convener:** The next petition is PE1272 by Randolph Murray. I understand that he is in the audience, so I welcome him to the committee. The petition calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to ensure that there is adequate provision for out-of-hours general practitioner cover in all remote and rural areas in Scotland. I invite committee members to comment.

**Nanette Milne:** I strongly support the petition. I spoke to one or two of the petitioners this morning. In a remote area such as the one that the petitioner is talking about, it is inadequate to replace medical expertise with, in essence, first-aid expertise. The matter should be investigated.

Should I make recommendations before Mary Scanlon has spoken?

**The Convener:** We will leave that until we have discussed the issues.

**Nanette Milne:** I support the petition and would like to hear what Mary Scanlon has to say as well.

**Mary Scanlon:** Thank you for letting me comment on the petition, convener. I have been to Kinloch Rannoch with my colleague Murdo Fraser. Like John Farquhar Munro, I am used to talking about remote Highland villages and how difficult it is to provide NHS services in remote and rural Scotland—which is very different from the convener's and Bill Butler's constituencies—but I have to say that I was shocked. NHS Highland would not dare to replace GPs with first responders. I do not mean to denigrate first responders, who are volunteers and give their time for no financial reward to help and support their local community, but with the best will in the world we should not expect them to diagnose because they are not capable of doing that. They provide excellent, complementary support to the health service, but it is unacceptable to expect them to replace GPs.

I referred the group from Kinloch Rannoch to the case of Applecross on the west coast, with which John Farquhar Munro will be familiar. NHS Highland said, "We can't get a doctor to go to Applecross", but the local people advertised and got an excellent response, and they now have an excellent doctor in place. I am pleased to say that the people in Kinloch Rannoch decided that they too would advertise to see how attractive it was for a GP to go to their area. They had an excellent response of 20 GPs who would be willing to come. NHS Tayside's cost for providing GP cover for the area was £558,000, but the locals have costed it at about £120,000.

In recent times, it has taken two hours for a doctor to reach Kinloch Rannoch—this is through NHS 24—and an additional two and a half hours for an ambulance to come. There would be ructions if that was the case in even the most remote parts of the Highlands. A drive from Kinloch Rannoch to Perth royal infirmary takes between one and a half and two hours on a good day, as many of the roads are single track.

I bring to the committee's attention the fact that the Health and Sport Committee is to undertake an inquiry into out-of-hours services in remote and rural areas. We discussed that at our away day. I cannot pre-empt our decision about the extent of the inquiry, but I can say that Kinloch Rannoch has been brought to our attention and committee members are concerned by the situation. I am not the convener or deputy convener of the committee, but I think it is safe to say that our inquiry will look at what is happening at Kinloch Rannoch. We think that it is unfair that people there are being discriminated against compared with the rest of Scotland. They do not have the access to the NHS that the most rural parts of the

Highlands and Islands have, and that is unacceptable.

**Bill Butler:** There is a question of natural justice and equity here. I take the hint that Mary Scanlon gave us. I believe that the Public Audit Committee referred the question of the new contract and whether it represents value for money to the Health and Sport Committee. Perhaps the best option for us is to refer the petition to the Health and Sport Committee, given that, as Mary Scanlon said, there is to be a full inquiry. The petition would fit in neatly with that inquiry. That is my suggestion.

**Marlyn Glen:** The issue is obviously a serious one for Kinloch Rannoch, but there has also been unacceptable confusion about the process of the change and the way in which the new GP was appointed. We need an in-depth investigation and, if the matter fits in with the Health and Sport Committee's inquiry, the best approach would be to refer the petition to that committee.

**Nanette Milne:** I endorse what Mary Scanlon said. She knows the situation personally, having been to see it. I think that the petition should be referred to the Health and Sport Committee.

**The Convener:** Okay. I will explain the process to the witnesses, as we are probably speaking in parliamentary jargon.

Petitions come to our committee in specific areas of policy that have major implications for the communities involved. The Parliament has a Health and Sport Committee that has responsibility for health and related matters. It is suggested that that committee will look into the whole issue in much more detail, calling before it senior practitioners in the health service, senior managers, ministers and representatives from the health directorate to explore the issues and discuss what other modelling could be done. We are trying to find a better way in which to deal with the petition that will be much more effective than dealing with it just through the Public Petitions Committee. Although we are useful in many ways, professional and intellectual rigour is required to drill down into the detail of the petition, which deals with big issues about staffing, resourcing and the management of the health service at a local level. We want to punt that to the Health and Sport Committee to take it forward as part of its wider deliberation.

We will make the strong recommendation that we have received a good petition on the matter. It will be up to the Health and Sport Committee to decide whom it wishes to take evidence from, but it will have the information that we pass on. We will suggest that it might be useful to have those who have petitioned the Parliament present as part of that process, but that is for the Health and



Sport Committee to determine. We hope that that will be the best way in which to deal with the petition.

Throughout the rest of today's business, I will pause every so often to give people a kind of easy guide to the petitioning process, so that everyone understands it and in case anyone is getting a wee bit puzzled.

**Mary Scanlon:** I have one important point to add. The concerns at Kinloch Rannoch have been on-going for some time—I could not tell you exactly how long—but I think that I am right in saying that the Health and Sport Committee would not look at the petition until January, I am afraid. It may look at it sooner, but the latest that it would look at it would be January.

**The Convener:** It is helpful for the petitioners to know that. That is a few months away, but I still think that it would be best for the petition to be dealt with by that committee, as it will make the connections that the petitioners have raised about the legitimacy and effectiveness of any proposed recommendation. Shall we take that course of action and refer the petition to the Health and Sport Committee? Our clerk will work with the clerks to that committee to ensure that the information from our end is appropriate for it.

**John Wilson:** I suggest that we also write to the local health board and the Scottish Government to make them aware that we are referring the petition to the Health and Sport Committee and to ask that, if there is anything that they can do in the meantime to alleviate the problems in which the residents find themselves, they do that before the petition goes to the Health and Sport Committee if they want to emerge from the situation with a good reputation.

**The Convener:** Okay. That is a helpful suggestion.

**John Farquhar Munro:** The problem in Kinloch Rannoch, which Mary Scanlon told us about, could be replicated all over rural Scotland. I therefore agree with John Wilson's suggestion. People should be made aware that that scrutiny is going to take place so that responses can come in from all over, not just from one particular area.

**The Convener:** Okay. I accept those recommendations.

Our next two petitions have been submitted by students from the academy here. We are still waiting for students from other schools in the surrounding areas to arrive, so I suggest that we defer dealing with those petitions to allow time for the youngsters from the other schools to arrive. I know that that will probably put even more pressure on the youngsters who are going to make the presentations, but they will want their

peer group to hear them—not just old people like me.

## Current Petitions

10:15

**The Convener:** For the benefit of members of the public who are present, let me say that current petitions are those that have already been submitted to the Public Petitions Committee—we are attempting to explore some of the issues that they have raised. The petitions are at different stages; some are on issues on which we have received updates, and we may decide after our discussions that we want to continue with them. We might have reached the end of the road with other petitions because we have, within our structure, explored the issues as far as we think is possible in trying to resolve or address them, or because the matter is being addressed more appropriately through other committees or structures of the Parliament or through the agency on which a particular petition expresses a view.

We have 16 current petitions, a number of which have been in our system for a while, so we will progress through them. We will, when the students arrive, return to petitions PE1274 and PE1275—although, as a former teacher, I get the feeling that the longer the wait goes on for those students, the less likely it is that the students who are present will have to return to two hours of physics, chemistry or mathematics. I understand their desire to keep the meeting as long as possible, so I will do my very best to help.

### National Planning Policy Guideline 19 (PE1048)

**The Convener:** The first current petition is PE1048, by Kitty Bell, which calls on Parliament to alter national planning policy guideline 19 in order to correct an anomaly to ensure that the precautionary approach applies to pre-school children and to all children at play, thereby giving them the same protection from telecommunications masts as their older brothers and sisters have while at school.

Do committee members have any suggestions on how we should deal with the petition? It has been before the committee for a while; we have explored many of the issues that it raises, and we have received a number of responses.

**Bill Butler:** It is obviously a very serious issue, which the committee has done its best to explore with the Scottish Government and others, but I do not believe that we could make any further inquiries that would be of assistance. The Scottish Government has said on several occasions that no anomaly exists because the precautionary principle applies to pre-school children. It has made it clear that the precautionary approach

applies to all children, irrespective of their age, so I am at a loss to see what useful further action the committee could take.

**John Wilson:** The petitioner has responded to the Scottish Government's consultation on the issue, and it appears from the information that we have that the Government has taken on board some of the petitioner's comments. We have, as Bill Butler rightly said, exhausted what we can do; we have examined a number of avenues. Although it might not be exactly what the petitioner wants, the Government, local authorities and installation companies will hopefully take on board the views that have been expressed and ensure that there is no conflict involving radio masts or other antennae that are located at nurseries or primary and secondary schools.

**Nanette Milne:** It is a very controversial issue and I do not think that it will go away, but I cannot see how the committee can take the petition any further. It has been made clear that applications for planning permission that involve antennae must be accompanied by a declaration that the equipment and installation comply with the guidelines on public exposure to radiation. Perhaps the regulations are not perfect and perhaps science will move on—I do not know. However, given the current state of knowledge, and that everything is being done to comply with the current regulations, I honestly think that the committee can do no more with the petition.

**The Convener:** I think that the committee is clear where we are with the petition, given the information that we have, the assurances that have now been put on public record and the recommendations, information and guidance that have been made available to local authorities. I presume that there is pressure on all local authorities about the siting of any such installations. There is now a clear level of awareness about the issue, which I hope will reassure the petitioners as much as possible in respect of their original concerns. The evidence may change, depending on what emerges from research on medical impacts.

There is massive pressure from the public, who want access to mobile phone use, but there is uncertainty about the long-term medical impact of that, particularly for young children. That is one of the challenges that we must face. However, on the basis of the information and assurances that have been provided to us, I think that we should close the petition. Do members agree?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**Scottish Public Services Ombudsman  
(PE1076, PE1163, PE1186,  
PE1190 and PE1212)**

**The Convener:** The next five petitions, which have been grouped together, are PE1076, PE1163, PE1186, PE1190 and PE1212. I will explain them for the benefit of members of the public. We have had a series of petitions over the past couple of years relating to different experiences that members of the public have had with the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, which is the complaints body for citizens in Scotland who feel that they have not been treated well by a public body or agency.

Petition PE1076, by D W R Whittet, calls for an appeals tribunal to review final decisions by the ombudsman when a complainant so requests. The other petitions relate to the effectiveness of the SPSO. For example, PE1186 calls for the abolition of the SPSO, and PE1190 calls for the Government to ensure that local authorities provide the SPSO and the complainant, at the point that it is requested, with all information that is deemed relevant to any investigation. Petitioners have raised a range of issues about the SPSO.

We have tried to deal with the petitions, knowing that there are avenues through other parliamentary committees for dealing with the ombudsman's role. However, there has been a change at senior level in the office of the ombudsman—which is one of those words that, given contemporary attitudes, we feel awkward saying. The newly appointed SPSO has given a number of commitments about carrying out a review of the organisation, which I think will take on board many of the issues that the petitions have raised.

I invite committee members to make observations or comments on the petitions. I know that every committee member will have had anguished letters from constituents about their experiences of a body that is meant to resolve their concerns about another body that is already messing them about, so it would be helpful if members had comments.

I am sorry that that took so long, but I thought that it would be helpful for members of the public to know what the issues are.

**Bill Butler:** I tend to agree with you, convener. I feel that the committee has carefully and fully considered each petition. We have had assurances from the newly appointed ombudsman that procedures will be improved and that the backlog of petitions will be dealt with. Furthermore, criticisms of the way in which complaints have been processed have been acknowledged, and the SPSO will try to deal with the lack of confidence that the public has expressed about

particular procedures. Given those reassurances and that the committee has, in my view, done all that it can to consider carefully the criticisms, I think that we should close the petitions, because the committee can do nothing further.

**The Convener:** Are there any other comments or observations? Mary Scanlon will become a fully paid-up member of the committee shortly.

**Mary Scanlon:** I am sorry—I do not have the background information that other members have, but in the early days I was one of the worst critics of the office of the SPSO, which I found to be dismissive and high handed. As well as taking a long time to respond to people, it would often conclude its consideration of a complaint without even having a word with the person who had made it in the first place. I think that the Public Petitions Committee has made quite a difference. I put on the record that I think that the SPSO's office has improved in recent years, and I have no doubt that it has been affected by the many petitions about it that have come the committee's way.

**The Convener:** In the light of those comments from members, we acknowledge the responses that we have had and close the petitions. We hope that the issues that have been raised can be resolved through the review process and perhaps by the SPSO adopting a different way of working.

**Cancer-causing Toxins (PE1089)**

**The Convener:** The next petition is PE1089, by Morag Parnell on behalf of the Women's Environmental Network Scotland, which calls on Parliament to urge the Government to investigate any links between exposure to hazardous toxins in the environment and in the workplace and the rising incidence of cancers and other chronic illnesses. I invite comments from members.

**Marlyn Glen:** I know that our consideration of the petition has been going on for quite a long time, but it would be good to continue it for a while longer—at least until we find out the outcome of the meeting with the Minister for Public Health and Sport. It is important that we wait for that. We should also try to get responses from the Food Standards Agency Scotland and from Mr Mike Palmer to the points that the Women's Environmental Network Scotland has made in its letter.

**The Convener:** I am happy to agree to the member's request. We will continue our consideration of the petition and follow up on the points that Marlyn Glen made.

### St Margaret of Scotland Hospice (PE1105)

**The Convener:** Our next petition is PE1105, by Marjorie McCance on behalf of the St Margaret of Scotland Hospice, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Government to guarantee retention of continuing care provision for patients who require on-going complex medical and nursing care, such as is provided in the 30-bed unit at the hospice, and to investigate whether arrangements for funding palliative care provision at hospices in the context of Health Department letter HDL(2003)18 are fair and reasonable.

For the benefit of members of the public, I will explain that there are two aspects to the petition that continue to be an issue. The first is specifically about resource allocation to a hospice in the west of Scotland. The second is a broader point about the distribution of money to hospices in general, and the share of their resources that they have to raise through private donations and charitable contributions. The petition has been considered by the committee on a number of occasions and has received fairly high-profile support from representatives of the archdiocese and elected members at local level. That is the background.

**Nanette Milne:** As the convener said, consideration of the petition has been on-going for some time. It is clear that the petition centres on funding for St Margaret's hospice and that the committee cannot have a locus in individual cases. However, because the Government is to review the current guidance on funding for the adult hospices, following a recommendation from the Public Audit Committee, I would like us to keep the petition open, at least until we hear what the Government thinks should happen regarding the guidance.

**Bill Butler:** St Margaret's hospice is not in my constituency, but it is only a stone's throw away. It does a tremendous job, as I am sure we all acknowledge. I agree with Nanette Milne that we should await the Government's response to see what it contains. I accept that we cannot intervene in the case of a particular hospice, but we need to await the Government's response on funding. The people who have put so much into the campaign for St Margaret's and its funding would expect nothing less from us. We should not close the petition until we get the last word from the Government.

10:30

**Marlyn Glen:** Is it in order for us to write to the cabinet secretary asking for a date for the proposed meeting with the Scottish hospices forum?

**The Convener:** We have received a communication from one elected member—it is briefer than other contributions that some elected members make—

**Bill Butler:** Name that member.

**The Convener:** It would be unfair to do that.

The member has identified a couple of areas where there is support across the main political parties to explore the issue. He asks us to continue the petition. My view is that it is sensible to continue the petition on the grounds that have been set out. Hopefully, that will enable us to get an immediate response from the minister and relevant health board on how they are tackling the broader issues that the petition raises. Is that agreed?

*Members indicated agreement.*

### Epilepsy Specialist Nurses (PE1182)

**The Convener:** PE1182, by Allana Parker, on behalf of Epilepsy Scotland, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to increase the number of epilepsy specialist nurses and to ensure that all national health service boards provide adequate epilepsy services for adults, children and people who have disabilities. Do members have comments?

**Bill Butler:** I understand that the petitioner welcomes the new NHS Quality Improvement Scotland standards and that, under the monitoring that is to ensue, the NHS will try to ensure that there is adequate care of people with epilepsy in each NHS board area. Given that we have done all that we can do, I suggest that we close the petition.

**John Wilson:** As the petitioner indicates in her letter, although Epilepsy Scotland is not totally satisfied, it is satisfied that the new QIS standards will be put in place. She says clearly that a failure by any health board to apply the standards will be monitored closely. The petitioner will return to Parliament if problems arise in delivery of epilepsy services around Scotland. We have done what we can—I am sure that the petitioner will come back to us at a later date if she feels the need to do so. We should close the petition.

**Nanette Milne:** I declare an interest as an office bearer of the cross-party group on epilepsy, which is an extremely active cross-party group—indeed, I think that it has the biggest membership of all the cross-party groups. In the light of the proposed monitoring, we can close the petition. I have no doubt that if things do not go according to plan, the cross-party group will revisit the issue.

**The Convener:** The recommendation is to close the petition. Is that agreed?

*Members indicated agreement.*

### St Andrew's Medal (PE1232)

**The Convener:** PE1232, by Alasdair Archibald Walker, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to instigate a national civic award, the St Andrew's medal, to recognise people who commit extraordinary or outstanding acts of bravery. Do members have comments?

**Bill Butler:** I understand that the Government will undertake a scoping exercise on the petitioner's demand. We should continue the petition, but put it on the back burner until we get the results of the exercise.

**John Wilson:** In the response from civil servants, I note that ministers are

"committed in principle to taking forward action in this area" and that

"detailed thinking is being developed".

We should write to the Government asking how long it will take to complete the scoping exercise and when ministers' views will be known. We should give the Government a nudge in that direction. It should give us an answer sooner than later—the sooner the better. I am in favour of suspending the petition, but not for too long.

**The Convener:** Do we agree to suspend the petition, while taking on board John Wilson's suggestions?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

### Great Britain Football Team (PE1233)

**The Convener:** PE1233 is by Craig Brown, the former Scotland team manager. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to consider what impact the creation of a Great Britain football team at the Olympics, or other sporting events, would have on the promotion and support that it and other public bodies such as sportscotland provide for football as a means of encouraging healthy lifestyles as well as generating economic and social benefits. Do members have any comments? Events, good and bad, have probably overtaken the petition.

**Mary Scanlon:** Last week, we had a good debate on the Health and Sport Committee's report on its inquiry into pathways into sport. I was pleased to speak in that debate. I believe that you opened the debate for your party, convener. Although the report did not deal with the first matter in the petition, it dealt with issues that relate to the second matter—the question of what public bodies and the Government are doing to encourage healthy lifestyles and so on.

I understand that this morning's meeting has a consensual tone, but I hope you will forgive me if I put on record the fact that I and many others were

disappointed by the Government's response at the end of that debate—I hope that its actions will be more positive than that response was.

The debate was a good and thorough one, and the report received the support of members of all parties.

**The Convener:** Are there any other comments? We cannot replay two important football matches, John.

**John Wilson:** As much as we would like to, convener.

**The Convener:** We were kicking every ball, but they did not go in.

**John Wilson:** The football associations of Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland have made their views known about having a team GB at the Olympics. The Scottish Government has taken a view, but it is not alone in that view. The football associations that I mentioned feel that the creation of a team GB might be a step too far in terms of keeping the national identities of their national teams.

We should close the petition, but we should be aware that it was not only the Scottish Government that lodged real objections to the proposal. No doubt we will reopen the debate from last week.

**The Convener:** Football is never a divisive issue, as you know, John.

**Bill Butler:** As John Wilson said, it was not only the Scottish Government that objected to the proposal. People of all parties and none—myself included—did so, too. I did not feel that we were given enough comfort that the proposal would not have hampered the continuation of Scotland's own football team. I know that others in my party take a different view, but we are a broad church.

The assurances from FIFA remind me of what Sam Goldwyn said about verbal contracts not being worth the paper they are written on.

**The Convener:** I always love the equanimity of a Partick Thistle supporter's contribution.

As I said, the petition has been overtaken by a series of decisions that were made by football authorities. We believe that the position that the Scottish Football Association arrived at was designed to protect the integrity of our national football team and to help it to do the best it can in qualifying for major competitions. I hope that the youngsters who are here today might one day see the Scottish football team getting to the finals of the European championship and the world cup, which those of us who are of an older vintage saw in the 1970s and later.

We recognise that there are various perspectives on the merits of having a team GB at

the Olympics, but do we agree to close the petition, which has been overtaken by events?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

### **Sheltered Housing (Self-funded Tenants) (PE1245)**

**The Convener:** PE1245, by John Wood, calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to consider how it will ensure the continued independence of self-funded tenants of sheltered housing whose funds and savings are being eroded by increased costs, for example through the supporting people programme. The petition deals with a relevant issue that all members will have had experience of at constituency level. Before I invite comments from members on how we should proceed, I welcome Rob Gibson, who is a Scottish National Party member for the Highlands and Islands, who has joined us for today's meeting.

Do members have any comments on PE1245?

**Bill Butler:** The issue is important and of some concern, so we should continue with the petition. I suggest that we write to the Scottish Government to ask what guidance is available to local authorities to help them to ensure that those who live in sheltered accommodation are aware of the charges that they face. We should also ask the Scottish Government what impact, in its view, the reshaping care for older people programme will have on those who currently live in sheltered accommodation. Colleagues will no doubt feel that a number of other issues should also be considered.

**Nanette Milne:** I know that the problem has vexed many sheltered housing residents for quite a long time. When people enter sheltered housing, they are often not aware how the charges that they face might change with time. A number of residents have been really alarmed by the charges. Also, people's financial circumstances can change. In writing to the Government, we should ask whether it will consider introducing a requirement for regular—perhaps annual—financial assessments, so that any changes in people's circumstances can be picked up as soon as possible so that they do not suffer financially.

**Marlyn Glen:** The reshaping care for older people programme, which Bill Butler mentioned, will be consulted on not this year but next year. I feel that we need to inject some urgency into that process, because people in sheltered accommodation are worried about charges now. There seems to be a lack of movement in dealing with care for older people, so it seems in order to ask the Scottish Government a more general question about what it plans to do immediately for older people.

From an equal opportunities point of view, age refers to not just younger people but older people—I have gone into teacher mode—and it is one of the strands that we are obliged to consider. It would be good if the committee reminded the Scottish Government of that obligation.

**John Wilson:** It is important that we write to the Government now, given that several local authorities are reconsidering their position on the use of sheltered housing wardens. It is imperative that the Government responds by carrying out a scoping exercise to find out what local authorities are currently doing and what they intend to do in the foreseeable future. When people move into sheltered accommodation, it is crucial that they are secure in the knowledge that the accommodation will continue and that charges will be levied at the same level by the sheltered accommodation provider. We need to get a better idea of what is coming through the local authorities, which are often responsible for delivering sheltered accommodation.

**The Convener:** Do members have any other questions?

**Marlyn Glen:** Have we covered the question about the consultation that takes place when changes to sheltered accommodation charges are mooted? We should ask whether the people concerned are consulted properly.

**The Convener:** We will take all those points on board. Obviously, there are several ways in which people want to map out what is happening to older people's services, given the changes to how such services are managed and funded. Do members agree that it will be helpful to try to follow through on those suggestions?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** We will take those comments on board. We will no doubt return to the petition in the near future.

### **Smoke-free Mental Health Services (Consultation) (PE1246)**

**The Convener:** PE1246, by Belinda Cunnison, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review its consultation "Achieving smoke-free mental health services in Scotland: a consultation", which the petitioner claims contains factual inaccuracies, thus making the process fatally flawed.

Do members have any comments? We contacted the Government about the petition and it made clear its response.

10:45

**Bill Butler:** Given that the Government made clear that it has no plans to review the consultation, I do not see what the committee can do to develop the petition. We have tried to explore every aspect of the matter that we can reasonably be expected to explore, but we have come to the end of the road. I do not know what colleagues think, but I think that we should close the petition.

**The Convener:** If there are no other comments, can we accept the recommendation to close—sorry, Marlyn Glen wants to speak.

**Marlyn Glen:** I was just going to agree to close the petition. It has been covered really well and we have a lot of information that was not available to us when the petition was lodged.

**The Convener:** Okay, we have agreed to close the petition.

### **Football Stadia (Safe Standing Areas) (PE1248)**

**The Convener:** PE1248, by Stephen A Taylor, on behalf of Pars Supporters Trust, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to re-introduce safe standing areas at Scottish Premier League football stadia to give professional clubs the option of having seated or standing areas at their football grounds. The petition has been in front of us before and the petitioners have spoken to us at committee.

Do members have any comments?

**Bill Butler:** Perhaps I should not comment, given that the petition was lodged by Dunfermline supporters and Partick Thistle roundly thrashed Dunfermline 2-0 on Saturday. However, I will not mention that.

It was reasonable to raise the subject of the petition, but there were doubts about it. There are no safe standing areas because of tragic incidents that I do not need to go into, because we are all aware of them. Given that the Health and Safety Executive and the police do not support having standing areas, we have done as much as we can humanly be expected to do, so we should close the petition.

**Nanette Milne:** I do not disagree. As a student, on Saturdays I used to stand regularly at Pittodrie supporting the once-renowned Dons. I thoroughly enjoyed it and felt safe there. However, as Bill Butler implied, things have moved on and there have been some serious incidents about which we all know. The solution to such incidents was thought to be stadia with seating only. We have to go on advice from the HSE and the police who are at the front end of assessing what happens in football grounds. I accept that we should close the petition.

**John Wilson:** There is another problem with requiring all-seated stadia—the constraint on smaller clubs progressing through the league system. However, given the responses that we have received, there is no other option but to close the petition, although I hope that we will be able to review at some point in the future standing spaces in football grounds.

**The Convener:** I was hoping for a wee chink of light from members so that I would not have to abuse my position as committee convener. I recognise where we are with the petition. It is suggested that we close the petition, which I accept. My issue is that in champions league matches in other countries, the fans behave perfectly well in designated standing areas, although I know that they have to be managed.

I know the reasons for not having standing areas in Scotland, particularly given what happened in a cup final a long time ago, and various other incidents, as well as some recent developments in top-flight English football. There is real concern about those things.

To be fair to the fans who raised the issue, they are genuine and recognise the financial pressure on clubs such as Inverness, Partick Thistle and Dunfermline, which have been in the premier league before and which, if they have a good season, might be back in it again. It is extremely difficult for those clubs to meet the criteria, which might be unfair on them, given that other clubs have greater resources.

I think that we should reluctantly agree to close the petition, but we should keep our eye on the issue, because fans might wish to continue to pursue it in a different fashion over the coming period.

**Bill Butler:** I am not disagreeing with you, convener—I said earlier that we should close the petition—but perhaps we could write to Pars Supporters Trust, which lodged the petition, to say that although we have to close the petition, if there is any change, we will be more than willing to consider it. We cannot bind a future committee, but I am sure that a future committee would consider the issue seriously.

It is all very well talking about Europe, but you see standing areas in Rome. At a fairly recent serie A game there were running battles between the two sets of supporters, with the police caught in the middle. It is a difficult one.

**The Convener:** Okay. We agree to close the petition and take forward the suggestion from Bill Butler to write to Pars Supporters Trust to see whether it wishes to pursue some of the issues through other avenues.

### Free Public Transport (PE1107 and PE1174)

**The Convener:** The final two current petitions are PE1107 and PE1174, which we have grouped together. PE1107, by Robin Falconer, on behalf of Highland Youth Voice, calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to reduce public transport fares for all under-18-year-olds in full-time education and to make provision for young people with no income to either travel free or pay only half the adult fare. PE1174, by Juliana Wolkow, on behalf of Holy Cross high school fourth year pupils, calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to provide free public transport for all under-16s who have no income.

I invite comments from members. If it is okay with the committee, I suggest that the young students who are present should be able to contribute to the discussion. I know that it is intimidating, because we are sitting here with big microphones and so on, but there will be roaming microphones, so I invite the high school students to share their experiences.

**John Wilson:** I suggest that we suspend the meeting for a moment, because I know that other pupils will be joining us. It might be easier if we pose the question to a bigger audience. There might be issues about transport links during the day, never mind the public transport issues that the petitions raise.

**The Convener:** Okay. We will take a brief break to allow the young students to arrive. We will then consider these two petitions, and the other two that were lodged by young people.

10:53

*Meeting suspended.*

11:14

*On resuming—*

**The Convener:** We resume our consideration of PE1107 and PE1174, both of which are about approaches to transport for young people, and one of which specifically mentions the cost of transport in the Highlands.

Do members have any comments? I reiterate that I also invite comments from any of the young, or not-so-young, students in the audience who have views on the petitions.

**Nanette Milne:** Do any of the students want to tell us what benefits free or reduced-fare transport for under-18s would bring them? Would such a thing benefit people up here? Is anyone willing to take up the challenge?

**The Convener:** Can I do my old teaching practice? Even if pupils did not put up their hands, I would make eye contact and some poor soul would be asked the question. Would any of the students like to be more active and more able to move about? What practical inhibitions face youngsters in terms of transport, particularly here in the Highlands? Are any of the young students brave enough to have a go? I cannae believe that youngsters here are too shy. Any comments?

Andrew, since I know you—[*Laughter.*] Thanks very much—it is an old tactic. As a young man in the area, what are some of the problems that you and your pals face?

**Andrew Danet (Alness Academy):** Time is definitely a problem. We have to wait half an hour for a bus to get somewhere, whereas in Edinburgh buses go every five or 10 minutes. That is quite annoying. The prices are also a problem.

**The Convener:** Say you decide to go for what you tell your mother is a quiet night out with your friends. What do you have to put into that equation cost-wise? What would it cost you to be able to go somewhere?

**Andrew Danet:** Now that we are over 16, we have to pay adult prices, so we are looking at a fare of £6 return to go to Inverness. On top of that are the costs of getting something to eat and buying t-shirts and things, so the costs can add up.

**The Convener:** Okay. We saw a venue—was it the Ironworks? [*Interruption.*] Yes, it was—that was me trying to understand youth culture. So cost is an issue.

Are there any comments from other young students about the transport problems that they have had? Andrew was brave enough to break the ice, so surely someone else will comment. Do any of the youngsters from Dornoch want to speak? I was talking to them earlier. I ask the clerk to take the microphone to the young gentleman who was nice enough to talk to me earlier. He is in sixth year, so he feels confident enough to speak, he says.

**John Mackay (Dornoch Academy):** I basically agree with Andrew Danet. [*Laughter.*]

**The Convener:** That is a good start. Well done. Keep going.

**John Mackay:** The prices can be really bad. From Dornoch it can be about £10 return, so if you want to buy something in Inverness, you can spend about £50 a day.

**The Convener:** Okay. Can I get a quick show of hands? In terms of broad principle—it is probably an easy question to answer—do most of you think that it would be worth considering free transport



for youngsters who are in full-time education? Would that be generally supported? As politicians, we will all have to face some pretty difficult budget decisions over the next period, so now might not be the best time for such petitions to be under discussion, given that there are other, broader spending challenges ahead.

I invite members of the committee to comment. If any of the youngsters want to come in, just show that by indicating with your hand, okay?

I think that we have a former teacher from the high school here.

**Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** Yes, indeed. I used to teach in Alness academy. The issue in the Highlands is in areas that are furthest from the main bus routes. Despite what we heard about the price, buses run from Dornoch to Inverness every hour or so. There is a far greater issue for people on the west coast and the north coast who want to go to Inverness, for example. A lot of schools and youngsters are much more disadvantaged than those in the inner Moray Firth area. It would be worth while for the committee to keep the matter under consideration, despite the costs, and see whether it can take it somewhat further.

**Emma Danet (Alness Academy):** I do not know whether everyone has one, but when you turn 16, you get a card that gives you a third off adult bus travel. However, those who go to after-school activities usually have to go to Inverness, which costs a lot—it is about £8 return, which is really expensive. We do not get a third off the return with the card; we have to buy a one-way ticket, so even with the card the price is quite high.

Living in the Highlands is quite hard. There is not a lot to do in the area, so we have to travel into Inverness or somewhere else to attend after-school activities. It adds up to a lot of money.

**The Convener:** I appreciate that. Are there inconsistencies in how much bus companies charge different age groups, such as young people? I do not have experience of that, obviously. Is it the case that you can get on one bus okay but, on another bus, you are charged full price?

Fatally, the youngster who was nodding has my approval.

**Ben Jones (Alness Academy):** It is inconsistent. It depends which bus driver is on. If somebody looks over a certain age, they will charge the adult price. Sometimes I do not have identification on me so I cannot prove my age. It depends which bus driver is on and what mood he is in.

**The Convener:** I do not think that you have a problem: you look about 13 to me.

Do the students have any more comments on the issue? They will not often have a chance to make their thoughts clear to elected parliamentarians.

Nanette Milne wishes to comment.

**Nanette Milne:** Do any of the young people feel that the financial consideration would be a disincentive if they wanted to go on and do a further education course?

**John Wilson:** I will add to that question. Do the young people feel that they are at a disadvantage when it comes to getting weekend work? Emma Danet indicated how much she spends when she goes into Inverness. What are the employment opportunities for young people who have to pay an £8 return fare to get into Inverness for a weekend job? Are they economically disadvantaged by not being able to take up employment opportunities that exist in the larger areas such as Inverness?

**The Convener:** I will ask the hard question that I imagine anyone who has the purse strings, such as the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, would ask: given what we know of the budgets ahead for everyone—local councils, the Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government—should free transport for teenagers be a priority?

**John Farquhar Munro:** They are nodding their heads.

**The Convener:** As the youngest here, John, what do you think?

**John Farquhar Munro:** I look it, don't I?

There is unanimous agreement: I saw most of the young students nodding their heads.

We have two petitions; one is fairly relaxed about what happens—it calls for reduced fares for everybody under 18—and the other asks for free travel. I understand that anybody between 16 and 18 who is in full-time education already gets some sort of travel pass that gives them a reduction in their fares, but somebody in that age group who is not in full-time education does not get that benefit. They have the same difficulty in getting around as the rest of us do, so that is rather unfair. The second petition, which calls for free transport, merits consideration.

**The Convener:** I invite comments from any young people in the audience. Perhaps taxpayers in the audience might have a comment on the petitions. They might be thinking, "Okay, it's free but what would that cost me? I already pay a lot for basic things such as council tax."

**William MacDonald:** Part of growing up is learning to budget. If somebody gets pocket money and wants to go into Inverness at the weekend, it is surely beneficial for them to budget

and think about how much they need for bus fares. A good reduction in the bus fare for under-18s or under-16s who are still in education might be beneficial.

**Marilyn Murray:** I have a free bus pass, even though I do not look as though I should. Free bus passes have meant a tremendous increase in bus travel. For any sensible person considering ecological issues in Scotland, such as pollution, trying to get people out of their cars and on to the public transport system has been an immense success.

I cannot understand any 16 to 18-year-old sitting here who would not go for free bus travel for themselves while they were young, to get them out of their parents' cars and on to the public transport system. It is a no-brainer for all sorts of reasons, but especially because of pollution. We need to get people out of private transport and on to public transport. We have to view the success of the over-60s scheme as empirical evidence; it is a fantastic scheme.

**The Convener:** I had never thought of the possibility of being able to remove my 17-year-old son from the car regularly as an incentive for having such a scheme, but it would be tremendous because he just clutters things up.

As elected members, we all know about the amount of mobility and activity that is generated by free bus travel for older citizens—the best euphemism for whom is “people who qualify”. The scheme makes a real difference to how they mix and socialise. I am sure that there would be an equivalent impact on young people if a similar scheme was introduced for them. There is awareness that it may well be a socially good measure to implement.

We now want to think about how we will deal with the two petitions that are before us. I invite committee members to comment on how they wish to progress the petitions.

**Bill Butler:** Following on from what Marilyn Murray said, and given that the Scottish Government has just published a review of the Scotland-wide free bus travel scheme for older people, it might be an idea to ask the Scottish Government to consider the two petitions in relation to the analysis that it is carrying out of the existing young persons' scheme. We could establish what its view is of the requests contained in the two petitions for free and/or reduced fare bus travel for young people under the age of 16 and for those between the ages of 16 and 18. It is obvious, given fares of £6 return to Inverness—or a £10 return from Dornoch—that this is a pressing issue for younger people. The committee should write to the Scottish Government in those terms.

**John Wilson:** I support Bill Butler's suggestion, but if we write to the Scottish Government we should ask it what considerations it has given, or will give, to people in rural areas, given the issues that have been raised about the frequency and availability of transport in such areas, in addition to the cost. When we raise the issue with the Scottish Government, it is perhaps important to highlight the specific issues related to transport in rural areas and the cost of travel. One or two speakers have pointed out that in some urban areas it is easier and cheaper to get public transport, but in rural areas it is more difficult and more expensive to get around. I hope that the Scottish Government can be encouraged to consider the issue when it produces its final report on young people and transport.

**Nanette Milne:** As other members have indicated, given that we are in straitened financial times it might be difficult to achieve a satisfactory solution at this point, but it is worth bringing everything that we have heard today to the Government's attention. I assume that we will do so by sending it the *Official Report* of today's meeting.

**Mary Scanlon:** Many people leave this area to go to university and only a small percentage return after graduation to stay here. The issue is not just one of equity but one of social inclusion because many young people of school age cannot even afford to see a film in Inverness or enjoy the many cultural aspects of the Highlands. That means that they leave this part of the world without having had the opportunity to travel around and enjoy the huge amount of culture that we have, much of which is centred in Inverness. If those young people had more opportunities to enjoy the culture of the Highlands, I suspect that that would contribute to encouraging them to come back to the region after graduation, which is a serious issue for the area.

**The Convener:** Do we accept the recommendations of members of the committee and agree to keep the petitions open so that we can explore the points that have been made?

**Members indicated agreement.**

## New Petitions

### Blood Donation (PE1274)

11:30

**The Convener:** We have with us in the audience pupils from Bridgend and Park primary schools. People from the Scottish Parliament's education services are in the school today to work with youngsters. Since 1999, we have tried to ensure that schools can benefit from the new Parliament.

I invite the petitioners from Alness academy to come to the table. You are probably a wee bit nervous, but do not worry. We have got a better view than you have got. I apologise for that.

PE1274 is from Andrew Danet, who is a pupil at Alness academy. He is calling on the Parliament to urge the Government to introduce a scheme to pay people each time they donate blood, and to consider other measures to encourage more people to donate.

I welcome Andrew Danet and his fellow pupils Ben Jones and Aidan MacKenzie to the committee. I know that Andrew has already become a star of radio and television as a result of the interviews that he has conducted on the subject of the petition. Some members of the committee have listened to those interviews, which have given us a greater understanding of the issues that are involved.

Andrew, you have three minutes in which to make a presentation to the committee.

**Andrew Danet:** Good morning. It is good to see you in Alness academy. It is a pleasure to have the committee here to listen to our views and ideas.

Donating blood is an honourable, brave and life-saving thing to do. A unit of blood can save someone. Three teaspoons of blood can save a baby's life. However, although it is an heroic thing to do, not a lot of us do it—only 5 per cent of people in our nation give blood, which is terrible. We do not donate enough blood. Is it because we are lazy? Is it because we lack awareness programmes?

One of the ways of addressing the issue would be to pay people to donate blood. In other countries, awareness of blood donation is far greater than it is here. For example, in Iceland, Greece and Germany, where people can get €20 for giving blood, they have far higher levels of donors—in Iceland, 32 per cent of people give blood. In America, following a programme that was run a few years back, the rate is 15 per cent, which is still far higher than it is here.

In countries such as France and Belgium, blood donation companies go to offices, schools and shopping centres, which attracts far more people to donate blood. Also, their awareness campaigns have a much higher profile. For example, when I was in Paris, I noticed that there were plenty of blood donation adverts on television, and that there were posters everywhere. Awareness seems to be far higher in European countries than it is here.

There is a 20 per cent drop in blood donation in summer and a 30 per cent increase in winter, which is a lot.

Blood donation is an important issue that we wanted to bring to the attention of the committee. The donation rate in this country is not very high. I agree that blood donation is a selfless service, but that is not enough. We live in a country where everyone is busy—they are at work, at meetings of the Public Petitions Committee or at school—and may not have time for blood donation. Perhaps we should look at going into offices and high schools. That is one way to raise numbers.

Blood donation systems are more interesting in the rest of Europe. In France, there are adverts and Iceland offers money. Denmark has an insurance fund to cover expenditure arising from donors' personal injuries. We do not have anything like that in Scotland. We should try such interesting ideas here.

**The Convener:** Well done. Thank you, Andrew. Do you feel better now?

**Andrew Danet:** Yes.

**The Convener:** Ben Jones and Aidan MacKenzie, who are also here for this petition, should feel free to answer any of the questions that are asked.

**Nanette Milne:** I congratulate Andrew Danet on a very good presentation and a significant petition. There is no doubt that we need an increasing number of blood donors. I have a personal interest in the subject as, in a previous life, I was an anaesthetist and was well aware of the need for blood during major surgical procedures; I used quite a lot of it then. I am also the mother of a son who had to have a liver transplant a number of years ago; I think that about 26 or 27 pints of blood had to be administered during the operation, which is way over blood volume. I am glad to say that he is very well now.

You have come up with some good and interesting suggestions, including on how to increase publicity. I think that what applies to blood donation also applies to organ donation; the two share the ethos that we give of our bodies to help others. I have a slight quibble with the idea of paying people to donate blood. The service has

always operated as a voluntary service. A number of countries that paid for blood in the past no longer do that. As you may be aware, the World Health Organization policy is that, for blood to be safe, donations should be made voluntarily and not paid for. That is to avoid giving incentives to people to give blood for the wrong reasons and to fail to disclose conditions that would preclude them from becoming a donor. Clearly, the safety of blood is very important. I tend to side with the World Health Organization. What are your comments on that?

**Andrew Danet:** I agree that donation should be kept voluntary. The safety of blood is important. If a money scheme was introduced, we would have to raise the level of checks that determine whether blood is safe. I understand the concerns of the World Health Organization and the transfusion service. When I was doing a radio interview in Northern Ireland, I heard that the policy there is that blood donation should be purely voluntary to make donated blood as safe as possible. I agree on that, but a money scheme would increase numbers, albeit that it is risky. We are a fairly safe country, so we could try out the idea.

**Nanette Milne:** There would be a cost to increased screening. At the moment, every blood donor has to complete a strict questionnaire and there are many categories of people who cannot give blood. Blood is thoroughly screened anyway but, if people cheated on the questionnaire and did not disclose conditions that they should disclose, and screening had to be upped and more people had to be screened, that would have a financial implication for the running of the service, including in terms of staff costs. I would think that that would be a downside to your argument. Would you like to comment on that?

**Andrew Danet:** I agree with you that that would be a bit of a downside, but increasing blood donation is very important—it is life saving. The biggest downside would definitely be increasing staff costs and so on. That is probably the con of my petition.

**Ben Jones:** At the end of the day, the whole point of the petition is to save lives. Paying people to donate blood will increase the numbers and that will save lives. When we started this, we did not know that it would be so big and that people would feel so much about it. Everyone in this room has probably had a family member who has needed blood at some time, which is why people feel so passionately. If people feel passionate about this, we could make it work.

As with all things like this, there will be people who try to cheat the system. I have read stuff online about people having fake identification and more than one ID so that they can give blood more than once in order to get more money. There will

be ways to cheat the system but, as I say, if people feel passionately about this, we can make it work and there will be ways to combat that.

**Nanette Milne:** Do you think that there are ways of doing that short of paying people to give blood—by increasing advertising, running awareness campaigns and so on? Do you agree that that should be the first move?

**Ben Jones:** Yes. Paying people is high up the ladder. The first stage would be to increase advertising campaigns, which is what they do in other countries. Paying people is the extreme way to go. I appreciate your concerns about that being a safety risk, but it could work if people feel passionately about it.

**Bill Butler:** I congratulate the petitioners on an excellent presentation and commend them for bringing a very important subject to the committee this morning. Ben, you said that if blood donors were paid, more would come forward. What evidence do you have for that?

**Ben Jones:** As Andrew says, in the countries that pay people to donate blood, the percentages are higher: 32 per cent in Iceland and 42 per cent in Denmark. Obviously, there is no direct link between paying people and those percentages, but it is suggestive.

**Bill Butler:** To support your case, you point out that the figures are higher in Iceland. Do you have any other international examples of paying people being successful? If it is successful in Iceland and other places, what do they do to prevent people from coming forward who carry blood infections such as HIV and hepatitis?

**Ben Jones:** That is a good question. I will be honest with you and say that I do not know the answer.

**Bill Butler:** Okay. Perhaps we can investigate that, convener.

I have one other question for any of the petitioners. Our information is that, at the moment, around 5 per cent of the Scottish population donate blood. We are also told that only 1 to 3 per cent of a national population needs to donate blood to ensure that there is enough blood available. If you accept both those facts, what is the point of your petition?

**Andrew Danet:** Help me out here. Okay, 5 per cent is a lot, but there might be a higher demand eventually. We are quite a small nation but the figure of 1 to 3 per cent does not sound a lot. I think that I read somewhere that it was not 1 to 3 per cent—I think that I read that it was 10 per cent, but I am not sure. I just think that it would be good to have an excess of blood rather than a shortage.

**Bill Butler:** That is an excellent answer to that question.

**The Convener:** But your blood pressure went up when that question was asked, did it not?

11:45

**Marlyn Glen:** I, too, am not sure, for the reasons that have been gone over, whether I am convinced about the idea of paying people to give blood. However, I am interested to know that there is a much better awareness scheme in France. The Public Petitions Committee has a reputation now of trying to be up to date and of using information technology—you cannot see that now, but there we go. You mentioned in your presentation the possibility of using e-mail and text alerts. Would you like to expand on that?

**Andrew Danet:** I understand that you cannot totally accept the idea of paying people to give blood, but I appreciate very much that you agree with raising awareness. In France, people get e-mail and text alerts that say that blood donations can be taken at a particular place, date and time. People are therefore kept up to date. They can be sent a text a week before, for example, so the system is very effective.

**Marlyn Glen:** That sounds like something that we could encourage people to do. It is very good to see young people being passionate about donation. Nanette Milne referred to organ donation, and there is even brain donation now—the Parkinson's Disease Society is pushing it. Quite a lot of work goes on in the Parliament on donation, and a blood donor van comes to the Parliament. We therefore really appreciate the publicity that the petition has given donation.

**Andrew Danet:** I would like to add, Frank, that when we were talking about—

**The Convener:** Call me convener.

**Andrew Danet:** Sorry. We said to the convener that the donation age in Northern Ireland is 16, which is something that we should maybe look at, because the donation age here is 17. Why do we not allow donation at 16? What is the difference?

**The Convener:** Where do you, as a teenager, take your information from most quickly? Is it from the new technologies of texts and the internet, or from conventional sources?

**Andrew Danet:** For me, it is from everything, but I can definitely see the appeal of up-to-date things such as television, e-mail and the internet. I can definitely see where they are coming from. I think that I would prefer to have a modern style of giving information.

**The Convener:** One of the concerns that people have is how they fit in donations with busy

lifestyles. For example, what always happens with me is that the letter comes in, I put it on the mantelpiece and I never quite get back round to it. It would be good if there was a regular reminder. Obviously, you would still have to take yourself to a particular location, whether that be the workplace, a study place or whatever, but it would be helpful to have a bit more prompting. Knowing where the venue was, and having a couple of hours to spare, you might think of popping over. That strikes me as a more effective way to trigger voluntary donations. From what I have picked up, I think that there is concern among committee members about a policy of paying people to donate. There is the issue of the regulatory framework to consider, and the safety issue and the principle behind it.

Beyond that, though, the broader question in your petition is about the effectiveness of the service. You are right to say that we do not know what is ahead of us medically or in terms of international events that might require a substantial blood bank, so that issue might be worth exploring. It would be helpful if, after reflecting on the issue—not necessarily today—you could make suggestions about how teenagers could get more engaged and how more teenagers could be brought within the orbit. For example, you said that the donation age is 16 in Northern Ireland and asked why it could not be the same here. Why cannot we look at that? Is there a practical way to overcome that difference? I would appreciate receiving your views on those areas subsequent to today's meeting.

**John Farquhar Munro:** I agree with what you said, convener. I do not think that a system of paying people to donate blood would find much support. It would create all sorts of anomalies and we would have people queueing up in a kind of dole queue on a Monday morning to get £5 or whatever. I can see all sorts of problems there. However, I certainly think that much more could be done through advertising and public awareness schemes to encourage people to continue to give as they do at present and maybe to encourage more to come aboard. There is no doubt that the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service undertakes a tremendous amount of work. People who work in the profession know how essential it is that there is a blood bank that is adequate for our needs. We should therefore have more publicity and more public awareness schemes.

**Andrew Danet:** When I was on Irish radio, I asked the man from the Irish blood transfusion service what he thought of the idea, and he just said point blank, "No way." I thought that the money idea was worth a try, but blood money was not my initial plan—it was definitely blood donation awareness.

**The Convener:** I do not know whether the issue is a morbid fascination for young people. I know from my own teenagers about the likes of “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”, “Twilight” and the new show “True Blood”—which must be supervised, I hasten to add; it is a great show, but it is pretty wild.

There is an issue around trying to ensure that youngsters are aware of the contribution that they can make. The committee has raised an immediate concern about cost but, in broader terms, we are happy to take on board some of your suggestions. We would like to explore further on your behalf the issues that you have raised to do with age, accessibility and promotion, and the need to ensure that we have a supply of blood that is adequate for our potential future needs.

Are there any further comments from members before we conclude the discussion of this petition?

**Nanette Milne:** The petition has come at an opportune time, as there happens to be a members’ debate in the Parliament on Thursday on the need for more blood donors. Members’ debates take place at 5 o’clock after Parliament’s official business of the day and, although a vote is never taken, a minister is present—it will probably be Shona Robison in this case—to reply to the points that are raised.

I am speaking in the debate on Thursday, and I will certainly draw the petition to the minister’s attention. The suggestions that you have made today will appear in the *Official Report* of this committee meeting—I will read it before the debate and ensure that I raise some of your non-remunerative suggestions. You have made some very good suggestions today, some of which—text alerts, for example—are important for your generation.

**Bill Butler:** Ben Jones said honestly that he could not answer the question on what the current situation is in Greece, Germany and America—I do not know whether any of us can at the moment. Perhaps we could set up a videoconference with representatives from the services there—rather than taking a trip to any of those places, I hasten to add—to find out what they do to increase the level of donation and to ensure that it is safe.

All the committee members will take part in a debate on Wednesday on a report on the way in which the Public Petitions Committee has been a success, the areas in which it has been less successful and how we can improve the public petitions process. One of the suggestions in the report is to hold more videoconferences so that we can check out what is done in other countries and make international comparisons to see whether what we do matches best international practice. As, like Ben Jones, none of us knows for certain about the situation in other countries, we could

perhaps take forward the videoconference suggestion in considering this petition.

**Andrew Danet:** I will just add—in case it changes anything—that, in Greece, the blood donation for money is run by a privatised rather than a public company.

**Bill Butler:** I think that safety is the main criterion, although I would always prefer public to privatised.

**John Farquhar Munro:** I think that it is commendable that a group of young people should lodge such a petition. It merits a lot of support. Not many young people would consider sitting down to write a petition on such an important issue.

**John Wilson:** I, too, commend Andrew Danet and his team for lodging the petition.

However, although it might be worth while communicating with other nations about how they deal with blood donations, we should bear in mind Bill Butler’s question to Andrew Danet about who provides the blood donations in those nations. Under the American system of private medical health care, users ultimately pay for such a service through their insurance. At present, America is involved in a major debate on public health care. The fact that many people each day in Scotland give blood for free pays testimony to our current system of health care. I would have an issue with encouraging people to give blood in return for a payment, because the NHS would ultimately need to pay for that. Like America and Greece, we could then end up with creeping privatisation. That would mean that everyone in this room would end up paying increased charges for a service that they receive for free at the present time.

Therefore, if we are to contact other nations, it might be worth while contacting nations that have a similar system to that of Scotland and the UK. That would be better than comparing our system with those of nations that have a system of private medical health care, which would only make for an unfair comparison.

**The Convener:** I hope that those responses provide some indication of the thoughtfulness that the committee can show in considering petitions. This Thursday’s committee debate in the parliamentary chamber will provide further opportunities for discussion of the issue.

The guarantee that I can give to Andrew Danet is that we will explore many of the points that have been raised by the petition. As will be evident from the nature of the questioning, we can be quite direct when we need to get to the heart of an issue. However, it is better to be honest at the beginning than to have any insincerity about the value of a petition. We think that the other aspects

of the petition will be the most productive in dealing with the concerns that have been raised. We will keep the petitioners up to date with the progress that we hope to make on the issue so that they have a chance to follow their petition through the rest of the process.

I thank the petitioners for their time. They should feel free to remain where they are while the other school students make their presentation. I hope that today's session has been helpful.

**Andrew Danet:** Thank you very much.

**The Convener:** I am conscious that we also have other new visitors today. Put up your hand up if you are from Bridgend primary school. Thank you very much—the old tactics still work well. We also have visitors from Park primary school.

I hope that you have all had a good experience with our education service this morning. We hope that today has given you a chance to understand more about the Parliament and how it should respond to you as citizens. When you reach voting age—which could soon be 16 rather than 18, according to speculation at the weekend—and cast your vote, we hope that you will be aware of the role that is played by the Parliament and by parliamentarians such as those who have been present today. If you ever see any of us in future, you can always buttonhole us and say, "When I was in primary 6/7, you came to my local high school. What have you done since about blood transfusion?"

I know that the Bridgend primary school pupils might need to leave shortly. If their teachers are thoughtful—they can stay here if they wish, unless that would cause trouble with the headteacher—they might want to leave just now before we consider the next petition. I thank everyone for their time and I hope that they have enjoyed being present here today.

### **School Visits (Funding) (PE1275)**

**The Convener:** Our final new petition today is PE1275. Again, it is from a student here at Alness academy. Andrew Page is ably assisted by Kirsty Adamson and Katie Lowe. The petition calls on the Parliament to urge the Government to ensure that all pupils at schools in remote areas such as the Highlands are not limited or prevented from visiting educational, cultural or study events in the central belt or Lowlands; to demonstrate financial equity in meeting the costs of such visits; and to ensure that location does not limit the opportunity to have such experiences.

I welcome the young students to the committee. You have seen the format, so do not worry too much about this. I invite Andrew Page to open with some comments—good luck to you.

12:00

**Andrew Page (Alness Academy):** Hello everyone, and welcome to Alness. Our petition is on equity in funding for school visits. The petition was created because here in Alness we feel that we are missing out on many educational events in the central belt and Lowlands of Scotland due to our geographical location. We need to pay large sums of money to get to events in the central belt and Lowlands. For example, a bus for 40 pupils costs our school about £480, which is usually split among the pupils who go, so families have to pay rather large amounts of money for their children to go on school trips.

Most educational events are held in the central belt. I know that we have Culloden up here, and Loch Ness, I suppose, but there are far more things down in the central belt, especially in Edinburgh and Glasgow. We also have the problem that going down to Edinburgh or Glasgow takes an awful lot of time, and there is nothing that we can do about that, but it means that we might also have to get accommodation, which adds to the £480 that we need for the bus. That does not help. It is rather unfair that pupils who are located around the central belt can get to those educational events, whereas we have to pull out of events because they are too much for our finances.

It does not help in the current economic climate if families have to pay large sums of money for their children to go on such trips. Many people are now redundant, and it is very hard for them. If one pupil goes on three or four trips to an educational site in the central belt or Lowlands in a year, their family has to pay about £100, which is far more than someone in the central belt pays—they probably have to pay very little. It is rather unfair, we feel.

We are requesting a subsidy, which would greatly benefit the educational journey of pupils in Highland. It would help with their families' finances, and it could also help us in studying for our important standard grade and higher exams. Such trips certainly benefit pupils and help with their studying and learning.

**The Convener:** Well done, Andrew. If Kirsty Adamson and Katie Lowe do not have anything to add at the moment, they can respond to questions.

The issue has been in the news recently, with an announcement relating to opportunities to visit designated sites of importance. That perhaps comes into the broader discussion.

I invite questions from members.

**Bill Butler:** Well done, Andrew, and well done to your fellow petitioners for your presentation and

for the content of your petition. Could you give the committee one or more examples of an educational or cultural trip that you or your fellow school students were prevented from going on because of the cost?

**Andrew Page:** I believe that there was a study session for higher students down in Edinburgh that our school was scheduled to go to, but due to the financial implications we failed to attend.

**Bill Butler:** Do you feel that that was to your detriment? If you had been able to attend, would it have helped you in the course of your study?

**Andrew Page:** I am sure that it would have helped the higher students who failed to go to it.

**Bill Butler:** You answered that perfectly.

If you are saying that there should be additional targeted funding or subsidy, who do you think should pay for it—the local authority or the Scottish Government?

**Andrew Page:** The Scottish Government.

**Bill Butler:** Through the local authority?

**Andrew Page:** Yes.

**Bill Butler:** That was a perfectly clear answer. Thank you very much.

**Nanette Milne:** As someone who was a councillor in the north-east of Scotland, I have a lot of sympathy for the principle of the petition. I know that schools in Aberdeenshire have to think very hard before they go on trips to the Scottish Parliament, for example. They have to tie in such trips with several other visits at the same time to make them financially viable. Educational trips are expensive. We come back to the fact that money is tight.

I have two questions. In your time at school, have you gone on any educational trips that were far afield? Where did you go? You mentioned one that did not come off. Earlier in the meeting, we talked about technology. You mentioned the highers event. Instead of travelling to it and thereby increasing your carbon footprint—to use the modern jargon—could you have taken part in it through videoconferencing? Could you have benefited from that more environmentally friendly approach?

**Andrew Page:** One visit that we went on was a geology trip to Our Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh, which cost roughly £35 to £40 per person, so it was quite expensive for us to go there. We had two or three coaches and more than 60 people went. We had to leave early in the morning and we had to finish our visit reasonably quickly. We also visited the Scottish Parliament and, again, we had to be reasonably quick. If a subsidy was available, not only would that knock money off the price of

such trips, it might allow us to stay longer. If we had had money to pay for accommodation, we could have visited more locations in Edinburgh, such as Edinburgh castle. That would have really benefited us, as we would not have had to leave at such an awkward time. It would have been less tiring for us if we had come back the next day at about 4 o'clock and got home at a reasonable time.

**Nanette Milne:** What about my second question, which was about doing part of such trips by videolink? I know that you probably could not visit Our Dynamic Earth by videolink, but perhaps you could find out about the Scottish Parliament that way.

**Andrew Page:** It might be possible to use videolink for some events, but it is not quite the same, and pupils might not benefit in the same way.

**Mary Scanlon:** Are the petitioners aware of anyone who has been unable to get sports training or to participate in sports competitions because of a lack of funding? I am aware of someone in Inverness whose children enter swimming competitions and they travel to Stirling because that is where the nearest 50m pool is. You did not mention sport. Are there similar considerations in that context?

**Andrew Page:** Yes. Trips for sport would be included.

**Mary Scanlon:** Could you give us any examples that you are aware of?

**Andrew Danet:** I have a friend called Lewis McIver who could not attend one of our Scottish competitions. He had to rely on a lift, because he was the only one going and there was no bus or coach, but he could not go because his driver was sick.

**Mary Scanlon:** What sport was that?

**Andrew Danet:** He did shotput—well, athletics.

**Mary Scanlon:** Thank you.

**The Convener:** There was a recent announcement that some resources would be provided to try to encourage school visits to the birthplace of Robert Burns, and to Culloden and Bannockburn. Given that you are close to Culloden, that is probably not the most exciting news for you. Are there any other events or occasions that you think that a young student in your academy would benefit from? I presume that awareness of the history of the immediate area is already in the curriculum.

**Andrew Page:** Study conferences would be one example.



**The Convener:** One of the things that all members feel strongly about is that the national galleries are all in Edinburgh. That is okay if you live or work in Edinburgh, but they are meant to be for everyone in Scotland. There are strong historical reasons why the galleries are in our capital city, which we can debate the rights and wrongs of until the cows come home, but that is the reality. How do we ensure that all citizens, particularly young citizens like yourselves, can experience those galleries, given that it is your mothers and fathers who are paying the taxes to provide them? That is a big question; sorry to ask you it. For example, do you think that it would be great if schools were given a cross-subsidy so that students could experience what is available in those galleries over the year?

**Andrew Page:** Yes. The subsidy would be for educational trips, not other trips, such as end-of-term trips.

**The Convener:** I do not think that we would be paying for long limousines or prom parties. Do not worry about that.

The issue is that you think that youngsters in other schools in Scotland have greater access to some things because of their geographical location.

**Andrew Page:** University open days are another example. It is difficult for us even to visit a university to see what it is like. The only thing that is kind of similar—it is not really the same—is Inverness College. It is not a university, so we cannot experience what a university is like. The universities—Aberdeen, St Andrews, Stirling, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Strathclyde—are all further south.

**Rob Gibson:** It would also be quite good for students from further south to be able to visit places such as Culloden and many other places in the Highlands and Islands that are integral to our national culture. The point that Andrew is making—sorry, is it Andrew? Yes, it is Andrew.

**Mary Scanlon:** There are two Andrews.

**The Convener:** It is a popular name.

**Rob Gibson:** It is a popular name indeed—a good name.

If students further south were able to access funding, it might allow more pupils throughout the country to understand their nation.

**Marlyn Glen:** It might be an idea if we set up some sort of exchange, so that pupils could spend time in another part of Scotland and live the life that other pupils live.

I want to ask about the national study session, which we can maybe make a noise about for next year and the year after. I was particularly

concerned that the session in Inverness was cancelled. Do you know whether another session in Inverness will be set up for you in future?

**Kirsty Adamson (AIness Academy):** As far as we are aware, the study session in Inverness was cancelled because it was too expensive to take it further up the country, which we found unfair, because the organisers did not consider the price that we have to pay to travel down. That is the cause of one of our issues: why should we have to pay to travel if they are not willing to bring it further up the country towards us?

12:15

**Marlyn Glen:** That is a direct concern about which we should ask questions for you in future.

**Andrew Page:** There are probably more events in the central belt and the Lowlands than there are in the Highlands. Obviously there are some here but, averaged out, there are more in the central belt and Lowlands, which is harder for us.

**The Convener:** We are trying to explore whether there is an attitude that you have to come to the central belt to get the experience and whether others are willing to acknowledge the genuine obstacles that you identify as youngsters—I am sure that they are also true for the broader population—because of the geography of our country. How do we ensure that our public bodies and agencies are more aware of those obstacles, so that we can get a more measured programme of activities that reflects more how far you have to travel? Perhaps activities can be provided in different ways, so that you get some of the experience more locally and then travel for a once-a-year experience, because you have built on other development and access issues. The committee may want to take that up.

We might want to explore the attitude of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, which runs the Parliament's business. It is great that the education service has provided the schools with the support that it has provided today. That service could always do with more support; it does not always get the resources that ordinary members of the Parliament would like it to have, because it could make a difference. We can take those points up.

Does Andrew Page wish to add any final comments on how he would like us to take the petition forward? We will follow it up with some of the appropriate bodies. Do you have any suggestions?

**Andrew Page:** It would be good if the petition was taken forward. I hope that a subsidy is eventually achieved.

**The Convener:** I thank all six students from the academy. We should take the chance to show our appreciation of the commitment and energy that they put into today's presentation, the research that they did to support their petition, and the fact that they handled some fairly tough and exacting questions with confidence. It worries me that I can see some future politicians emerging from the six of them. I hope that we can make progress. I ask the committee to show its appreciation of the youngsters. [*Applause.*]

I also thank Rob Gibson for his presence.

## New Petitions (Notification)

12:18

**The Convener:** We have reached the final part of today's formal committee business. We have notification of new petitions that will be presented to the committee in future. Do members agree to note the petitions mentioned in the paper?

*Members indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** I thank the headteacher Ken MacIver and Alex Ferrie, who is one of the senior modern studies teachers here; all the teachers in modern studies and associated subjects who brought along students from other high schools in the wider area; all the students who contributed; and all the members of the general public who managed to come along this morning. I hope that it has been worth while. Although, when we are told that a meeting is to take place in a different part of Scotland, committee members say, "I've got to travel," the reality is that we benefit from it. I appreciate the patience that everybody has shown us today. I also appreciate the Highland hospitality that we have been shown, the piper's welcome and the facility that the academy has made available.

We will have the chance to do a broad, open question-and-answer session from about quarter to 1 to about half past 1. There will be a brief break for the buffet for those who are present. I hope that we can benefit from that as well.

We have meetings ahead of us. I guarantee to the petitioners and the young people who are present that we will pursue their petitions. Young people are sceptical about the political process and whether it listens to the issues that they raise. I hope that we have done that and, more important, that the young students have benefited. When they put on their curriculum vitae the fact that they gave a presentation to a parliamentary committee that may or may not have influenced future policy, it will help them to stand out from other applicants in a tough job, college or university market. They have represented their school exceptionally well and I look forward to them having a good, positive future along with all the other young people who came.

I close the meeting and thank everyone for attending.

*Meeting closed at 12:20.*

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