



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 3 September 2013

Session 4

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

14th Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con)

*Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP)

*Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab)

*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Councillor Angus Campbell (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar)

Robbie Drummond (CalMac Ferries Ltd)

David Ewing

Stuart Garrett (NorthLink Ferries Ltd)

Mark Gordon (Secular Scotland)

Caroline Lynch (Secular Scotland)

Councillor Norman A Macdonald (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar)

Steve Moreton (Northlink Ferries Ltd)

Tam Parker (Scottish Association for Country Sports)

Dr Colin Shedden (British Association for Shooting and Conservation Scotland)

Roger Willison-Gray (CalMac Ferries Ltd)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Tuesday 3 September 2013

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:01*]

Interests

The Convener (David Stewart): Good morning and welcome to this meeting of the Public Petitions Committee. As always, I remind everyone to switch off their mobile phones and electronic devices, as they interfere with our sound systems.

I welcome David Torrance, who is a new member of the committee. He has replaced Adam Ingram. I place on record my thanks to Mr Ingram for his contribution to the committee's work, and I am sure that all committee members will want the committee clerk to write to him to pass on condolences for his recent bereavement.

The first item on the agenda is a declaration of interests by David Torrance. In accordance with section 3 of the code of conduct, I invite Mr Torrance to declare any interests that are relevant to the committee's remit.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I have no interests, apart from those that are registered.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

Current Petitions

Ferry Fares (PE1421)

Interisland Air Services (PE1472)

10:02

The Convener: Item 2 is consideration of three current petitions. As previously agreed, the first two petitions will be considered together.

First, the committee will take evidence from Western Isles Council on PE1421, by Gail Robertson, on behalf of the Outer Hebrides Commerce Group, on fair ferry fares; and on PE1472, by Councillor Gordon Murray and Councillor Rae MacKenzie, on behalf of Protecting Inter-island Transport Links, on interisland air services. Members have notes by the clerk on the petitions, which are papers 1 and 2.

I warmly welcome Councillor Angus Campbell, who is the leader of Western Isles Council, and Councillor Norman Macdonald, who is its convener. Thank you very much for coming, colleagues. I know that it is your committee cycle this week, as I bumped into Councillor Macdonald in Benbecula last week, and that you have had to disrupt your ordinary work in the Western Isles to come here.

I understand that Councillor Campbell will make a brief opening statement on the two petitions.

Councillor Angus Campbell (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar): Thank you for the opportunity to come to speak to the committee.

The two issues in front of members are very important for the Outer Hebrides. I will start with a few words on the road equivalent tariff, if I may.

In my 14 years on the council, we have always had a lobbying group on RET, and we were delighted to see RET introduced to the Western Isles. It made a significant impact on our own people's ability to travel, it brought in tourism, and it was important to the cost of bringing goods into the islands. Unfortunately, our economy relies very much on imported goods, and everything that comes into the islands adds to the cost of living. We were therefore disappointed, to say the least, when we saw that commercial RET was being removed.

Our issue—and, I imagine, the issue of the group that is mentioned in PE1421—is the evaluation that was done of the effect of RET on the commercial rates that were paid. I certainly feel—and I think that most councillors feel—that the evaluation of the process was not a very sophisticated look at the effect of the commercial help of RET. It has become apparent with the bit

of work that has been done since then that it offset a lot of other rises and costs for hauliers. Indeed, if we look at what has happened since it was changed, we will see that there has been a significant increase in the cost of bringing goods to the islands, which has affected every person on them.

I will give one example. It is estimated that, for a new couple, building a house costs an extra £3,000 because of the increased cost of bringing goods to the islands.

Our council recently had a joint meeting with the Outer Hebrides Commerce Group, which lodged PE1421. The council decided unanimously—that does not happen often in our council—to support a return to commercial RET as it was first introduced. That is our view on commercial RET.

I will put the flights issue in context. Like everybody else, we have been in a difficult place financially for the past three years. We have dealt with a 10 per cent budget cut. This year, we were on our third year of consultations after all the low-hanging fruit—the easier choices—had been picked in the previous two years.

As our history shows, we are committed to connection across the islands. Our investment in the interisland ferry movement has been significant in getting ferries to connect our islands.

One choice that was on the table was the removal of the Barra and Uist air services. In October and November, we did a round of public consultation on a list of all the possible ways of closing the funding gap. The priorities that came out of that were care of the elderly, education and community transport.

Norman Macdonald and I conducted meetings from the Butt to Barra. As a result of that process, which had the biggest consultation response that I have ever seen, the unacceptable options were taken out, the acceptable options were taken and there was a band in the middle, which included the Barra air service. The result was that much higher priority was put on community transport, education and home care. That came through even from community consultations on Barra. Unfortunately, we were in a difficult place, and we felt that people told us in the consultation that they would prefer to make such choices over some of the less palatable choices.

We know that the situation is not easy and we hope that, one day, we can revisit such things. However, like everybody else, we must live within our means.

The Convener: Thank you for raising issues to do with RET and air services. We will start with questions on RET then move on to air services.

Has your local authority collected evidence on the impact of the changes to RET that affect commercial vehicles? You have touched on that.

Councillor Campbell: We have supported the commerce group's work and we fed into the further study to evaluate the effects on trade in general and how they affected the prices that people who live on the islands pay. Our economic development department has been heavily involved in that work. We have also offered the group a lot of support with providing evidence on that issue.

The Convener: It is fair to say that Gail Robertson has done a great job with the group to highlight the RET issue. I think from looking at the local press and listening to local radio that she has had a high profile on the subject.

There have been changes in the transitional arrangements—for example, the limit for commercial vehicles went from 5m to 6m. Has that had much effect? Did you welcome that or did you see it as marginal?

Councillor Campbell: We absolutely welcome anything that brings down the cost of transport. That change certainly helped, and a few operators that travel with certain types of goods have been able to change from 5m to 6m vehicles to accommodate more on trips. However, it is without doubt that the majority of goods come to the islands on 40-foot wagons—they make up the vast percentage of travel backwards and forwards. The reinstatement of that cost still lies with everybody.

The Convener: The effect on the Western Isles economy is still an outstanding worry and concern.

Councillor Campbell: Absolutely. The majority of goods come on 6m wagons but, for example, house frames cannot be carried on such wagons.

The Convener: There is concern in the Highlands and Islands Enterprise area about the Western Isles economy and, in particular, the loss of young people to the economy. I presume that anything that hits economic activities in the Western Isles would concern councillor leaders such as you.

Councillor Campbell: Absolutely. The top priority of the council and the community planning partnership is to find work so that people have the choice whether to stay and live in the islands. The recent census showed, for the first time in many years, a slight increase in the population but, if you look into what lies behind that, it is the elderly who account for most of the increase, while the working population continues to decline. However, I am encouraged about the small increase in the zero to five age group, and I hope that that is a sign that our work is starting to have an effect.

The Convener: Thank you for that. I now bring in Angus MacDonald.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): Madainn mhath—good morning. It is good to see you both again, especially in the capital.

Some of the people in Lewis and Harris I have spoken to have said that local hauliers did not pass on to their customers the benefits of RET. What do you say to them?

Councillor Norman A Macdonald (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar): There has been a misunderstanding and a misconception about the basis of the decision to remove RET from commercial vehicles. Following the announcement of the introduction of RET, one haulier made it clear at the outset that it would not be possible for him to pass on a 40 per cent discount. That statement was taken out of context. The reality is that the haulier was unable to do that because he already receives a 25 per cent discount on fares through the haulage rebate scheme when he uses the freight ferries to take his vehicles across to the islands. However, his statement was taken to mean that he would not pass any of the RET benefit on to the customer.

Councillor Campbell mentioned the Halcrow study. The piece of work that was done in consultation with the Government, the council and others has shown that that report was flawed and not robust. Everyone now accepts that the benefit was passed on from the hauliers to their customers, but the question is whether their customers in turn passed on the benefits to individuals. For example, it can be demonstrated that the benefit was passed on to the big supermarkets, but whether they passed that on to their customers in any significant way is a matter of conjecture because it is hard to make on-the-shelf pricing comparisons.

There is no doubt that most people in the Hebrides accept that the hauliers—as they are able to—passed on the benefit to their customers. Some passed on the benefits in full; others did so to a lesser extent because they were already in receipt of discounts that related to volume and using the freight ferry.

Angus MacDonald: It is still a contentious issue. As recently as two weeks ago, I spoke to a number of small and medium-sized enterprises and was told that hauliers did not pass on the benefits of RET. Indeed, some maintain that, when RET was introduced, one haulier in particular increased his rates. There is clearly disagreement in the islands on the issue.

Has Comhairle nan Eilean Siar considered offering financial or other support to groups affected by the removal of RET fares for commercial vehicles?

Councillor Macdonald: The interisland ferry service offers that support to hauliers in the islands through a business assistance scheme—the scheme must comply with state aid rules—but we do not offer that to hauliers who bring goods into the islands. That is generally seen as the way in which those subsidies work. It is the same with air services. For services into the islands, it is usually the Government that provides subsidies, but we take responsibility for services within the islands—in that respect, there is no difference between us and Orkney and Shetland—although we were delighted by the Government's announcement that it would introduce RET on the interisland services within the lifetime of this Parliament. The sooner that happens, the better for the hauliers who ply their trade between our islands.

10:15

Councillor Campbell: At a time when we are struggling to provide financially for our core services, much as we would like to see more done in economic development—and as a local council we are probably more active than most, because of the nature of the islands—we must make priority choices. The same sort of discussion can be had about the air services.

As a small businessman myself, I think that what is apparent is the rise in prices since the change back on RET. The second piece of work that has been done is credible and more sophisticated, identifying exactly what costs were coming in on top of that at the time, such as increased costs for fuel and insurance, and how those increases were dealt with. Some companies can show eight years of no increase in transportation costs to the islands by opening up their books. We would all agree that there are not many things in life that have been cost equal for the past eight years, but I accept that the perception out there is that people are paying too much and, as a small businessman, I can guarantee that I would always complain about that.

Angus MacDonald: What has resulted from your discussions with the Scottish Government?

Councillor Campbell: There are quite a few issues outstanding from the discussions with the Minister for Transport and Veterans. Following the meeting at which everyone agreed that we have a set position on the reintroduction of RET for commercial vehicles, as it was, we wrote to the minister asking for another meeting. I have had an acknowledgement, but I am still waiting for a time for that. The same applies to a couple of other issues, so I have written again saying that it would be good to deal with all those things together. I

await a reply, and I hope that we can get positive engagement on that again.

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): The briefing paper refers to various reports and gives dates for when they were produced, and it also refers to a six-month study being carried out with stakeholders. Can you tell me exactly where we are on the reports that have been carried out and are being carried out?

Councillor Campbell: I cannot give an exact date, but the Halcrow report was done during the period when commercial RET was being looked at and the decision was taken to pull back, based on evidence. The bigger piece of work, the six-month study, came to an end at the end of last year. I think that it was finished in January, and the Government went public with it in May.

Chic Brodie: I am still confused, because the paper states that

“In April 2013, Transport Scotland advised that it intended to carry out a review of large commercial vehicle fares”,

and that the

“report was published on 13 May 2013.”

It is probably me who has got the figures wrong, but I have to satisfy myself on that point.

I understand the view that you take of this element, but I would like to ask about the example that you gave in relation to house prices. Is that all down to RET or is it down to other economic factors?

Councillor Campbell: That figure was used as an example of the effect of RET on the cost of bringing goods to the island. If a 40-foot trailer costs an extra £500 or £600 and someone needs to bring two or three across, you can readily work out the costs in your head. I do not know whether the committee has seen the report on the second study that was done, but it gives more comprehensive detail on how those costs were calculated than I can give you today.

Chic Brodie: Based on those reports, would you be satisfied with further amendments to the proposed fare structure for longer commercial vehicles, or do you see the reintroduction of RET as essential?

Councillor Campbell: Our position as a comhairle is that, ideally, we would be looking to get back to where we were, but there is no doubt that anything that would move the position on would be welcome. We are more than willing to have any constructive discussions that might move us along that road.

The Convener: I was going to move on to air services, but Jackson Carlaw and John Wilson have further questions on RET.

Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con): When I was on Arran over the summer, I spoke to a number of businesses. I think that other islands would also have welcomed the opportunity for commercial RET. The response that they have received from the Government and ministers is the one that you have been challenging this morning: that the experience in your community was that that money was pocketed and not passed on to the community, and that the issue is therefore off the agenda. Getting to the truth of the matter is fundamental to the wider public consideration of the issue.

What slightly worries me about your evidence this morning is that it is all somewhat anecdotal. We will not see a change of policy based on statements that begin, “Most people accept,” “We can say,” or, “There was one haulier who might have.” To what extent can the council, notwithstanding the various reports that have been published, produce something a little bit more authoritative and empirical about the experience of named companies and individuals who are prepared to attest to the fact that they feel that the benefit was being passed on to the community?

Finally, having looked through all the evidence—I know that the production of reports is under way—can you at this stage quantify the financial loss to the islands in the 12 months following the withdrawal of the commercial subsidy? That would give us some idea of what the economy has probably lost in total as a consequence.

Councillor Macdonald: The report that MVA Consultancy concluded in January is the most definitive and robust. The hauliers provided their books to the consultants on an open-book basis to demonstrate that they were passing on the benefits from RET.

There is no doubt about the benefits of RET. The £3,000 figure that Angus Campbell mentioned is the increase in cost from the period when RET applied to the period when RET was removed and fares increased by 50 per cent. The figure equates to the difference over that period, so that was the benefit for one household as they got a house across. That does not happen every week, but it happens quite often. The most important thing is the number of articulated vehicles that go on the ferry every day of the week and bring goods to the isles. One of the challenges that both sets of consultants faced in putting a figure on the loss is that it is very difficult to quantify the difference, but in that period it is probably into millions of pounds.

The Government is probably best placed to know the figure, because it knows what it has saved as a result of not paying the 40 per cent discount. That is the tip of the iceberg in terms of the loss, because that is the actual saving, but

there is also a knock-on effect on services. It is very difficult to put an accurate figure on the loss.

The Convener: I am sorry to cut across Mr Carlaw's question, but I am not aware of the second consultants' report that you mentioned. Can you provide the clerks with that information? It is crucial that committee members see the second consultants' report.

Councillor Macdonald: Absolutely. I think that that was a report that was commissioned jointly by us and the Government. As Angus Campbell said, the Government ultimately published it in May.

The Convener: Your second point about savings for the Government is obviously something that we can determine from the Scottish Government by asking it the question or getting a clerk to write to the minister. That information is easy to get once we know that that figure exists.

Jackson Carlaw: I simply want to commend something. Mr MacDonald was slightly concerned because he still met people who thought that the benefit had not been passed on. That is very much the nub of the argument. I think that the public impression is that the argument has been lost. If you think that that is not the case, a considerable job needs to be done to counteract that impression, and that needs to come from within your community in the first instance to help us.

Councillor Macdonald: Absolutely. On the response that Mr MacDonald has received, I do not think that the response would be different in any town in the country if people asked, "Are things more expensive now than they were?" There is no doubt about that. There is an element of that, but the reality is that things would be a lot more expensive—even now—if it were not for the RET level that is currently in place. That is the critical point for us. Things would be a lot worse than they are. There is no doubt that you will find people who will say that things are generally more expensive. There are services that RET has no impact on—it has no impact on electricity, for example—and people are paying more. Therefore, the general view that we take is that things are more expensive.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Good morning, gentlemen. I want to follow up on Jackson Carlaw's issue. You referred to all hauliers opening up their books for examination. Did all hauliers participate in that exercise? Did they all provide their accounts to show the difference that RET made to their operations and its impact?

Councillor Campbell: No. I think that one or two still refused to take part in the process. There is no way that I have come here to protect or stand up for hauliers; that is their business, and they

have to do that. We are looking at the effect on our community. Most of the hauliers came forward, including some big ones, and said, "The people doing the study can go in there on a confidential basis." That is why it would be very good for the committee to see the study and the conclusions that those people were led to.

John Wilson: I accept what you say. The reason why I asked the question is that RET would apply to every haulier and, if it applies to every haulier, I would expect all hauliers to participate in any exercise that could allow an argument to be built up to allow the further introduction or reintroduction of RET. Our difficulty is the issue that Angus MacDonald raised. Some hauliers said that they were passing on the benefits of RET to their customers, but there was no guarantee that those benefits were then passed on to the consumer. Jackson Carlaw referred to the public perception. It is very difficult in these economic times to get that public perception correct because of the increasing prices of foodstuffs and other stuff, no matter where a person is in the United Kingdom. It is about trying to ensure that the general public feel that there is a genuine benefit in providing RET to hauliers and that benefits are passed on not only to the hauliers' customers but to the residents of the islands.

Councillor Campbell: We would have no argument at all with that. That is the difficulty with a chain of businesses. However, if people do not campaign for RET for the islands, a 40 per cent uplift in building costs will remain, which makes it virtually impossible for people to live and work on the islands. I agree that it is important that we must find a way for benefits to filter down to the end user, but there is no doubt that, without such measures, you are giving up on people who live on those islands.

Councillor Macdonald: It could be a condition of receiving a rebate that hauliers open up their books to the Government on a confidential basis so that at least it is sure that the discount has been passed on by the hauliers to their customers. After that, it is largely due to competition. If somebody takes a pallet full of whisky across on a truck, for example—perhaps this is not a very good example—that is discounted by 40 per cent by the haulier for a customer and another customer who is in the same business, and one of the retailers passes on that discount, competition will drive it beyond the stage at which the haulier passes it on.

It is very difficult to intervene in such situations, but if one supermarket is selling its whisky 40 per cent cheaper than another supermarket because it is genuinely passing on the discount to the consumer, clearly people will support that business. Competition is really the only measure

there is for that at the moment because I do not think that the big supermarkets are prepared to open up their books to us or to anybody else.

10:30

The Convener: We have found that with the supply of fuel to the Western Isles. I have been involved in a few of these areas and your questions about RET also apply to the provision of fuel. John?

John Wilson: Thank you, convener—that is all of my questions.

The Convener: I am conscious that we are slightly behind time, but I will bring in Chic Brodie and then I want to move to air services.

Chic Brodie: I am not sure how much foundation there is in this question but it follows on from what John Wilson said and it has relevance to the next part of our session. Output in the Highlands and Islands has gone up—in fact, population has gone up. Given the constraints that you have, can you explain why that is happening?

Councillor Campbell: In the Highlands and Islands?

Chic Brodie: In the islands.

Councillor Campbell: I do not judge myself qualified to speak on that. The population figure that I referred to earlier is certainly worth a further look in terms of what is happening on the islands—in the Western Isles, where I come from. We have not got over the change to the demographics: our working age population is still going down. We are seeing a bit more economic activity. Within that figure, you will see that 12 per cent of the working population now work off the islands. A big part of our economy involves a breadwinner having to work away from home and bring the money back into the islands.

Our challenge is to get core businesses—production businesses—on the islands. For us, one of the big drivers for that over the past 10 years has been renewable energy. That is a whole other argument, but we have been thwarted in it. The Outer Hebrides still has the issue of maintaining businesses of sufficient quality to support a good workforce—that is still our challenge today.

The cost of starting a business on the Western Isles is considerably more than on the mainland because of the transport costs. It is an argument that we are having on European funding. We have to recognise that, if someone wants to start a business, it is not the cost per job but the cost of providing the job there that they have to consider, if we want people to work and live in the islands.

The Convener: We will move on to air services, and I will start with a couple of questions.

First, why were air services cut? You mentioned services from Stornoway to Benbecula and the service from Benbecula to Barra. Why were they cut by your local authority?

Councillor Campbell: I think that it was purely down to our financial situation. We have had to deal with a £12 million cut to a £120 million budget over the past three years. We had the cut to air services on the table a year before, and fortunately we were able to make other cuts, but this time it has been really difficult working out where to go to find the money.

As I said in my introduction, the cut was part of the consultation process, which was a four or five-month intensive period of consultation. We have had nothing like it in the Outer Hebrides before, to my knowledge, in terms of response and engagement and size of meetings. The priorities that came through clearly to us from the people were very much towards other services.

The Barra air service, for instance, is used by about 2,000 people a year, mostly from the public sector—almost universally from the public sector—and tourists. It was costing us £83 per single trip subsidy for a tourist to go from Barra to land on the beach and £83 to get them back again. We said to our people, “Is that good value for the restricted money that we have left, or would you rather have us keep more home helps, provide more community transport or do more in our schools?” The answer was quite emphatic, and that is why we ended up taking the decision that we took.

Councillor Macdonald: On that point, I attended the first consultation meeting on our budget cuts in Castlebay. When we went out to the wider public, the consultation was on some 140 different lines of budget that directors of departments had brought forward as the cuts that they deemed, as directors, were most palatable, given that we told them that we did not want to impact on jobs or front-line services. We went out to consult on those options.

There were more than 60 people at the Castlebay meeting and more than 120 at some of the other meetings in the first round of budget consultation. We said to them, “These are the options that we have; what are your views?” As Angus Campbell said, the priorities that were identified across the islands involved community transport within communities—to take people to post offices, shops, surgeries and so on—and education, specifically specialist teachers in schools. That is one place in the education system where cuts could have been made, because we do not have to have specialist teachers. Those

were the key issues that people raised as major concerns.

We said that the council would make decisions and come back in January with a range of measures that we were minded to take. We mitigated the worst impacts and, in January, because we had publicised what we were minded to do and taken into account people's concerns about the services—the home-help services, the specialist teachers and community transport—the number of people who turned out at the consultation meetings was less than a third of the number who turned out at the first ones, and the feedback we got was very positive, as we had reacted to people's priorities.

At the meetings in Barra and South Uist, people expressed concerns about transporting people from those areas to hospital. They encouraged us to engage with the health board to see whether it would contribute towards the maintenance of the air services. We did that, but we did not get a positive response. We investigated a range of avenues that would allow us to retain those services. The other option was to cut the Benbecula to Stornoway service altogether. The compromise was to reduce that service to a three-days-a-week service.

There were difficult choices across the board, but we feel that the balance that was struck was largely right. We have the evidence for that in the consultation responses, in terms of the number of people, including those in Barra and South Uist, who expressed concerns about the air services as opposed to the other services.

The other thing that changed within that period involved the inter-island ferry service between Eriskay and Castlebay. As the number of people using the air service has declined rapidly, the number of people using the ferry service has risen. There has been a significant shift. People have decided that they want the flexibility and the ease that is provided by a service that goes back and forth across the sound three or four times a day rather than one that still depends on the beach in Barra.

The Convener: The Scottish Government says that it has funded your local authority for the air services. What is your argument against that point?

Councillor Campbell: I have heard that argument, but one of the great things that the Scottish Government has done has been to remove ring fencing with regard to how we spend our money. As I understand it from discussions with the Government, the idea is to allow us to address local priorities, and the local priorities, which were clearly expressed to us by the people to whom we spoke, were what we tried to address

through our decisions on the budget. I cannot see why a Government would want to ring fence funding for a service that is not one of the priorities of the people in the area.

Angus MacDonald: In March, when we were in Stornoway, Councillor Gordon Murray and Councillor Rae MacKenzie gave evidence that, when the Outer Hebrides were first brought together under one local authority, every effort was made to provide the infrastructure to bring the communities physically together and that the air service between Barra, Benbecula and Stornoway was one of the first achievements in relation to that goal. Now that you have ditched that lifeline service, where does the principle of bringing together the island communities stand?

Councillor Macdonald: I do not think that we have ditched the Benbecula to Stornoway service; it has been reduced from a five-day to a three-day service. However, the Benbecula to Barra service has been discontinued.

You are quite right that linking up the islands was an aspiration of the local authority long before Angus Campbell and I had anything to do with it. Indeed, that is what the council has done over the past 35 to 40 years by building causeways and putting in place ferry services where previously there was none. That is what has had the impact; it has also had an impact on the Sound of Harris ferry, which runs between Leverburgh and North Uist.

Day and daily, a huge amount of traffic is going back and forth throughout the islands. However, the difference with the Benbecula to Barra service is that, as Angus Campbell has made clear, fewer than 2,000 people used it; the average load factor was 25 per cent; the council subsidy was four times what the customer was paying for the seat; and a third of the seats were taken up by tourists staying in Barra.

We welcome tourists but, given the range of cuts that we had to make, we would not be acting responsibly if we maintained a service that provided for visitors and tourists in Barra to go on a 20-minute flight to Ballavanich, not even get out of the plane and then 10 minutes later fly back to the beach on Barra and for which we were paying an £80 subsidy per seat at the same time as we were considering reducing overnight support and home-help services.

That was the basis of our decision—and we did not take it lightly. As Angus Campbell has said, we considered air service reductions in each of the past three years and left them alone. However, the low-hanging fruit has now disappeared and we are now having to make difficult choices. No one welcomes the removal of services, but every local

authority in the country and indeed every Government has to look at what it is doing.

Angus MacDonald: I take your point about subsidising tourists but surely the flights are not jam-packed with tourists. There will be people trying to get to the Western Isles Hospital, for example.

Councillor Macdonald: The reality is that these flights are not jam-packed with anyone. You are talking about an 18 or 19-seater plane used by an average four or five people, a third of whom are considered to be tourists and another third public sector workers.

There is undoubtedly an issue about transporting patients to hospital, but during the consultation process the people in Barra made it very clear that if they were going to end up in Inverness or Glasgow for medical treatment they would rather go straight from Barra to, say, Glasgow than go from Barra to Benbecula to Stornoway and then to Inverness or Glasgow.

When we asked Transport Scotland whether it would be prepared to consider a second rotation of the plane to Barra on a daily basis, it said no. The fact that that service is full much of the time is a constraint in getting patients to hospital. On the other hand, full flights are a good thing for air service operators and anyone who subsidises a service, and we suggested to Transport Scotland that a second rotation direct from Glasgow to Barra as the tide allowed—which is possible—would alleviate the problem significantly and allow everyone who needs to go to hospital in Glasgow to get there timeously.

The Convener: We are well over time, but I am keen to get in as many questions as possible. I must therefore ask for short questions and, indeed, short answers.

Angus MacDonald: I will be as brief as I can, convener.

I presume that both of you will have read Friday's *West Highland Free Press* article entitled, "Loss of Barra air link must be reversed". For the committee's benefit, I will read out this very short article:

"When they were compiling their list of savings, officials at Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's headquarters in Stornoway turned their attention to the inter-island flights between Barra and Benbecula.

Here was a service that seldom flew with every seat occupied"

as you have clearly stated.

"Those on board were mainly patients on their way to medical appointments, with a sprinkling of councillors and public-sector employees making up the rest.

So councillors voted to axe the service, saving £148,000 a year. The number of flights between Benbecula and Stornoway was also cut to three per week.

Barra is now suffering the consequences.

There are elderly patients who have to take a ferry and then a taxi to get to Benbecula for a flight to Glasgow because the direct flight from Barra is full. Visiting health specialists can no longer visit. Fears have also been voiced that urgent blood products might not make it from Stornoway to Barra in time.

Compared to the personal impact, the additional cost to NHS Western Isles of sending patients to Glasgow seems unimportant, but it could be considerable, as the health board suggested last week.

Cutting the Barra-Benbecula air service was a bad decision. It must now be reversed before those comhairle councillors and officials end up with more than red ink on their hands."

What do you say to that?

10:45

Councillor Campbell: I take my decisions based on what I get back through the consultation process rather than on what I might read in the press. However, a couple of those points have already been mentioned.

The need for two rotations from Barra to Glasgow is absolutely clear. We have asked that the Government consider dealing with that through the public service obligation, but the Government's response was that, due to restricted resources, it cannot consider increasing the PSO.

We are in exactly the same position. For example, the recent application for a flight from Skye to Oban was rejected by the Minister for Transport and Veterans because the projected passenger numbers of 14,000 were not enough for the Government to put money into it. We have fewer than 2,000 passengers travelling on the Barra service.

When we talked to the health board, we pointed out that most of the consultation responses were about the effect on health services. We asked the health board to consider whether, if our proposed change resulted in an increased cost of service provision for its budgets, it might come to the table to see whether we could do something together. We actually left some money in the pot so that we could come to a solution with health.

We are not allowed to take advantage of the air discount scheme from the islands to the mainland because, as a public body, we would be receiving a second subsidy if we did. However, as a local authority we were second subsidising every trip that was made for health board services or the enterprise agency.

We are still working on the issue, but I believe that, if we had a system in which all parts of the

public sector paid the full cost and the discount applied only to ordinary passengers who were island residents, the system could be made to work. However, we need the health board and the enterprise agency to come to the table.

We are willing to provide our part, but we cannot continue to take away from other services to provide a double subsidy to the health board or a trip for tourists. It was a hard decision but one that we had to take.

Angus MacDonald: To date, has the health board refused to come to the table?

Councillor Campbell: We have had great difficulty in getting a meaningful discussion with the health board. For example, I took up with the health board individual cases from Barra after two ladies spoke to me during the second consultation. When I spoke to the health board chief executive, he said that the board would just send the patients to Glasgow. That is the level of engagement that I have had.

The health board may find that the change has had an effect on its budget, but that is what we said to it. We asked the health board to do a piece of work on the issue and, if the change resulted in £80,000 of additional cost, it could put £40,000 of that towards the air service and we would match that.

The Convener: Time is short, so we need to move on to the next question, which is from Chic Brodie.

Chic Brodie: Gentlemen, what discussions have you had with other councils on the west coast in looking at the overall costs? Is Glasgow the centre of the universe—why must you fly there rather than, for example, an airport nearer my home? Have you had any discussions about outsourcing the service? I understand the issue about European state-aid rules on providing a subsidy for commercial purposes, but have you had any such discussions?

Councillor Campbell: Yes, we have, but let me make a couple of points.

First, when we put the service out to tender this time, we made the tender as flexible as possible to see what different answers we might get. We left the matter open to operators to put proposals on the table about providing the service in a different way. Unfortunately, particularly given the need for a twin otter-type plane for the Barra service, only the present operator was near the point—there was one other operator that was so far away that its proposals just did not make sense.

On the wider picture about being more inventive or thinking outside the box about the provision of west coast services, we are feeding into the current HITRANS study on the greater use of rural

air space and on how the twin otter planes could be used more efficiently. We know that the way that Ryanair makes best use of its resources is to keep its planes flying and to keep them working. We have unique planes that could go to other parts of the west coast and Highlands and Islands and, particularly when the new planes are available, we should be making more use of them. We are feeding into that study.

There are also discussions through the Highlands and Islands conveners group, and transport is on the group's agenda almost every single time. We meet eight or nine times a year to discuss such issues.

Chic Brodie: I suggest that there might be an acceleration of that discussion, with consideration given to having less of a burden on the public sector. I am sure that you are pursuing that.

What basic changes would you like to be made to Scottish Government policy regarding PSOs?

Councillor Campbell: PSOs are very important instruments for islands and for remote and rural communities up and down the Highlands. To have the ability to use them on more routes and in slightly different ways would be a good thing. The protection of them as a tool to make things happen is very important to islands and remote communities.

Councillor Macdonald: PSOs are instruments that are used more often than not with some form of subsidy—a PSO is required to be in place for there to be a subsidy—but I believe that there can also be PSOs that do not require subsidy.

Such PSOs are often used to safeguard and give a monopoly position to an operative where services are considered to be so fragile that, if a competitor came in, both companies would cease to function and we would end up with no service at all. PSOs have been an extremely useful mechanism right across Europe, not just in the Highlands and Islands, for protecting air links, road links and, in some cases, rail links.

The mechanism is there to be used. It is a lot more flexible than some people think in what can be done with it. If a subsidy is provided, that has to be done through either a PSO or aid of a social character. Those are the only two mechanisms that are readily available.

Jackson Carlaw: As I said to the petitioners when we first heard about the matter, it struck me that PE1472 is inviting us to strike at the very heart of local democracy. There are not many things that right-thinking people can say the Scottish National Party Government has done that are whole-heartedly to the benefit of the country, but the ending of ring fencing of local authority expenditure was one.

Essentially, we are being invited to intervene on a matter that is currently in the competence of the local authority. I do not know what representation Councillors Murray and MacKenzie are within the local authority, and whether they support the administration or are opposed to it. I understand that they are opposition. We have two opposition councillors coming to the Scottish Parliament inviting us to support a petition that overturns the decision of the democratically elected local authority in exercising its due responsibility.

I do not know whether you agree, but—whatever the merits, or not, of the decision—it seems to me that the appropriate remedy, if the people of the islands feel sufficiently strongly about the matter, is through the ballot box at the next set of local authority elections, when they can either return or reject the local authority that has made the decision. Is that a proposition with which you agree?

Councillor Campbell: Absolutely. That is a proposition that we have to deal with at every single election, and it is one that I am very prepared to deal with.

We do not have what I recognise as an opposition in our council. I see an independent council of 31 members, which has a couple of groups within it. I do not recognise the word “opposition”, because we do not have an administration as such. The challenge that I would make to anybody who talks about the choices that we have made is to go to their own constituency and tell people what they are going to do instead. That is the challenge for us all.

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): This is a tiny question, but it is nonetheless important. Good morning, councillors. What advantages do the subsidised air services operating within the Western Isles bring that are not provided by the subsidised ferry services? Setting aside the information that you have given us about health services, which are hugely important, what other advantages do you see?

Councillor Campbell: They certainly speed up transport for people going from north to south. They make it more possible to do certain activities and return home within the same day.

Ferry services have come on leaps and bounds. I remember when we started the ferry service from South Uist to Barra 11 or 12 years ago. The council paid for it for the first few years to prove the cost. We were using a 12-passenger sea angling boat to take people across—we had used fishing boats previous to that. We now have a crossing four times a day and 20 times more people use the ferry service than choose to use the air service. That tells us something.

The cost of the ferry service is significantly lower even with the subsidy, and ordinary people will choose to travel in that way. Considering the time that is involved in going to an airport and booking in, although the flight is relatively short, there is not much difference between flying and other modes of travel.

Councillor Macdonald: The other important thing is that the air services bring accessibility to the islands both ways. They make the islands accessible to people who want to visit them, but—probably more important—the 12 per cent of our working population who work away, many of them offshore in the oil and gas industry or the merchant fleet, are totally dependent on being able to get to work and home quickly. More people are using the services for that reason. Business users use the air services quite a bit, but the public sector uses them less following the removal of the air discount scheme for public sector use.

The statistics show that people are using the air services. As an authority, we use them, although we are using them less than we did in the past because the 40 per cent discount was really important to us. The removal of the air discount scheme for the public sector has had an impact and, over time, if things continue as they are, the number of people using the air services will decline to the extent that most of the routes in and out of the islands will be commercial routes. Those routes are subsidised through the individuals using them, but they are nonetheless run as commercial operations and if they do not have the load factor that they are looking for—it is not 25 per cent; it is more like 60 per cent—those services will be considered to be marginal.

John Wilson: Are there any proposals to monitor the health and economic impacts of the decision to withdraw the subsidy? We have heard evidence that people with hospital appointments, medical appointments and other issues may find it more difficult to get from certain areas to the areas where they receive their treatment. The economic impact on the islands is also important. In our earlier discussion, we spoke about the population size of the Western Isles. Could the withdrawal of the subsidy potentially have an impact on the repopulation or the existing population of certain remote areas in the Western Isles?

Councillor Campbell: Our economic development department is continually monitoring that. The commerce group is also conducting a study into the economic effect on Uist businesses of the loss of the air service on Mondays and Fridays. We are getting that information fed back to us.

We also have a continuing discussion with community councils and councillors. Two weeks ago, I was down in Barra meeting the two

community councils there. I asked them to come to the table and provide evidence of the real effect that the withdrawal of the subsidy has had. That discussion is going on.

Please do not think that we want this. We are trying to find ways of getting back to where we were and we are keen to build up as much evidence as we can and to find other ways of providing the service. I assure you that that process is on-going. We also engage through community planning and the local office of Highlands and Islands Enterprise to get feedback on whether there has been an effect on business from the loss of the subsidy. The challenge is to equate that.

John Wilson: Is Western Isles NHS Board involved in the discussions, given the potential additional cost to the health board of transferring patients to the mainland instead of taking them to Stornoway? Have those additional costs been included in any assessment by the health board?

Councillor Campbell: There is an open invitation for the health board to feed into that process, which has been repeated several times. The health board is also part of the community planning partnership in which we have that discussion. However, we are not getting figures back from it. For instance, when the issue of the blood that was mentioned in the article that Angus MacDonald read out arose, we approached the health board and we were told that there is no reason why we cannot have a sufficient blood supply in Barra to provide that service. We have to take that as the expert point of view. However, it is fair to say that we are not getting from the health board a breakdown of the additional or marginal costs of providing the service in a different way.

11:00

The Convener: I apologise for the fact that we have overrun the suggested timings for this item, but I think that everyone would agree that this is an important issue not only for the Western Isles but for island and rural communities across Scotland. Our witnesses have raised some interesting pieces of information.

My view is that it is important that we do some research on the issue. For example, we should look at the consultant's report that Councillor Macdonald mentioned, which we have not had access to. There are probably also wider issues. I feel that it would be useful to invite Keith Brown to talk to us about the issue at a future meeting, and also to involve the chair or chief executive of NHS Western Isles. We might even want to speak to the managing director of Highlands and Islands Airports, because there are issues for our air services. Whatever happens, if we end up with

fewer services to Benbecula and Barra, that will make both those airports more marginal, which is really worrying. Last week, I heard that the catering at Barra airport has stopped because it is not viable to run it any more. The council, which is operating under real constraints, did what it had to do, but that is just a small example of what is happening in relation to the viability of those marginal airports.

I appreciate that members do not necessarily want individual petitions to run and run, but I believe that there is still a lot of meat in this petition and issues that we need to explore. I still have a lot of questions about the next steps, and I am sure that other members do as well. As always, I welcome members' views.

Chic Brodie: I support that view, convener. I would rather have the conversation with the minister first, before we focus on issues involving the Highlands and Islands, because the issue is much wider than that. The issue is clearly important to the people who are with us today, their colleagues and people in the Western Isles, but—as I suggested when I said that work should be done with other councils—there is a much bigger issue here. However, we should certainly speak to the chief executive of NHS Western Isles.

The Convener: I should perhaps have been clear about the fact that we are, of course, talking about two petitions. One is about RET and the other is about air services. Keith Brown is the minister who is responsible for both those issues, which is why I suggested that we talk to him.

Angus MacDonald: I was pleased to hear the convener of the council say that it is looking at ways of getting the service back up and running. However, the difficulty with the health board is clearly a major hurdle to clear.

I agree that it might be a good idea to invite the chair of the health board to appear before the committee. However, it might also be a good idea to write first to the health board to ask why it is not prepared to get round a table with the council and other interested parties.

Jackson Carlaw: I am slightly flabbergasted. I have to say that I think that we are worrying at a bone and are straying beyond the remit of the petition when we try to make wider inquiries into this, that and the next thing.

It is fairly clear that the Government has said that it has no plans to review its policy on these matters and that the removal of subsidies by a local authority is a matter for that local authority. I am not clear what we think we are going to achieve by pursuing the issue. There seem to me to be two definitive positions and, therefore, I do not think that any further progress is going to be made. I understand the broader issues that you

seek to address, but I am not sure whether they are matters for this committee or matters that another committee that is more directly responsible for such issues should be invited by us to consider and pursue.

John Wilson: The petition before us is worthy of further examination. As Jackson Carlaw quite rightly said, decisions of local authorities are matters for those local authorities. One of the priorities that the UK Government and the Scottish Government have set themselves is preventative spending. If we find that the health board is spending more of its resources off-shoring provision—if I may use that term—from Stornoway to the mainland, that might result in a potential cut in services in Stornoway and the rest of the island. We need to ensure that, when we consider public expenditure, we do not offset expenditure on services that could be provided in communities.

I would like to think that we could examine these matters further, convener. We should follow your suggestion and write to NHS Western Isles to ask why it has not fully participated in the work that the council has done and what additional costs the health board has borne as a result of having to transport people from Barra and other areas in the Western Isles to mainland hospitals to access services that could potentially be better provided on the islands themselves.

Anne McTaggart: I agree with John Wilson. It is imperative that we speak to the health board.

The Convener: Jackson Carlaw makes a good overall point, which is that we have to be constrained by what the petition says. That is something that is always worth bearing in mind in these arguments. My overall point was that there are wider implications, but it is useful that Jackson Carlaw brings us back down to earth by saying that we should stick to what the petition says. I accept that point.

However, looking at the two petitions, it is clear that there are further bits of work that we need to do. With regard to the health board, do members wish simply to write to the chief executive of the health board or do they wish the chair and chief executive to appear before the committee?

John Wilson: I would be keen to write to the health board in the first instance, as we do not want to cause it to incur the additional expense of getting here.

The Convener: I flag up our important new videoconferencing facility.

John Wilson: That could potentially be used.

The Convener: The second issue concerns the minister, who has a locus on both petitions. What are members' views on inviting Keith Brown along?

Angus MacDonald: I would be keen to have the minister along to discuss the PSOs, but I have a separate view on the RET petition. There is an argument to close that petition, given that the Scottish Government has set up a working group to review the large commercial vehicle fares. As that is happening, the petition has done its job and it could be closed.

Chic Brodie: To be clear, I want to invite the minister to the committee so that we can discuss the PSOs and the air strategy. I agree with Angus MacDonald about the RET petition.

Jackson Carlaw: On the RET petition, I thought that a question arose as a result of the discussion this morning. It was suggested that we write to the Scottish Government and ask it to quantify exactly what saving has been made as a result of the removal of the commercial RET. That would be a useful figure to put into the public domain. However, once we have done that, I would not dissent from the course of action that has been advocated.

The Convener: I therefore suggest that we ask for a look at the consultant's report, which we have not yet seen, that we ask the minister to quantify the figures, as Jackson Carlaw suggested that we do, and that we deal with the matter at our next meeting with a view to closing the petition at an early stage. I put on the record our thanks to Gail Robertson and the others, who have highlighted the issue in relation to the Western Isles and beyond.

Do members agree to that course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: On air services, the conclusion is that we need to continue the petition so that we can get some information from NHS Western Isles, and that we should invite the minister to come to a future meeting of the committee to talk only about the air services petition and not about RET.

Do we agree to do that?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank members for spending such a considerable amount of time on these two important petitions. I particularly thank our colleagues from the Western Isles, who gave up a lot of time to come here and had to make an overnight stay. I hope that they will get home this evening.

I suspend the meeting for one minute to allow the next petitioners to take their places.

11:09

Meeting suspended.

11:11

On resuming—

CalMac Ferries (Wi-fi) (PE1473)

The Convener: The committee will now take evidence from CalMac Ferries Ltd and NorthLink Ferries Ltd on PE1473 by Frances Anne Gillies, on behalf of Barra Youth Council, on wi-fi on CalMac ferries. Members have a note by the clerk, which is paper 4.

I welcome the panel. I am sorry for delaying you, gentlemen—as you probably picked up, we were having quite an intensive debate. I am sorry that we have overrun on time.

From CalMac, I welcome Roger Willison-Gray, who is the information services director, and Robbie Drummond, who is the group finance director; and, from NorthLink Ferries, I welcome Stuart Garrett, who is the managing director, and Steve Moreton, who is the information technology manager.

There is no opening statement. For ease, I intend to divide up the questions between CalMac and Serco. The first set of questions will be for our CalMac witnesses. When will passengers on CalMac services get wi-fi?

Robbie Drummond (CalMac Ferries Ltd): As we set out in April, we are in the middle of the process. We have tendered for extending wi-fi across the network. We think that the contract will be awarded some time in August and that the roll-out will take place at the back end of this year and into January or February of next year.

The Convener: I take it from the nature of the geography on the routes on which your 29 vessels operate that you are looking at satellite services. You mention some other means, but I presume that, on many occasions, 3G will not reach across the Minch.

Roger Willison-Gray (CalMac Ferries Ltd): Satellite is not feasible on all of our vessels because of their size. In addition, there would be substantial operating costs associated with satellite for what are relatively small passenger numbers.

The larger vessels on the longer routes will have satellite. We have a pilot for the new satellite technology under way on the Lord of the Isles and we will shortly have one on the Clansman. The remaining vessels will use a variety of technologies; mostly, they will use high-speed meshed wi-fi, so there will be ship-to-shore communications and wireless access points on the vessels. The backhaul will be through the fixed line network at each of the locations.

The Convener: So what is the reality for passengers who use a 40-minute service, such as the one to Tarbert that I used a few weeks ago? Will members of the business community and tourists get wi-fi once the pilot is up and running next year?

Roger Willison-Gray: I should point out that this is a multi-million pound investment, involving 29 vessels, 26 routes and 54 locations. It is a complex network that will take time to roll out. However, once everything is in place, we will use the network to provide services such as ticketing to our vessels and, as a result, all the passengers on the vessels will have access to wi-fi. Currently, we have no plans to charge for that.

11:15

The Convener: To be clear: will all passengers on all vessels on all your routes have wi-fi once the system is up and running next year?

Robbie Drummond: That is absolutely the intention, and ports will have it as well.

The Convener: Thank you for that. I throw open the discussion to my colleagues.

Angus MacDonald: I travel regularly to Norway, and it has been the case for a while in Norway that wi-fi has been available on most ships, even small local ships or ferries. As we know, NorthLink has already introduced wi-fi on the services to the northern isles. I am glad that CalMac is getting there, but it is unfortunate that you are a wee bit behind.

Your statement on 8 March indicated that the roll-out of on-board wi-fi involves

“significant technological challenges and costs”.

Can you outline what those challenges include and how much the installation of the new communication system might cost? You mentioned a multi-million pound cost, but I presume that it is not too high.

Roger Willison-Gray: It is a competitive procurement. It is an outcome-based tender—a full *Official Journal of the European Union* tender—and therefore I cannot give you a price, because it will depend on the bids that we receive from the six qualified bidders. Obviously, I cannot comment on the procurement process until it is complete.

In terms of technology, all I would say is that it is unfortunate that BT and other providers of infrastructure to the Western Isles are unable to offer the same level of service that is offered in Norway. The limitation for us is not the technology on our vessels but the inability to communicate from places such as Barra, where, as I am sure you are aware, there is no mobile signal.

The Convener: There is, but it depends.

Angus MacDonald: Even in Lewis there can be the lack of a signal, as we found out to our cost in the past few weeks. The Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee has very much taken that issue on board and is looking at it in depth.

David Torrance: Good morning, gentlemen. My question is to NorthLink Ferries. What was the cost of installing on-board wi-fi on your ships? Did it make economic sense to charge passengers for the service?

Stuart Garrett (NorthLink Ferries Ltd): The total cost was less than £100,000. It was part of a large refurbishment programme, so it was a programme of works. There is no charge for wi-fi on our services.

Anne McTaggart: I have another question for Serco NorthLink Ferries. By what means do you monitor passenger satisfaction with the on-board wi-fi service?

Stuart Garrett: We introduced individual servers on each of the vessels and in each port location in addition to introducing wi-fi and expanding the local area network—LAN—in each of the ships. We are able to capture individual log-ins and upload and download through the servers.

We have separate customer satisfaction surveys available on board. To date, while there are, as ever, intermittent issues with wi-fi, there has been no issue of significant or even limited concern about the wi-fi provision.

Anne McTaggart: Can you outline some of the key comments and concerns about the service from passengers who have perhaps filled out some of the customer service forms?

Stuart Garrett: When there is a satellite-related issue and there is no service—or when the down-station, as it is referred to, has loss of productivity—that is entirely outwith our control. What we do find, though, is that issues in relation to wi-fi connectivity are often down to the user and the individual device that they use. There are certain proprietary brands of wi-fi and hand-held equipment in particular that perhaps do not connect as well to external wi-fi systems as some other types of equipment.

The Convener: I will bring in Steve Moreton—he is the IT whiz kid here, so he can perhaps take the scales from our eyes. Am I right in thinking, in my amateur view, that satellite is the main solution to the problems with providing wi-fi on vessels?

Steve Moreton (Northlink Ferries Ltd): Yes. Because of the routes that the ferries take, they are significantly out of the line of sight of the shore. That produces the same issues that

CalMac has discovered: there are certain routes on which we just cannot afford to rely on shore-based connectivity. Most ferry companies do indeed use satellite.

The Convener: I had a quick look before I came out today, and I saw that there are a number of companies that would provide you with satellite fairly quickly. If the committee was visiting Antarctica tomorrow, they tell me that I could get fast broadband speed using satellite and modems. I am obviously taking a very amateur view, and it is much more complicated when you are running a fleet, but it is technically possible. How long have you been providing wi-fi on your three vessels?

Steve Moreton: We have been doing so since the beginning of the year—since the reboot. There was already a limited wi-fi system in the ships from the previous NorthLink company, which also used satellite communication. I am not sure how long that had been on board.

The Convener: Perhaps Jackson Carlaw can direct his question to both groups of witnesses.

Jackson Carlaw: Serco already blocks access to sites such as BBC iPlayer simply because of the potential scale of bandwidth usage. Is that likely always to be the case? Is it a permanent position? Does CalMac expect that to be the case? Would you also not give people access to things such as iPlayer because it would be very expensive or because it would overutilise your service availability?

Steve Moreton: The data rates that are associated with videostream exceed the capability of the satellite.

Jackson Carlaw: Can you identify the commercial cost of providing that service, if only to illustrate how unfeasible it would be?

Steve Moreton: If we went for the satellite equivalent of a leased line, we would be talking about tens of thousands of pounds a month.

Jackson Carlaw: And that whole cost would have to be borne by somebody, so the investment would simply not be justified.

Steve Moreton: Correct.

Jackson Carlaw: I would expect CalMac to take a similar view.

Roger Willison-Gray: We have the same view. There is a question around providing reasonable access, which has to be managed.

Jackson Carlaw: There will be so many other wonderful things that people can do on board anyway that they would not need to sit and look at BBC iPlayer, I assume you will assure us.

The Convener: They could go for a coffee.

Chic Brodie: Good morning, gentlemen. Mr Drummond, you said in answer to a question from the convener that installing wi-fi is your "intention" rather than saying, "Yes, we are going to do it." Is that intention inhibited by your contractual arrangement with the Government?

Robbie Drummond: We are going to do it.

Chic Brodie: Okay. I know from my business experience that one sometimes has to take a risk and invest in projects to attract customers.

In your press release of 8 March, you state:

"Where there is sufficient capacity and network coverage this will allow us to deliver 'Wi-fi' services to passengers."

Given that the Government has a large focus on tourism, how far are we being constrained by not providing such a service to tourists?

Robbie Drummond: I am not sure that I am qualified to comment on that. We are installing wi-fi primarily for the safe and effective operation of vessels and to manage our processes better. As an outflow from that, we will be able to give passengers access, which would clearly improve their experience. We would hope to gain additional revenue from that, but that is hard to quantify.

Chic Brodie: Perhaps I can help by asking NorthLink a question. Having successfully introduced wi-fi, do you monitor passenger satisfaction with the on-board service? If so, can you comment on or highlight any concerns that passengers have raised in that respect?

Stuart Garrett: Looking at individual ships and ports, we track the number of log-ins on a monthly basis. On the MV Hrossey, for example, the log-ins numbered 2,712 in May, 3,064 in June, 3,297 in July and 3,644 in July. Those figures show an incremental use of the facilities that tallies with the increase in traffic during the summer months.

Chic Brodie: Which would indicate customer satisfaction.

Stuart Garrett: One would hope so, yes.

The Convener: I have some questions for our CalMac colleagues. Did I hear you correctly when you said that the contract had to be advertised in the *Official Journal of the European Union*? Is the contract of that scale? In my experience, such contracts are normally over £4 million.

Roger Willison-Gray: No. The threshold is £195,000 but, as I am sure that you are aware, there are complexities around what you can and cannot do. Part of the reason for advertising the contract is that our existing network supplier has been in place for 10 years; in such cases, it is good practice to go to market, so we would have done this anyway.

We also want to ensure that we attract the best potential suppliers. As I have said, the issue is technically complex and we have attracted a number of potential suppliers who are able to work in very challenging environments.

The Convener: I realise that you do not yet have the tender prices but, whatever the final cost is, will the funding come out of the CalMac group's current capital programme, or are you getting any extra money from the Scottish Government?

Robbie Drummond: It is coming out of resources from the Scottish Government.

The Convener: Right. If for the sake of argument it costs £4 million to provide the contract, all those funds will come directly from the Scottish Government and not from your existing budget.

Robbie Drummond: It is part of our existing budget. It will not come out of capital budgets; it will be revenue spend.

The Convener: So what percentage of the project will be funded by the Scottish Government and what percentage by CalMac?

Robbie Drummond: It is being funded out of the resources that we are getting from the Scottish Government. It is not ring-fenced funding; it is funded from our block grant.

The Convener: Okay. Is it additional funding? Do you want to write to us about this?

Robbie Drummond: It is part of the funding package that has been agreed.

The Convener: I will bring in Chic Brodie in a second.

If I understand it correctly, the current arrangements to cover your various routes across the Highlands and Islands and the rest of Scotland were extended by three years. Is wi-fi provision going to be a condition of future tenders, or is it a condition of the current arrangements to provide the service?

Robbie Drummond: It is not conditional on the current contract, and any future contract is clearly a matter for Transport Scotland.

The Convener: So that is a question for Transport Scotland. I imagine, however, that it would be quite sensible to make it a condition of future service provision, not least because you have already provided the services.

I believe that you wanted to come in, Mr Brodie.

Chic Brodie: If I may, convener.

I have to say that I am astounded: not five minutes ago you said that you would deliver a

capital programme, but now we hear that you do not know how it is going to be funded.

Robbie Drummond: It is fully funded. In any case, as my colleague has explained, it is not a capital programme; it is a service-based contract—

Chic Brodie: So how much are you going to spend, Mr Drummond, given that your contract lasts for another two and a half or three years? You must know what the cost of the investment is likely to be and which budget it is going to be sourced from.

Robbie Drummond: As this is not investment but service-based provision, we are talking about the amount that we will pay each year to the service provider, which will replace the amount that we are already paying for our full technology platform.

This is not just a case of putting wireless on to the vessels; this is a full technology programme right across the group from our head office to our ports and vessels, part of the aim of which is to increase efficiency in executing and managing our business. One of the added benefits is that we can offer this additional facility to customers.

The Convener: What is your budget figure? What have you estimated it will cost you?

Robbie Drummond: It is well into seven figures, but we will not have that information until we get the responses back from providers. I do not think that it would be right to put that out.

The Convener: From wearing other hats, I know that even though the tender process is not complete the custom and practice are that finance directors will have given you a figure for what they expect the cost to be. What do you expect the cost to be?

Roger Willison-Gray: If we were outside procurement, we would be willing to answer that question. I have no desire for the people who are bidding for the contract to know what our budget is at this stage.

The Convener: You raised your eyebrows, Mr Carlaw. I do not know whether that means you want to ask a question.

Jackson Carlaw: I am sorry, convener—I was merely indicating that I was in full sympathy with you there.

11:30

Angus MacDonald: I have what might be seen as an operational question for CalMac. Can the installation be completed only when the ships are in for refurbishment or refit or can it be done at any time?

Roger Willison-Gray: That is an interesting question. The short answer is that it will depend on the supplier's bid. Our desire would be to have all the vessels fitted during the dry dock period, and therefore to be fully tested and go into service following their annual overhaul. The complexity is that the annual overhaul programme begins in September and completes in March, and it is likely to be November by the time the contract award is mobilised. We are targeting March for the roll-out, but the feedback from suppliers is that doing 29 vessels in less than three months is optimistic.

It is likely that the core network—the central switch part of the network—will be installed by the beginning of next year. We expect the port offices and slipways, including wi-fi, to be operational around March or April. As for the vessels themselves, some will be operational in the first quarter and some may get delayed until the second quarter—particularly those that have to be done while in transit. During that period, some of our vessels will be operating 24 hours a day, with two crews on board, which presents particular operational challenges in putting access points in passenger areas and crew quarters.

I expect that we will have fully completed the roll-out by June of next year, and we will endeavour to do it as quickly as possible, but it will depend on the suppliers and there is obviously a price sensitivity. If somebody says, “Yes, we can do it by March, but it'll be three times the price,” we will clearly have to take a commercial decision on whether that is appropriate.

Angus MacDonald: I am a bit confused. I understood from the initial statements that it would be done in January or February.

Robbie Drummond: That will be the start of the roll-out programme, but it depends on what the suppliers come back to us with. It will be delivered not all at once but as a series of rolled-through deliveries.

Roger Willison-Gray: We can set an aggressive programme, but the bottom line will be whether the contractors can deliver to it and achieve best value for the Government. It would not be prudent for us to accept a ridiculous price point to get it in by March.

Angus MacDonald: The sooner the better. As someone who travels on the Isle of Lewis vessel, I know that it is quite frustrating not being able to get on with work when you are travelling between Ullapool and Stornoway.

Robbie Drummond: We accept that.

The Convener: Will some vessels not be available for certain periods because of the wi-fi work that is being carried out, or can that work be done when they are in transit?

Roger Willison-Gray: It depends on the vessels. Not only do we have 26 vessels, but no more than two of them are of the same type and configuration, so we have 13 pairs of different vessels with different layouts. Some can be done in transit and some cannot.

The majority of the smaller vessels do not operate after about 10 o'clock at night and there is no resident crew, so they are relatively easy to do. Where there are resident crew on board, it can be much more complex to work around legal rest periods and other interruptions. We will put in the best optimised programme that we can at the price point that we think is acceptable and represents good value for the Government.

The Convener: Is there a likelihood of any interruption for customers? That is the point that I was trying to make.

Roger Willison-Gray: No, we will not be taking vessels out of service to fit wi-fi.

John Wilson: For clarification, are you saying that all vessels, including the three reserve vessels, will be fitted with wi-fi by June 2014?

Roger Willison-Gray: As I said, there is a caveat: it depends on the award of contract and on the schedule that the suppliers provide, but we believe that there is no reason why we cannot achieve it by June of next year.

John Wilson: For all vessels?

Robbie Drummond: Yes, for all vessels. The only caveat is around the timing and the practicality of getting the programme completed.

Jackson Carlaw: A thought has occurred to me while listening to Mr Drummond—perhaps he can clarify whether it is an uncharitable thought on my part.

From what I have gleaned so far, my understanding is that you entered into the programme because wi-fi is a service that you want to provide in its own right. Given your response, is the programme in fact an incidental benefit that arises from the much wider solution that you are seeking to implement across the entire business, including the head office and other facilities, and a part of the wider look at your provision, rather than because providing a wi-fi service in isolation emerged as an objective that you particularly sought out? Was it conditional on the wider service solution that you were trying to provide that wi-fi had to be a feature of that work or, had that not been the case, would wi-fi still be something that we would hope that you would do rather than something that you were committed to doing?

Robbie Drummond: Absolutely—it is an element of the wider solution that we are putting in

place. We are renewing the network right across our business, which will allow us to operate more effectively. We will also give access to our workforce and our customers.

The difficulty does not relate to the system being wireless; the difficulty relates to the network that sits behind it. Our approach is the most sensible way of providing the service as part of a much wider programme.

The Convener: We are a bit behind time. As colleagues have no final questions, I again thank Barra Youth Council for its excellent petition. The members who visited Stornoway will recall that the three women gave a first-class presentation on the petition. They showed great initiative.

I do not know at what stage CalMac's plans were or whether the petition helped develop its ideas or whether it was planning to introduce wi-fi anyway. Nevertheless, I will be charitable and say that I am glad that CalMac is going ahead with the service.

It seems sensible to close the petition, under rule 15.7, on the basis that CalMac has initiated a networks project and that it will conclude that process as soon as possible. Do members agree?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank our four guests for coming along. I am sorry that we have delayed you. Some of the questions were technical, and others were financial. Your responses helped the committee to understand what Serco NorthLink is doing and what CalMac is pursuing. Both are very important companies in relation to the development of ferry services in Scotland.

I briefly suspend the meeting to allow a changeover of witnesses.

11:37

Meeting suspended.

11:38

On resuming—

New Petitions

Airgun Licensing (PE1485)

The Convener: Item 3 is consideration of new petitions, of which there are three. As previously agreed, the committee has invited two of the petitioners to speak to their petitions. The first is PE1485 on airgun licensing. Members have a note by the clerk and a Scottish Parliament information centre briefing.

I welcome David Ewing, who is the petitioner, and Dr Colin Shedden from the British Association for Shooting and Conservation Scotland and Tam Parker from the Scottish Association for Country Sports. I invite Mr Ewing to make brief opening remarks. I will then start the questioning before passing over to my colleagues.

David Ewing: I hope to demonstrate through my statement that there is absolutely no requirement or public support for an airgun licensing scheme. A licensing scheme will not work and will impose an unfair financial and administrative burden on law-abiding shooters, the taxpayer and the police service. I have many figures with me—I have provided some of them to the committee—that demonstrate how costly such a scheme would be.

We have worked out, using official figures, that the scheme could potentially cost—in the worst-case scenario—£100 million to implement. There are, of course, variations to that amount. Furthermore, there is little airgun crime, so the proposal is disproportionate and has no justification.

Since starting the campaign, I have spoken with many individuals in the UK and abroad, and everyone feels that, in the light of the figures that have been presented, the proposal is totally unjustifiable in any way.

The Convener: Thank you for giving that opening statement—I know that it is always tricky coming along to committees. Why should law-abiding airgun owners worry about licensing?

David Ewing: Airguns themselves are reasonably straightforward to obtain; they are one of the first ways in which many people are introduced to shooting and many of them go on to obtain licensed firearms. They also provide a very easy way for people to carry out pest control on a casual basis at reasonably low cost. Once costs start increasing, that will have a knock-on effect on the people they do the pest control for. People might not be able to afford the costs, which could

perhaps price lower-income people out of the market of shooting.

The Convener: What is your assessment of the Scottish Government consultation on the issue?

David Ewing: I thought that the consultation was very unfair. The Scottish Government did not, apparently, consult on the principle of licensing and has decided that the measures are to go ahead. The consultation result was that 87 per cent of respondents are against licensing altogether.

The Convener: I should have said that Mr Parker and Mr Shedden should feel free to intervene at any time, if they wish to make a contribution or point. Do you gentlemen wish to say something now?

Dr Colin Shedden (British Association for Shooting and Conservation Scotland): An estimate by the industry has shown that the most common use for air rifles and the pellets that are used in them is general recreational shooting—“plinking”—which a lot of people regard as shooting at tin cans or targets in the back garden. That has, I would say, taken place safely and harmlessly for many decades. One of the fears of those who use airguns in Scotland is that licensing would involve a “good reason” requirement, and it has been made clear that general recreational shooting would not be regarded as good reason. Therefore, the vast majority of people who have airguns now could be excluded from the licensing system because of their failure to comply with that requirement. Those are the areas that cause those who have responded to the petition most concern.

Tam Parker (Scottish Association for Country Sports): As an association, we have a lot of member clubs that are specifically based on airguns. They bring a lot of youngsters into the sport and train them to use airguns safely and to be aware of the dangers involved. They can do that reasonably cheaply at the moment. However, if the burden of the cost of a licence is added on top of that, it would for many people prohibit that activity.

People who go shooting are possibly the most law-abiding section of society; they tend to be less involved in anything else, basically because they have to keep their noses clean. If airguns are licensed, activities such as a father and son using airguns, so that the son can be introduced to a bit of gun safety before climbing the ladder, would all be stopped, as Dr Shedden said. As with everything, education is always the best policy, as far as our association is concerned.

Chic Brodie: Good morning, gentlemen. Have you ever been shot by an air rifle? I have. It is very unpleasant. There is no licensing, no care, no education.

Tam Parker: That would be quite illegal, I might add, whether the airgun was licensed or not.

Chic Brodie: It might be quite illegal.

I was intrigued by the statement that Mr Shedden made, which was that airguns are for general recreational use. I have a short finger here that proves that they are not for general recreational use. I was lucky that it did not surpass the hand and hit the rosette that was on my chest at the time, during an election campaign.

I return to the consultation, Mr Ewing. Do you believe that the 1,000 responses were general from across the populace, or were they from people who were either specifically for or against airguns?

David Ewing: I believe that everyone who had an interest in the proposal responded.

Chic Brodie: Who are more likely to have an interest in the proposal?

David Ewing: People who are for airgun licensing and people who are against it would be interested.

Chic Brodie: That might account for the 87 per cent figure.

11:45

David Ewing: Everyone had an opportunity to respond; it was a public consultation. Most people are not interested in the proposal and there is absolutely no justification for it.

Chic Brodie: In 2011-12, the police force recorded 514 offences in which a firearm was alleged to have been involved. Regrettably, we know that there have been fatalities, particularly of youngsters. Are you still convinced that airguns are for general recreational use?

David Ewing: Some 195 of those offences were airgun offences, which was a 71 per cent drop since 2006. If we saw the same drops in the next five years, there would be no airgun incidents. That would involve very little to no cost to the taxpayer, as opposed to implementing an expensive licensing scheme.

Chic Brodie: I know that Mr Parker was going to come in, but I have a final question. How did you arrive at the figure of £100 million?

David Ewing: We took figures from the Association of Chief Police Officers, which stated that the average cost of processing a shotgun or firearms certificate is around £200. We assumed the same cost for an airgun licence. If there were individual airgun applications for the 500,000 airguns in Scotland, the figure could be up to £100 million. To take a lower figure, if we assume that there would be 125,000 applications, which is

more reasonable, the cost would still be £25 million.

Tam Parker: The incident in which Chic Brodie was shot by an air rifle was a totally illegal act that was carried out by somebody who would not apply for a licence anyway. Criminals do not tend to apply for licences. They do not need them, because they get things "off-ticket", as it is put.

Chic Brodie: How will they be excluded?

Tam Parker: They cannot be excluded. You are not trying to exclude them; you are trying to exclude the lawful use of airguns. That is what licensing tries to do.

Chic Brodie: You are saying, "We'll do away with licences and it's okay. It'll be an open house, and some people will use airguns illegally."

Tam Parker: At the end of the day, that is an enforcement problem. They are not currently licensed, there are very few incidents, and the number of such incidents is dropping. It looks as if somebody has taken a huge sledgehammer—probably a powered sledgehammer—to hit a very small nail. That is what the proposal appears to be.

Chic Brodie: I do not consider the death of a child from a shotgun or air rifle to be a small matter.

Tam Parker: Nor do I. Again, that would be a totally illegal act carried out by a criminal. We cannot legislate for what those people do. You can try to, but they do not obey the law. If another law is brought in, it will be another law that they will not obey. That is their mindset. That is not what we in civilised society do, but I am afraid that there are people who act outwith that.

David Ewing: We all agree that the death of a child is a tragic incident. However, there was a case in which a child was beaten to death with a golf club by its mother, and there does not seem to be the same outcry against golf or an attempt to regulate golf clubs. At the end of the day, we are talking about the death of a child, and there is no point in blaming an inanimate object; it happens because of a person's will. Therefore, I do not see how licensing is relevant.

Jackson Carlaw: The important thing to understand is that the Scottish Government is not proposing to ban air weapons; it is proposing to license them. I think that you are asking what material effect licensing will have. I have some sympathy with the view that Mr Brodie's finger would not necessarily have been protected if those products were licensed. Let us remember that handguns and firearms were licensed when they were used in some tragic incidents in Scotland. The licensing itself is not a guarantee that airguns will not be used inappropriately by individuals.

The question then is, I suppose: what is the practical effect of licensing? I have been struck by some of the relative figures that you have quoted—in particular by the fact that the number of airgun incidents is fewer than the number of people who are treated for dog bites in one hospital in Scotland alone. Therefore, the burden of evidence and proof on the Government when it introduces legislation will be to explain what the practical benefit of licensing will be relative to the effect that it will have.

When you quoted the figure of £100 million, I wondered whether it is rather lurid, because it is essentially an extrapolation from various existing figures. It is not from anybody who has calculated what the overall cost of a licensing regime could be. Nonetheless, your argument is that the cost would be significant and that Police Scotland would bear an inherent additional cost that it does not currently have to carry. I imagine that you consider that that cost would be considerable and would divert funds from other areas. What efforts have you made, either individually or collectively, to go a little bit beyond the figure that you cited to establish a general overall likely cost? Have you contacted Police Scotland for advice?

David Ewing: We have not received information from Police Scotland but, as I said, we have made a more conservative estimate based on 125,000 airgun licence applications. We have again used the average cost of £200 for firearms licensing that was provided by the Association of Chief Police Officers. We found that the figure would be around £25 million if the costs of licensing airguns were the same.

Dr Shedden: I will make a point that is important from a policing perspective. About 60,000 people in Scotland are currently licensed to have firearms or shotguns. That is done over a five-year cycle, which means that Police Scotland will be dealing with about 10,000, 11,000 or 12,000 people a year. The indication, given the ownership of 500,000 airguns in Scotland, is that in one year a pulse of people would come through for licensing. Whether it was 10,000, 100,000 or 200,000 people, a lot of people would come through at once. Administration of that system will place a severe burden on the police and on the civilian resources of Police Scotland.

We do not know how many people will come forward, so we cannot give an accurate cost, but the question is a good one. We should all strive for better regulation that is evidence-based. The principal argument behind the petition is that the number of offences involving air weapons has declined by 71 per cent over five years. The Scottish Government is to be congratulated on its educational initiatives, and Police Scotland is to be congratulated on its enforcement of the legislation.

We feel that that is the way forward to achieve better regulation.

I draw a parallel with another licensing regime that I have been involved in, which is the knife dealers licensing legislation that came in four or five years ago. The regulatory review group has just looked at that legislation and feels that it has not worked at all. It has disproportionately affected rural businesses and the group's advice to government is that instead of licensing being mandatory, it should be discretionary to local authorities. The group could obviously not say, "Let's scrap knife dealers licensing", but they have done the best that they could do. I worry that we could be looking in five or 10 years at similar situation in which airgun licensing has resulted in the same muddle and mess and has been of no benefit to public safety.

Chic Brodie: Knife crime has fallen by 61 per cent. Are you saying that licensing has had no bearing on that?

Dr Shedden: The regulatory review group report says that there is no evidence that knife dealers licensing had an impact on knife crime. Please bear it in mind that the knife dealers licensing legislation was designed for non-domestic knives, commonly known as hunting knives, which are not commonly associated with knife crime in Scotland.

Angus MacDonald: Good morning, Mr Ewing. I have read the backing information to your petition online. The final paragraph states:

"The shooting community is a minority but it faces a lot of persecution and bigotry that would be unacceptable to any other minority group".

The phrase "persecution and bigotry" is quite strong terminology. Can you expand on that statement?

David Ewing: I certainly can. If you have an interest in shooting or gun ownership, the media often makes you out to be a bit of a strange person. For example, several groups on online media gloat over the injuries of people who are hurt in accidents during hunting, horse riding and so on. It would not be acceptable to laugh at that if it was happening to other minorities, so we are picked on to an extent.

Angus MacDonald: That is not, however, the wide picture. I imagine that that is the exception to the rule.

David Ewing: A great many people do not know a lot about such sports and the media does not help the situation. A lot of opinions are formed through ignorance, because people do not understand the facts of the matter. I would say that we face a lot of abuse.

John Wilson: Good morning, gentlemen. I want to examine some details in Mr Ewing's submission. You mention an "Estimated 500,000 airguns in Scotland".

Where does that estimate come from?

David Ewing: The figure comes from a statement that was released by the Scottish Government.

John Wilson: Have you examined where the Scottish Government got the figure from? To my mind, if there are an estimated 500,000 airguns in Scotland, it would be difficult to introduce a licensing regime that retrospectively encapsulated every air rifle or airgun that is out there. Who owns those air rifles and airguns? Do we know?

David Ewing: We cannot tell, I think.

Dr Shedden: The 500,000 estimate is a minimum figure, which is based on information from the Gun Trade Association that was supplied to the Scottish Government through the Scottish firearms consultative panel. The panel accepted that as a minimum figure, based on sales and on the obsolescence of older guns.

John Wilson: If 500,000 is a minimum figure, the number could rise dramatically depending on whether individuals acquired or purchased their air weapon.

Dr Shedden: That is recognised as the minimum figure for the number of airguns in Scotland just now.

John Wilson: Your submission also states:

"Below I have prepared a list of many negatives ... It could potentially criminalise many law abiding citizens despite having committed no harm to anyone or intent to commit a crime simply because of this newly created and pointless offence."

What would be the offence? How would we criminalise people simply by asking them to license their air rifle or airgun?

David Ewing: From what I understand, if the legislation is passed, it will be an offence to own an airgun without a licence. Depending on how seriously the Scottish Government and the justice system decide to deal with the issue, we might find that people who have an airgun that they have forgotten is in their possession—it might be stowed away somewhere—might suddenly find themselves breaking the law. If, when a family relative dies, someone comes across an airgun, they might get into trouble. Those people would not have not done any real harm. A few years previously, possessing an airgun would not have been an offence, but people might suddenly find themselves with an unlicensed airgun for which they could face consequences.

John Wilson: You are right that there have been incidents in the past in which a relative has found a world war two memento that a grandfather or husband brought back from the war; individuals have faced prosecution after finding a weapon because the police subsequently decided to take appropriate action. Do you think that airgun owners would be reluctant to register and license their weapons as part of a formal licensing process in which they had to declare ownership and use of a weapon?

David Ewing: I really cannot say, because that would be down to the individual. People who use airguns for pest control or professionally would, no doubt, apply for licences, but others might not be able to afford to do so and might just have to get rid of their airguns. It really comes down to the individual.

John Wilson: You have said on several occasions that people might not be able to afford the licence. What do you expect would be the cost of the licence?

David Ewing: Again, that depends. If the scheme used the same principle as is used for the shotgun firearms certificate, the cost would possibly be around £50. However, I have heard figures of £100 quoted.

That is not the only issue. As has been mentioned, people are currently allowed to own an airgun for plinking, which might mean using it in your own back garden as long as it is used safely. Under the proposals, that would also be banned. Therefore, many people would need to apply to clubs, which would involve additional fees. Some people might need to travel many miles to go to a club, which would also involve more time and money. Many people might just say that they cannot afford the cost, so they would be priced out of their hobby.

John Wilson: Do you think that, for a weapon that may cost anything up to a couple of thousand pounds, a cost of £50 or £100 may be a disproportionate cost for having a licence to own and use that weapon?

David Ewing: Obviously, more serious competitive shooters would most likely continue, but it would definitely deter a lot of the people who perhaps do it more as a hobby or on a casual basis. They would give up their sport and they have not done anything wrong.

12:00

John Wilson: Mr Parker, do you have any comments on the line of questioning that I have been pursuing?

Tam Parker: Yes. To refer back to the point about how people denigrate those who are

involved in guns, there is the use of the word “weapon”. A weapon is something that you use against people. These are airguns. They are used for sport, for pest control or just for general enjoyment in the back garden, as Dr Shedden said. I do not particularly like them being called weapons. They are only weapons if they are used against people, as happened to Mr Brodie. In that case, they are most definitely weapons, but I resent the fact that when in general use—as they would be—they are classed as weapons, as opposed to guns.

Other than that, airgun owners, through no fault of their own, will have the cost imposed on them despite the fact that they have never done anything to harm anybody or to break any laws. However, all of a sudden, they have to pay for something that they have for nothing at the moment. Realistically—as I said—because of the fall in airgun offence figures, I cannot see any justification for that.

Dr Shedden: I have a small point on one of the possible unintended consequences of a licensing regime that is quite expensive. First, airguns are relatively cheap, so would you spend £50 or £100 to license an airgun from the bottom end of the market, for instance?

Another unintended consequence of bringing in a licensing system will be that a number of individuals will think, “If I’m going to have to get a licence, I might as well get a licence for either a shotgun or a rimfire rifle,” for instance. Instead of using an air rifle for pest control as they currently do, they may move to slightly more powerful shotguns or firearms for pest control or other sporting purposes. Therefore one of the unintended consequences may be that people, instead of investing in an airgun licence, will invest in a firearms certificate or a shotgun certificate, which will mean more and more people will be involved in sporting shooting.

John Wilson: Does Mr Ewing or any other member of the panel consider the introduction—along with the airgun licence—of the other security measures that are applied for a firearm or a shotgun, which involve a secure locker being fitted, in the home, that is to be locked at all times when the firearm is not in use, as one of the issues that may arise when licensing airguns?

Tam Parker: Most responsible airgun users already take such precautions; you would not leave an airgun lying about the house. If you have an airgun, it will be in a cabinet or in a locked cupboard. That is how most responsible airgunners use them because they are not toys, at the end of the day.

David Ewing: It is required by law that reasonable precautions be taken to ensure that

airguns do not fall into the hands of children. That is already in law—we are supposed to store them in locked cupboards or where people cannot get easy access to them.

Tam Parker: You are supposed to keep airguns away from unauthorised use.

The Convener: I am conscious that we are short of time. The next step is for the committee to consider how we will pursue the petition. Obviously the part that is clear is the Government’s intention. The witnesses have made that clear—the Government wants to license airguns.

The committee has to be realistic about what we can do that will be useful in terms of pursuing the objectives of the petition. I throw that caveat in.

Chic Brodie: At this moment in time, I think that the committee should do nothing. I suggest that we close the petition on the ground that there has been a consultation. In fact, as the petitioner said, he responded to that consultation. Any proposals for legislation will be brought forward in due course. Once we know the details of that, there will be a further opportunity for people to make known their views as part of that process.

Jackson Carlaw: My view is halfway between believing that there is not much more that we can achieve at this point and being in favour of leaving the petition open so that we can refer it to the Justice Committee when a bill is introduced. The petition could be considered at that time.

A number of issues arise in terms of explaining what the licensing will achieve and whether people might be able to surrender unwanted airguns. It is clear that an enormous number of them—I had not appreciated just how many—are in circulation. It might be premature to refer the petition to the Justice Committee now, if formal legislation is not in place. If that is the case, I suggest that we hold on to it for a little longer.

The Convener: The clerk advises me that the matter is not being dealt with by the Justice Committee. We can refer it to the Justice Committee in a general sense. Notwithstanding my earlier points, it might be useful to get the Cabinet Secretary for Justice’s view on some of the comments that the witnesses have made before we make a decision on whether to close the petition. I feel that we should go the extra mile for every petitioner. It would be useful to see what the minister’s view is. I am not being unrealistic—the minister is not going to change his overall position on licensing—but it might be useful to get some feedback on the practical points that the witnesses have raised. At that stage, we can make a decision on whether to close the petition.

Jackson Carlaw: If that were the preferred route, I suggest that it would also be useful to ask questions such as whether consideration will be given to people having the ability to surrender unwanted airguns.

Chic Brodie: There is little point in asking the cabinet secretary to come here until we have some flesh on the bones of the legislation. That does not preclude the witnesses coming back to the committee at some stage. The Justice Committee will look at the issue, and it may well be that we can pass on to it more information from the Government and the witnesses.

The Convener: I was not suggesting that we invite Kenny MacAskill to the committee; I was suggesting that we write to him, include a copy of the *Official Report* and ask whether he can follow up on any of the points that have been made. Once he replies, we can reconsider matters.

John Wilson: I agree that we should write to the cabinet secretary to ask him about the timetable for the introduction of the legislation and what organisations in the sporting community he has consulted on it. I am conscious that tickets for the shooting events at next year's Commonwealth games are among the fastest selling. Shooting seems to be one of the most popular sports at the Commonwealth games. We should try to find out from the cabinet secretary when he intends that the legislation will hit the committees. That will allow us to respond accordingly to the issues that the petitioner has raised.

The Convener: That is sensible. We could also find out whether Mr MacAskill agrees with all the statistics that have been cited. I am sure that they are accurate, but it is always useful to get the Government's view on such matters.

Angus MacDonald: Given the strong views of David Ewing, it is only fair that we approach the justice secretary and suggest that he look at the idea of an airgun amnesty in the future.

The Convener: Do members agree to that course of action?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: To summarise, we will continue the petition and write to the justice secretary to ask him a number of questions, such as the one that John Wilson suggested, as well as asking him to comment on the points that have been made in the *Official Report*. We will consider the matter at a future meeting.

I thank the three witnesses for coming along and for making their points. We will keep you up to date with developments on your petition.

Schools (Religious Observance) (PE1487)

The Convener: The second new petition is PE1487 by Mark Gordon and Secular Scotland, on religious observance in schools. Members have a note from the clerk and a SPICe briefing. We have also received a written submission from the Church of Scotland. I welcome Mark Gordon and Caroline Lynch, the secretary of Secular Scotland. I understand that you wish to make a joint presentation. We are a bit behind time, for which I apologise. If you can keep your presentation to around three minutes, that will be very useful.

Caroline Lynch (Secular Scotland): We will be as brief as possible. Our petition seeks to change the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, which sets the default position as being that every child is opted in to religious observance in schools and that parents have a statutory right to withdraw their child should they wish to do so. We want parents to have an active and meaningful choice as to whether they want their child to participate in religious observance or whether they want to send their child to a suitable and meaningful alternative activity. In essence, we want parents to be asked first.

Our petition seeks a simple solution to a serious problem that is caused by the law not working as intended. Today, we will give you the testimony that we have received from parents telling us what is really happening on the ground. Mark Gordon started the ball rolling with his personal experiences, which he will tell you about.

Mark Gordon (Secular Scotland): Ladies and gentlemen of the committee, my personal experience of opting my daughter out of religious observance was the trigger for raising the petition. It became abundantly clear from discussions with the school, analysis of legislation and discussions with others of the prevalence of belief in the population that many parents would not want to take the stand that I took. Having decided to act, however, we sought the experiences of other parents, some of which we hope to present to you in an additional submission afterwards. If you will permit me, I will give you a small sample of what we found.

We have testimony from parents of children who have been opted out that their children have been left unattended in corridors with little that is meaningful to do. We have testimony of children being, in effect, chastised for their parents' decision, children being told to carry out menial tasks—including, believe it or not, sharpening pencils and cleaning a library—and parents being considered difficult because they dared to question a headteacher's wisdom. Parents have been told that there is no right to withdraw, have had to seek legal advice because a school could not or would not provide acceptable alternative

activities and have been told that alternative activities such as humanist material would categorically not be allowed. A teenage pupil who had a right to withdraw himself was forcibly prevented from leaving religious observance that he objected to. Crucially, there is evidence that, despite very recent regulations—the Education (School and Placing Information) (Scotland) Regulations 2012—that outline the requirement for school handbooks to lay out in writing the parental right to withdraw, a large percentage of school handbooks do not, as yet, contain that information.

My daughter is well treated and, in my opinion, attends a very good school. However, she has reported—as others have—that she has sat in the school office with the school secretary during religious assemblies. More recently, she was taken to a church service against my written instructions. Maybe not every parent is as confident as I am in making a stand for the right thing to do. Perhaps most parents do not want their children to be exposed to some aspects of Christian religious observance but they do not feel able to opt out and address the issue by facing up to the authority of the school or to risk their child being ostracised for non-conformity. Perhaps they just fear damaging an otherwise healthy parent-teacher relationship.

My conclusion is that the law is no longer in accordance with the demographic of Scotland, which has changed significantly since the last review. There is also a built-in unfairness. Despite the religious observance review group stating that religious observance should not be of a confessional nature, we know from testimony that it is. The existing legislation makes the removal of religious observance even from a single school extremely difficult, as it requires a poll of the local authority electorate. In any case, that is not what we seek, as it would only end up in patchy provision throughout the country. Indeed, if our petition were successful, it might well strengthen religious observance through discussion.

Because of all that, we are here today to present our petition.

12:15

The Convener: Thank you very much for that joint presentation. You have touched on evidence and have provided some very useful examples, but do you have comprehensive Scotland-wide evidence of the views of pupils, parents or staff?

Caroline Lynch: Yes. We have brought with us testimony from parents, teachers, course designers and students about their experiences. Those experiences vary widely; we are not saying that every single school is failing. What we are

saying is that, on this issue, failure is endemic throughout the school system.

The law makes five provisions. First, it provides a minimum of six opportunities for religious observance throughout the year; secondly, every parent has a statutory right to withdraw; thirdly, every parent must be informed of that right and given sufficient information on which to base their decision; fourthly, if the statutory right to withdraw is taken up, a suitable meaningful alternative activity must be in place for the child to ensure that they are not penalised; and, finally, no child should be disadvantaged by choosing to withdraw from religious observance. There are failures across the board in all those areas. Because that failure is endemic and happening everywhere, the law—in our opinion—is in need of urgent reform.

The Convener: Perhaps you can give us that evidence to look at, if you have not done so already.

Caroline Lynch: Absolutely.

Chic Brodie: Good afternoon. I am intrigued by—indeed, I might somewhat agree with—Mr Gordon's comment that such a change might strengthen religious observance. How have you come to that conclusion?

Mark Gordon: We think that the change would make the process more inclusive, because parents and children would positively opt to get involved in it. After all, there are possibly a lot of kids who do not want to be there.

Jackson Carlaw: Good afternoon. I suppose that all I can do is play devil's advocate with this petition—if you do not mind the contradiction in the sentiment underpinning that statement.

I have no religious convictions myself, but I think that you have made a very good case this morning for ending the opt-out provision. You clearly feel that no alternative meaningful activity is taking place. I went to a school where I had to attend religious education or observance. My parents very much encouraged in me an independent attitude not just to that but to subjects such as politics and history—whatever we were taught in school we would challenge in the home. As a result, I ultimately came to an independent view on matters that are subjective or of faith. Imposing a view that no one should be exposed to any kind of religious education is itself a rather doctrinaire approach, when surely it is perfectly open to parents to encourage a degree of independent thinking by challenging whatever their children have been exposed to. I do not necessarily equate participation, attendance and conviction as being one and the same thing and ultimately and fundamentally I am not terribly sure what great damage is being done here unless children are not being encouraged by their parents or schools to

evolve any ability to assess, judge and evaluate information on an independent basis.

Caroline Lynch: There are several points to note in response to that. First of all, our religious education is split into religious and moral education and religious observance. In religious and moral education, children are taught what religion is and what the beliefs of the different groups are. We have absolutely no issue with that, because everyone needs at least a basic understanding of that information in order to function in our world.

Religious observance, on the other hand, is active participation in religion. Although there is guidance in place that sets out what such observance should be—it should, for example, be non-denominational and inclusive and should not contravene anyone's personal faith stance—the reality on the ground is that in most cases we are talking about Christian worship. Indeed, we can give you dozens and dozens of examples of that.

Just yesterday I got a phone call from a parent who was very angry and distressed because his five-year-old son had brought home two young earth creationist books that had been given to him during religious observance. Those books directly state that their aim is to debunk Scottish education and scientific education in general, and they talk about exposing the myth of evolution. That is the type of material that is making its way into schools under the auspices of religious observance.

We also have evidence of prayer spaces being used for the faith healing of incurable conditions. That is being done without parental knowledge and consent, and it is among the reasons why we are so concerned.

My five-year-old son had nightmares for months because he was told that Jesus had nails hammered through his flesh to save him. Teachers tell us that children are being told that they are sinners and that, unless they accept God, they are going to go to hell. We have heard from Muslims who, along with Jews and Buddhists, are being asked to participate in praying to God. All sorts of people are being asked to pray to a Christian god, which is an anathema to their own personal stance.

Parents are not being informed that they can opt out, and some are being prevented from exercising their right to do so. We have a lady whose daughter has been threatened with expulsion from school if she exercises the right to opt out. Those are the type of things that are going on, and at present there is very little protection for parents because the abuse of religious observance is so endemic. It is happening across the system, and all over the place.

Jackson Carlaw: I follow a lot of what you have said; you are talking about a certain evangelical fanaticism that would be of concern not just to the pupils who opt out but to the pupils who remain in that environment. However, I maintain that there is a difference between attending a religious observance event and participating in it. I have to say that I have done plenty of the former: I have attended but not participated—

Mark Gordon: It behoves us to offer the children protection rather than just saying, "Well, it is up to the child to figure this out." We are talking about five-year-olds.

Caroline Lynch: In addition—

Jackson Carlaw: Well, I was not protected—I was encouraged to think independently and to challenge the views that were expressed to me. That is what I did, and in so doing I came to a rational judgment that I am comfortable with, and that I can live with and understand. I am not quite sure how protecting people—as you put it—from hearing any alternative point of view is to do them any service at all.

Caroline Lynch: It is not about protecting them from hearing an alternative point of view—they will hear alternative points of view throughout their education, in religious and moral education. It is about participation: the freedom to choose what your faith is and to participate in it freely. That is about human rights.

We raise the point that, in not allowing parents to choose freely how their children participate in religious observance or to exercise that judgment as they should do, we are directly contravening human rights law. Article 18.4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which we have opted in to and ratified, states that parents have the right to raise their children and have them educated in accordance with their beliefs, and we are breaching that.

The Convener: I am sorry, but we are really short of time now. Do members have any other points?

John Wilson: I have a brief question for Ms Lynch and Mr Gordon. I am assuming that, if you wanted us to go ahead, the change would apply only to non-denominational schools in Scotland.

Caroline Lynch: Not at all—it would apply to all state schools. Although the majority of parents who send their children to a denominational faith school perhaps have accepted the faith stance of that school, there are parents who send their child to an inter-denominational school for non-faith reasons: perhaps because of the educational standard of achievement, or perhaps because the child has not been able to get a place in a non-denominational school. I mentioned a parent

whose daughter has been threatened with exclusion. She sent her child to that school because her child's friends went there.

People send their children to certain schools for a range of reasons. Ultimately, the schools are state funded and are open to everybody under the law—that is the requirement. Parents who send their children to such schools should not have fewer rights or protections for their children than there are for any other children in the state system.

John Wilson: On that basis, I assume that you are talking about amending the Education (Scotland) Act 1918.

Caroline Lynch: Our petition is based on the Education (Scotland) Act 1980.

John Wilson: I understand that denominational schools were created under the 1918 act; the majority of them have been established under that act.

Caroline Lynch: The 1980 act covers religious observance and rights in relation to that; it specifies the requirements. We would amend that act to reverse the situation, so that parents who want their children to take part in religious observance would choose that.

The Convener: As members have no more points, the next step is to consider how we will deal with the petition. My view is that we should continue it and seek the views of the Scottish Government, Education Scotland and the Scottish Parent Teacher Council. As always, I am open to committee members' views.

John Wilson: I suggest that we write to ask Interfaith Scotland for its views. I am interested in seeking the views of a range of organisations on that body and particularly of some of its associate members, including organisations such as the Pagan Federation, which has raised issues with the teaching of religious and moral values in schools.

I know that an exchange has taken place between the clerk and Edinburgh Secular Society about making a submission. If any other organisations feel that it would be relevant for them to respond to the petition, their submissions would be welcome, too. We can name organisations, but we might not cover them all. I am sure that a number of organisations out there would wish to comment and they are welcome to do so.

Anne McTaggart: It is important to ask the Scottish Parent Teacher Council for its views.

Jackson Carlaw: I am interested in exploring with local authorities the provision of alternatives in the opt-out process, which struck me as not

quite fulfilling the aim of being suitable and worthwhile activities. I am also interested in knowing the number of people who opt out, how suitable alternative activities are provided and conducted and whether suitable alternatives are not being provided because they are difficult to finance and sustain. That raises quite interesting issues. I am slightly uncomfortable with the idea that resources are being diverted or that individuals who opt out are in no way benefiting from that.

The Convener: That is a good point. We could write to, say, six local authorities covering rural, island and busy city centre areas.

John Wilson: I suggest that we also write to the Educational Institute of Scotland and the Scottish association for senior teachers and headteachers—I am not sure of its name—for their views. There is an educational issue, particularly as the petitioners have raised the question of local choice for headteachers and teaching staff about the religious and moral education that they deliver and about religious observance.

The Convener: As members have no more points, are we happy to continue the petition and seek the views of the organisations that we have identified?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank both petitioners for coming along. We will keep you up to date with developments. I apologise that you were delayed because we were held up by lengthy consideration of earlier petitions.

I allow the petitioners to leave but, because of time constraints, I will not suspend the meeting.

Scottish Qualifications Authority Examinations (Independent Regulator) (PE1484)

The Convener: The third new petition is PE1484, by Ian Thow, on an independent regulator for national examinations set by the Scottish Qualifications Authority. We have the clerk's note and the SPICe briefing.

In my view, we should seek the views of the Scottish Government, the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.

Chic Brodie: I agree. The background to the petition is deeply disturbing. It is disconcerting that the tiers of management—the chair and board, an advisory council and an executive management team—may take 20 days to resolve an issue but, if the matter is unresolved, the complainant must then write to another part of the same organisation. We must look into the issues.

The Convener: Do members agree with the course of action set out?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Current Petitions

Pernicious Anaemia and Vitamin B12 Deficiency (Understanding and Treatment) (PE1408)

12:30

The Convener: Agenda item 4 is consideration of current petitions. PE1408, by Andrea MacArthur, is on the updating of the understanding and treatment of pernicious anaemia and vitamin B12 deficiency. Members have a note by the clerk.

This is a very good petition—we debated it in the chamber. I suggest that we write to the British committee for standards in haematology to ask when the guideline on B12 and folate deficiency will be published and about the use of the Active-B12 test. Those are both important matters. John Wilson has an interest in the matter.

John Wilson: Yes, I do. We were advised at an earlier committee discussion that the report would be available during the summer. Our summer has ended, but we do not have the report as yet. I support the convener's suggested action. I suggest that we also write to the Scottish Government to ask how quickly it will be able to report on the British committee for standards in haematology's findings once they are published.

The Convener: Do members agree to that course of action?

Members *indicated agreement.*

A83 (Improvements) (PE1428)

The Convener: We move swiftly on to PE1428, by Councillor Douglas Philand, on behalf of Argyll First, on improvements for the A83. Members will recall that the councillor presented information to the committee on the issues. The Scottish Government has since carried out a lot of work. Given that the Scottish Government has clarified the timescale for the works recommended in the A83 study report, I recommend that we close the petition.

Members *indicated agreement.*

Scotland's National Tree (PE1457)

The Convener: PE1457, by Alex Hamilton, is on Scotland's national tree. I welcome the Scottish Government's announcement today that it is to launch a consultation on having a national tree. That is most welcome, although I am sure that members will have their own views. Do members agree to close the petition, given that the Government action meets the needs of the petitioner?

John Wilson: I suggest that we submit Mr Hamilton's submissions and the evidence that we have received to the Scottish Government as part of the consultation.

Jackson Carlaw: I want to note rather than welcome the Scottish Government's action.

The Convener: Does that mean that you are pining for another tree?

Chic Brodie: That is why the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party changed its logo.

Angus MacDonald: I draw attention to Alex Hamilton's comments from 11 August, in which he encourages us to make statements to the local and national press. I for one will certainly issue a press release to the local media urging my constituents to engage in the consultation process. I encourage others to do so, too.

Chic Brodie: Do you have trees in Falkirk?

Angus MacDonald: One or two.

Scottish Living Wage (Recognition Scheme) (PE1467)

The Convener: PE1467, by Andrew McGowan MSYP, on behalf of the Scottish Youth Parliament, is on a Scottish living wage recognition scheme. Members have a note from the clerk and a number of submissions.

The Scottish Youth Parliament has submitted a lot of good petitions. In this case, although there are probably different views among the business community, it would be useful to get feedback from the Living Wage Foundation, which is part of Citizens UK, which offers accreditation to employers who pay the living wage. One of the main arguments against the petition is that we do not want to set up another scheme, but let us hear what the accreditation agency has to say. It may feel that any such scheme would be in addition rather than in opposition to its work to ensure that employers look at the living wage. It would be a shame to close the petition before doing that final piece of work.

John Wilson: I thought that the submission from Peter Kelly at the Poverty Alliance covered the issue of the Living Wage Foundation, on behalf of the Scottish living wage recognition scheme, supporting the idea that we should continue to develop the foundation's role in encouraging employers to pay the living wage. The question is whether we need to write to someone else before we close the petition. The petition has been worth while and it was interesting to see the Confederation of British Industry Scotland's response. It is not news to someone such as myself who has been involved in the campaign over a number of years; the same

arguments were used about the introduction of the minimum wage. We are now in a position where there is general recognition for the living wage, and I think that we can close the petition and move on.

The Convener: Just to clarify, Mr Wilson, did the Poverty Alliance speak on behalf of the Scottish living wage foundation?

John Wilson: My reading of it was that it spoke on behalf of a number of organisations, including the Scottish Trades Union Congress, the Scottish churches, the GMB, the Public and Commercial Services Union, Oxfam and the Child Poverty Action Group, saying that they already recognise the scheme and would urge any campaign to support further recognition through the scheme that is currently in place.

Jackson Carlaw: I think that it would be worth holding the petition open a little longer. I note the reported comments of the UK Government, which is about to announce incentives to employers to pay the living wage, over and above the national minimum wage. It would be interesting to see what actions the UK coalition Government proposes to take to encourage a higher level of payment before we close the petition, to see whether there is anything in that proposal that we might commend to the Scottish Government.

Anne McTaggart: It has been an outstanding petition, and we should thank Andrew McGowan, who is here again today. However, for the reasons that Jackson Carlaw has given, it is important to keep the petition open for those views.

The Convener: Mr Carlaw, do you want us to write to the UK Government to clarify that?

Jackson Carlaw: That would be useful.

The Convener: I am not totally convinced on the question of whether the Living Wage Foundation is covered, but I am happy to accept John Wilson's point about its being covered in the Poverty Alliance paper.

Anne McTaggart: Could we write to the Living Wage Foundation to clarify that point?

The Convener: We can do that to clarify that it will not be in conflict. As I understand it, Citizens UK runs the accreditation for the living wage through the Living Wage Foundation, but that is just a technical point. It might be useful to get the foundation's view and to return to the petition at a future meeting. Would members be happy with that?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank Andrew McGowan for coming along today.

Young Carers' Grant (PE1470)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1470, by Lauren King, who is also a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament, on behalf of the Scottish Youth Parliament, on a young carers' grant. Members have a note by the clerk on submissions relating to the petition. Again, this is a good petition. It would make sense to refer it to the Education and Culture Committee, which is considering the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill as we speak. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Young People's Hospital Wards (PE1471)

The Convener: The next petition is PE1471, by Rachael McCully. Rachael is another member of the Scottish Youth Parliament, which is dominating today's petitions. The petition concerns young people's hospital wards, and members have a note by the clerk on the submissions. Again, I invite members' views on the next steps. We are still seeking responses from NHS Borders and NHS Lothian. Do members wish to get a complete answer before we analyse the matter in full? I know that it is a common view of members, and of Chic Brodie in particular, that they are unhappy about delays, but I believe that we should get back all the responses before we make a decision.

Chic Brodie: I agree. We see three responsible petitions from the Scottish Youth Parliament and I think—without wishing to bore everyone by talking about speedy responses—that it is incumbent on us to deal with them properly. They are not fly-by-night petitions; they are serious petitions, and we should encourage everybody to understand that they are serious, so that we can address them. We should certainly get full responses, and once we have done that I suggest that we seek clarification from the Government and from NHS Education for Scotland on how we can progress.

Anne McTaggart: I agree and again thank the petitioner for coming to the gallery to hear the petition being actioned. It is important to keep the petition open for all the reasons that have been given.

Jackson Carlaw: It seems to me from the range of responses that we have received that many of the health boards have told us what they do rather than their particular response to the petition. In some ways, they seek to exercise a flavour—if I can put it that way—of the petitioner's request rather than necessarily deal with the letter of it, so when we have collected all the information, we will not necessarily have a concise view of the petition, but of how young adults are treated in the system. At that point, it would probably be useful for the Health and Sport Committee to take a look at the petition and

consider what it thinks should be done if there is a need to co-ordinate and bring about a national standard.

The Convener: Are members happy that we continue the petition, and seek the responses that are still outstanding and the additional ones that Chic Brodie mentioned?

Members indicated agreement.

Menie Development (Governance and Propriety) (PE1474)

The Convener: The final current petition is PE1474, by David Milne, on governance and propriety during the Menie development. Members have a note by the clerk and the submissions. I invite contributions from members on the next steps for the petition.

Jackson Carlaw: It seems that Police Scotland has denied that it was part of some major conspiracy, which I think was suggested to us when we took evidence. I think that it was suggested that it had co-operated with Mr Trump's organisation in order to apply the law on a discretionary basis. Moreover, that seems to be the flavour of most of the other responses that we have received. For those reasons, I am in favour of closing the petition.

The Convener: Do members agree?

Chic Brodie: I agree. We would have needed more than what was said; we would have needed evidence, and there is none. The responses have attended to that, so we should close the petition.

John Wilson: Did David Milne respond to any of the submissions that we received?

The Convener: Yes, he did. Members have the submission in their papers, but it has not been published.

John Wilson: Right. I seek clarification on whether we should put it on the record that Mr Milne responded, but that there may be issues with some of the content of that response. In the past, certain petitioners have accused the committee of being secretive in our deliberations. Before we close the petition, it would be useful to say that we fully understand that Mr Milne made a submission, but because of issues that have arisen from it, it is not publicly available, although we hope that the majority of the response will become available once some issues have been resolved.

The Convener: John Wilson makes a perfectly fair point. We can officially record that we have all received the feedback from David Milne, that the committee decided in light of that letter that there were issues around the complete submission, and

that it will come out in due course, as John Wilson said.

After hearing everyone's comments and considering the observations from the other public bodies, my view is that there is little to demonstrate that another inquiry is necessary and that we should close the petition under rule 15.7. Do members agree?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Correspondence

12:43

The Convener: Agenda item 5 is correspondence. We have received a letter from the president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. Members will recall that there have been issues around our asking COSLA for responses. For one reason or another, we have not always been able to get feedback in time to make further deliberations in the committee. It has been suggested that the deputy convener and I meet the president of COSLA to discuss that issue further.

I seek the committee's agreement that the clerk, Chic Brodie and I should meet the president of COSLA, at its suggestion. Obviously, we will feed back information about that at a future meeting.

Members *indicated agreement.*

Meeting closed at 12:44.

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