



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 1 April 2014

Session 4

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE
7th Meeting 2014, 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:

Jane Brown (Robert Burns World Federation Ltd)

Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Alison C Tait (Robert Burns World Federation Ltd)

Jim Thomson (Robert Burns World Federation Ltd)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

Committee Room 5

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Tuesday 1 April 2014

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:00*]

New Petitions

Renaming Glasgow Prestwick Airport (PE1506)

The Convener (David Stewart): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I welcome you all to today's meeting of the Public Petitions Committee. As always, I ask everyone, whether members or those in the public gallery, to switch off any electronic equipment because it interferes with our sound system.

Item 1 is consideration of two new petitions. The committee will take evidence on one of the petitions. John Wilson has sent his apologies and I welcome Jim Eadie, who is substituting. David Torrance will not attend today, either.

The first petition is PE1506, by Alison Tait, on behalf of the Robert Burns World Federation Ltd, on renaming Glasgow Prestwick airport as Robert Burns international airport. Members have a note by the clerk, the briefing from the Scottish Parliament information centre and the petition. Members will note that Willie Coffey MSP has indicated his support for the petition. He would have liked to attend the meeting, but he has another engagement.

I welcome our witnesses. Good morning and thanks for coming along. From the Robert Burns World Federation Ltd, we have Alison Tait, the chief executive, Jane Brown, the president, and Jim Thomson, the senior vice-president. I invite Alison Tait to make a short presentation of around five minutes to set the context, after which I will ask a couple of questions. Chic Brodie and Jackson Carlaw have a particular interest in the petition, so I will invite them to ask questions after I have asked mine.

Alison C Tait (Robert Burns World Federation Ltd): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you, convener, for allowing us to come along and put forward our case for the renaming of Prestwick airport.

The Robert Burns World Federation was founded in 1885. Its main objectives are to advance the education of the public about the life, poetry and works of Robert Burns and in furtherance thereof to encourage and arrange competitions among the general public, students

and school children; to stimulate the development, teaching and study of Scottish literature—all Scottish literature, not just Burns—art, music and language; to conserve buildings and places that are associated with Robert Burns and his contemporaries; and to strengthen the bond of fellowship among members of Burns clubs and kindred societies throughout the world. Clubs, societies, individuals and corporate bodies that support the aims and objectives of the federation may be admitted as members. However, as the leading authority on Robert Burns, his life and his works, we interact on a daily basis with many people, both members and non-members.

Robert Burns is a global icon and is recognised worldwide. He is one of the top literary figures in the history of the planet and is comparable to all the greatest literary characters. The culture secretary, Fiona Hyslop, said:

“Robert Burns is Scotland's greatest cultural icon, recognised and celebrated all around the world. His legacy is of incalculable value to Scotland and the country's image abroad.”

However, it is not the sentimental aspect of Burns but the business case that is important and that brings us here today. Prestwick airport is Scotland's other international airport. Renaming the airport would immediately identify its geographical location right in the heart of Burns country. We see it as a positive step forward to have the international airport almost in sight of Robert Burns's birthplace. As a gateway to the region, it will potentially be seen by millions of passengers. Renaming the airport would be a fitting and relevant tribute to the memory of Robert Burns. More important, it could have an impact on the market, as it services an area that is rich in culture, heritage and tourist attractions.

We envisage that renaming the airport would increase its profile for Burns tourism and would provide an opportunity to improve passenger footfall to the area. That would be of advantage not only to Ayrshire, but to Dumfries and Galloway and to wider Scotland. There is an opportunity for the south-west of Scotland to capitalise on tourist value in respect of everything from spend on tour guides and ancestry research to golf and hotels—I could go on. From a marketing point of view, it is possible to capitalise on Burns throughout the airport and potentially increase footfall. Due to security, footfall in airports nowadays is mainly passengers as opposed to the cafe culture footfall that existed previously.

In physical terms, Prestwick is Scotland's largest commercial airfield, although in passenger traffic terms it sits in fourth place after Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen airports. However, it has the potential to improve on that. Passenger traffic peaked at 2.4 million in 2007 following 10 years of

rapid growth, which was driven in part by the boom in no-frills airlines, especially Ryanair, which uses the airport as an operating base. We understand that there has been a significant reduction in passenger traffic, with around 1.1 million passengers passing through the airport in 2013.

The federation has worked closely with the Scottish Government for many years on the promotion of Burns, as both organisations realise the value that Burns brings to the Scottish economy. It is reported that Robert Burns is worth nearly £160 million to the Scottish economy. The federation continues to encourage overseas visitors to Scotland, with Burns being one of the greatest focal points for those who visit Scotland.

Fiona Hyslop also said:

“The strength of culture is challenging us to think differently, to do things in different ways”.

So, we are doing things differently. We are working in partnership and collaborating with many other organisations nowadays. We would be delighted to work in partnership with the airport management to provide assistance wherever necessary to progress the airport's future growth. The Robert Burns World Federation is keen to see the airport used to its full potential, as that would have a positive impact on employment in a region of high unemployment where the unemployment rate in several areas is currently above the national average.

Burns was the ultimate cultural activist, challenging the political mores of the day and envisaging a different future. We envisage a different future for the airport.

Thank you for listening. We are happy to take any questions.

The Convener: Thank you very much for your evidence. If Jane Brown or Jim Thomson wants to answer questions, they should catch my eye, please.

I have a couple of quick questions. Looking at the petition, it seems that what you really want is a change in branding. What evidence do you have that a change in brand would make customers more likely to fly to and from Prestwick airport?

Alison C Tait: Burns is a global icon who is known worldwide. His name is so well known that, if it were attached to the airport, people from all over the world would recognise it immediately. They might not recognise the name Prestwick.

Jim Thomson (Robert Burns World Federation Ltd): I do not have any statistical evidence, but there is anecdotal evidence. In the past year, we have had several visits from overseas, particularly from the United States.

People flew from Pittsburgh, Los Angeles or wherever into London and thereafter had to fly to Glasgow or Edinburgh. They made it quite clear that they would have preferred to fly to an airport closer to where they wanted to come. Although there is an opportunity to do that via Ryanair, I do not think that the people from the Carnegie Institute, for example, wanted to do that, so they had to fly to Glasgow. People would travel to the airport not only from the USA and Canada, but from the far east and other points.

The Convener: I had a look at some other exercises in brand changing from across the UK. You probably know that Wick airport is now called John O'Groats airport, that Sheffield airport is Robin Hood airport and that Liverpool airport is John Lennon airport. They are all different, of course, but have you compared their experiences to see whether the change in name changed the footfall?

Alison C Tait: I cannot comment on that.

Jim Thomson: We have not carried out the commercial exercise that that would involve because we do not have the facility to do that. In Northern Ireland, there is the George Best international airport, too. I venture to suggest that those airports are following a trend that started in America. I do not think that Sheffield airport changed to Robin Hood airport for any other reason than that it felt that it was the right thing to do in terms of where it is and how the name sits with its heritage and culture, particularly its history, in the framework of what people are trying to do in that area. The bottom line is that, although the commercial argument takes precedence, there are times when you have to ask yourself, “Is this the right thing to do?” I venture to suggest that this is the right thing to do because it tells the world who Scotland is.

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): Good morning. This is a difficult petition for me to address because, after years of publicly seeking to achieve the objectives of the petitioners, I should be sitting where they are sitting. You will have to curb my enthusiasm, convener. I have contacted the chief executives of Liverpool and Belfast airports. On the day that Belfast airport announced the change of name to George Best airport, more than 1,000 people came to see the rebranding.

As the witnesses will know, an exercise is going on with a management consultant who is a key player in all this. I met him two weeks ago to talk about various things. Have you spoken to him or do you have any plans to speak to him?

Alison C Tait: I know who he is—I did some background research. We have not spoken to him yet, but if that would be acceptable I would certainly go down that route.

Chic Brodie: It might be worth while.

Have you made any contact with the airports that have rebranded, such as Belfast, Sheffield and Wick—which I did not know about?

Jim Thomson: I had no idea that Wick airport had changed its name, either.

Chic Brodie: Have you contacted those airports, or do you plan to do so, to find out the impact that rebranding would have?

Alison C Tait: If our suggestion was an option, then yes, we would do some further research and find out more information from them.

Chic Brodie: How many languages is Burns translated into?

Jim Thomson: His poems and songs are translated into 52 languages, but there is more depth to it than that. For example, in universities from Tokyo all the way to San Francisco you will find Scottish literature departments. Places such as Singapore promote Scottish literature better than we do in this country. Scottish literature is not just Burns; there are many other great Scottish literary figures. We are sitting quite near the tallest non-military statue in the world, which is of a literary figure.

Scotland venerates its literary heritage, but other countries value it as well. There have been more than 2,000 prints of Burns's works worldwide and countries such as Russia have produced stamps with Burns's head on them—Russia was the first country in the world to do that. Burns is an international staple.

If you went to Harvard University, you would be required to study the Harvard classics. To this day, one volume of Harvard classics is the works of Robert Burns.

Chic Brodie: It was a rhetorical question. You say that Burns is translated into 52 languages and, last week, I heard that Burns's works are sold in 195 countries. Clearly, the brand is very important.

Have you had any contact with Ayrshire College and the engineering companies? I would say this, but Prestwick is a unique airport because it has significant engineering support behind it, through the college, and great experience of maintenance—both repair and overhaul—which makes it attractive to large-body jets. Worldwide, it is difficult to find any airport to carry out maintenance of large-body jets.

Have you had any contact with the college or with Spirit AeroSystems?

Alison C Tait: I know the principal of the new Ayrshire College, Heather Dunk, and I am in contact with some of the aerospace firms because

of my involvement with Young Enterprise Scotland.

Chic Brodie: I have one last question, although I could go on until 12 o'clock. Far be it from me, with my limited business experience, to challenge what was said at last week's Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee meeting about what would give the airport the best chance of growing its business and returning to profit. Branding was not mentioned particularly. You market the Robert Burns World Federation very well, but have you had any contact with people who might be involved in marketing of this nature?

Alison C Tait: No.

Chic Brodie: Can I encourage you to do so?

Alison C Tait: Yes, certainly. Thank you.

Chic Brodie: Thank you. I am tempted to say that, at some stage, the airport will be named as you wish, but that is not in my gift.

10:15

Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con): I am sorry, but this is the good cop, bad cop routine. Like the Deputy First Minister, who gave evidence on the airport last week, I am agnostic on the issue. I represent West Scotland and, until recently, had lived for several years in Troon. Therefore, I am well aware of the downturn in traffic at Prestwick airport and am very keen that a business case be put together that will allow the airport to survive.

I want to test some of the concepts that are involved in this. For me, this is not about promoting Robert Burns, but about securing the future of the airport. That is what underpins my concern. Is your argument that calling the airport Robert Burns international airport would make more people want to come and holiday in Ayrshire?

Alison C Tait: That is part of it, yes. The name would make the airport more recognisable and would pinpoint its geographic location. We would like to encourage more tourist traffic to Ayrshire, Dumfries and Galloway and the surrounding districts. There are many issues involved.

Jackson Carlaw: Therein lies my concern. Until now, the airport has been seen as a secure gateway into broader Scotland. Is there a sufficient additional market out of Burns within Ayrshire to secure the viability of the airport?

Jim Thomson: I do not think that the Burns traffic alone would secure the viability of the airport. There are lots of issues involved, of which you are probably more aware than I am. In a previous life, I had a lot of work and contact with the airport. Without doubt, the biggest issue for the

viability of Prestwick airport has been its absentee managers. The landlords have been on the other side of the world and, as a result, investment has not taken place. When I think back even 15 years to the stature that Prestwick airport had once, compared with its stature today, I doubt that the Burns name on its own would bring that investment. Nor would it more than double the footfall from 1 million passengers to 2.4 million passengers.

However, the Robert Burns birthplace museum, which opened only 18 months or two years ago, is well past 1 million visitors. To say that there is no Burns tourism would be misleading but, on its own, it will not make Prestwick airport survive.

Jackson Carlaw: That sounds realistic, for which I am grateful.

We have talked about people coming into Scotland, but the airport also depends on people flying out of Scotland to justify the investment that airlines would make in routes. That brings us back to pricing, location and all the more complicated issues that underpin the success and viability of any airport. That is where I am unsure that I understand your argument. Would somebody from Glasgow or elsewhere want to fly from Prestwick airport because it was called Robert Burns international airport rather than fly from any other airport that was more convenient or price competitive? I cannot believe that they would.

I wonder whether the new name would be helpful in the event that everything else could be put right. Is that where you are coming from, as opposed to believing in putting the cart before the horse?

Alison C Tait: Yes, you are right. People will come to Prestwick from Glasgow or the outlying districts only if the flights are going to the destinations that they are looking for.

Jackson Carlaw: My final points reflect what the Deputy First Minister said last week. The Government has taken over responsibility for the airport not because it wants to, but because it feels that it has to. There is no pretence that the Deputy First Minister is an airport magnate with the ability to manage such a project herself. The Government will require, at the very least, a management team to do what is required to turn the airport around, possibly with the Government's support. Everybody thinks that this surely must be its last chance—and possibly its best chance in recent years—to make that happen. Therefore, I wonder whether this is really a matter for MSPs and the Scottish Parliament. If the management team that is undertaking the exercise on behalf of the Government believes that it is the right thing to do, should we not respond to that initiative rather

than try to advocate a route that the team might not have the evidence to support?

Jim Thomson: There are several arguments in there about what should come first. On the management of the airport, we simply say to you that Luton and Stansted airports work perfectly profitably in the shadow of Gatwick and Heathrow airports. Glasgow and Edinburgh airports are both successful, and Prestwick airport can work equally successfully in their shadow.

I do not think that it makes much odds whether the name is important to the managers. It is more an issue for the Parliament and how it wants Scotland to be seen, not only within Scotland but abroad. I suggest that, although the management team's views and ideas should be taken into consideration, the decision on the name of the airport lies with the Parliament.

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning, panel. I have read that Facebook and social media sites have been involved. Could you explain what you have done before arriving here today?

Alison C Tait: The amount of support through Facebook was the reason why we decided to bring the official petition. The petition got only about 260 signatures, but the Facebook site continues to gather support, which is pleasing. This has come about because of the social media support.

Anne McTaggart: Have there been any other campaigns involving local people?

Alison C Tait: There was an unsuccessful campaign, possibly about 10 years ago, before my involvement with the federation.

Jim Thomson: There have been repeated attempts by various groups to try to influence the previous management, or owners, to rebrand the airport away from "Pure Dead Brilliant"—all that sort of thing. I can understand why they did that and do not have an issue with it. It is just that everything has fallen on deaf ears, because the owners did not see any value in taking a Scottish poet and saying to the world, "This is important to us."

The Convener: I have some wider questions. We have talked, rightly, about the rebranding exercise and I understand the points that you are making. A key issue in the development of airports in Scotland was the use of the route development fund. Labour brought that in initially and, in fairness, the current Government is looking at a form of funding to ensure that local airports have marketing support to develop companies to take an interest in them. Would that be useful for Prestwick airport in the longer term?

Alison C Tait: Yes, it certainly would be. There are a number of businesses in the area already, but the more we can attract, the better.

The Convener: I am sure that you have picked up from your supporters and their organisations that many tourists and, indeed, the business community might well drive or take the train to London for flights, rather than use Scottish airports. I would encourage a general strategy for the development of many more direct flights from Scotland, irrespective of the airport. As you say, Edinburgh and Glasgow have done particularly successfully on that.

Ryanair is an excellent company and has used the base at Prestwick. In general terms, it is important to try to develop a range of carriers. The danger of being dependent on one carrier—as I know from my own experience in Inverness—is that people are very reliant on it. If that goes wrong, there are real problems. Dundee in particular has found that to be so. I know that Oska Travel has looked at charter flights for the long term. Do you know whether any other carriers have been encouraged to come to Prestwick?

Alison C Tait: Yes, I imagine that some have been. The more we can attract, the better. Prestwick airport did so much better a few years back, when it had lots of different destinations. It was wonderful to see the airport busy again. Unfortunately, it has taken a dip at the moment, but I am sure that, with the right partners in place, we can get back to where it was.

The Convener: The key, of course, is to encourage other partners to come in that will not alienate the existing partner, which we do not want to do. That is a delicate balance.

Alison C Tait: It is, but we do not want to have all our eggs in one basket. It is better that we widen the set of people with whom we work.

The Convener: I have picked up from talking to the business community that it is interested in full-service airlines, which, in the past, meant airlines such as British Airways. That would give us the advantage of through-ticketing and interlinking—the ability to go directly to cities around the world. Do you know whether Prestwick has considered that as well?

Alison C Tait: It should.

Jim Thomson: The only Scottish director I knew who worked at Prestwick under the previous company from New Zealand was Bill Barr. When I spoke to him about that, he told me that the company was not interested. I mentioned through-ticketing to him, because it is a big issue. For example, if somebody wants to go on holiday to anywhere across the Atlantic, they require to go via a hub airport. Whether that hub airport is in the

United States or the United Kingdom is irrelevant to the flyer, but they cannot do that from Prestwick and have not been able to do it for quite a number of years.

The people from Pittsburgh made that point clearly to me when they came here last year. They would have preferred to fly into Prestwick via through-ticketing from their take-off point.

The Convener: I realise that that is not within your gift, but it is part of the wider arguments. Access to London is crucial, but we all know that, in effect, Heathrow is full and Gatwick is not far off full. For those who are going to a European destination, it is a great advantage to have direct flights to Europe. We will still, obviously, need access to London but, with the best will in the world, it will be a long time before the plans to develop Heathrow result in any increased capacity. Also, Heathrow will be more interested in lucrative long-haul destinations. Short haul has been cut dramatically within Scotland—flights have been cut from Inverness and Belfast, for instance—and that will continue because the money is in long-haul flights, not localised flights.

Do you agree that, because of those factors, the strategy should be to go directly from Scotland to European destinations?

Jim Thomson: If somebody wants to fly from Scotland direct to a European destination at the moment, they can go from Aberdeen but the choice is basically Glasgow or Edinburgh. Jet2, for example, flies daily from Glasgow and Edinburgh to the points of high interest on the European continent—Majorca and the Algarve, for example—and I do not see why some of that business cannot come to Prestwick, to be honest. There must be some kind of drop-off. Five years ago, we did that and it worked. I am not blaming anybody, but absentee landlords perhaps do not make the best managers.

The Convener: When new carriers have come in, such as the Virgin Atlantic little red service, which got the slots at Heathrow that BA had to give up because of competition regulations when it bought BMI, the flights have gone to Edinburgh and Aberdeen but not to Prestwick. There is an argument about where companies wish to fly to.

Chic Brodie: All that you just said, convener, highlights the uniqueness of Prestwick. I will bring us back to the branding. We did not talk about some of the changes that are needed not only for Prestwick but for other airports, such as changes to air passenger duty.

Prestwick is the only airport in Scotland that has a railhead next to it. I have had conversations with Network Rail and I wonder whether the petitioners have had discussions about improving the railhead and how it might be better applied in relation to the

airport. They could call it Tam o' Shanter railway if they liked; I do not mind.

Alison C Tait: As Prestwick improves under new management, the rail links will improve as part of the plan. There are also plans to link up Prestwick with Kilmarnock and Kilmarnock with Edinburgh. Lots of things are being discussed at the moment and such improvements will probably come as part of the bigger parcel. As such things progress, the airport and the rail links will all improve, I hope.

10:30

Jim Thomson: As it stands, the rail link is a pretty routine, regular, well-contrived service on an electric line, and it does not need a lot done to it. There is already an overpass from the airport to the station. The station facilities could probably do with being improved if the footfall is going to increase, but I see that as quite minor in the context of how the rail operation would work in conjunction with the airport.

Chic Brodie: I think that that is going to happen. Let us return to the uniqueness of the airport. If I was selling brands abroad—we know that Scotland's exports are growing quite rapidly—I would not mind branding my products as having been flown out of Robert Burns international airport. Discussions are being held about what might happen if cargo traffic was pulled up from the north of England to Prestwick instead of being sent through Heathrow, which is currently bordering on inoperable. Have you talked to any large companies that export and that might look to use the brand as a means of increasing their visibility abroad?

Alison C Tait: There are a fair number of exporters in Ayrshire. Having worked previously with Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which is based at Prestwick airport, I know that such discussions are to be had with companies that may be interested in using the brand. We have links with Isle of Arran Distillers, which uses the Robert Burns brand, and in the past year we have established links with the Robert Burns transport company. As part and parcel of what we are doing to advance the federation as an organisation, there are lots of discussions to be had with various organisations and companies.

Chic Brodie: Prestwick airport is unique in the length of its runways and in its weather. It is also a backstop in the event of any—unlikely, I hope—terrorist activities. It also has a railhead and a huge engineering backdrop. I expect that I know the answer to this question, but with proper branding could it not be an exceptional and unique airport that supports the other passenger airports in Scotland?

Alison C Tait: Absolutely.

Jim Thomson: I think that this is a unique opportunity as well, Mr Brodie. Scotland has a great opportunity to say something to the world about who we are, what is important to us as a nation and what heritage, culture and history mean to the people of Scotland. I see it as a fantastic opportunity. It may well be passed up for all sorts of good, positive reasons—I would not be critical if that happened; I would just be disappointed.

Chic Brodie: You and me both.

Jane Brown (Robert Burns World Federation Ltd): I will give a sentimental point of view, although I know that this is not about sentiment. I had the honour of laying a wreath at the foot of Burns's statue in George Square, Glasgow, on 25 January. When I looked around the square, I saw all the statues of the worthies with letters after their names and accolades written on their plinths telling of everything that they had done. I laid the wreath, bowed my head and stepped back. When I looked up, I saw that there was only one word on the plinth before me—Burns. That is all that needed to be said. Around the world, everyone knows what that means.

That is the sentimental view—that is what I am here to give, as I am passionate and sentimental about the issue. Everyone would know that Robert Burns international airport was in Scotland, near his birthplace. East Ayrshire Council and Dumfries and Galloway Council recently worked hard together to create a Burns trail, so that anyone who arrives at Prestwick will start in Alloway, where Burns was born, and make their way to where he died and where he is buried. It is great that that work has been undertaken by the two councils. It used to be "them and us", but they have now joined together. It is a good step in the right direction, and anyone who came as a tourist would get information about it straight away. It is another wee string to the bow.

The Convener: That is an interesting point.

It is a very good petition. The next step is that the committee will look at where we want to go with the petition. I think that we have gone beyond the branding and the name, and you have given us some interesting answers. Whatever happens with the name, we need the airport to succeed, and a series of other factors come into play, including route development and the development of current and new carriers. We also need to think about our general philosophy about whether we should fly from Scotland or elsewhere—that will be key.

My view is that we should continue the petition and undertake some further investigation. Members will be aware that there was a discussion at the Infrastructure and Capital

Investment Committee involving Adam Ingram and Nicola Sturgeon. That was a useful debate, and I think that it is worth taking advice from that committee.

Are we agreed to continue the petition and await any relevant recommendations on the issue to the holding board and ministers by the recently appointed senior adviser? We would need to continue the petition to get that technical advice from those key people. We could then debate the petition again, at a later stage, once we have got that key information.

We will keep the petitioners up to date with progress. All the committee members have shown a big interest in the work that you are doing. I ask you to stay for a second while I confirm whether the committee is agreed on that course of action or whether there is any other course of action that members would like to follow.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): I agree that the petitioners have made a strong case this morning, and I would be content to continue the petition. It would be worth waiting to see the recommendations that come from the recently appointed special adviser, who has been in post for less than two months. I agree with the course of action that you suggest, convener. I presume that we will ask that the committee be informed at an early stage when the special adviser has come up with those recommendations.

The Convener: Definitely.

Chic Brodie: I agree absolutely. It might be helpful if the petitioners contacted some of the people whom we have suggested to broaden and deepen the petition, if that is possible. That might bring a totally different perspective to what was discussed last week at the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee.

Anne McTaggart: I agree that we should continue the petition and follow the course of action that has been suggested.

Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP): I endorse the view of other members that we should continue the petition while the management consultant is looking at the commercial viability of Prestwick.

Jackson Carlaw: I am content.

The Convener: As you will have picked up, all members are keen to follow the course of action that has been identified. We will keep you up to date with developments. I thank all three of you for coming along and participating so helpfully.

I suspend the meeting for a minute to allow our witnesses to leave.

10:37

Meeting suspended.

10:38

On resuming—

Aberdeen to Inverness Rail Improvement (PE1509)

The Convener: The second new petition is PE1509 by Lee Wright on Aberdeen to Inverness rail travel improvement. The committee invited Mr Wright to give evidence, but unfortunately he could not appear today because of work commitments. Members have a note by the clerk, a SPICe briefing and the petition.

As members will be aware, there have been some developments with regard to the petition. On Friday, the Government announced a new package for the route. I am not sure whether that was in response to the fact that we were going to consider the petition today—if it was, I am grateful.

Jim Eadie: Never underestimate the power of this committee.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Eadie.

In summary, the press release mentions a £170 million investment, the redoubling of the track between Aberdeen and Inverurie, the extension of the platforms at Inverurie and Elgin and some signalling improvements. The petitioner is very concerned about the service's poor frequency and the time that it takes to travel between the two cities—one of which, as members will know, I have a certain affinity with—but I note from the announcement that an hourly service and a reduction in the time taken to travel from Aberdeen to Inverness are planned.

A big difficulty is that much of the route is single track, which causes problems with service frequency. I note that a longer-term aspiration is electrification of the route. I certainly support the development of new stations, such as the one at Dalcross. Given that a station existed there many years ago, that development would make a lot of sense, particularly as it would tie into the Inverness airport route.

The petition makes an interesting point about ensuring that train tickets are sold on a seated passengers only basis. I do not know whether members have a view on that. The petitioner's point is that passengers should not be allowed to stand on any train in Scotland that happens to be too busy and that capacity should be based only on seated passenger numbers.

Do members have any general views about the petition, particularly the latter point?

Jackson Carlaw: I observe only that Network Rail's fortuitous announcement directly addresses a considerable number of the petitioner's issues. Extending platforms at stations to allow six-car trains to stop will increase capacity, and the dualling of the line will increase service frequency and shorten journey times.

People shake their head in bewilderment at a number of key journeys that have to be made by either road or rail in Scotland, as anyone trying to get to Oban by road or between Inverness and Aberdeen will know. We have all experienced some of those journeys, and those of us who do not have to live daily with them should count ourselves very fortunate.

Although long overdue, the investment programme is very welcome, and, as far as meeting the petitioner's needs is concerned, I suspect that that will be as much as can be hoped for in the suggested timeframe. I hope that he will feel that the programme meets those needs. I must say that I was surprised; I was not expecting that announcement from Network Rail, but I welcome it.

Angus MacDonald: I agree with Jackson Carlaw's comments. I, too, welcome Network Rail's announcement. When I read the briefing paper, I was struck by the time the journey takes. Two hours and 28 minutes seems excessively long for a 108-mile journey, and I am therefore sure that the petitioner will be pleased to note the proposed reduction in journey times and the introduction of two new stations at Dalcross and Kintore.

I am curious to know whether any other UK rail companies have a seated passengers only ticketing policy. I am not sure whether that policy operates anywhere else in the country, but it might be worth finding out.

Anne McTaggart: I am not sure how feasible a seated passengers only policy would be or whether it has been done before. We would need further information on that before making any recommendation.

The Convener: That is a useful point. If members agree, I will ask SPICe to research the policy across Scotland and the UK; in fact, I am interested to find out whether there are any European experiences of such policies. The argument is that the passenger's contract with the company is that they will have a seat; that is the company's obligation. Of course, such a policy would create massive problems at peak times, but the petitioner will argue that that is the company's problem and that it is obliged to ensure that customers are well looked after on trains.

Chic Brodie: This does not hugely apply in Scotland, but when I lived in the south-east, I was

struck by the amount of standing on trains. Do the operators comply with health and safety regulations?

The Convener: That is a very interesting point that I will also ask SPICe to look at. In an accident, anyone who is standing on a train is more vulnerable, although I know that seats on trains do not usually have seat belts. I would have thought that there would be health and safety issues to consider. Does the committee agree to ask SPICe to look at that issue, too?

10:45

Jackson Carlaw: I am slightly concerned about straying into that area, because it is quite a big topic. In circumstances of force majeure, when signalling causes trains to be cancelled and people have to get on to one train, my experience is usually that the train goes much slower to reflect the fact that there are standing passengers on board.

I do not want such a policy to be enforced in a way that produces unintended consequences, with passengers unable to get on trains and having to stand in the station for another three hours because they are not allowed to get on a train until there is a free seat. I am not sure how one would apply any sort of compensation scheme. After all, how would someone be able to demonstrate to anyone's satisfaction after the event that they had been sitting or standing?

We need to be careful that we do not wander into territory that would require us to take considerable evidence and where we might stray beyond the petition's brief. I am slightly anxious about that for various reasons, but I understand what you want to do, convener.

The Convener: Jackson Carlaw is wise to caution the committee against not extending the brief too far. However, I understand from the committee that we could ask SPICe to carry out some brief research into whether a seated passengers only ticketing policy exists anywhere. That work should be fairly straightforward, and I will report back on it at a future meeting.

It is recommended that we write to Transport Scotland and Network Rail to request their views on the petition, but, as members have hinted, Friday's announcement effectively provides that information. Do members still feel that it would be useful to get a categoric report from those companies, or has the issue been covered by the release that I summarised earlier? Do members feel that we need to do further work in addition to addressing the points identified in the petition? We would report back on that work at a future meeting.

Jackson Carlaw: It might be worth while asking Network Rail to provide a timetable for the next five years on when it expects to undertake the work. The press release was part of a broader package of announcements covering the whole five-year period, but it did not specifically state how and when this particular project would be advanced.

The Convener: Do members agree that we should do that? I will get SPICe to address the other point.

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: We will continue the petition and ask further questions of Network Rail and SPICe, and I will report back to the committee at a future meeting.

Current Petitions

Congenital Heart Disease Patients (Care) (PE1446)

10:47

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is consideration of current petitions. PE1446 by Dr Liza Morton, on behalf of Scottish adult congenital heart patients, is on Scottish standards for the care of adult congenital heart patients. Members will have a note by the clerk and the various submissions. Malcolm Chisholm MSP, who has an interest in the petition, would have attended the meeting to speak, but he has a prior constituency engagement.

I invite contributions from members.

Chic Brodie: I have nothing to say other than that I agree with the proposed action. We will have more information by the end of the year.

The Convener: Indeed. I should perhaps have said that the petitioner is keen for us to defer the petition until the end of 2014 and maintain a watching brief on progress towards the development and implementation of national standards.

Angus MacDonald: I am pleased to note from the briefing and from questions that members have asked in the chamber that the issue is on the radar of the Minister for Public Health, who is fully aware of the Scottish adult congenital cardiac service.

I see that Dr Morton is pleased with the establishment of the working group, which she describes as a very positive step forward. However, I also note her request that the committee keep a watching brief on the issue, and I agree with Chic Brodie that we should do so.

Jackson Carlaw: I remember Dr Morton's evidence vividly; her case was forceful, compelling and well articulated. I am happy to support the recommendation, but I suggest that we note in the committee's minutes our very strong support for the petition's aims and our desire for it to succeed. In our watching brief, we would be putting the issue out of sight and out of mind, but we would expect the work that is under way to lead to positive results and outcomes.

Anne McTaggart: I commend the petitioner for the work that has been undertaken so far, but it is clear that there is still work to be done and progress to be made. I agree that we should keep the petition open with a watching brief, but we should ensure that we are watching the issue.

The Convener: Are members happy with that course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I endorse the comments that have been made. Dr Morton gave excellent evidence to the committee and the petition is very good.

Alzheimer's and Dementia Awareness (PE1480)

The Convener: PE1480 by Amanda Kopel, on behalf of the Frank Kopel Alzheimer's Awareness Campaign, is on Alzheimer's and dementia awareness. Members will have a note by the clerk and various submissions.

This is another strong petition. I noted recently in the press that Alex Neil visited the family and that some positive publicity resulted from that. One key issue is the importance of extending free personal care to under 65-year-olds who have dementia. There is a suggestion that we consider the petition again after the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing has made a statement to Parliament, which we expect to happen soon, and has written again to the committee on the matter.

Angus MacDonald: The cabinet secretary's letter says that a statement will be made later in March. I presume that, given that we are now into April and heading for the Easter recess, the statement will be made later in April. That said, I am certainly content to wait for it.

Chic Brodie: I want to make two points. First, I know that the local member has been diligent in following through the petition and arranging meetings with the cabinet secretary. Secondly, I take Angus MacDonald's point that the statement was supposed to be in March; perhaps it will be backdated. One hopes that it might be made this week, but the matter is in hand.

The Convener: If members agree, I am happy to write to Alex Neil asking when the statement will be made, just so that we have a timeframe. Do members agree with that course of action?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will continue the petition until we have a note back from Alex Neil.

Single-room Hospitals (Isolation) (PE1482)

The Convener: The next current petition is PE1482, by John Womersley, on isolation in single-room hospitals. Members have a note by the clerk and the submissions. Alex Fergusson MSP has an interest in the petition and would have attended today's meeting, but he had a prior engagement.

I invite comments from members, although I flag up one option, which is to write to the Government seeking confirmation that patient and public views should be sought to inform the proposed review and to ask whether the Government has undertaken a cost benefit analysis of having 100 per cent single rooms compared to 50 per cent over the course of a hospital's lifetime and, if so, whether it will share that information with the committee.

Chic Brodie: When we considered the petition previously, I raised a question about expense and, leaving aside the personal aspect, how much might have been saved had we consulted on mixed-room hospitals. To an extent, the cabinet secretary's letter of 19 March lays out the estimated impact. One also has to look at the longer-term costs arising from the impact of non-socialisation of patients who do not wish to be in single rooms. I have had several representations from people in the medical profession who have suggested that there is a disbenefit from applying a policy of single rooms, because multibedded rooms can assist with the betterment of a person's medical condition. Of course, that does not apply to everyone, but the 50 per cent rule was initially aligned with that thought.

Jackson Carlaw: I am kind of with the cabinet secretary on this. There are people who, in response to public opinion surveys, would say that they would prefer that we still had segregated carriages on trains rather than open carriages, but we cannot provide a mix of both just because people would like that. The development of a hospital is a long-term thing. It might not be easy to simply reconfigure accommodation to suit at any particular moment in time.

Politically, I have supported the Government's announcements on the development of single-room hospitals for a variety of reasons, including infection control and having en suite facilities for each patient—a whole range of things has influenced my decision on that. Although I think that there is a role for patient opinion in all this, the hospital's primary responsibility is to heal the patient and have them leave hospital at the earliest possible time and in the best possible health.

I think that a slightly homoeopathic element is being brought into the discussion, rather than a clinical one. I am not sure, therefore, that I feel moved to disagree with the cabinet secretary's policy position on this.

The Convener: Jim Eadie? I am trying to tempt him to comment, but he is resisting the temptation.

Jim Eadie: I will not rise to the bait of Mr Carlaw's comments. There has to be a balance and optimal care has to be the driver rather than

cost reduction; the comments from other members are largely correct in that regard.

The Convener: I will not ask the committee to make an absolute decision just now on whether they are in favour of 100 per cent single rooms. I will ask whether patient and public views should be part of this. There is also the issue of the cost benefit analysis to follow up, on which we did not get a categoric reply. That is what I am asking the committee to do now, instead of making any definitive decision. Do members agree with that course of action?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you.

Supermarkets (High Streets) (PE1497)

The Convener: The next current petition is PE1497, by Ellie Harrison, on behalf of Say No to Tesco, on supermarket expansion on local high streets. Members have a note by the clerk and submissions. There was a good response from local authorities. I found the submissions quite interesting when I looked through them this morning. Do members have any general comments?

Angus MacDonald: I was interested in the response from Falkirk Council's chief executive, Mary Pitcaithly, in which she made a number of valid points, as did Alastair Mitchell from the Falkirk business improvement district company and Falkirk and District Town Centre Management Ltd—I suggested that she might contact him. Their comments relate mainly to Falkirk town centre. As they point out, the situation there is quite different from that which is presented by the petitioners in the Glasgow area, but similar concerns to those of the petitioners have been expressed with regard to the district centres in the Falkirk Council area—in particular in Grangemouth, where a new Asda store opened just on the outskirts of the town centre in 2007. That store had a dramatic impact on the footfall in the town centre and hurt a number of independent retailers, which are still trading, but only just.

Similarly, I am aware of the situation in Stornoway—as you will be, convener—where a Tesco and a Co-operative are operating on the outskirts of the town centre and have severely impacted on the footfall in the town centre.

A number of valid points are raised in the submissions that we have received and I have some sympathy with the petitioners when I see what has happened with the larger out-of-town retail stores. However, the other argument from local authorities is that smaller supermarkets—Tesco Metros and so on—seem to retain footfall in the town centres and high streets. I would say that

the jury is out on this one until we see more of those smaller stores developing in our high streets.

Jackson Carlaw: I am still not entirely persuaded. I invited the petitioners to send us an evidence-based list of the stores that had closed. In fact, I spent some time on Great Western Road on Friday afternoon just to see what it was like and there was hardly a vacant unit the length of Great Western Road. The shops were all thriving and they were busy.

I assume that if some units have gone in the natural course of business, others have taken their place. Specifically, I took time to look for the Sainsbury's Local unit, which is about halfway down the road between the River Kelvin and the city centre. I looked around and I saw other fresh produce stores that were still operating in that environment. The petitioners attributed the closure of a specific store at the other end to the opening of Waitrose, but in fact the Waitrose store was not a new unit—it replaced an existing supermarket.

I wonder whether these small supermarkets have a prejudicial effect, as has been suggested, or whether they bring a certain amount of pizzazz and attraction to an area that has suffered from a drop in footfall traffic, and collectively bring more business to the area. Like Angus MacDonald, I am not persuaded that it would be right to try to introduce any kind of restriction.

11:00

Chic Brodie: When the petitioners appeared before the committee, I engaged in some robust questioning on why the name of the company had been used, which concerned me.

Having looked—as I would—at the response from South Ayrshire Council, and having had discussions last week about other developments in South Ayrshire, I am somewhat concerned about the limitation that would apply to the class 1 planning process. A large toy retailer, which will remain nameless, applied to have a shop in the middle of Ayr High Street, but it was turned down because it did not fit in with the development plan or the planning process. We sometimes micromanage things unnecessarily. I share Jackson Carlaw's view that some of these shops can bring in footfall that there might not otherwise be in the town and therefore bring benefits to other shops.

The Convener: The key issue for the committee is whether we see this as something that the Scottish Government has a role in; if we do, the suggestion is that we ask the Scottish Government how business rates relief is used to support small and medium-sized businesses. If we see it as a wider issue that is really to do with competition—

as members know, that is a reserved issue—we do not really have a locus.

I seek members' views. Should we continue the petition and write to the Scottish Government? Alternatively, is it predominantly about competition, in which case we do not really have a locus?

Jim Eadie: There is a tension between the need to promote economic growth at all costs and the need to reflect the views of local communities. There has been an expansion of these businesses in the south of Edinburgh, which I represent. There has to be a balance and it is necessary for each application to be taken on its merits. However, there is concern among the community that some of these developments reduce the footfall for small, independent traders. It would be valuable to have some information on that; perhaps we could ask the Federation of Small Businesses whether it has had any feedback from its members on the impact of the growth in smaller supermarkets.

To balance our consideration of the issues, I add that a Sainsbury's Local has opened in Marchmont in my constituency. Through a partnership with Remploy, it is employing people who would have had trouble accessing employment in the current labour market. A number of issues have to be considered in reaching a judgment, but there is no doubt that there is concern in the south of Edinburgh about what is perceived to be the overexpansion of this type of businesses.

Chic Brodie: I agree with Jim Eadie about consultation, but it is about something much wider than the consultation process; it is about looking at how development plans are being developed, and the definition of the retail policy and what areas it applies to. For example, one issue is whether a food shop is allowed to open in a certain part of an area. Funnily enough, the policy is not applied equally across all councils, so I think that a much wider issue is involved. However, I take the point that awareness of the impact on the local community should be part of the application of planning process policy.

The Convener: We received a full report from the Federation of Small Businesses that probably covers Mr Eadie's earlier point. Are members agreed that we should write to the Scottish Government about business rates relief? Its response will not be the answer to all the issues that are raised in the petition, but I believe that it would be useful to have that information before we make a final decision on the petition.

Chic Brodie: I am not sure whether a change to the application of business rates relief will change the policy in question. As I said, we should consider how consistently planning policy is being

applied across different areas for the macroretail sector. I am sure that the policy has not been defined clearly enough and I know that it is applied differently by different councils.

The Convener: We could write to the Scottish Government and ask how it ensures that there is such consistency.

Angus MacDonald: It would be interesting to see the response to that. Experience of my local area suggests to me that there is very little consistency of the kind suggested.

The Convener: All our regions or constituencies have experienced problems from urban town centres losing footfall as a result of out-of-town developments. I had a one-off meeting with a retail developer the other day who said to me that it is not a zero-sum game. Perhaps I should rephrase that—they said that they are not looking to develop within cities but that they want to develop on the outskirts of cities. It is not a case of developers saying, "Either we develop here or we don't develop at all."

I know that BID teams in my area are concerned about city centre developments and how small local and family businesses are losing trade. It is a worry across Scotland.

Chic Brodie: Yes, but it is much wider than that. I can talk only about some of the towns in the south of Scotland, but it is not just about shops. It is about having places to live in town centres, having entertainment complexes in town centres and having proper transport facilities that make it easier for people to shop in town centres. That is why I have expressed concern about why we are focusing on business rates relief.

The Convener: Are members happy for us to ask the Scottish Government about the consistency of approach point, to which Chic Brodie referred earlier? We can consider the Government's response at a future meeting. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

National Bird (PE1500)

The Convener: The final current petition is PE1500, by Stuart Housden OBE, on behalf of RSPB Scotland, on the golden eagle as the national bird of Scotland. Members have a note by the clerk and submissions.

The petitioner is happy for the petition to be continued in light of the response from the Minister for Environment and Climate Change. We may wish to accept the offer of assistance that RSPB Scotland has made and suggest that it undertake further work, possibly through a public consultation, to enable it to demonstrate that there

is widespread support for the concept of a national bird and for it being the golden eagle rather than other bird species that might be worthy of consideration.

The minister has suggested that we consult other relevant committees on the issue—for example, we could consult the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee, the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee and the Education and Culture Committee.

I invite members to give their views on those points. I will take Jackson Carlaw first, because he has a well-known interest in this subject.

Jackson Carlaw: Rushing in where angels fear to tread, convener, I can say that I very much welcome the minister's letter. I think that it made many of the points that I made previously, but it perhaps did so less pejoratively. However, he made two or three recommendations that I think we should follow up. Given that the minister, too, was an advocate of Scotland having a national tree, I am impressed by his caution in believing that, before we press ahead with the adoption of other national symbols, we should have a broader discussion about the process that might underpin that.

I would very much welcome this committee taking the lead, as the convener indicated the minister has suggested, on what would be a useful piece of work and writing to other parliamentary committees to establish what their thoughts might be on the process of adopting additional national symbols. We might need to take further evidence on that at some point, but our work could lead to a recommendation on how the adoption of future national symbols might be achieved, which we could give to ministers for their consideration.

I very much agree with the minister's point—again, I made the same point previously, but he makes it less pejoratively—that it really ought not to be for Parliament, without having a broad public consultation on a broad range of candidates for a national symbol, to prejudge or dictate what the outcome of such consideration might be.

I was very taken by the evidence that we received from Scottish Natural Heritage, which detailed a number of other birds that could be considered. The osprey, in particular, struck me—I have referred to it previously—as a possible candidate for popular affection.

Before we progress consultation on, or support for, any further national symbols, we should consider the principle underpinning consideration of the adoption of national symbols and whether such symbols are desirable.

The Convener: Yes, it is about having a route map for consideration of future national symbols—

that is a good point. I think that my points and Jackson Carlaw's are very similar in terms of a recommendation for next steps. We need to take leadership over the wider issue. Do members agree that we will write to the other committees that I identified to pursue the point?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you.

Meeting closed at 11:11.

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