



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee

**Wednesday 25 April 2018**

**Session 5**



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**Wednesday 25 April 2018**

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**RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE**  
**12<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2018, Session 5**

**CONVENER**

\*Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con)

\*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

\*Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)

\*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

\*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)

\*Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD)

\*Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab)

\*Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Gavin Booth (Bus Users Scotland)

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Sheila Fletcher (Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland)

Elaine Jamieson (Highlands and Islands Enterprise)

Heather Jones (Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre)

Hussein Patwa (Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland)

Robert Samson (Transport Focus)

James Withers (Scotland Food & Drink)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Steve Farrell

**LOCATION**

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)



## Scottish Parliament

### Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee

Wednesday 25 April 2018

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:04]*

### Interests

**The Convener (Edward Mountain):** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 12th meeting in 2018 of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. I ask everyone to ensure that their mobile phones are on silent, please. Apologies have been received from Richard Lyle.

I welcome Kate Forbes to her first meeting of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. I thank Fulton MacGregor for his contribution to the committee's work. He will be missed, but I am sure that Kate Forbes will stand in well for him. As it is her first committee meeting, I invite Kate Forbes, as a new member, to declare any interests that are relevant to the committee's remit, in accordance with section 3 of the code of conduct for members.

**Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP):** Thank you very much, convener. I have no relevant interests to declare.

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

## Transport (Passenger Representatives)

09:05

**The Convener:** Agenda item 2 is a session with transport passenger representatives. Before I introduce the panel, do any members of the committee want to declare any relevant interests?

**Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** I am honorary president of the Scottish Association for Public Transport and honorary vice-president of Railfuture UK. I should also say that I have a senior rail card and a senior bus pass.

**John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** I remind the committee that I am a member of the cross-party group on rail and a member of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers parliamentary group.

**The Convener:** I am not sure whether members need to declare membership of cross-party groups, but I thank you for that.

**Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP):** I am honorary vice-president of Friends of the Far North Line.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** As cross-party groups have been mentioned, I am co-convener of the cross-party group on rail.

**The Convener:** I am not sure whether we need to worry about declaring membership of cross-party groups in the future, but I thank you for doing so.

We will take evidence on transport issues from passenger representatives. I will introduce the panel. Sheila Fletcher and Hussein Patwa are members of the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland; Robert Samson is a senior stakeholder manager for Transport Focus; and Gavin Booth is director of Bus Users Scotland.

I give a special welcome to anyone who is watching this transport session on Facebook Live.

Each committee member has questions for the witnesses. The witnesses do not need to push any of the buttons on their panels, as that will be done for them. If you would like to answer a particular question, you should raise your hand, and I will pick the appropriate moment to bring you in. I ask you to keep your answers as brief as possible. That will save me from trying to interrupt you if I am worried about the time.

**Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD):** Good morning, panel. My line of questioning focuses on bus transport. The number of bus passenger journeys per year has fallen below 400

million, which is the first time that that has happened since records began. The Scottish Government is reviewing free bus passes for the over-60s. Given that we are trying to get more people out of their cars and using buses, why has the number of bus journeys fallen under the 400 million mark? What should we do about that?

**Gavin Booth (Bus Users Scotland):** That is not just a Scottish phenomenon; it is happening across the United Kingdom. People's buying and travel habits are changing. A lot of passengers who would normally commute, for example, are working at home, and that has an impact on passenger numbers. We see online shopping in particular as one of the problems that lead to a reduction in numbers. We have seen the result of people choosing to shop online rather than go to the high streets. Those are the two most obvious explanations for the fall in numbers.

**Mike Rumbles:** What can we do to increase bus transport? Considering that almost half the revenue is public money, how can we increase bus use across Scotland?

**Gavin Booth:** There are ways to do that. There are examples throughout Scotland of partnerships between bus companies and between bus companies and local authorities having resulted in stabilising passenger loss and increasing passenger numbers in particular areas. The pattern is different. In the east of Scotland, the fall in passenger numbers is much less than that in the west of Scotland and other parts of Scotland. To a degree, that is because of the work that was done when one of the major bus operators withdrew from the Borders and East Lothian. Large and small local independent bus operators sat down together with the local authorities and planned what should happen. The result is that good services are being provided and new buses are being bought. If partnership of that kind can be replicated throughout Scotland, that is the way forward.

**Robert Samson (Transport Focus):** We did a piece of research in rural and urban areas in England. One reason why bus patronage was falling was that buses were not running at times that suited passengers for going to work or for nights out. There were also issues relating to the length of journey times.

We did another piece of research on buses with young people—14 to 19-year-olds. There was a fear of not knowing the system. If a person is using a bus for the first time, how do they go about it? A lot of people ask their parents, but a generation of parents does not have experience of using a bus service either. There are a lot of barriers to overcome.

The research showed that, if services improved, 28 per cent of infrequent or non-users in the areas in England that we surveyed would support or consider using a bus service. I think that that would be paralleled in Scotland.

Whatever structure is established by the transport bill that will go through Parliament later this year—as a consumer organisation, we are not really interested in structures; we are interested in outcomes for passengers—there should be a strategy, whether for a franchise, an alliance, or a partnership with local authorities and bus operators, on how to grow the market and get non-users and first-time users on to bus services. Looking at ways of redressing the balance and getting back up to more than 400 million passengers should be an integral part of the transport bill.

**Stewart Stevenson:** I want to pick up on what Gavin Booth said about home working and online shopping as contributors to reducing patronage. I can see the logic of what was said, but why do those factors not appear to have the same effect on the numbers of rail journeys, which continue to rise quite steeply?

I will make another suggestion, to which I invite a response. I never used the bus until I got a bus pass. The reason for that was that I did not know what the exact fare was. Therefore, when I got on a bus on occasion, I found that I did not have the right money. I have always thought that that is an immense disincentive for starting to use buses. Once a person is an experienced user, it is not a disincentive, but, to be blunt, it is almost a “No Entry” sign to an inexperienced and infrequent user. Is that fair comment? Is the point on rail fair comment, too?

**Gavin Booth:** Robert Samson may be better able to comment on the rail point.

There are barriers to bus use that have to be broken down. I totally understand what Stewart Stevenson said. I have jumped up and down on the fares point for years. Going on a bus is one of the few things that people do without knowing exactly what it will cost them. When a person goes into Marks and Spencer to buy something, they will know what it will cost before they hand their money over. Very often, people do not know the cost on buses. Bus companies are not very good at publicising fares, particularly where there is a complex series of fares, depending on where the person is going to. I have bashed my head against the bus companies to persuade them to include fares information to make it easier for all passengers to know whether they need £2 or £5, for example, to make a journey.

09:15

That ties in with the issue of information. The great unknown about bus travel is information. People have electronic access to lots of information, but bus companies are not always very good at publicising their bus services and giving times at bus stops. Many bus stops in Scotland have no information whatsoever. A potential new passenger can turn up at a bus stop, not find any information, think, "I don't want to know," and decide to get a taxi, catch a train, walk or take the car. There is a lot to be done on removing barriers, on fares, and on information to attract more people to use buses.

**Sheila Fletcher (Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland):** I am here speaking on behalf of disabled people, because I am on the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland. A large number of elderly and older people, who are the traditional bus users, also have mobility problems.

I accept that the change to homeworking and people not commuting any longer are having quite an effect on bus usage. People in the categories that I have mentioned travel only occasionally; they do not travel every day. I am from a Highland community, and we have seen reductions in the bus service. That is partly because the local authority budget for bus services has completely collapsed and school buses are being registered. Generally, school buses are coaches that have steps, and anybody with a mobility problem will have a big problem getting on and off one of those vehicles. They also operate at times that are not really convenient. I will give an example. The Tain bus leaves at 8 o'clock. We have had issues with people having to stand around in Tain for a considerable length of time in the cold waiting for the dentist or the doctor's surgery to open or for the connection to get the bus to the hospital in Inverness.

We seem to have lost track of integration of services. I am a frequent bus user. Generally, people who travel like to be confident that the bus service will be there in time and that they will make their connection. The biggest issue for a lot of people is whether they will be able to get back home again after whatever they have done.

There has been a focus on digital. I am afraid that the people whom I am speaking for today do not have access to digital communication. A number of factors contribute to that.

**Hussein Patwa (Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland):** Gavin Booth mentioned that information is often available electronically. That is true but, very often, that information is not produced with disabled access in mind. Timetables are still very complicated; they

very often use obscure codes and are very often formatted in a way that does not work for people who use access technology.

Leaving bus stops aside for a moment, bus stations are quite often very inaccessible places. In particular, it is often difficult to find members of staff—it is difficult to identify people who work for bus companies to get information in person. For many disabled people, person-to-person contact really matters and gives them the confidence, information and ability to use bus transport.

A balanced approach is required, and it is clear that there are gaps in connectivity and gaps in the way in which we communicate with passengers that contribute to that.

**The Convener:** We will come on to accessibility towards the end of the session, because that is a key issue. Thank you very much for highlighting those points.

**John Mason:** I have a question that builds on the questions from Mike Rumbles and Stewart Stevenson on why numbers are falling. Do you think that there is a status thing around how people travel? For many people, their ideal is to have their own car and go where they want; if they cannot manage that, their second choice is probably the train; and the bus is only a third choice, if they are really stuck. I wonder whether that would be particularly the case in Strathclyde, where people may have a bit more choice and can get the train?

**The Convener:** Sheila, you shook your head there.

**Sheila Fletcher:** I think that there is a misunderstanding about the way that people use buses. Older people generally use bus trips to meet up with friends, although they do not arrange to do that; they go to the bus stop, meet friends and then travel with them, and they have a great time on the bus having conversations about everything. People say that buses are a means to an end, but I do not think that they are. The social aspect of bus travel is important and it enables people in local communities to bond with one another and know what is going on.

To keep that going, we need a lot of the traditional means of knowing about the buses that are running. For example, in my village, we have liners coming into Invergordon, and on days when they are in, we often cannot get on the buses. Cleverly, someone has put a list of the liner dates on the bus stop so that we are aware that we might not be able to travel on those days. It is little things like that, and probably not national things, that need to be done. A lot of bus travel is very local.

I have struggled to use the buses in Strathclyde, because the system is not as good as it is in Lothian. In Lothian there is a little map that shows you exactly where the route is going, and it is really helpful to have information like that.

**John Mason:** Thanks—that is helpful.

Mr Booth, you talked about partnerships. In theory, Strathclyde partnership for transport should be a good model. However, in Edinburgh the fares are on the bus shelters or bus stops, and there is a diagram of where the bus is going—that was Ms Fletcher's point—but that information is not provided in Strathclyde. Are there other differences? We are seeing bus usage falling in Glasgow and Strathclyde while it is increasing in Edinburgh.

**Gavin Booth:** There certainly are differences. Edinburgh is always held up as a good example. It has an advantage in that there are very few fares. There is a flat fare throughout Edinburgh, so it is easy to explain and sell to people, whereas in Glasgow and other places there are a series of fares depending on where you are going to. Selling the fares is a lot easier in Edinburgh.

I am sorry—I have forgotten the rest of your question.

**John Mason:** It was just about any other differences that there might be between Edinburgh and Glasgow. For example, in Glasgow the buses have to do incredibly round-about routes to get round the pedestrian precincts; they are a good thing, but they make bus journeys a lot slower and longer.

**Gavin Booth:** They do. I think that bus operators view pedestrian precincts with mixed feelings. There are arguments for allowing buses but nothing else into certain areas, because pedestrian precincts tend to be where people want to be, but if they have a considerable walk to get from the bus to the shop, that will perhaps discourage them.

I think that there is also a social difference between Edinburgh and Glasgow. There has been a lot of investment in the Lothian Buses fleet in Edinburgh, and buses are used by everybody from the poorest people to the richest people in the city, which is unusual around the country. It happens in London, in Edinburgh and maybe in one or two other places. There is no social stigma about travelling by bus and it is something that everybody does. We are lucky in Edinburgh to have a very good bus service.

The SPT area is much bigger and it is a much more difficult area to manage. I would like to see the same commitment to investment in vehicles and partnerships between the bus operators and

the local authority to produce what we have here in Edinburgh.

**Robert Samson:** On Monday afternoon, I had a meeting with First Glasgow, at which we discussed the results of our latest bus passenger survey. Passengers are telling us that one of the things that they dislike about bus travel in Glasgow, and one of the problems, is road congestion. That is the main barrier to punctuality.

On value for money, although weekly tickets and longer passes represent better value, the passenger rating is higher for single tickets, which are less expensive, at £2 for a single journey. There is a link between level of income and the up-front cost of £17 or £14 for a weekly ticket. Although such tickets are better value for money, there is a distinction in the passengers' minds. There is also a link between value for money and road congestion, specifically in Glasgow.

**John Finnie:** Good morning, panel. As ever, there are plenty of statistics. Bus fares in Scotland have increased by 5 per cent in real terms in the past five years, which compares to an increase of 3 per cent in Great Britain. In price terms—viewing fares in the way that a consumer would—fares have risen by 18 per cent in the past five years. What impact have increased bus fares had on bus passengers and bus use more generally?

**Gavin Booth:** That figure is an all-Scotland figure. Sadly, as we know, there are huge variations. There is no common standard throughout Scotland for the fares that are charged or the distance that you can travel for a particular amount of money. I am sorry to keep coming back to the example of Edinburgh, but Edinburgh people know that they can travel fairly far for a very reasonable fare. In other cities in Scotland, such as Aberdeen, I believe, the fares are proportionately that bit higher, which must have contributed to the overall rise.

Bus companies will tell you that they have to invest in new vehicles and that fuel costs and maintenance costs are increasing all the time, which means that they have to increase fares. I accept that that is a practical reason for increasing fares, but bus companies could probably do more to simplify fares and to make them more attractive in order to get more passengers on board.

**John Finnie:** Gavin Booth touched on ticketing options. How could they be improved and is there a role for the Scottish Government in ensuring that there is improvement?

**Gavin Booth:** Bus companies have been moving pretty fast on contactless ticketing, whereby passengers use their bank card to tap in their fare. It is spreading throughout Scotland and, within a year or so, it should be pretty well

universal. It is making bus travel that bit easier for a lot of people.

A lot of people, such as Stewart Stevenson and me, have senior citizen bus cards, so fares do not go through our minds quite as much as they go through the minds of a lot of other passengers. Our age group makes up a large proportion of bus passengers in Scotland. Bus companies are reimbursed for every journey that I make and every journey that Stewart Stevenson makes. However, the amount of reimbursement has been cut over the years and, therefore, bus companies are now receiving less reimbursement for my journeys than they did a year, two years or three years ago, which is having an impact on their costings. I imagine that they are having to increase fares to make up for that difference.

**The Convener:** If I remember rightly, the budget for concessionary travel has gone up each year and it has never all been completely used. That is the evidence that we have heard. In the light of that, your comment is interesting.

**Robert Samson:** I have two points to make. We asked our question on value for money only of fare-paying passengers, not those with concessionary passes. There is a 65 per cent rating for passenger satisfaction overall in that regard, which is higher than the figure for the rail sector.

We have found from other pieces of research that there needs to be an improvement in fares and ticketing in order that the system is easy to understand. Often when people first come to the bus network, their knowledge of the fares and ticketing system is not there; they get that knowledge through word of mouth or by engaging with the bus driver. As part of the proposed transport bill, there has to be some kind of central source that looks after all passengers' needs to tell people about the fares and ticketing systems that are available in an easy-to-understand format that attracts people to that mode of transport. It can be done.

09:30

**Kate Forbes:** Could you outline, on behalf of Transport Focus, the key Scottish results from the 2017 bus passenger survey? After that, I invite the rest of the panel to talk about the regional drivers for satisfaction or dissatisfaction in rural and urban areas.

**Robert Samson:** Across Scotland, there was an overall passenger satisfaction level of 89 per cent. There are different survey methodologies. We ask passengers to rate the journey that they took that day—we do that on the Glasgow subway and on rail, too. We do not ask, "What do you think of bus journeys overall?" We carry out a snapshot

survey of passengers' experience of a particular journey, from start to finish.

There are regional differences. In the most recent survey that we did on Lothian Buses, which I think we carried out in 2015, its value-for-money rating of 80 per cent was the highest in Great Britain. The lowest rating for value for money is in Aberdeen.

When we ask passengers about the value-for-money ratings that they give, whether positive or negative, they say that they compare bus travel with rail and with the cost of a car journey. They also compare it with the cost of everyday items. They give the value-for-money ratings that they do on the basis of the cost of bus travel relative to the distance travelled and the cost of everyday items in their general spend.

**Kate Forbes:** So cost is key. Do other panel members echo that?

**Sheila Fletcher:** I do not think that cost is key for members of the disabled community, because they generally have a bus pass. The problem is access to that transport. We will come on to access later on, so I do not want to say too much about it now.

Information is another issue. There is confusion about how to pay. I am thinking, in particular, of when schoolchildren become adults who commute. They will always have got on a bus without having to pay a fare, so they will not be very bus-wise. We need to improve the information that we provide to youngsters if we want them to travel by bus in the future.

**The Convener:** I am mindful of the time, because we have a lot of issues to cover, so after we have heard from Gavin Booth, we will move on to Gail Ross's question.

**Gavin Booth:** Bus Users Scotland helps to resolve complaints. We have bus compliance people out in the field throughout Scotland, who travel incognito on buses. We measure things in all sorts of ways. For example, we hold events at which passengers come to us. However, we decided not to get involved with fares, because what bus companies charge is a commercial decision for them. We tend to step back from getting involved in complaints about fares. We refer people with such complaints to the bus company.

In my experience of travelling around, there is too much variance between different parts of Scotland. It would be good if people were paying the sort of fares that they expect to pay to travel around, but because, in general, most people travel only in their own area, they might not understand the differences in the way that we do.

**The Convener:** That was useful.

**Gail Ross:** Good morning, panel. I want to move on to mobility and the problems that disabled people have on public transport. Sheila Fletcher has touched on the need for integrated timetables and the lack of access to information. Access to the buses themselves might also be an issue.

How can we make it easier for people to access bus services and the buses themselves? I know that there are some new buses coming in on various routes, although perhaps not in our area. Could you comment on the new buses and the difficulties that people have with the buses that are already in use? Are there difficulties in switching between modes of transport? You mentioned the possibility of integrating timetables a little bit better.

**Sheila Fletcher:** Two types of vehicle are used. There are buses, which generally have to be low floor now, and there are coaches. For a lot of our rural areas, coaches are the local transport, and they have a series of steps. They are wheelchair accessible, but the bus companies have been quite slow in accepting that some people cannot climb the steps. For example, we have somebody on the committee who can transfer from her chair on to a seat, but the bus companies want people just to sit in the wheelchair space in their wheelchairs for the entire journey, and they will not load people in a wheelchair on to a bus using a lift and then store the wheelchair underneath.

There are a few things that would help. The biggest issue for disabled people is that they do not want to feel different from other people. They want to have services that enable them to travel easily and not to be flagged up as taking extra time to do things. I have not seen it in action yet, but Gavin Booth and I have been to see a new type of coach that will have a wheelchair space and several seats on a low-floor level, and it is about to be introduced in Fife in a few weeks' time. It will take a considerable length of time for that to reach all the parts of the transport system that we are involved in, but it is a big move towards improvement.

Integration is hugely important, because if you are disabled, you might not be able to walk very far. Rail services have the passenger assist scheme, but there is nothing similar for buses. You have to ask specifically for help. I travel by Megabus quite a lot, and the message has not got from the head office to the bus that there is going to be somebody in a wheelchair, so it can happen that, when a passenger turns up, there is a crisis in how to deal with them. We are moving forward, but not far enough or fast enough. The other issue is the distance that people have to walk between modes of transport. Although active travel is being promoted, quite a lot of disabled people can walk

only very short distances, so we have to bear that in mind as well.

**Robert Samson:** On a positive note, we met Xplore Dundee in 2017 to go over the bus passenger survey results, and only 80 per cent of passengers with a disability had overall satisfaction. Working with those results, the drivers had a period of disability awareness training, and this year when we went back we found that 94 per cent of passengers with a disability were satisfied overall with the service provided, representing quite a significant uplift of 12 or 13 per cent. There are areas where bus companies can work proactively with drivers. Bus travel is different from the rail network, because the only contact that a passenger will have with the bus company, nine times out of 10, will be with the driver, so specific training can help in that regard. It is not the be all and end all, but if it improves the satisfaction of people with disabilities who are using the network, it is a good thing.

**Gail Ross:** Does Hussein Patwa have any comment on accessing bus and rail transport?

**Hussein Patwa:** Absolutely. A large part of the issues involved with accessing buses is down to awareness on the part of drivers and bus company staff. It appears that in different areas there are different levels of training and of any kind of certification or checks and balance to ensure that the training that drivers are receiving is cognisant of the different disabilities and issues that people may have, particularly with regard to hidden disabilities, where a person may have access challenges that are not immediately visible.

Sheila Fletcher mentioned integration, which is a valid point. One thing that is not always taken into account is the length of time it takes to transfer between services. Even if the distance between transit points may be relatively short, it might take a passenger a significant amount of time to get there.

The final point concerns communication between bus companies. My colleague Sheila Fletcher mentioned the passenger assist scheme, which provides people with assistance from their original point of departure to their final point of arrival, including any changes en route, by train. No such system exists for buses and, often, passengers are left to fend for themselves. If the transit point is in a remote area—for example, an out-of-town bus park or lay-by—it might be difficult. There might be nobody there and no immediate ways of contacting the bus company for help or getting in touch with the driver if that becomes necessary.

**Gail Ross:** That is helpful. Thank you.

**Stewart Stevenson:** Robert Samson said that he was interested in outcomes rather than

structures, so I will disappoint him by asking about structures. However, there are structural options that can contribute negatively or positively to outcomes. Does anyone have any suggestions for particular changes to regulatory frameworks or ways that we approach matters that, based on experience and feedback, it seems would deliver?

**The Convener:** That could be an open-ended question that could allow the witnesses to completely rewrite the regulations. I am afraid that they will not have time for that, so I ask them to keep their answers to succinct points. That would be helpful.

**Robert Samson:** We do a lot of work on bus services thanks to funding from the bus companies, regional transport partnerships and Transport Scotland, but we do not have a statutory remit. In England, where we have a statutory remit, when the Bus Services Act 2017 went through the Westminster Parliament, we asked passengers what structures they wanted and how bus services should be operated. We found that 75 per cent of passengers did not know how services were operated and, to be frank, did not really care. When we asked the passengers, they said that the bus companies and all levels of Government—be it national or local—should work together and deliver the service that they want regardless of the structure.

We have prepared 10 action points, which I have sent to the committee and all MSPs. They would fit the existing system, reregulation, franchising, partnerships, alliances and quality contracts and would put passengers at the heart of the system. They are based on our research and address what customers actually want. They include boosting the role of the driver, which would drive training; customer care and satisfaction; improving fares and ticketing; and ensuring frequency and stability of service. They also address timetable changes. Timetables can change at a moment's notice in the bus industry. Passengers want to be consulted on timetable changes, because they affect their lives. I used to live in a village and I could no longer get to my job because the bus service had been changed.

The action points will put passengers at the heart of the system regardless of the structure. I ask the committee to ensure that those 10 points are addressed so that passengers get the service that they deserve. That would drive up passenger numbers to more than 400 million.

**Stewart Stevenson:** When the previous Labour-Liberal Democrat Executive legislated for transport, it introduced voluntary and statutory bus partnerships. There have been virtually no statutory bus partnerships and comparatively few voluntary ones. That would seem to be a structure in which public policy would more directly control

how bus services are provided and could tick a lot of the boxes. Do you have any views, Mr Samson, on why bus partnerships have not been used, apart from the fact that they create administrative burdens for local authorities, which is probably the reason?

**The Convener:** That was a very long question but I will let you come back with a shorter answer, Robert.

**Robert Samson:** I will give a very brief answer. We sit on a number of partnerships and alliances in English metropolitan areas to which the passenger voice is central. Whatever structure you devise, you must ensure that passengers have a seat at the table and can influence the structure. That is the key point.

09:45

**Sheila Fletcher:** I have a quick point about bus registration. Local authorities are notified of bus service changes and withdrawals 70 days before they happen. I think that they then have a four-week period in which they can talk to the bus companies. That period is also an opportunity for them to talk to local people. We want equality impact assessments to be done on any bus service change or withdrawal; we also want disabled people to be included in the discussion before a change is made.

At the moment, council officers and councillors are reluctant to tell local people that their bus service is changing, because they will be under pressure to go back to the bus company and offer it some money to try to keep the service going. As Robert Samson rightly said, a lot of services facilitate commuter journeys and, without them, people would not be able to continue in their jobs, or even to get to their doctor. Therefore, we need to have a more robust system of informing people of what is happening.

**The Convener:** Thank you. I—

**Stewart Stevenson:** I have a second question.

**The Convener:** I know. It would be useful if you could make it brief.

**Stewart Stevenson:** I will. My question is about the concessionary travel scheme—a couple of us here are members of the scheme—which is being looked at. Are there any things that must not happen to the scheme? Is there anything that should happen to it?

**Gavin Booth:** As a beneficiary of the scheme, I would hate to see it change in any way. I would be sorry to see the lower age range rising, as it has in England. I understand the sums that are involved in providing the scheme, but it is tremendously useful for older people. It gives us mobility, it helps

our health and I applaud the Scottish Government for introducing it and maintaining it at the current level.

**The Convener:** Your vested interest is noted.

**Sheila Fletcher:** I, too, have a vested interest. I would really struggle with any changes, because the system is excellent. It enables people to get out and about, and it combats loneliness and isolation. It is important that we try to keep the scheme as it is.

**Robert Samson:** Over the past four years, we have surveyed more than 20,000 passengers. We do not ask free passholders questions about value for money, but their overall satisfaction rates are far higher than those for fare payers, as you would expect. In addition, about 49 per cent of concessionary travel scheme passholders say that they travel by bus because they do not have any other option. In many ways, it is still a lifeline service. Some people make leisure journeys, but for about 50 per cent of those whom we survey who are entitled to concessionary travel, it is the only option that they have to travel.

**The Convener:** That is a valid point.

**Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con):** We have been speaking mainly about bus travel, and I will move the discussion on to rail travel. The ScotRail Alliance announced on 30 March 2018 that it had commissioned an independent rail expert to produce an improvement plan. Are you satisfied with how the alliance communicates with passengers about planned and unexpected service disruption? If not, what changes would you want to be introduced? What impact does the bus replacement of rail services have on passengers, particularly those with limited mobility? In particular, I am thinking of situations in which there is suddenly no train service and people unexpectedly have to travel by bus.

**Hussein Patwa:** Communication is pivotal for everyone, but particularly for disabled folk, who need to have information not only about what is happening, but about the additional steps that may be necessary to allow them to complete their journey.

If we take as an example the recent adverse weather and the major disruption that that caused across the country, ScotRail, to be fair, did a lot to communicate using electronic means through social media, email and text messaging for those who subscribe to that service. However, we must bear in mind that a sizeable proportion of the population is not digitally connected. There are also people who might be digitally connected but who cannot access the channels through which information is provided.

I have always said that I would like greater use to be made of mass media—terrestrial television and radio—to communicate messages about what is happening. Passenger assist, which uses the plain and simple telephone, is extremely beneficial to passengers. In MACS's experience, we have yet to find a single instance in which ScotRail has used a telephone—a lot of people have mobile phones these days—to advise somebody who has booked assistance that their service has been cancelled, disrupted or curtailed and that there is bus replacement transport.

In many places, the accessibility of bus transport is not taken into account at all, which leads to very long taxi journeys and additional stress and anxiety for passengers. It is not always clear where the stopping places are for bus services—sometimes they are not outside the station—and communication is generally quite patchy. Very often, it is left to the passengers to try to work out where their bus is and which bus is going where. Sometimes buses skip intermediate stops, so people do not know which bus to get on or how the whole system works.

**Sheila Fletcher:** Things have improved slightly. Generally, stations that are accessible are used for rail services that use bus replacements. In the past, I have needed to get off the train at Pitlochry to use the bus. In the Highlands, it is quite common for people to need to use the steps to cross over the railway, but many people cannot do that. In some stations, there is no access to the other platform.

There has been awareness that people who travel might not disclose that they are disabled, but they might have mobility problems. As Hussein Patwa mentioned earlier, people might have hidden disabilities that mean that they need to be told quite clearly what is happening. We need to improve on that.

**Robert Samson:** We met Nick Donovan, who compiled a report on improving performance, and we went through the passenger issues. The report details 20 action points to work on. However, there is no magic bullet to improve performance. We need to focus on getting the assets and the day job right in order to improve the main driver of passenger satisfaction, which is train reliability.

**Peter Chapman:** Are you not confident that the piece of work from Nick Donovan will help?

**Robert Samson:** It will help and give a focus. However, there might be overall satisfaction in the national rail passenger survey but, if we break down the survey, we know that young passengers under the age of 25 in Strathclyde were satisfied with ticket-buying facilities, the station environment, interaction with staff and train cleanliness. However, overall, they were fairly

dissatisfied because, for example, a person's train was five minutes late getting into Glasgow Central. Performance has a major impact.

The ScotRail Alliance knows that it has to focus on performance in order for there to be overall satisfaction, because there is a clear correlation. Everything else can be right, but if someone's train is late, they might be late for work and their boss might not be understanding. The report focuses on the day tasks and the management attention that are needed to improve performance so that it goes back up to more than 90-plus per cent.

**John Finnie:** I have a brief question for Sheila Fletcher, who talked about the difficulties for people with mobility issues on trains. Are you of the view, as I am, that the safety-critical second person on the train—the guard—has a vital role?

**Sheila Fletcher:** Absolutely. They are very important. I found out recently that quite a lot of guards are much more customer focused than they used to be; they are very good at sussing out whether someone needs a little bit of help. That is a plus point for ScotRail and it is really good that it has done that. I would definitely hate to see the loss of the second person on the train.

There have been incidents when people from our committee have gone to places to view things. Fortunately, at Waverley, when one of them was in a wheelchair, they were told not to get on the train because there was no assistant on the train to use the ramp to get them off at the station where they wanted to get off. That is a key issue with one-man trains as, especially at unmanned stations, there might not be somebody there to deploy the ramp.

**Peter Chapman:** The consumer group Which? recently raised concerns about how ScotRail deals with passenger compensation claims during periods of disruption. Do you share those concerns? If so, what changes would you like to be made to compensation arrangements?

**The Convener:** Who would like to respond? I ask you all to be as brief as possible.

**Robert Samson:** The new franchise agreement includes the delay repay scheme, for which there is a threshold. We researched that with passengers and about 50 per cent of them do not claim the compensation that they are entitled to. It is about building up trust between ScotRail and the passenger and improving the customer experience. When a train is late, why not make an announcement telling passengers that they are entitled to compensation and reminding them to put in a form or use various other mechanisms—it does not matter what—to get that compensation? Staff at the barriers could engage with passengers and tell them that they are entitled to compensation, which would improve trust between

the operator and the passenger. There has to be better communication on what passengers are entitled to; that applies equally to ScotRail and the cross-border train operators.

**The Convener:** I notice panel members all nodding in agreement.

**Hussein Patwa:** I have a short operational point with regard to the threshold for delay repay. How do people know what time their train has arrived at the station? Is it the time at which the train physically stops, or is it when they get on to the platform? That has never been made clear to me as a passenger in the past seven years of travelling. The potential is there for many people to make claims that are not valid, or the opposite—for them not to make claims that would be valid. The issue of communication and passengers knowing what to do, when to do it, how to do it and what happens once they have submitted a claim really needs to be looked into to ensure that people are doing things correctly and getting what they deserve.

**The Convener:** Hopefully, ScotRail is listening to our broadcast, and will read the *Official Report*, and will come up with an answer to that. It is a valid point.

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** I will move on to some of the other issues that the Donovan report flagged and which seemed to be of concern to commuters. One of those issues is overcrowding on trains, which is probably better in some areas and worse in others, especially those areas in which there have delays in the delivery of new services or a reduction in the number of carriages. Is your impression that overcrowding has got better or worse, or has it stayed the same?

**Robert Samson:** One of the problems is that, although there will be more capacity on the rail network with the introduction of class 385s and the new high-speed trains, that was announced in 2014 when the franchise changed. It is a bugbear for passengers that, four years later, we are still sitting here waiting for those new trains. When we do research with passengers, we find that one of their top priorities is always being able to get a seat on the train and, on particular routes, particularly at commuter times—the morning and evening peaks—that is a problem. There will be an uplift in capacity of between 25 and 50 per cent more seats on some routes, if not more, which will alleviate those problems. However, we want those trains as soon as possible to be able to do that and to generate passenger growth.

**Jamie Greene:** Another issue that comes up frequently is stop-skipping on services. One of Donovan's key recommendations was that that practice should be stopped unless absolutely

necessary, and a promise was made by ScotRail to that effect. Is that improving? How much confidence do you have in the promises that the practice will be eliminated, and do you have any other views on it?

10:00

**Robert Samson:** We have had meetings with ScotRail about stop-skipping, and we are confident that the situation will get better and, hopefully, that the practice will stop entirely. Passengers want the timetable to be delivered in its entirety. One of the problems with stop-skipping is that, while people who are advised of stop-skipping in advance when they are standing on the platform may find that frustrating, they can cope with it, but passengers who are already on the train when there is an announcement that it will miss their stop are incandescent, and rightly so. It is up to the rail industry to deliver the entire timetable, so that all stations are served.

**Jamie Greene:** That leads nicely into my final question, which is about the performance improvement programme that is based on the 20 key recommendations from Donovan's review. Robert Samson said that those are all very welcome improvements, but that the programme is not a magic bullet. What is the magic bullet? If the improvement programme will not do it and the previous 249-point plan did not do it, where is the industry heading on improving the service to passengers? What is the magic solution?

**The Convener:** I encourage Robert Samson to respond briefly.

**Robert Samson:** The magic bullet is that the plan that has been agreed and implemented is watching the monthly reporting figures and the moving annual average to look for improvement. We have to give the plan six to nine months to bear fruit and show improvement through each period, so that the performance percentage goes back up into the mid-90s. There is no magic bullet really—what is needed is hard work on the day job to deliver the 20-point plan in its entirety.

**The Convener:** Perfect. The next question is from Colin Smyth, and I suspect that Sheila Fletcher and Hussein Patwa will be the main respondents.

**Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** Thank you, convener; they will be, because my questions are about some of the recommendations in the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland's annual report for 2016-17. The report highlighted a number of concerns about accessibility to and from some of the recently remodelled stations, such as at Haymarket and the taxi ranks at Waverley. How might those issues have been

avoided and what lessons can be learned for future projects?

**Hussein Patwa:** A key concept that the committee is now pushing where it can is that accessibility should be a consideration at the conceptual stage for any project, before any work commences and before the plan is even signed off. Especially with some of the retrofits that are now going on, we are finding that a lot of investment is having to go into remodelling and redoing things to make them compliant and accessible, because accessibility has been an afterthought or something on which stakeholders have not been fully consulted. That is causing additional disruption, anxiety and stress for passengers. Accessibility should be integral to every project, starting at day 1, rather than being included only when the plan is implemented.

**Sheila Fletcher:** Haymarket is a good example, because MACS was very involved with that. We have moved away from being involved in specific station developments now, because we simply do not have the time for that. The big issue at Haymarket is the position of the taxi ranks—that will be an issue at all stations—and it arises from a misunderstanding about how easy it is for blind people or those with a mobility issue to get from the station to the taxi rank. If it is any distance, it is a very big barrier for those people. Passenger assist staff help people to the door of the station, but they are not, technically, allowed to go beyond that. Some of the staff are very good at helping people to get to a taxi rank, but at Haymarket they are not allowed to cross the road and take people down to the taxi rank. That is a big issue because of the distance of the rank from the station.

**John Finnie:** Ideally, everyone would work together to ensure that that happens, but perhaps there are other issues for the local authority or people who are involved with the roads network. At a new station such as Forres, do you feel that the necessary consultation took place and that provision was put in place? It certainly seemed to me that that was the case.

**Sheila Fletcher:** I agree. I was involved in the consultation on Forres through another panel that I was on, rather than through MACS. It is crucial that local people are involved all the way through.

**Colin Smyth:** We have talked about the accessibility of the stations, but does MACS have any other issues relating to rail travel and accessibility? The report talked about issues with concessionary travel and on-train assistance. Do you have any particular concerns?

**Sheila Fletcher:** A number of very specific issues have come up recently, one of which is the plus ones for blind people and the difficulty of booking tickets. The person with the card can go

up to the barrier and get through, but if they need to have a companion with them, a ticket has to be bought for that person. The scheme is very much based on local authority concessionary fare schemes and there is variation across the country. Nationwide standardisation of that would be very useful.

**The Convener:** Thank you. Unless there are any other points on that issue, it forms a natural conclusion. Representatives of ScotRail are due to come in front of the committee on 9 May—how appropriate is that?—and the minister is due on 16 May. I am sure that a lot of the points that have been raised today will be picked up by committee members at those meetings. It has been an extremely useful meeting for us, and I thank the witnesses for their evidence. I also thank the viewers on Facebook for their attendance.

10:06

*Meeting suspended.*

10:11

*On resuming—*

## Salmon Farming

**The Convener:** Our next item is on salmon farming in Scotland. I welcome Donald Cameron, who is the reporter for the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee on the salmon farming inquiry.

I invite members to declare any interests. I will start by declaring that I have an interest in a wild salmon fishery. I gave a full declaration at the start of the inquiry.

**Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I repeat the declaration of interests that I made on 5 March in relation to a fish farm and a wild fishery.

**The Convener:** This is our fourth evidence session in the committee's inquiry. Last night, we had a useful videoconference with the Aquaculture Stewardship Council. Brief notes from that meeting will be made available and put on the website. It was an extremely informative meeting.

The committee is disappointed that we have not yet been able to identify any retailers of the product in Scotland who are prepared to give evidence in person. I am told that they are giving written evidence, but it is disappointing that they will not give evidence in person, despite our invitations to do so.

The committee will now take evidence from bodies that have an interest in the development of the farmed salmon sector. I welcome James Withers, chief executive of Scotland Food & Drink; Elaine Jamieson, head of food and drink at Highlands and Islands Enterprise; and Heather Jones, chief executive of the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre.

The first question will be from John Finnie.

**John Finnie:** Thank you convener. I share your view of the retailers. No doubt they would quote a phrase that I read in our papers about

“pristine waters in visually dramatic Highland and Island loch settings.”

How important is Scotland's natural environment to the market for Scottish farmed salmon?

**James Withers (Scotland Food & Drink):** It is critically important to all Scotland's brand, not just the aquaculture industry. A large part of the growing market here and overseas is about Scotland's broader provenance story, and there are a number of parts to that. It is about a mixture of heritage and tradition, but it is also about innovation, family businesses and environmental integrity. The only strong future for our aquaculture

industry is in embracing world-class standards of environmental stewardship and animal welfare and husbandry. If we do not do that, we will not keep building the brand that has driven a doubling of food exports from Scotland in the past 10 years.

**Heather Jones (Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre):** It is important to remember the context in which Scottish salmon goes to the global market. Compared to other farmed species, such as Ecuadorian shrimp, Vietnamese pangasius, Chinese carp and sea bass and sea bream from the Mediterranean, the quality of the provenance and the standards of environmental monitoring in Scotland are high. They are widely regarded by a number of other countries, including developed countries, as the best in the world. The New Zealand Government's comparative study on environmental quality standards held up the Scottish regulatory system as one of the best.

10:15

**John Finnie:** To look at it in a negative way, what would be the consequences of a failure to retain that position of quality connected with the environment?

**James Withers:** We are dealing with a customer base that is different in different countries, but most of the countries that we are looking at as markets and our home market are increasingly environmentally conscious. They want to understand the regulatory system that sits behind the product. They might not want to go into the detail, but they want to have faith that our production systems work in harmony with the environment and enhance it where possible. Scotland's growth in food and drink has been, in a large part, about building that reputation, so anything that has a detrimental impact on that would be hugely damaging. As Heather Jones said, the perception is that the quality of the product and the standards of production are extremely high.

**John Mason:** I was interested by Heather Jones's comment that Scotland's reputation is very good. At last night's videoconference with the ASC, we heard that it feels that Scotland is pretty poor in comparison with, say, Norway. We will come on to talk about sea lice later, but the ASC feels that Scotland is relying on things like the beautiful visual surroundings, as the quote John Finnie read out says, but the reality is that we are not as strict as South American countries, Canada, Norway and so on.

**Heather Jones:** I am certainly surprised to hear that the ASC thinks that Chilean husbandry standards are higher than Scotland's. Scotland is widely regarded as one of the most tightly regulated places in the world for salmon

production. In relation to other species, salmon is the king of fish in the way that it is monitored and researched, and the environmental impact is a recognised factor.

**John Mason:** Has that been approved by some third party internationally or is that just our opinion in Scotland?

**Heather Jones:** It is certainly the opinion in a report written by the New Zealand Government that compared systems and found that the Scottish system is one of the strongest. Different systems have different strengths, but I have seen little evidence to suggest that Scotland is in a poor place.

**The Convener:** The point that the ASC made last night was that some companies have certification through their schemes in other countries, such as Norway and Chile, and the very same companies operate in Scotland, but no farms in Scotland have the certification that those companies have for farms across the world.

**Heather Jones:** There are a number of certification schemes. Certification bodies trade and market as a way of creating value for themselves and for their products.

I will pick up the point that has been made about the retailers with some of our contacts in our industry consortium. The UK retail market sets very high standards. M&S has plan A and all the major retailers specify fish health quality, water quality, stocking density and other things. The US and German retailers are starting to copy what is being established in the UK market. James Withers is right that consumers get a very high standard here.

**John Finnie:** I have a question for Elaine Jamieson on the importance of the issue to the rural economy. I am sure that the provenance of produce is important across the range, but specifically in relation to the issue that we are considering, does Highlands and Islands Enterprise have a view about that?

**Elaine Jamieson (Highlands and Islands Enterprise):** We look for sustainable growth across all our key sectors in Scotland, including tourism and food and drink. We look to the regulatory bodies and to Heather Jones and her friends in the science and academic community to lead the scientific work on positive environmental management and stewardship. From our point of view, we support businesses to be innovative in their practices and so lead to positive outcomes.

The tourism sector relies heavily on our natural environment. We have seen aquaculture—fin-fish farming in particular—and tourism grow significantly in recent years. I appreciate that not all environmental impacts are aesthetic, but the

people who are appreciating our assets have not perceived any impact.

**Stewart Stevenson:** I have a comparatively small point for Heather Jones. It has been argued by some that Chile has better regulations than Scotland, but—it is a big but—the monitoring and implementation of those regulations are extremely poor. I am inviting you to agree that regulation is not everything. In particular, in Chile, the industry has been shut down for periods on several occasions because of the poor monitoring and management of health issues, even though, in theory, the regulations tell a different story. Is it fair to say that we have to look at the outcomes, rather than just what is in the legal framework?

**Heather Jones:** Absolutely—that is a very good point. Chile has had multiple major health challenges, which have caused hundreds of thousands of fish losses because it has allowed untrammelled high-density and high-intensity growth. That has put pressure on the fish stocks, which leads to disease challenge and health risk and, as a result, all the fish die. Many of the Norwegian multinationals have been disinvesting from Chile because they are losing money and that is because the regulatory system does not work successfully.

If companies are to have confidence to invest in Scotland, they need to know that our regulatory system will be stable and quantified. Giving some certainty around the system can incentivise, or disincentivise, foreign direct investment.

**Peter Chapman:** I am keen to explore more about how the industry is certified in Scotland. As we heard last night, the ASC does not certify any fish farms in Scotland, as far as we are aware. What drives the certification system in Scotland? Is it driven by retailers?

**Heather Jones:** I am not an expert on food certification systems. I know that the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation uses an independent company called Acoura, which is headquartered in Edinburgh and which is one of the major certification bodies for marine standards for capture fisheries, salmon production and other food production.

Each retailer specifies in its contracts with suppliers minimum standards that have to be applied on withdrawal times for medicines, stocking density, the way in which the fish are brought to market and so on. Consumer pressure creates as much demand on producers as any other form of pressure, and that is funnelled through the retailers.

**James Withers:** There is very little that I can add to that. Acoura delivers many of the quality assurance schemes for land farming, such as the Scotch beef and Scotch lamb quality assurance

schemes and a scheme for a special type of pork. From that point of view, there are parallels between farming the land and farming the sea. As the committee is well aware—it is a shame that you do not have retailers in front of you to make this point—the regulatory demands that retailers make are complex and ever changing, and in most cases they go well beyond legal requirements.

**Peter Chapman:** I am pleased to hear that. I know that the retailers are pretty strict with their supply chains, whether that is for beef, pork, lamb or salmon. We are not clear what that process looks like or how it is driven, so a wee bit more detail would be useful to the committee.

**James Withers:** I am not sure whether the SSPO has given evidence yet, but those who are directly involved in production and processing would be best placed to answer that. It is the same with wild catch fishing with the Marine Stewardship Council and the Marine Conservation Society. There are a variety of certification schemes out there.

**The Convener:** We will move on to the next questions, which are from Stewart Stevenson.

**Stewart Stevenson:** I first want to make an observation about Label Rouge. If the French endorse something, it has to be good. That might not be based on reality, but it is based on perception. No comment is necessary.

I want to develop the point that Heather Jones raised about Chile. If expansion is too fast and there is no appropriate regulatory scheme and oversight, it can mean difficulties. Does the environmental interaction between fish farming and the pristine waters need to be managed more tightly as we expand the industry?

**The Convener:** Who wants to start off with that one? You are all looking at each other, which means that I get to nominate. James, you can start and we will work along the panel.

**James Withers:** The question is really about whether the interaction between the regulatory bodies and the industry needs to be tightened up. Is that a fair summary?

**Stewart Stevenson:** I think that is fair but, to be clear, I am talking particularly in the context of the proposed expansion of the industry.

**James Withers:** Yes—that interaction will be critical. In production terms, the industry is relatively static. When I started in my role at Scotland Food & Drink six years ago, Scotland had 11 or 12 per cent of the world's market share in Atlantic farmed salmon and we are now down to about 7 per cent. As demand rises, I am concerned that we will not be able to capitalise on that opportunity in Scotland.

Growth needs to be managed carefully. As Mr Finnie mentioned in his initial question, our environmental integrity and pristine waters are a key asset, so it is critical that we grow the industry, in value as much as in volume, collectively with the environmental agencies.

If you had asked me that question even 18 months ago, I would have said that I was not sure that we have good enough relationships between the industry and the regulatory bodies from the day-to-day operational point of view and in terms of proactive management. However, there has been a sea change there. An industry leadership group has now been established. Senior representatives from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Marine Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage are around the table and managing that growth agenda. The relationships are now stronger and the collaboration and partnership that have marked the Scotch whisky industry's environmental performance could now be mirrored in the aquaculture industry. I am much more hopeful that that kind of partnership and collaboration can underpin our growth journey over the next years.

**Stewart Stevenson:** You talked about the forum in which quite a lot of people are involved in regulation. Are there too many bodies for the regulation to be effective? There is some evidence that leads us to believe that.

**The Convener:** I am happy to let James Withers answer that, Stewart, but you will have to make your peace with Mr Rumbles, because you have asked his questions.

**Stewart Stevenson:** I beg your pardon, Mr Rumbles.

**James Withers:** I would be happy to let Heather Jones answer that because, to be honest, she probably has a better handle on it. As with many areas of Scottish industry and regulation, there are a number of different bodies with clear and distinct remits, but Heather Jones might be better placed to comment.

**The Convener:** We will go to Elaine Jamieson first.

**Elaine Jamieson:** Aquaculture is like any other sector in Scotland. Growth has to be sustainable and well managed and aquaculture is no different. In fact, it might be ahead of other sectors, in that the industry and its partners in the public sector and wider stakeholders are cognisant of the challenges that they face, which is important.

10:30

As James Withers has described, the aquaculture industry leadership group is a powerful group of people who are joined up, open

and collaborative in their thinking—and collaboration is key. At a more tactical and operational level, when we look at supporting the industry to grow, we have a team Scotland approach in which we very much work as a critical friend who challenges and supports businesses and the sector to grow on multiple aspects using that opulent synergy of knowledge that we bring to the table, be it through economic development agencies, the innovation and the academic community or the regulators.

There are good examples of the integrated approach between regulators. I defer to Heather Jones to give you more detail on that. For example, in the islands, where I live, regulators and local authorities work well together.

**Heather Jones:** My answer to the question whether we have too many regulatory bodies and whether the landscape is confused is no. Each body has a specific role and, as long as it seeks to have opinions and evidence on its area of expertise, it is clear what that role is. For example, the Crown Estate is a landlord, so companies pay it rent to anchor their nets to the sea bed. That is, in effect, its role. SNH's role is to protect and to preserve species and habitats that are under threat or on European protected lists, so that concerns the impact on other environments. Marine Scotland's role is specifically about the health, welfare and husbandry of fish. In the same way that the chief vet has responsibility for how rural land animals are cared for, what medical treatments they can be given and how to ensure that they flourish, Marine Scotland science has responsibility for fish. Finally, SEPA is responsible for the impact on the environment on the sea bed and the water column of waste deposits or other effluents in the system, which is the same as with agricultural systems for rearing cows and sheep, in which effluent and treatments go into the environment.

**Mike Rumbles:** Your evidence today is welcome. It is in contradiction to a lot of the other evidence that we have received, so it is interesting to hear it, because there has been severe criticism of all the regulatory bodies involved in the aquaculture process.

I will focus on the evidence that Highland Council gave us. Planning applications for fish farms are taken on individually, as they have to be. A developer puts in an application and Highland Council, for example, has to deal with that application. When we put the planning issue to Highland Council, it said that it would be good if there was a more strategic view of the whole process of fish farming in the Highland region. It was clear that it thought that that would be an effective way of dealing with the planning process, rather than having to do so in a piecemeal way

because of how the law stands. What are the main problems, if any, with the planning process for fish farming?

**The Convener:** Who wants to start off on that? If none of you volunteer, I will have to choose someone.

**James Withers:** The SSPO is my go-to organisation for commenting on the planning process. A more strategic overview and framework for how we grow the sector nationally would be helpful. At a local planning level, individual planning applications are taken individually, which I understand. They are subject to significant test and environmental assessments, but some applications run into difficulty, despite having approval from SEPA, SNH and all the regulatory authorities.

The chief planner sits round the table of the industry leadership group that I mentioned. The industry has developed the strategic framework for how it wants to go forward. If we had a planning system that demonstrated how it can support that development nationally, with all the checks and balances that such a planning system would need, that would make it easier for the industry to think about how it invests and grows. I suspect that that is not an issue just for the aquaculture industry; that is probably a comment on the planning system per se. I am not sure that the planning system is fully functional.

**The Convener:** My committee colleagues seem to want to make me work for my living by jumping around the questions that they indicated that they wanted to ask. Does Elaine Jamieson want to talk about planning? I will then bring in John Finnie on planning issues, after which we will maybe try to go back to the issue of the status quo, which is where we started.

**Elaine Jamieson:** I am from an economic and community development agency and am not an expert on planning, but I agree with the comments of Heather Jones in particular. There are good examples that we could look at in which the regulators work effectively together and planning is effective. In Shetland, for example, there is a very good integrated approach in which a broad range of issues to do with the environment, businesses and the community are balanced.

Sustainable growth needs to be at the heart of planning, and there needs to be a conversation between the public and private sectors to consider what true sustainable growth will look like in the future so that there is clear direction and clear vision over the medium to long term.

**John Finnie:** I will roll a few issues together. What role should the local development plan play? Who should lead? It is clear that we want communities involved. Should planning be looked

at in splendid isolation or integrated as part of other reforms? If I noted correctly what Heather Jones said, she talked about the distinct role that everyone has. If we are talking about a high-level vision, how is everything wrapped together so that, for instance, local people are not disenfranchised and there is an open and transparent process?

**Heather Jones:** I suppose that I was quite surprised that the planner from Highland Council suggested that a macro body could make decisions, because it seems to me that the essence of local democracy is that decisions are taken as close to communities as possible.

Let us take Shetland as an example. There was a disease outbreak of infectious salmon anaemia there in 2009. That is another disease that has devastated Chile. Since then, the number of actively farmed sites has been significantly reduced. Productivity may still be the same, but the companies have rationalised and changed the dynamics of where they put the fish and they have changed their density levels. In Scotland, there are probably 300 planning permission sites, but only 200 of them are used. The point that I am making is that the industry becomes self-regulating, as does the environment. There will be disease outbreaks if there are too many sites and they are farmed too intensively. People can therefore pick and choose.

I go back to the issue of expansion and how to expand efficiently. Losses can be reduced, production on the existing sites can be optimised, expansion of existing sites can be considered, and new sites can be developed.

The Norwegian Government has done all those things in the past 15 years. People talk about Scotland being in a perilous position now, but our volume of tonnage—160,000 tonnes—is about the same as it was 15 years ago. Norway's tonnage has gone from about that to 1.2 million tonnes. It has a bigger coastline but, to go back to the planning question, the local authorities and local communities there get a dividend from the companies' investment. There is also a strategic national plan, which the Government approves in the Parliament. The espoused goal of that plan is that it would like the industry to grow to five times its size by 2050. There is a deliberate policy of encouraging expansion in areas of low population. More licences will be issued in regions in the north of Norway, because the aim is to keep communities active there. That point is relevant to Shetland, the Western Isles and Orkney. Without aquaculture jobs, some communities would not be able to keep existing.

**Gail Ross:** Good morning, panel. You spoke about Norway's coastline. We have a lot of coastline that we do not currently use for fish farms, specifically in the north and the east. If we

were able to expand all the way round our coastline, would that have a positive impact? At the moment, everything is concentrated in the west.

**Heather Jones:** There is a clear and wise reason why there is no fish farming on the east coast. It is a bit like the situation in Iceland, where there are farming areas and no-farming areas—Scotland has farming areas and no-farming areas. Ninety per cent of our wild salmon stocks and productive salmon rivers—including the Tay, the Tweed, the Dee and the Don—filter into the North Sea. They are all very productive, because they have much larger river catchment areas. If we were to change the balance, there would be a risk. At the moment, there is in effect protection for all the east coast fisheries because there are no fish farms there.

Another reason why fish farms are located on the west coast in Scotland and Norway is that the companies look for sheltered locations. In general, the North Sea is less sheltered than sea lochs on the west coast. That is partly about caring for the fish, but it is also about not putting humans who work for the company out into very exposed hostile environments in the North Sea. Companies have a welfare responsibility to their employees as well as to the food production system.

**John Finnie:** Just to push on the planning issue, there has been talk of macro policy and local democracy. Sometimes, it is good to have tension, as that focuses minds. The report “Scottish aquaculture: A view towards 2030” states that regulations and planning should move to a more—sorry; that is not right. It states:

“Regulations and planning move to be more proactive in supporting”—

I do not think that this is good English, one way or another, but never mind—it is maybe not me after all.

**The Convener:** Why not make it into good English and get the point across?

**John Finnie:** Okay. The suggestion is that regulations and planning should

“move to be more proactive in supporting good growth, rather than”—

this is the telling phrase—

“passively enforcing standards.”

If we have standards, surely it is vital that they are enforced. Are we getting the balance right in decision making at local level, where there seems to be a lot of pressure on local authorities to play their part in contributing to the target? Is there undue pressure?

**Heather Jones:** I suppose that I had not interpreted the word “passively” to mean that the

regulations are not being enforced. All regulations in Scotland are enforced. The point of that phrase in the document is that, if we want to grow the industry, that will happen only if we actively do something to encourage it to happen. If we do not, we will just have the status quo.

As I said, demand is increasing in the global markets. People in Dubai, China and the US want to buy salmon, full stop, including Scottish salmon. Production has doubled or tripled in Norway and Chile, and it is increasing vastly in Canada and growing by 10 per cent a year in the Faroes. However, it is flat in Scotland. Therefore, Scotland is not taking any of that global market opportunity. It is a judgment for the people of Scotland whether we want it to do so, but the industry certainly feels that there is an opportunity to reinvest in the communities of Scotland and to use the coastline of Scotland. Very few countries in the world have the right climatic conditions to grow salmon, and Scotland happens to be one of them.

**John Finnie:** Could repeating that list be viewed as heaping pressure on local planners, who already feel under pressure? Like other members who represent rural areas, of course I want employment in rural areas, but I want the environment to be protected and the highest standards of welfare for creatures as well. There is a lot to be done there. Is excessive pressure being applied to local authorities?

**Heather Jones:** I am not in a position to know that.

**John Finnie:** Are you applying pressure?

**Heather Jones:** No—not in the slightest. Our role is to support investment in research.

**The Convener:** We will move on to a question from Gail Ross, then I will try to get us back on track from where we left.

10:45

**Gail Ross:** I do not know whether anyone will be able to answer this question, but I will ask it anyway. It relates to something that we have not really touched on in any of our evidence sessions. Heather Jones mentioned global markets and the US market specifically. How will we continue to expand into American markets if we keep shooting seals? That is something that such markets are not very keen on.

**Heather Jones:** In 2022, the US market is planning to bring in new regulations, to which every salmon-producing company will need to adhere, including those in Chile, where there are sea lions—which are much bigger and more aggressive in attacking fish in cages than seals in Scotland are—and those in Norway where, as you know, shooting is a national sport. There are

issues about how to protect stocks of fish; farmers have the same issue in the risk of attacks on their sheep by, in my case, a family Labrador. We recognise that farmers have a right to protect their stock, which they have invested in and cared for, when there is the risk of predators.

A lot of work is done in Scotland that uses acoustic deterrent devices. The sea mammal research unit at the University of St Andrews has a great deal of expertise and does a great deal of research to ensure that those ADDs use frequencies and patterns of noise that are effective and not harmful. Many innovative research projects have been done. Ace Aquatec, a Scottish company that makes an acoustic deterrent device, just won a Queen's award for enterprise. If such devices can be made successfully in Scotland, they can be sold to any fish-farming operation in the world, including those in Chile, where there are sea lions.

**The Convener:** Unfortunately, Stewart Stevenson has left. His question related to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee's report, which I am sure that you will all have read. Kate Forbes, who was on that committee, and Donald Cameron, who is still on the committee, participated in the production of that report.

I am struggling a little to understand exactly what your views are on the report. Do you recognise the criticisms that are in it or do you not recognise the report's view on where the industry is at the moment?

**James Withers:** My take is that the industry is quite young compared with land farming and agriculture, which we have been doing for hundreds and thousands of years. In such industries, real challenges remain around animal health. For example, in the sheep industry, each year in Scotland a percentage of lambs are born that will never make the food chain due to disease, the weather and various environmental factors. Between 20 and 30 per cent of cattle that present to slaughter have liver fluke, which is a disease of the liver. Raising animals is tough because we have to deal with biological and environmental factors.

I do not think that any sector of the food and drink industry has a future if it does not embrace an almost zero tolerance of mortality and any disease issue. There should be a continual appetite to improve. If an individual company was before the committee, you should ask it whether it was content with where we are on mortality. I suspect—and I certainly hope—that it would say no. The industry is not perfect; I do not think that the industry itself would say that it is. Having worked with the industry, I think that it is up for embracing world-class standards of production

and it absolutely accepts that there are improvements to be made. No one has more interest in achieving such improvements than companies and the industry itself.

Ultimately, losses cost money and they affect reputation. We have talked about the importance of brand. Scottish salmon sells on its brand—its food quality and environmental credentials. The industry has challenges, but my sense is that it recognises them and that there is a desire for improvement. The investment that the industry is putting into innovation and the fact that we have an aquaculture innovation centre, which Heather Jones is representing today, are signals that there is a desire to do better.

**The Convener:** Do you recognise the report and its contents?

**James Withers:** Yes, I do, but—

**The Convener:** Thank you. Now—

**James Withers:** Before you cut me off—

**The Convener:** I was looking for a straight yes or no answer.

**James Withers:** Yes—I absolutely recognise the contents of the report. However, to put that in context, in Scotland we have a spirit and desire to embrace world-class standards of production. My overarching point is that the one thing we know for certain is that the demand for global protein and for Scottish salmon is increasing; today, every day this week and every day for the rest of the year, we will eat a million meals in the UK involving salmon. I would far rather that we met that demand from systems in Scotland, which we can control and through which we can add economic value here, rather than having that demand met from elsewhere. If, for example, we had a moratorium or stopped producing salmon, that demand would not go away; it would be met from systems over which we have no control.

**The Convener:** I do not think that that is what the report suggested. Can Elaine Jamieson answer briefly, because I know that members of the ECCLR Committee want to come in on the back of that?

**Elaine Jamieson:** I very much agree with James Withers's comments. The growth and development of any sector cannot be viewed in isolation, but should be viewed holistically and in an evidence-based manner in terms of growth for the economy and areas within it. Having spoken extensively to the industry—in fact, I spoke to it yesterday, at seafood expo global—I know that it is fair to say that the industry is very cognisant of the challenges that were highlighted in the report and that work is well under way to address some of those challenges.

**Heather Jones:** I recognise a number of the issues that the report covers, but I have a slight issue with the underlying premise, which appears to be that Scottish salmon farming is, in and of itself, bad and having a negative effect on the environment. That does not seem to me to be the right mindset with which to approach the matter.

Members of the industry would say that they fully own and recognise the fact that they are responsible for achieving optimal fish growth and welfare while minimising impacts. That is partly why, in the three and a half years that SAIC has been in existence, the industry has invested in 23 different research projects with us, which have largely been focused on dealing with some of the issues that the environment committee's report talks about. Of our £34 million-worth of projects, £22 million is industry hard cash. The industry is putting significant millions of pounds' worth of investment into Scottish universities to help to solve the problems that it is experiencing in Scottish waters. That seems to me to be a sign of a mature and responsible industry that wants to tackle the problems that it is facing.

**Donald Cameron:** Good morning. As the convener said, I am the reporter from the ECCLR Committee. With the greatest respect, I have to disagree with the characterisation of the report in what Heather Jones has just said. In fairness, what the report says is that aquaculture has to operate to the highest environmental standards and it is not doing that. Underlying the report, and the committee's concerns, is the projected expansion by doubling production from the present 160,000 tonnes over 15 years.

The concerns of the ECCLR Committee are, effectively, that, if that expansion happens and the industry is not operating to the highest environmental standards, we have a problem. I am sure that Kate Forbes can add to that, but it is important to put the ECCLR Committee's views on the record, and the report and summary letter enshrine those views. Do you not agree that it is in the product's interest to produce it to the highest environmental standards? People want to eat salmon that they know is produced to those standards.

**James Withers:** Yes. That is a very straightforward answer. In some ways it comes back to the point we made earlier about how consumer retail perceptions and scrutiny will drive more improvements than anything else. We see that in the realms of food waste, and plastic is obviously a huge issue at the moment. A large part of the seal issue is about consumer assurance and welfare.

I want the aquaculture industry in Scotland to grow. It could have huge benefits, and the social and economic sustainability factors are as

important as the environmental sustainability factor. However, that should happen only on the basis of supporting companies that embrace the highest standards of regulation.

As a consumer and someone who lives in Scotland and values its landscape and natural heritage, I want to see that growth only if it meets not only bare-minimum standards but world-leading standards. What is going on in Brussels now and in Singapore later this week will help to sell the product.

**The Convener:** James, you started off well, with a very short answer, but it got extremely long.

**Kate Forbes:** I want to focus on mortalities, which James Withers has already referred to. You said that the industry is not satisfied with the current level of mortality. Is the current level of mortality acceptable, in light of the level of mortality you would accept in any other food source?

Secondly, everyone is happy to say that something is not acceptable, but what should be done, and by whom, to address the issue? That mortality rate has a negative impact not only on the environment, but on investors and consumers.

**Elaine Jamieson:** I am confident that the industry is not satisfied with the current mortality rate and is actively addressing the issue. That is evident through the innovation activity that producers and businesses in the upstream supply chain are engaged in, and through the investments and the progress that they are making around mortality. Significant investments are being made by small and medium-sized enterprises as well as our large businesses.

Yesterday, I had a conversation with one of our salmon-producing companies and learned about the proactive approach that it has taken with at least two other farming companies in a specific geographical location to address mortalities. I understand that mortality events often create a sense of urgency and a need for action. However, those businesses are stepping back from large productivity numbers to address short-term challenges and longer-term growth opportunities. They are working together around some very localised fish management operations—for example, they are synchronising treatments.

The fish health welfare work that is going on, which Heather will be able to speak about much more eloquently than I can, is a good example of industry leading the way, supported by the public sector and wider stakeholders, and taking ownership of the work to improve the current situation.

**Heather Jones:** The causes of mortality in fish farming can involve bacteria, viruses and parasites

in the environment, insufficient or poor nutrition and feeding, human error, and physical trauma through, for example, big storms slamming fish into the nets and bruising them. There are lots of causes of mortality, and every farming company that I know is seeking to minimise its mortalities because they represent a significant amount of lost profits.

What can we do about mortalities? We can improve water quality, because fish thrive in a highly oxygenated environment. We can vaccinate against some of the diseases that fish have, such as bacterial kidney disease and pancreatic disease. Pharmaceutical companies have worked with the industry to identify causes of mortality and how they can be avoided.

We know that vaccination is a successful strategy in human populations. We can have the best possible management and husbandry to minimise the risk of disease outbreak, through stocking densities and how often you handle the fish. We want to handle the fish as little as possible because fish suffer stress in the same way as humans and, if you crowd them too much, their performance and eating quality go down. The retailers will specify all manner of ways in which the fish farming companies have to ensure that their fish are healthy and ready for market. The farmers want every fish that they put to sea to come back out again.

The question was about whether there are too many mortalities and the answer is yes, but people are doing everything that they can to bring those numbers down.

11:00

**The Convener:** Can you quantify those mortalities as a percentage of fish that go to sea?

**Heather Jones:** I do not have that data, but I am sure that the SSPO does.

**The Convener:** I have read in the press that it is somewhere between 20 and 25 per cent.

**Kate Forbes:** Do you think that we are moving fast enough on the issue? Fish mortality rates hit a record high in 2016. There would be an absolute outcry if the mortality rates in any other form of agriculture hit those same highs—we just would not stand for it. Why is fish farming different? Are we innovating fast enough to reduce mortality rates?

**Heather Jones:** In the past five years, there has been a significant trend of increased mortalities because of disease. That is correlated partly to rising sea water temperatures and partly to viruses and diseases becoming evident in Scottish waters that were not previously evident here—there are diseases that started in Tasmania, went to Ireland

and somehow came to Scotland. Once you have those diseases in your environment, you cannot get rid of them. It is perfectly fair to ask what we can do about that.

One of the biggest causes of mortality in the past couple of years has been complex gill disease, which affects how the fish breathe. Two weeks ago, there was an international conference in Galway on how to find answers to those complex gill issues and it was attended by industry professionals, Scottish researchers and members of the Scottish innovation centre. One of the things that Scotland would like to do is to become the expert and host of that international forum, so that we do as much research as we possibly can to resolve the problems that we know are happening both here and around the world. That can come through academic, industry and international research collaborations. We need to draw on the expertise and consider what the Tasmanians have learned about gill disease, how we can apply that to Scotland and how we can make the best possible interventions to minimise the mortality rate.

**The Convener:** I have one further question on gill disease. I attended the ECCLR Committee and asked whether the industry can do anything once the disease starts to develop and the answer was to harvest the fish before they die from the disease. Does that hide the true extent of the problem? Is the problem bigger than the 20 or 25 per cent mortality rate?

To put that into context, I am a farmer—I declare that as an interest—and when a farmer is calving, for example, they will accept a small mortality in the region of 4 per cent, which is sad, but probably a reasonable level of mortality about which there is not a lot that one can do. However, we are talking about a mortality rate in excess of four or five times that in the salmon industry.

Can you explain a bit more about gill disease mortality? Is the problem bigger than the industry has indicated, because the fish farmers are harvesting fish earlier?

**Heather Jones:** I do not know the answer to that question. I will make an observation that I learned from a conversation with the Scottish Government's chief vet on the comparison between the mortality rates of land-based animals and fish. Fish spawn by generating 100,000 eggs per fish and not all of those will become wild salmon from wild salmon rivers—the same is true for other fish—whereas cows have one calf or possibly two, and so the mortality rates of fish are not analogous to the mortality rates of land animals. That is according to Scotland's chief vet.

**The Convener:** I am sure that we accept that there are subtle differences between fish and animals.

**John Mason:** My question follows on quite well, because we have just talked about mortality and Ms Jones has given us a wide range of reasons for it. However, one of the committee's fascinations is sea lice. I am amazed that we have got as far through the meeting as we have without too much mention of them.

First, I ask for a general comment on what panellists' views are on sea lice. We have heard that some farms are doing extremely well and that other countries have stricter controls. The ASC suggested that its normal limit is 0.1 female louse per fish, which seems quite low—and lower than we are achieving. Are you content with the policy as it is at the moment or should we be tightening up or copying Norway a bit more?

**The Convener:** I am keen to give Heather Jones a break, because she has been under the microscope. Does anyone else on the panel wish to come in on that or do I have to go to Heather, by default, to answer?

**Elaine Jamieson:** I can give Heather a few minutes' respite, but not too much because she is the expert on that area.

It is fair to say that producing companies are deploying a wide range of strategies to tackle sea lice with the support of innovative businesses in the supply chain. Although treatments remain an option, there is an increasing number of others, such as baths, thermolysis and hydrolysis. We also have some very ambitious supply chain companies coming through that work hand in glove with producers in looking at such solutions.

Although we are an economic and community development agency, when we meet industry representatives we are always keen to understand their challenges as much as their opportunities and how we can work with them in the future. One company in Scotland that has had localised but very challenging problems with sea lice has deployed not one or two but multiple approaches to tackling them. It has been working in collaboration with its neighbours in the geographies in which they operate. Yesterday, it was telling me that, from March 2017 to March 2018, it had seen an 87 per cent reduction in adult female lice per salmon.

**John Mason:** Could you give us what that figure was, and what it is now?

**Elaine Jamieson:** Not from my brief notes. I received a presentation from the company yesterday but, unfortunately, I do not have it with me. I suggest that when the committee hears evidence from producers next week, they will be

able to give much more detailed information on what they are actually doing in their businesses.

**John Mason:** I am getting a little bit of an impression—not just from yourself, Ms Jamieson, but from everyone—that there is a laissez-faire approach that says that the producers are taking it all very seriously, but Norway's approach is much more proactive. It has green, yellow and red zones. If I understand those correctly, if a producer has too many lice per fish and goes over the Norwegian limit, they will then be in a red zone, and it will automatically have to reduce the amount of stock that it has and no more farms will be allowed in that area. Such an approach suggests that, rather than just leaving it to the individual producer to see the benefit that it will get from having fewer lice, the Government—or someone—could come in and impose more. Are you in favour of that?

**Elaine Jamieson:** I do not think that I am in a position to comment on that. That rests with the industry.

**John Mason:** Okay—that is fair enough. I will ask Ms Jones.

**The Convener:** Heather, it looks as though you have had a chance to gather your thoughts.

**Heather Jones:** I will do my very best. The Norwegian system is being introduced rather than it being the case that it has been implemented. The industry here has its own code of good practice on when treatment should happen. There are treatment thresholds that are below that, and there are also times at which we will want to treat at an individual net or pen level rather than just monitor at the whole-farm level. The industry has improved its control of lice by changing some of its sampling protocols, intervening earlier and minimising the risk of the exponential growth of this devastatingly devious parasite that we have not yet found a way to bang on the head.

It is worth saying that salmon go to sea completely devoid of lice: they are utterly clean. They come out of freshwater hatcheries pristine. Just as Labradors get ticks from—in my dog's case—wild deer when they go walking in the countryside, wild fish carry lice that then get into the farmed environment.

**The Convener:** Smolts are clear of lice when they go to the sea from rivers. As you know, their passage through fish farm areas to the sea is relatively short, as is their passage on the way back. Lice are a naturally occurring parasite, and it would not be right to blame the problem on either side.

**Heather Jones:** I am simply saying that the parasite is endemic and pervasive, and it is highly prevalent in the water column. It is in the

environment. If fish are placed in a sea-water environment, there will always be a risk that they will get lice.

**The Convener:** Okay—I am sorry. Continue.

**Heather Jones:** I have slightly lost my train of thought.

Obviously, companies want to treat fish in a way that minimises lice, their impact on fish mortality rates, and their potential impact on other species. Studies have been done on the impact of sea lice from farmed fish on wild salmon. The most persuasive study that I have seen comes from Irish academics. It says that sea lice constitute possibly 1 per cent of all the causes of mortality among wild salmon. Yes, lice have an effect, but they are one of many effects that cause a decline in wild salmon stocks. Many things could be done to improve the return rates of wild salmon stocks, but there are also many things that we cannot do anything about. We cannot change the fact that sea water temperatures are rising off the Faroes, that what salmon predate is less available to them, or that a lot of wild seals eat a lot of wild salmon. What we can do, and what the industry does, is try to minimise the impacts.

**John Mason:** In a sense, there are two issues: the good of the fish and the return for the farm. However, I am concerned about the limits that have been set. I referred earlier to the Aquaculture Stewardship Council and similar bodies. The ASC's limit is a bit arbitrary at 0.1 female louse per fish. If that limit becomes widely accepted in supermarkets in Germany, America and other countries, and our fish do not have ASC or any other accreditation—I think that the committee will be doing some more work on that—is there a danger that we will miss out? Do we as a society need to do more to protect the Scottish industry? For example, SEPA has been criticised for not carrying out enough unannounced visits. Am I right in thinking that that is an additional worry?

**Heather Jones:** The only way to answer the question, "At which point should we intervene?" is to have some really good science that tells us that the best time to intervene is at 0.5 or 0.2 ovigerous female louse per fish, or whatever the figure may be. The ASC has a limit of 0.1 and Norway has some other number, but the levels of lice depend on the way in which someone is farming, the location, the sea water temperatures, the currents and all sorts of other factors. Plenty of locations in Scotland do not suffer with any sea lice problems whatsoever, but individual sites are very prone to such pressures, so it is important to consider where farms are sited. We could think about expanding growth in Orkney, for example, where there are incredible tidal flow exchanges between the North Sea and the Atlantic and no problems with lice.

**John Mason:** I want to ask Mr Withers about this. How do you see the supermarkets, especially international ones, going forward? Will they look for accreditation by the ASC or some other body? Will they take into account the number of lice? There are reasons that the levels of lice differ in different areas, but I suspect that a supermarket in Germany would not fully understand that and would take a very fixed line.

**James Withers:** Accreditation, whether it is British Retail Consortium accreditation at processing level, the SSPO code of good practice or MSC accreditation, is a gateway into the retail industry. It is a given. The challenge for the industry is that there is a lot of accreditation; the retailers also have their own accreditation.

On the question about lice, I honestly do not know whether that will become a factor.

11:15

**John Mason:** Do most retailers have their own accreditation, or do they rely on others for it?

**James Withers:** It tends to be a combination of both. The British Retail Consortium is part of the global food safety initiative, which is the entry point. I do not know as much about the fish side, but vegetable producers who supply the major retailers must be BRC accredited and they will almost certainly be inspected on any differences by every single retailer, so there might be four or five unannounced inspections. A number of the retailers also inspect salmon farms.

**John Finnie:** I have a brief point for James Withers. I welcome your comments. If I were sitting where you are, I would not want to talk about lice because, given your role, it is clearly a negative issue. Public perception is hugely important. Even the term "lice" is not one that we want to talk about. Do you not have deep concerns about even the fact that we are having to discuss this?

**James Withers:** No. Mortality is an issue in every form of animal production. Industry will benefit in the long term if it is open about the fact that it has production challenges and that it wants to address them. The alternative would be to say that it is not an issue and to try to bury the matter and hope that no one talks about it. That would not be a helpful strategy in the longer term; such an approach would almost certainly come back and bite us. The debate, which is about how we tackle the issue and not whether there is a problem, is a healthy one.

**John Finnie:** Thank you—that is reassuring.

**Colin Smyth:** The "Aquaculture Growth to 2030" report recommends that there should be

“an examination of the role of Marine Scotland as both regulator and policy advocate for development.”

It goes on:

“There is an opportunity to align with other food and drink sectors in Scotland by moving the development role into the Scottish Government’s Food, Drink & Rural Communities Division”.

Do you have a view on that recommendation or any thoughts on its pros and cons?

**Heather Jones:** That has already happened, I think. People who work in the food and drink division, which is in the agriculture directorate, are responsible for the food promotion side of salmon. The Marine Scotland side is about regulation.

**Colin Smyth:** So you are saying that Marine Scotland does not undertake any policy development work, and that that has all been moved into the Scottish Government.

**Heather Jones:** The policy work that is being done in the food and drink division is about the case for salmon, as part of the expansion of Scotland’s food production system. A lot of policy thinking is going on between the Government and the industry about a farmed fish health framework, which Mr Ewing is keen to see developed and delivered. That is about improving the industry’s performance in how it creates value for Scotland.

**Gail Ross:** Another of the recommendations in that same report is to introduce innovation sites. Has there been any progress on that?

**James Withers:** The bad news for Heather Jones is that that is probably one for her, as she works for the body that is technically responsible for the delivery of that recommendation. The recommendation was up there, in bright lights, as part of the top-tier recommendations.

**Heather Jones:** The industry has had a number of discussions with Government about the scope for innovation on sites and equipment. We are funding new equipment and technologies that might improve production performance. That piece of work is on-going, and the Government is considering what would be permissible within the regulatory framework in which we operate.

**Peter Chapman:** I will focus on SEPA’s role, although I realise that we do not have a SEPA representative here. SEPA is in the process of changing its approach to regulation, because it recognises that the status quo is not an option. SEPA is looking at issues including protecting the environment and biodiversity by ensuring that fish production is matched to the environmental capacity. It is also looking at increasing the capture and beneficial use of the waste, reducing medicine release into the environment and supporting action to protect wild fish. Will the changes that SEPA is proposing in its sector plan

improve regulation of the sector, and are further changes needed on top of the ones that I have mentioned? If so, what are those changes?

**The Convener:** I feel sorry for Heather Jones, because everyone looks away or looks at her. I am trying to give her a chance to gather her thoughts. One of the points in that question concerned increasing the capture and beneficial use of waste. We have not touched on that, so Heather Jones might like to pick up on that, as she has now had a chance to gather her thoughts.

**Heather Jones:** I am not particularly well placed to comment on what SEPA’s role should or should not be and how well it is playing that; I do not have the insight to offer a view on that. I am sure that the work that SEPA is doing with the industry is about better regulation and outcomes. Whatever changes SEPA is trying to make, it is very much committed to the one-planet vision, which we have heard Terry A’Hearn talk about. Anne Anderson, from whom you heard last week, is the chief officer for going beyond compliance. That set of discussions and thinking is going on between the regulator and the industry.

**The Convener:** Does anyone else want to come in on that? Heather, you did not touch on the capture and beneficial use of waste. Do you want to talk about that innovation?

**Heather Jones:** I confess that I do not know anything about it.

**The Convener:** Okay.

**Peter Chapman:** I recognise that we do not have a SEPA representative here, which makes the questions difficult. Do you have any thoughts on what data the SEPA licences should be based on? Can you comment on that?

**Heather Jones:** No.

**Peter Chapman:** We are struggling here, convener.

**The Convener:** James Withers, I am always delighted to bring you in.

**James Withers:** How kind. A good description of the relationship between SEPA and the industry in recent years would probably be that it has been sub-optimal. I have seen examples in other sectors of that being the case, such as agriculture and whisky. If we went back 10 or 15 years and asked SEPA whether there was any sector that it was concerned about, whisky might have been up there. However, SEPA developed a strong relationship with the industry body, the Scotch Whisky Association. The association was at the forefront in writing a proactive plan, and a partnership developed so that the model moved away from SEPA simply acting as policeman to it acting as a partner in improvement.

My sense, both from Terry A'Hearn's leadership and from people who are directly involved, is that there is now much greater scope for developing that kind of partnership relationship. Previously, industry was in one place and SEPA was in another, telling the industry to crack on while it acted as the policeman, looked at what was happening and enforced if necessary. That old-world model needs to be consigned to the dustbin. A much more proactive approach can now be taken and there are good examples, whether of bathing waters in relation to the agriculture sector or the use of water resources in the whisky industry, which could be used as a model for aquaculture. I think that that is starting to happen.

**Peter Chapman:** Thank you.

**The Convener:** We will move on to the next set of questions.

**Jamie Greene:** Good morning, panel. I have kept quiet throughout the session, listening with great intent to the fascinating discussion. I will touch briefly on the point that I was asked to look at, which concerns research, development and innovation in the industry, and conclude by asking for some commentary that is more of an overview of the future of the industry.

Much of the research is very technically led, addressing specific production issues of which we are aware and the environmental aspects of production. Very little is said about innovation in the economic or management aspects of the industry. Does anyone have any comments or views on how research or innovation that is not focused only on the technical aspects could better facilitate effective growth in the industry?

**James Withers:** There is a huge area of innovation beyond simply addressing some of the biological challenges. Those innovations, which are relevant across a number of sectors in the food and drink industry, run from sustainable packaging through to improvements in logistics.

I am hopeful on that front, because two initiatives that have developed over the past wee while offer some hope about Scotland being the home of real innovation right through the supply chain in aquaculture as well as in the primary production. One is the make innovation happen project, which is bringing together under one roof—or on one website with one phone number—about 150 existing support tools for food businesses that want to innovate.

The second is a bit more tangential: the coming together of Scotland's research institutes under the Scottish environment, food and agriculture research institutes—SEFARI—collaboration. The likes of the Rowett institute, which leads on nutrition, the Moredun Research Institute, which has traditionally been about livestock production

and animal health on land, the James Hutton Institute and Scotland's Rural College are coming together. That offers real hope to better translate some of the research on the ground in farms or processing. Some of the work that has gone on into endemic production diseases in livestock, feed conversion and biological efficiency in land animals is transferable into the water.

A lot of the innovation will be market led. On nutrition and health, it will be about people wanting to improve their dietary balance and food intake, as well as wanting to think about sustainable packaging, for example. A lot of innovation is happening in that. You make an important point that we should not focus only on the production challenges; we should consider the wider market and efficiency opportunities.

**Elaine Jamieson:** I will give Heather Jones a wee break by talking about innovation.

At Highlands and Islands Enterprise, we are very ambitious, alongside our businesses, about growth through innovation across the supply chain. We are looking upstream and downstream. Innovation is not only about capturing challenges; it is about creating high-value opportunities in the economy—particularly, for my role, the rural economy—and capturing as much value in Scotland as possible.

Innovation takes many forms. The Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre is focused on business-to-academic partnerships, but we also consider business-to-business collaborations not only to solve challenges in the here and now but to look further ahead into the future. We also support businesses individually.

One live example that is taking up quite a bit of my colleagues' time is a project called aquaSENS, which is still at the conceptual stage. It takes the aquaculture industry as a whole. We are considering fin-fish and shellfish production in Shetland and working across three innovation centres—SAIC, the Industrial Biotechnology Innovation Centre and the Data Lab—to consider how we can use things that capture real-time data to inform real-time activity. That will enable people to view what is happening remotely and make well-informed decisions about what they do on their fin-fish or shellfish farm so that they can become much more predictive in their approach to the business over the medium to longer term. It will also provide a robust set of data over the longer term—a very hard evidence base that holistically captures as much information as possible about what happens in a region.

We are working with a range of stakeholders and being led by the industry. We are working with the Scottish centre of excellence in satellite applications—SOXSA—at the University of

Strathclyde and the Satellite Applications Catapult to develop the project and we are submitting a bid to the industrial strategy challenge fund for a sizeable amount of money to help to bring that forward. That concerns some of our wider ambition on innovation.

Skills and training are key to innovation. We need people in our country with the right level of skills and knowledge, whether that is acquired through the academic or vocational pathway. A lot of work is going on across industry, the public sector partnership and stakeholders to empower people in Scotland to ensure that the aquaculture sector is a positive, progressive career destination and is accessible to all.

Work is under way and more is to be done not only on reaching school leavers, young people and the people who influence young people, but on making the industry accessible to more mature entrants. A good example of that is the Scottish vocational qualification level 4 in fish farm management, which allows people to learn, develop and make a positive contribution to the fish farm sector at a later stage in their life.

11:30

**The Convener:** I will give Heather Jones a bigger break and bring in Gail Ross, who has another question.

**Gail Ross:** The HIE report “The Value of Aquaculture to Scotland” said that attracting staff is difficult. I was up in the west coast in my constituency a couple of weeks ago and I spoke to several people who said that there are jobs available and people want them, but access to housing in many small communities is preventing people from taking them up. Do you have a comment on that?

**Elaine Jamieson:** I would not disagree at all. That is what we hear from our businesses. The situation is more challenging in some parts of the Highlands and Islands than in others. Infrastructure is key to having a successful sector. Norway, for example, is further ahead than we are on roads and information technology infrastructure. Setting aside housing as an infrastructure challenge, attracting people to rural and remote areas or attracting young people to come back to those areas is a challenge because they expect to be able to use a mobile phone and get on the internet.

A positive thing to come out of the aquaculture industry specifically is that it is accelerating the speed of some infrastructure developments in the region. To go back to the aquaSENS project, there may be an opportunity to improve mobile connectivity in some remote rural areas. On the Isle of Mull, Scottish Sea Farms needed very good

broadband connectivity, so it went ahead and did that and there is now a community asset that people can use.

To answer your question, it is true that housing is a problem, but we also need to consider infrastructure.

**The Convener:** Now that Heather Jones has had a good break to marshal her thoughts, we can go back to Jamie Greene’s question.

**Heather Jones:** There is a lot of technological development around the crunching of big data, for example in the use of sensors and imaging systems, such as subsea cameras. We have sponsored a project that is working on a DNA grab of the sediment below sea cages—a sample of that can allow a much quicker response on what the impacts are. A lot of new technology is being applied in the industry.

As Elaine Jamieson said, the industry would like to have strong broadband, because having an internet of things allows better farm management. It is the same situation in land-based agriculture: agritech is transforming the information that farmers have so that they can optimise their feeding and treatment regimes. That is all coming through and some innovative young Scottish companies are contributing to it.

**Jamie Greene:** Thank you for those very comprehensive and diverse answers. It sounds as though some great work is being done, using technology in particular, to advance research. Given that we are approaching the end of the meeting, perhaps I can take a step back and summarise a theme that has come through much of the evidence—that of how we square the circle of achieving the significant growth in the industry that many people desire yet still address the valid and substantive concerns about the environmental impact of that growth. That theme is reflected in the work of the ECCLR Committee. We know that demand is not going away and that if we do not meet that demand, someone else will, as Mr Withers said.

However, throughout our evidence sessions, I have never been clear about who should be responsible. Should responsibility lie with the industry or the Government? Norway, for example, took a more top-down approach, through legislation and policy to control planning, regulation, innovation and growth. In Scotland, there seems to be a wide discourse on which agency or which bit of Government, industry or academia should be responsible. Does anyone have a view on who should spearhead that growth? How can it be achieved in a sustainable way?

**Elaine Jamieson:** I am not going to directly answer your question by saying who should

spearhead it, but I will share my observation that all stakeholders in the industry have become increasingly collaborative. I am a great believer in industries being led by industries. Industry drives the economy, not the public sector. We are here to support industry. I would be keen for industry to come forward with some solutions and a call to action to the public sector with regard to how we should support it.

As the industry, which is becoming increasingly sophisticated, continues to move forward, we all have a responsibility to chart that path and offer support. We should be ambitious with regard to growth, but not at the expense of environmental sustainability, rural communities or our position in the global marketplace. The opulent synergy will be brought about by our having people at the table who can be critical friends to one another in the sense of challenging and supporting that discussion as it goes forward. There is an issue about process and about being focused on outcomes, but I do not feel happy about commenting on who should lead that.

**Heather Jones:** I think that the industry has set out a vision of expanding the Scottish economy through expanding production in a sustainable way. That is very much captured in one of the infographics in the report, which shows three overlapping circles in a Venn diagram, which came from a United Nations programme about how to get the optimum relationship between economic growth, social benefit and environmental protection. The industry's ambition is to grow within those three parameters.

This discourse is helpful, because it throws up issues that people will want to tease out and understand, and it will allow them to inform Government policy in relation to where things should go next. The flipside is that, if you decide that you do not want growth, that has ramifications for economies such as the one that Elaine Jamieson is concerned with, and it also has implications in relation to the foreign investment that might come to Scotland or, alternatively, go to Canada or the Faroes. That comes back to James Withers's point: global demand will be there, but will Scotland's communities benefit from it, without trashing the environment? Nobody wants to trash the environment, least of all farmers. It is the nature of politics to try to find that answer.

**Jamie Greene:** Before James Withers answers, I would just make the comment that that organic growth has not happened. Production levels in Scotland are relatively flat compared with the substantial growth levels that we have seen in other markets. Although I take the point that the issue is down to industry, I do not see that leaving things to industry has had the desired effect.

**Heather Jones:** We hear a lot about the precautionary approach, but I would say that the DEPOMOD model that SEPA has used for the past 20 years has been so precautionary that it has limited growth that could have happened without having damaging effects. That is not what the perception is; the perception is the opposite. However, if you take hard data from the past 20 years of SEPA's work to examine the impact, you will see that its modelled forecast said that the impact would be high but it was actually low. The amount of growth that there could have been was not achieved because the model said that the growth had to be kept low. The model underestimated the capacity of the environment, rather than the other way around, in some cases if not in others. That is why you need feedback loops and data to tell you where you can sustainably grow and where you cannot. That comes back to the Norwegian red, amber, green idea.

My point is that there has not been growth in Scotland because there has been a great deal of caution and nervousness that, if you were to ground-truth the models, would not be proven to be necessary.

**James Withers:** Partnership between industry and the public sector is the single most important answer to the question. I would argue that the food and drink sector has been an economic success story over the past 10 years and that, if you strip everything else away, you will see that the single biggest reason for that is that there has been a partnership between industry and the public sector.

That does not mean that it is always a comfortable and cosy relationship—the industry challenges Government and Government challenges the industry. The food and drink industry identified a growth opportunity and believed that there would be benefits from it, and aquaculture has now done the same—the growth document has been referred to a couple of times. What happened is that a partnership was created that debates how we should help the industry to grow rather than whether it should grow and whether that is important. It needs to grow carefully and sustainably, and the partnership helps that to happen.

From a wider food and drink point of view, we rejected the idea of creating a single body that would spearhead growth and do it all. We thought that we would lose three to five years of our lives debating structures, pension liabilities and all sorts. Instead, we wanted a partnership to be formed in which each individual party would have a specific role that would be built around an agreed objective and opportunity. That is the opportunity in aquaculture, which will involve

creating a forum where people can talk about difficult stuff such as gill disease and lice in a way that is based on a desire to fix issues so that there is a stronger platform on which to grow.

**The Convener:** I think that we have got through all the questions, but I am looking around the committee members to check.

**John Finnie:** I thought that you were soliciting a question.

Anyone listening in on the meeting would think that you were obsessed with growth, as you keep repeating the word. Surely, when there are challenges, what you want to do is consolidate and make good. Is enough not enough? What is the obsession with growth?

**James Withers:** I am obsessed with growth. I confess to being a signed-up obsessive because, through growth, we add value and jobs—

**John Finnie:** When does that stop?

**James Withers:** It stops if there is environmental damage or if undue pressure is being put on communities or social structures. There are both regulatory and natural limits. In this sector and elsewhere, I see growing demand and an opportunity for Scotland to tap into that demand. The natural protection that is built in is that we will only grow and tap into the demand if we have all the environmental safeguards that we have talked about.

**Elaine Jamieson:** One thing that we have not touched on that is of key interest to me is community sustainability and community development across the rural economy. We are talking about one of the distinct regional opportunities for the Scottish economy at the moment. That opportunity is driven by demand and by all the work that has been done by the industry and those of us who support it. We should not underestimate what the sector does for the social fabric of Scotland, particularly in our rural economies. I welcome the opportunity to take that into the debate. What might not necessarily be apparent is the valuable contribution that the very existence of such businesses in our rural economy, with the increased investment, the innovation and the higher-quality jobs that they provide, brings to the social fabric of Scotland. The issue is not about growth; it is about inclusive growth and the sustainability of our communities.

I will pick out and give you a peppering of a few random and probably disconnected examples. In the food and drink sector, salaries sit at around the minimum and living wage level. That is a challenge that James Withers and I, along with our colleagues in the food and drink partnership, are working hard to address.

**John Finnie:** Elaine, can I stop you there? We have had growth in everything except terms and conditions for the people who deliver it. How is that a challenge? That should be a given.

**Elaine Jamieson:** I was about to say that, in aquaculture, we see significant growth in the quality of employment opportunities and the career pathways that people have. We also see that in the communities in which they live. Growth is much more than just business growth; it has an effect on the rural economy and the people who live in those communities.

**John Finnie:** For the avoidance of doubt, Highlands and Islands Enterprise is committed to growing the wages and improving the terms and conditions of workers in the aquaculture sector. Is that what you are saying?

**Elaine Jamieson:** We are committed to that for all sectors, but aquaculture is a sector where we see success.

**John Finnie:** That is reassuring. We can work together on that.

**The Convener:** That is a point of consensus on which we will end that line of questioning.

We have come to the end of our questions, so I thank James Withers, Elaine Jamieson and Heather Jones for coming to the meeting today and giving evidence. It has been an interesting session, and I thank them for their time.

*Meeting closed at 11:44.*

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