



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Public Petitions Committee

**Thursday 5 December 2019**

**Session 5**



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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**PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE**

**21<sup>st</sup> Meeting 2019, Session 5**

**CONVENER**

\*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

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

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con)

\*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

\*Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Lynn Russell

**LOCATION**

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)



# Scottish Parliament

## Public Petitions Committee

Thursday 5 December 2019

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:19]*

### New Petitions

#### Rail Fares (Pricing) (PE1760)

**The Convener (Johann Lamont):** Good morning. I welcome everyone to the 21st meeting in 2019 of the Public Petitions Committee. Agenda item 1 is the consideration of new petitions.

The first new petition for consideration is PE1760, on clear pricing for train fares, which was lodged by George Eckton. The petition calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that a requirement of future rail contracts is that customers, as a matter of course, be given information on the cheapest possible fare. The petitioner has found that passengers can sometimes save money by purchasing split tickets, which are multiple tickets to cover a journey, rather than a single ticket. The journey involves the same route, taken at the same time, but the cost is different.

The petitioner states that, when passengers purchase a ticket at a staffed ticket office, the knowledge of those staff helps them to buy split tickets. However, when passengers purchase tickets online, via the app or at a ticket machine, they are not given that option and, therefore, are not informed of the cheapest possible way to make their journey. Since the papers for the meeting were published, the petitioner has emailed, suggesting that the committee write to the Office of Rail and Road to seek its views on the petition.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

**Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP):** I have a lot of sympathy with the petition. I come from an area that has a lot of railway stations that do not have ticket offices, and, therefore, a lot of people buy their tickets online. I see no reason why the process should not be the same as when we buy a ticket from an attendant. We should pursue the matter and write to the Government and ORR, as the petitioner has asked us to.

**Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con):** I agree—absolutely.

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** It is another straightforward information technology

issue. The technology is available to make the process simple, but, for some reason, we are not adopting it. I am with the rest of the committee members. We need to write to the Scottish Government, asking why that is not being done.

**The Convener:** I wonder whether it is partly IT-related and partly down to a weird pricing policy. I remember going up to Inverness, and the guy behind the counter said, “Well, of course, if you get a ticket to Perth and then a ticket to Inverness, you’ll save a lot of money.” The staff knew that, so I went off with a fistful of tickets. That is not about IT; that is about an odd pricing system. We could flag that issue up as well.

**Maurice Corry:** I see from our papers that Alex Hynes, or one of the other senior directors of ScotRail, said that he had discovered that there was a variation.

Railways on the continent, on which I travel a lot, have a basic fare. People know what the cheapest fare is, wherever they are. They have that option. The fare is so reasonable that, for example, there is little difference between first class and second class. SNCF and other railways, such as those in Italy, have cracked it. We should dig into that one.

**The Convener:** We agree to write to the Scottish Government and to the key stakeholders: the Rail Delivery Group, Transport Focus, the Advertising Standards Authority—because there is an issue about the transparency and honesty of the ticketing policy—and, as the petitioner suggests, the Office of Rail and Road.

**Gail Ross:** We should also write to Abellio ScotRail.

**The Convener:** Okay. That is straightforward. It is an interesting issue and the petitioner has provided us with a lot of useful information.

Is that agreed?

**Members indicated agreement.**

#### Grouse Moors (Killing of Wildlife) (PE1762)

**The Convener:** The next new petition for consideration is PE1762, on ending the killing of wildlife on grouse moors and elsewhere in Scotland, which was lodged by Libby Anderson and Bob Elliot on behalf of OneKind. The petition calls for a full review of the animal welfare impacts of the use of traps and snares on grouse moors and elsewhere in Scotland.

Our briefing paper for this petition explains that trapping and snaring can be legally undertaken in Scotland for the control of some types of wildlife. The use of traps and snares is subject to legal restrictions, which are designed to prevent harm to non-target wildlife.

Trapping and snaring crime is not shown as part of recorded crime statistics, because offence data cannot be broken down to that level, but the "Wildlife Crime in Scotland 2017 Annual Report" sets out Police Scotland disaggregated offence data showing that 15 illegal trapping and snaring offences were recorded for 2016-17. However, it is recognised by the Scottish Government and Police Scotland that there are challenges in detecting wildlife crime and that that figure might be just the tip of the iceberg.

In 2017, the Scottish Government set up an independent group to consider the environmental impact of grouse moors. A report is expected in the coming weeks, and the Scottish Government committed, in the 2019-20 programme for government, to responding to the group's recommendations.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

**Gail Ross:** There might be some reference to the matter in the Werritty report, which the Government is now in receipt of. I have huge sympathy with the intention behind the petition. I know that the use of legal snaring has gone down since tougher regulations were introduced. I have a personal opinion on its use, but that is not appropriate for here.

The Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee is doing quite a lot of work on the matter, and I wonder what other members think about passing the petition on to that committee.

**Brian Whittle:** I think that the Government is already considering some legislation and reporting on the matter. It is already quite far down the line with that. It would be interesting to get the ECCLR Committee's view on the petition before we pass it on. I think that it will end up with the ECCLR Committee ultimately, but we could probably seek its views in the first instance.

**The Convener:** There is clearly an issue here. It looks as though the Scottish Government is doing a lot of work on the matter and is going to report. If we got an update from the Government, we might find that the work is being done. We would have an option to pass the petition on, or we could simply recognise that the work is being done and close the petition. We could take the opportunity to see what is happening first.

**Maurice Corry:** Is there not also a petition about raptors? There is a correlation here.

**Brian Whittle:** There are several of them.

**The Convener:** Over the years, there have been a number of petitions on animal welfare and safety, and there is a long-term debate about hunting and shooting and about whether the

practices are acceptable or justified. That is where the political argument lies.

**Maurice Corry:** Absolutely.

**Gail Ross:** We could write to the Government, asking it what it is doing over and above the recommendations in the Werritty review. That review concerns only grouse moors, but snaring and trapping are used by farmers, land managers and other people, including gamekeepers, outwith grouse moors.

**Maurice Corry:** We may wish to speak to Scottish Land & Estates and the Scottish Gamekeepers Association.

**The Convener:** We will first write to the Scottish Government. It may be that a discussion is going on, which we would not need to replicate through further correspondence. We can then reflect on what the Scottish Government says. Is that agreed?

**Members indicated agreement.**

### **Freedom of Information Legislation (Scottish Police Federation) (PE1763)**

**The Convener:** The next new petition is PE1763, headed "Make the Scottish Police Federation comply with FOI legislation" and lodged by Robert Brown. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to make the Scottish Police Federation comply with the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002.

Our briefing explains that freedom of information requirements apply broadly to public authorities such as Governments, councils and health boards. Police Scotland is subject to the requirements of the 2002 act, but the Scottish Police Federation is not. As police officers are prohibited from joining trade unions, the Scottish Police Federation was created as a staff association with responsibility for the welfare and efficiency of police officers. Trade unions are not covered by freedom of information legislation.

It could be argued that the Scottish Police Federation is akin to a trade union and, therefore, should not be covered by freedom of information requirements. However, the Scottish Police Federation was established by legislation; therefore, it could be argued that it has some similarities with public bodies. The Police Federation of England and Wales is required to comply with freedom of information legislation as a result of changes to the law that were made in 2017. The Scottish Government stated in July 2019 that it had no plans to make the Scottish Police Federation subject to freedom of information legislation.

Elaine Smith, who has noted her support for the petition, says:

"I have realised that the Scottish Police Federation appear to be totally self-governing and do not conform to the standards set for England and Wales Federations".

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

09:30

**Brian Whittle:** The petition has real merit, especially given that England and Wales have already gone down the same route. However, the Scottish Government has indicated that it has no intention of changing its position. Frustrating as it may be to both the petitioner and the committee with regard to investigating the issue, I do not know that there is anything in particular that we can do to push the matter forward, given that we know where the Scottish Government stands.

**The Convener:** I do not think that trade unions should fall within the remit of, or be caught by, freedom of information legislation. The police are not allowed to have a trade union, and the only way that they can have a staff association is through legislation. Would it be fair if what is, in effect, a trade union for the police fell under different legislation from that which applies to other trade unions?

The SPF is a unique organisation. However, given that I perceive the organisation as a trade union, I do not see why—unless I am arguing that all trade unions should be in the same position—it should be singled out. The police do not have any choice—they are not allowed, under different legislation, to set up a trade union.

**Brian Whittle:** The whole matter is really interesting following incidents down south, such as the plebgate scenario, that have brought the police there under the auspices of FOI legislation. Again, I go back to the fact that the Scottish Government has been quite firm in saying that it has no intention of moving down that route. I am, therefore, not quite sure what we can do with the petition.

**Maurice Corry:** It is a difficult one. The release of any information under FOI is entirely in the jurisdiction of the body that is being requested to release it, and there may be valid reasons why it cannot be released. There is some sort of parity. Perhaps we should go back and question the Scottish Government, just to double-check that it is still of the same view.

**The Convener:** The matter was not in the programme for government. The Government said what it said in July 2019, so we know what the answer is going to be. We would only be deferring our decision on whether we want to explore the

matter further. My feeling is that the case has not been made for why the SPF, as a quasi-trade union, should fall within the remit of FOI legislation, unless we are arguing that all trade unions should be subject to FOI—I would argue that they should not be. Why would we be inconsistent? There are particular circumstances that have led to the current position in England and Wales, but my sense is that there is not an issue in Scotland.

**Gail Ross:** I agree. The Government has made it quite clear what its policy is, and that is not going to change. I agree with Brian Whittle—as a committee, we cannot really take the petition forward.

**Maurice Corry:** I have not said that I disagree with that; I just wanted to play the devil's advocate, because the petition raises an issue that needs to be given serious thought. I understand the reasons why the SPF was set up.

**The Convener:** The petition highlights the difference between the circumstances in England and Wales and those in Scotland, and it gives us an opportunity to reflect on the situation. However, my sense is that there is no pressure for such a change in Scotland. It would require broader discussion about how a staff association inside the police should operate if it is not to operate like a trade union, and I do not think the case has been made for such a change.

My sense is that the committee agrees that we should close the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders, on the basis that the Scottish Government has confirmed very recently that it has no plans to make the Scottish Police Federation subject to freedom of information legislation. Do members agree?

**Members indicated agreement.**

## Primary School Curriculum (Evolutionary Studies) (PE1764)

**The Convener:** The next petition was lodged by James Robertson, on behalf of Families in Support of Evolutionary Studies, and it calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to add evolutionary studies to the primary school curriculum. As our briefing for the petition explains, very little of the school curriculum is statutory in Scotland. The non-statutory curriculum for excellence is intended to be an outcomes-based approach whereby education authorities and schools have a great deal of autonomy on what is taught and how.

Religious instruction and observance have a statutory position within Scottish education under sections 8 and 9 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. Section 8 provides that, where it has been

the custom for schools to have religious instruction and observance, an education authority may not discontinue that without such a proposal having been confirmed by a local referendum. Section 9 is titled "Conscience clause" and provides that

"any pupil may be withdrawn by his parents from any instruction in religious subjects and from any religious observance in any"

public or grant aided

"school."

In curriculum for excellence, one of the headings under which experiences and outcomes in sciences are organised is "biological systems", which has a sub-heading of "inheritance". The following benchmarks are relevant to these experiences and outcomes:

"Knows that genetic information determines characteristics such as colour of eyes and shape of petals."

"Knows that genetics is the study of inherited characteristics and that inherited characteristics are carried on genes and can sometime skip a generation."

In response to a written question in 2013, Alasdair Allan MSP, then Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages, advised:

"Evolution is specifically covered in the experiences and outcomes for the sciences that form a core element of the Curriculum for Excellence".—[*Written Answers*, 29 October 2013; S4W-17514.]

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

**Brian Whittle:** For me, the question is whether we are crossing a boundary and dictating to headteachers what they have to include in their day-to-day curriculum. As you said in your summary, there is a great deal of autonomy for schools, so I am struggling with the idea of a diktat that says, "You must teach evolution."

**Gail Ross:** The opposite view is that we already mandate things for teachers. We have our one-plus-two approach to languages; we have our STEM—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—emphasis; we have religious and moral education; and we have two hours of PE a week. We already lay down a lot of things that offer a basic curriculum, and then things are added on top. It is perfectly reasonable for us to write to the Scottish Government and get an overview of what is already being taught in schools and how that fits in with what the petitioner is calling for.

**Maurice Corry:** I agree. From my experience of my own children in local schools, the religious studies teachers have been very broad-minded and have included this issue. I know from discussions with my kids that the subject is not just about faith but is about non-faith aspects and about living a good life. We should see what the

Scottish Government will say about adding something to the prescription about what a teacher teaches. We should not try to dictate because, after all, these are professional people. One tends to find that religious studies and philosophy are linked and this may be something that can be added in. It is about tweaking, if anything.

**The Convener:** It seems to me that the argument is between those who say that the theory of evolution is scientifically based and therefore should be taught as what happened, and those who want to teach creationism. That is where the conflict is. I am assuming that the campaign for this kind of education is saying that evolution is not just another form of belief but is evidence based. The petitioners' argument is that it should be at the core of the curriculum. That is something that people are going to argue about, particularly folk of particular faiths who have different beliefs about how the world was created. The argument here is, in the meantime, whether the theory of evolution should be taught as part of science.

**Gail Ross:** However, there are atheists who send their children to school and absolutely do not believe in creationism, but there are still schools that teach it as historical fact, which is not right. That is the opposite end of the scale for both options.

**The Convener:** I think that the campaign is about trying to bring the issue into the public domain and have that discussion—to say that, although people may have come to believe certain things, there is a scientific view of what is the case. I assume that the campaign wants that scientific view to be located in the curriculum as of right.

**Gail Ross:** It opens up a conversation about the secular aspect of our education system and how we go forward as we become a more secular society. There is a place for religion and for evolutionary studies and it is about how we get the right balance. We should write to the Government in the first instance.

**The Convener:** Do we agree to write to the Scottish Government to seek its views on how it would be managed if the Government acted in the terms asked for in the petition? That would at least give us an understanding of where the Government was coming from. Are we agreed?

**Members indicated agreement.**

## **Public Office (Accountability) (PE1765)**

**The Convener:** PE1765, which has been lodged by Fiona McBride, is on making those in Scottish public office accountable. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish



Government to ensure that effective measures are introduced to secure the accountability of all MSPs and Scottish Government agencies for misuse and abuse of both parliamentary privilege and conferred authority assigned to individuals in positions of trust.

Our briefing for the petition states that politicians and public servants are subject to the law and that MSPs and those in public life are bound by specific codes of conduct as outlined in the paper. It also explains that parliamentary privilege grants certain legal immunities for MSPs. In the Scottish Parliament, any privilege is conferred by or under the Scotland Act 1998. Section 41 provides that, for the purposes of the law of defamation, any statement made in “proceedings of the Parliament” and the publication under the authority of the Parliament of any statement is absolutely privileged. That means that such statements cannot form the basis of a defamation action. Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

**Maurice Corry:** All those codes of conduct are in place and I do not think that we can improve on that. They are there, we are answerable, we have signed the documents and so on and the situation is perfectly clear. I propose that we should close the petition.

**Brian Whittle:** I am interested in the fact that I have parliamentary privilege. I did not know that, so there you go.

**The Convener:** We can exempt you.

**Brian Whittle:** I do not feel privileged at all. I think that we should write to the Scottish Government and the Commissioner for Standards in Public Life in Scotland and take a view on the matter. I understand where Maurice Corry is coming from—I cannot see there being much change—but we should at least take a view.

**The Convener:** I am not sure what the petitioners want. Is it that people are doing bad things and there is not enough protection in the system against that? Clearly, there are breaches of the codes, but the codes exist and the issue is what happens as a consequence.

**Gail Ross:** I understood the petition to be looking for some sort of recompense for people who have been affected by bad legislation and decision making, as well. There is a bit about that at the end of the petition. Something like that goes way beyond our personal code of conduct.

**The Convener:** You are talking about a compensation scheme in which individual decision makers such as MSPs or others would be fined if, as a consequence of their decisions, legislation had an impact on people. However, there would surely have to be a link with the purpose.

Someone might support a decision based on advice that it was the right thing to do and they might have tested the argument, but unforeseen consequences might then transpire. The idea seems very unwieldy. There are all sorts of things that can be done but, ultimately, when Governments get things wrong, the electorate can have their say. That is the ultimate punishment.

09:45

**Maurice Corry:** There are checks and balances.

**Gail Ross:** The process would need to relate to legislation, but proving Government wrongdoing would probably be quite a subjective matter in a lot of areas.

**The Convener:** Yes, although I would not test that argument in here. *[Laughter.]*

**Brian Whittle:** What Gail Ross says is true in just about every area.

**Gail Ross:** The issue is who would make those decisions.

**The Convener:** The question for us is whether we want to explore with the Scottish Government and the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland whether the proposal is even feasible. We are not making light of the issues. We recognise that there are issues about probity, the thoughtfulness with which decision makers make decisions and the responsibility that is on them when the consequences are borne by other people. The issue is whether we think that there needs to be a change and, if so, whether we know what that change would look like. The question is whether we can usefully do something on the issue.

**Maurice Corry:** To follow on from my earlier point, if we are writing to the Scottish Government, perhaps we should check out the robustness of the current regulations and the operation of the codes.

**The Convener:** One person might think that a piece of legislation is fabulous because it has helped them, but somebody else might think that it is terrible because it has had consequences for them. The decision makers might realise that their decision will have consequences for certain people, but they might still think that it is the right thing to do. Examples of that include decisions that have been made in the past on health. Decisions on public policies might have an impact on whether a particular industry can continue. It is complex.

**Brian Whittle:** We would be opening cans of worms all over the place.

**Gail Ross:** Given all the stages that a bill goes through, including taking evidence in committee, the amendments that are made at stages 2 and 3 and then the debate in the chamber, as well as post-legislative scrutiny, the current system is pretty robust.

**The Convener:** The petition is not just about legislation; it is about what members can say in Parliament. We are not very clear about that issue.

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** We should ask the Scottish Government and the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life for their views on whether we can take the matter any further. We can decide what to do when the responses come back.

**The Convener:** Fair enough. Do members agree to write to the Scottish Government and the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life, asking for their views on the action that is called for in the petition, including on the practicalities of fines and so on?

**Members indicated agreement.**

## Continued Petitions

### Residential Care (Severely Learning-disabled People) (PE1545)

09:48

**The Convener:** The next agenda item is consideration of continued petitions. The first continued petition is PE1545, on residential care provision for the severely learning disabled. I welcome Jackie Baillie MSP, who is attending for consideration of the petition, which was lodged by Ann Maxwell on behalf of the Muir Maxwell Trust.

When the committee considered the petition previously, which was in June 2019, we took evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport. The cabinet secretary offered to meet the petitioner to discuss the concerns that are raised in her petition and made a commitment to support research that establishes the level of need for those with profound learning difficulties. Following the meeting, the committee agreed to write to the cabinet secretary to ascertain how that work would be progressed and whether any plans had been made to meet the petitioner.

The clerk's note summarises the responses from the cabinet secretary and the petitioner. The responses seem to show some discrepancy between answers that were provided to the petitioner during the meeting with the cabinet secretary and the written response that we received. Specifically, there were opposing answers on whether research into the needs of children and young people with profound learning disabilities will be undertaken and whether the remit of the joint commissioner and provider event that was planned for the autumn was to include residential services with supporting medical care.

Before I ask members for comments or suggestions for action, it might be useful for Jackie Baillie to contribute.

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** Thank you very much, convener. I am here not because I know the petitioner but because I am the convener of the cross-party group on learning disability. I undertook a freedom of information request to NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to find out how many delayed discharges had occurred, particularly those involving people with complex learning difficulties. Although such delayed discharges are small in number, the delays are for a significant time—in one case, I think that it was two and a half years. Primarily, that is because it is very difficult for many social work departments to fund and source the packages that are required for people with very complex learning disabilities. There is an absolute need to ensure that people

with learning disabilities do not end up with delayed discharges, because being in hospital is not appropriate care for them.

I have considerable sympathy with the petition because, although Dr MacDonald's report is very important in ensuring that people with complex learning disabilities are brought back home, I do not think that the report covers residential services. Residential provision, alongside medical assistance, is essential, and there is a gap in the market for that.

**The Convener:** My sense from the questions that we posed to the cabinet secretary was that we do not even know the numbers. She agreed that that information would be found, but we need to be confident that that work has happened.

There is a debate about whether the report that is being undertaken by Dr Anne MacDonald covers residential services. It is almost as though the Scottish Government is answering a question that it has not been asked and not answering the question that it has been asked, which is frustrating. I had not been aware of the issue with people remaining in acute services.

From the petitioner's argument, we got the sense that there is resistance to the idea of residential care for people with learning disabilities. The policy has shifted and people should be supported in their community but, as a consequence, there is a resistance to providing residential care even when that might best serve someone's needs, and a sense that that service should not be developed at all.

**Brian Whittle:** When the petition first came in front of us, it looked fairly straightforward. It was about delivering the best care for patients, and everyone agreed that that seemed to be a very reasonable request. Having cross-examined the cabinet secretary when she was here, I would be interested to find out whether the actions that she agreed to take have been taken. As Jackie Baillie said, it is quite worrying that FOI requests have to be undertaken to find out the numbers. We should be able to easily access such statistics, and they should be understood by any health board.

For me, the petition has grown and grown to become a much bigger petition than I initially thought that it would be. I definitely think that we need to recheck what the cabinet secretary agreed to do and whether that has been done. We should also write to the Government about whether the work to gather data has been undertaken.

**The Convener:** We will write to the cabinet secretary to follow up on the commitments that she made to the committee that work would be undertaken on residential services and supported medical care. She also said that work would be done to establish the numbers of people in this

group and whether their needs are being met. Do we agree to write to the cabinet secretary?

**Members indicated agreement.**

### Ship-to-ship Oil Transfers (PE1637)

**The Convener:** The next continued petition is PE1637, on ship-to-ship oil transfers and trust port accountability. The petition was lodged by Greg Fullarton on behalf of Cromarty Rising.

At our previous consideration of the petition, in June this year, we noted a number of continued concerns that the petitioner had raised, including about the accountability and governance arrangements of trust ports. The committee agreed to invite the Scottish Government to respond to those concerns and to outline what conversations it has had with the United Kingdom Government on the issues that the petition raises. Written responses from the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands and the petitioner are included in our papers.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

**Gail Ross:** The petition relates to my constituency. I declare an interest: I supported no ship-to-ship oil transfers when there was a live protest.

The petitioner says in his submission:

"there is no-one to appeal to ... Scottish Trust Ports are public assets, yet there is no public accountability."

That is absolutely right.

I have been approached about the issue. We should get the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands in to give evidence. We need to put the issue to him and hear from him face to face.

**The Convener:** Should the focus of that oral evidence session be on the question of the accountability of trusts? The Government has answered the question about the conflict between reserved and devolved matters, but something else behind that has emerged. The safety of the environment is an important issue, but the point is that the trusts can make decisions without being accountable. Do you want to focus on that?

**Gail Ross:** Yes.

**Brian Whittle:** I agree with that. The petition comes under the auspices of accountability—or the lack of it in this instance. That is what the issue has evolved into. Trying to find somebody who is accountable for decisions is often an issue, so I agree with Gail Ross that that should be the direction of travel. Questioning the minister about that would be the appropriate way forward.

**The Convener:** Do members agree?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** We will invite the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands to give oral evidence at a future meeting, with a particular focus on the question of trust accountability.

### **Hidradenitis Suppurativa (Specialist Support) (PE1682)**

**The Convener:** The next continued petition is PE1682, by James Jamieson, on access to specialist support for hidradenitis suppurativa sufferers in Scotland.

At the previous consideration of the petition, in June 2019, the committee agreed to write to national health service boards, asking what procedures are in place to identify the services that are required by HS patients and how those services are delivered. The responses that we have received are summarised in the clerk's note.

The committee also agreed to ask the Scottish Government to include information on HS on the dermatology patient management pathways website and mobile app. The Scottish Government has confirmed that HS is to be included on that website and that app, and it has outlined the process that is currently under way to achieve that.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

**Brian Whittle:** It might be interesting to write to NHS England, which takes a different approach. It would be interesting to find out how successful that approach has been in treating the condition. I would be interested in that feedback.

**The Convener:** I was quite struck by the petitioner's response. Rona Mackay and I met him, and I got an understanding of the consequences of the condition and the extent to which he feels that people who deal with him do not really understand it because it is not a common condition or a mainstream one in the health service. His view is that the Scottish Government is waiting for clinicians to act rather than saying that it wants them to look at the matter further. He also feels that peer support is important in enabling people to understand the condition properly and that there is a need for specialist HS clinics. There is some support for those views in the responses from the health boards.

Perhaps the committee could write to NHS England and also ask the Scottish Government to respond to what the petitioner has said.

10:00

**Gail Ross:** I agree with those good suggestions.

**The Convener:** If members are agreed, we will continue the petition and will seek that information.

**Members indicated agreement.**

### **Hepatitis C (Treatment Targets) (PE1689)**

**The Convener:** The next continued petition for consideration is PE1689, on hepatitis C treatment targets in Scotland, which was lodged by Jim Clark.

At our last consideration of the petition, in June of this year, we agreed to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport about the Scottish Government's commitment to eliminate hepatitis C as quickly as possible. A response has been received, which outlines that the Scottish Government is working with Health Protection Scotland and NHS boards

"to agree treatment targets which will see Scotland reach elimination well in advance of the World Health Organisation target of 2030".

The submission goes on to state that the latest figures for 2018-19 show that that year's target of 2,000 treatments was exceeded by more than 600.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

**Brian Whittle:** The petitioner has highlighted an issue that committee members were probably not especially aware of; in that way, his petition has already succeeded. He is asking for between 2,500 and 3,000 treatments, which are already happening. I welcome the way in which the petitioner has gone about the business of bringing the issue to our attention—we should thank him for it—but what he has asked for is already being achieved.

**Gail Ross:** I agree. I say, "Well done" to the petitioner.

**Maurice Corry:** I agree.

**The Convener:** I suggest that the committee ask the Scottish Government to be vigilant about one aspect of that success, which is that it has been underpinned by the cost of individual treatments reducing. Because the target was around numbers, extra money had been provided but, rather than that money being used to give extra treatments it was used for other things. Clearly, there has been a shift back if more than the target number of treatments has been achieved. However, the reason for that was that the costs were reducing. I am concerned that there might be an opportunity cost—which, in some ways, could be seen as a loss—because the

Government stuck rigidly to its target. Nevertheless, the evidence now suggests that the position has shifted again, because the Government has achieved more than its target.

If the committee were to close the petition, we could write to the Scottish Government, highlighting the importance that we place on the potential for eliminating the disease well ahead of the 2030 target but stressing the aspect of the cost of the treatments having reduced.

Do members agree to close the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders, on the basis that the Scottish Government has exceeded its treatment targets for 2019-20 and is working to agree treatment targets to eliminate hepatitis C in advance of the World Health Organization target date of 2030?

As has already been suggested, perhaps the committee could also thank the petitioner for engaging with us and raising an issue on which there needs to be continued vigilance. I have no doubt that, if the petitioner were to have continuing concerns, he would be able to bring back the petition a year after its closure.

**Members indicated agreement.**

### **Independent Water Ombudsman (PE1693)**

**The Convener:** The next continued petition for consideration is PE1693, on the establishment of an independent water ombudsman, which was lodged by Graeme Harvey on behalf of the Lowland Canals Association.

The committee last considered the petition on 6 June 2019, when it took evidence from Scottish Canals. Following that evidence session, the committee agreed to write to Scottish Canals, seeking further information on critical repairs, a new advisory group and governance for the appointment of a chair.

A response has now been received from Scottish Canals, as well as a further submission from the petitioner and a submission from Therese Stewart. The clerk's note for the committee summarises both responses. In relation to the new advisory group, Scottish Waterways for All, it notes that membership was extended to include, among others, the Lowland Canals Association, which raised the petition.

The petitioner believes that the group should provide a useful forum where the concerns of users can be considered and matters of policy can be discussed. However, the petitioner notes that, because three members of Scottish Canals staff are on the management committee, it cannot function as an independent ombudsman.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

**Brian Whittle:** It is obvious that the relationships have improved greatly since we received the petition. It is noted by Graeme Harvey that the new chief executive officer, Catherine Topley, has instigated much better communication and co-operation pathways. We have to accept that.

The big concern for me is the £70 million backlog of work that needs to be done. I am not quite sure how that will be done.

I also note that the Scottish Government is fairly adamant that it does not support the action that is called for in the petition. I suggest that the petitioner has been partly successful in achieving what they were looking for but that the setting up of an independent ombudsman, which is the ultimate goal, is not going to happen. The Government is fairly adamant about that.

The committee has done a good job of bringing the two sides together, and the communication and dialogue have improved relationships, but I am not sure that we can go any further with the petition.

**The Convener:** I was struck by the extent to which the tourism strategy talks about developing properties around canals. People are gravely concerned about that, because the focus is not then on the canals. I was concerned that, in the asset management strategy of June 2018, the priority order for investment was, first, the "Avoidance of Catastrophic Failure"—who could argue with that?—with

"Protecting Staff and Visitor Safety"

coming before

"Operability and Functionality of Canals".

My concern—this is suggested by the petitioners—is that the business plan is diversified in such a way that the core purpose of looking after the waterways has been downgraded to the backdrop of the tourism asset. That question remains unresolved.

I agree with Brian Whittle that we should close the petition. I have no doubt whatsoever that the petitioners will keep a close eye on the effectiveness of Scottish Waterways and will continue to press it on the maintenance of the network.

I was also concerned about the evidence that we got from someone who talked about antisocial behaviour and the canals being places where people could hold events. There is quite a lot around the petition, and I am not sure that the answer to the questions would be an independent water ombudsman. However, if we are going to

close the petition, we might want to flag up our ongoing concerns to the Scottish Government.

**Jackie Baillie:** I wonder whether I can take advantage of the fact that you are considering the petition. Scottish Canals has assets in the canals, and it has properties that it rents out. I am dealing with a case for two constituents who are now leaving their Scottish Canals property because of the sub-standard state that it has been in for almost a decade. There is no oversight of that.

I have considerable sympathy with the petition, but, if the committee is going to write to the minister in wider terms, I hope that you will consider including looking at whether Scottish Canals' properties are below a tolerable standard and fit to be let. I would not want a Government agency to be letting out the kind of property that I see my constituents living in.

**The Convener:** We can write to the Scottish Government, identifying a series of issues. What Jackie Baillie is talking about could almost be the subject of a separate petition—not that I want to encourage people to create more work for the committee. We can flag up that that point was made in our report of the meeting.

We are agreeing to close the petition. There are a lot of issues around the petition, but there is a sense from the petitioner that there has been some movement, and a body has been set up. We hope that it will be effective, but, if there are further concerns a year on, the petitioner might want to reflect on that. Are we agreed?

**Members indicated agreement.**

### **Soul and Conscience Letters (PE1712)**

**The Convener:** The next continued petition is PE1712, on soul and conscience letters, which was lodged by Laura Hunter. We last considered the petition in June this year, when we noted the written submission that was received from the Law Society of Scotland. It stated:

"There could be better information made available ... to the medical profession about what information is required in a S and C certificate."

We agreed to seek the British Medical Association Scotland's views on that suggestion. The response, which is included in our papers, highlights that no concerns have been raised with the BMA about the quality of soul and conscience guidance.

However, the BMA said that providing improved guidance could

"help ease the pressure on a GPs time and make the task both simpler and more straightforward"

and would not be "overburdensome or unduly bureaucratic". The BMA Scotland would support the development of such guidance.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

**Gail Ross:** We should put what the BMA said to the Scottish Government and ask whether it is considering updating the guidance.

**The Convener:** It is important that general practitioners know what is included in the letters. The underlying issue is that the petitioner feels that people can avoid justice, going to court and being held accountable for what they have done because they have a letter. The implication is that it is easy to get a letter.

You are quite right that, in writing to the Scottish Government, we should ask about improved guidance and say that we hope that any improved guidance would address the issue as the petitioner perceives it, which is that the letters are a way of avoiding going to court and can be easily elicited from a doctor. GPs might not understand the significance of the letters—it is not like getting a note from your mother to say that you are not well enough for physical education class. What comes across strongly from the petition is not so much the feeling that GPs do not know what to do, but that they possibly do not recognise the significance of the impact of their agreeing to write such letters. If we could write to the Scottish Government in those terms, that would be good. Are we all agreed?

**Members indicated agreement.**

### **Natural Flood Alleviation Strategy (PE1720)**

**The Convener:** The next continued petition is PE1720, on a natural flood alleviation strategy for Scotland, which was lodged by Les Wallace. It calls on the Scottish Government to develop a natural flood alleviation strategy under the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009.

The petition was last considered in June, when the committee agreed to write to the Government and other key stakeholders. The clerk's note summarises the responses that have been received since that meeting. The submissions outline the current situation regarding natural flood alleviation in Scotland and what would be required for more schemes to be put in place.

A number of submissions highlight the importance of natural flood management as part of a range of measures. In its submission, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency states that the 2009 act and the Government's supporting guidance on delivering sustainable flood risk management emphasise the importance

of NFM as part of a range of measures in sustainable flood risk management. It also states that SEPA will publish its national flooding strategy in 2020, which

“will further reinforce the importance of working with natural processes.”

However, neither SEPA nor the Government support a separate NFM strategy.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

**Brian Whittle:** This is another petition that the Government has strongly indicated that it will not support, and it will not move from that position. Given that position, the ultimate aim of the petition will not be achieved, no matter what we do next. We have little option but to close the petition. However, in doing so, I wonder whether we can write to the Government again to highlight the petitioner’s concerns. I do not know where else we can go with it.

**The Convener:** I suppose that the issue is whether there should be a separate NFM strategy or whether we accept that the Government already includes it in the work that it is doing and that it does not want it to be the subject of a separate strategy. I am persuaded by the argument made that the Government and others are taking these things into account and that they have a broader strategy to deal with the difficult issue of flooding.

10:15

**Gail Ross:** We have received responses from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, NFU Scotland, SLE, Scottish Natural Heritage and others. All have told us that a flood alleviation strategy or plan is part of the wider work. They note that it is not a solution on its own but that it has been incorporated in work that is already being done. I think that that is our answer.

**Maurice Corry:** I agree. It is part of the wider work. I do not think that it stands separately.

**The Convener:** Do we agree to close the petition, then?

**Gail Ross:** Yes. I do not think that we can take it any further.

**The Convener:** We agree to close the petition under rule 15.7 of the standing orders on the basis that the Government does not support the production of a separate natural flood alleviation strategy. It has been clear in its evidence that it sees the matter in the context of its broader strategy on flood management, and SEPA is developing a flooding strategy to be published in 2020.

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** We thank the petitioner for his work in lodging the petition and the information that he has provided. If, after a year, he feels that there has been no progress on the matter, he may wish to submit a further petition. We thank him for his involvement.

## National Tourism Strategy (PE1721)

**The Convener:** The final continued petition on today’s agenda is PE1721, which is on the national tourism strategy for Scotland and the role of the National Trust for Scotland. Jackie Baillie is again present for our consideration of the petition.

The petition, which was lodged by John Hanks on behalf of Friends of Geilston, calls on the Scottish Government to meet the National Trust for Scotland to discuss the role that the NTS can play in the context of the national tourism strategy—tourism Scotland 2020—and, within that, the future of any NTS property that is under threat of closure, such as Geilston garden, near Cardross.

When the committee previously considered the petition in June, it agreed to write to the Scottish Government, the NTS, VisitScotland, the Scottish Tourism Alliance and the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee at Westminster. The clerk’s note summarises the responses that have been received. The submissions outline the ways in which the National Trust for Scotland is involved in the national tourism strategy, both as a member of the Scottish Tourism Alliance and as a key member of the heritage tourism group, which is the asset group for the heritage pillar of the strategy. The Scottish Government states in its submission that the National Trust for Scotland is an independent charity and that, as such, management of its properties is a matter for it and its board.

Since the meeting papers were published, the committee has received a submission from the petitioner, which has been provided in hard copy to members this morning.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action? It might be useful if I again ask Jackie Baillie to make some comments to inform our thinking.

**Jackie Baillie:** I am always happy to be useful to the committee, convener. Geilston garden is in my constituency, and I note that we have been joined by the petitioners in the public gallery, which demonstrates their continuing interest in the subject.

I was struck by the fact that it was a select committee in another place—the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee—that noted the importance of gardens to our tourism offer, not just

in Scotland but across the UK. I have no doubt that the National Trust for Scotland will be involved in discussions, meetings and working groups on the national tourism strategy, but it appears to be taking decisions in relation to its assets in isolation and without regard to the strategy, because it has considered the closure of Geilston garden.

The petitioners are concerned that decisions on the garden may be based on flawed data. I am using Geilston as an example, but it could apply to any other garden in the ownership of the NTS. It has underestimated the visitor numbers for Geilston, where there has, in fact, been a 20 per cent rise, but you would not know that to look at the paperwork from the NTS.

**The Convener:** I remind you that the petition is not about Geilston gardens.

**Jackie Baillie:** I know that, but I am using it as an example because it demonstrates what can happen with NTS-owned assets.

No attempt has been made to count the number of NTS members visiting those gardens—or, potentially, any gardens—or their contribution. They are not just local assets; most gardens are a wider asset. Geilston is a west of Scotland asset and others are probably a national asset.

Committee members will recall that the NTS commissioned a report from Ekos on options for the future, which I was happy to supply to the committee. The NTS has since indicated that it wants to do an enabling development and that it will review the decision in a year. That is welcome, but it is an incredibly short timescale, and more time may be needed because of planning issues.

However, Geilston is an example of what is happening and its closure is not necessarily the only thing that the NTS will do. It has pointed out that it spent about £98 million on conservation work in 2018-19, but that it has a backlog of repairs across portfolios of £46 million. Given that backlog, people are naturally worried that the NTS will consider the disposal of more assets; it would be a mistake for it not to realise the assets that gardens represent for its tourism strategy.

I respectfully ask the convener to keep the petition open. It would be useful to know about the progress made by the NTS in relation Geilston as an indication of any wider issues with the gardens in its portfolio and to understand the timetable and the steps that it intends to take in relation to those gardens. I also ask her to write to the Scottish Government to ask it to consider the importance of gardens to tourism, because I am not sure that we have captured that.

**Brian Whittle:** I have a lot of sympathy for the petition. It is not just about Geilston, as the convener rightly pointed out. We can probably all

highlight similar issues in our constituencies. In Ayrshire, some of the gardens have been downgraded. Those are public and community assets. I wonder what we can do with the petition, which I would definitely like to keep open. Should we highlight the recommendations of the DCMS Committee's report on garden design and tourism to the Scottish Government?

**The Convener:** The petition asks the Scottish Government to meet the National Trust for Scotland to discuss the role that it can play in the context of the national tourism strategy. That has been done. The committee cannot deal with a decision about an individual closure, so we need to ask ourselves a question. I understand that people who are campaigning to keep the gardens open will use whatever opportunities they can to make their case, but that is not what the petition asks us to do—and it would not be appropriate for the committee to do that.

The question is whether we end up in a place in which the petition has asked for one thing, but, when the motives behind that have become clear, we then start addressing those—a kind of petition creep, if I may be so bold. That is not to say that we do not support or recognise the concerns that people have about an individual asset, but a petition has to be on national issues, and that part of this petition has been addressed. Does the committee have a view?

**Brian Whittle:** That is why I was highlighting the fact that we should take it away from that specific local issue—I have exactly the same issues in my area. It would not be the first petition that has crept into other areas.

**The Convener:** We are, however, working towards it being the last that does so.

**Brian Whittle:** It depends. The petition raises important issues about such community assets—the whole outdoor learning thing, access to open space and so on. There is a bit of work to be done here.

**The Convener:** The Scottish Government will not make a decision about an NTS property. Therefore, when we write to it, we could write about the petitioner's view on the importance of gardens. That is not about what we think of that specific asset. I am open to the committee members' decision, but I want us to be clear about not misrepresenting to the petitioner—or to anyone else—what the committee can do in that regard, while recognising the petitioner's rights to campaign in the way that he thinks is appropriate to save a specific asset in his community.

**David Torrance:** The petitioner is calling for criteria that are being met by the Government, so there is nowhere for us to go but to close the petition. However, we should still write to the



Government to highlight the importance of the gardens to the tourist industry.

**Maurice Corry:** I know Geilston garden well. Along with Jackie Baillie, I have spoken about it before. I concur with a lot of what she says. I would like to keep the petition open. I declare an interest as a member of the National Trust for Scotland and because Geilston garden is in my region. Nevertheless, throughout Scotland, there are issues with the National Trust for Scotland in relation to keeping things going. At this stage, we should write to the Government to highlight the conclusions and recommendations of the DCMS Committee's report, mention that this is a general issue nationally and ask what the issues are. Then we can see how the Government comes back to us on those aspects.

**The Convener:** Let me be clear: the Government will not direct the NTS to keep anything open or to close anything. We cannot deal with a specific aspect of a particular decision, and the petition does not ask us to do that.

**Maurice Corry:** I am not suggesting that.

**The Convener:** If we were to agree to keep the petition open, all we would do is write to the Government highlighting the conclusions and recommendations of the DCMS Committee's report. That would not make any difference to an individual decision. It might do, but it will not address the fundamental point that people want to keep those gardens open. I do not have a view on that. It is entirely in their right to campaign for that. That is not what the petition asks for.

I am trying not to get bogged down in the detail of it. I am trying to be honest with the petitioner about what is in the committee's capacity to do. I do not want the petitioner to think that the committee writing to the Government would have any impact on an individual decision by NTS on a particular property.

**Maurice Corry:** I am not asking for that. I was just saying that the committee needs to highlight the report to the Government and get its feedback on it. As I said earlier, irrespective of Geilston, there are other issues, gardens and facilities. I think that only seven or eight NTS properties make a profit—lots of legacies and endowments are involved. We should not close the petition at this stage. We should get some reaction from the Government on the subject of gardens in Scotland.

**The Convener:** I will ask Jackie Baillie to make one final contribution and then we will have a quick canter around the committee to see what we decide.

**Jackie Baillie:** Thank you, convener. I encourage you to write to the Scottish

Government in the terms that you have suggested, because the national tourism strategy does not take enough account of the importance of gardens to the tourism offer. If it did, that could inform the actions of the National Trust for Scotland. From a constituency viewpoint, I appreciate that the committee cannot get involved in individual decisions and that the strategy is a matter for the Scottish Government, but, if that happens, it will shine a slightly brighter light on the future.

**Gail Ross:** Like everybody else, I have absolute sympathy with what the group is trying to do. There are gardens of national significance in my constituency. I can see both sides but, in the interests of getting off the fence and coming to a conclusion, I return to the fact that the petition has asked whether the National Trust for Scotland is involved in the national tourism strategy. We heard from VisitScotland and the National Trust that they are involved. I do not see any value in writing to the Scottish Government to ask questions about the report, but we could write to the Scottish Government to highlight what is in the report and close the petition, as we have received the answer that the petition asks for.

**David Torrance:** I agree with that.

10:30

**The Convener:** The question is not whether we think that Geilston garden should stay open. We have to be mindful of the best use of the committee's time.

The reassurance that the petition sought has been given. What has prompted the petition remains an open question, and as a committee we have to decide whether we would make any difference in that regard. I am interested in members' views on the compromise position that Gail Ross suggested: that we close the petition but write to the Scottish Government to highlight the DCMS Committee's recommendations. That would at least afford the petitioner, whose concern relates specifically to Geilston garden, the chance to have a conversation with the Government about the proposals or the report.

**Brian Whittle:** I do not have anything to say specifically on Geilston; we probably all have similar issues in our own areas. However, the petition highlights potential issues around the relationship between governance and decision making across such facilities, which raise concerns for me. If the committee judges that the petition has reached its end, I would ask that we write to the Scottish Government in those terms and highlight our consideration of the relationships and the decision-making processes across several different organisations, and the resulting impact. I am talking in particular about the impact further

down the line rather than the situation that Jackie Baillie spoke about, when a facility is closed and it is a disaster. My understanding is that there is an issue with such facilities being community assets and Scotland-wide assets, especially under the National Trust for Scotland.

That might be a side issue, and I am perfectly prepared to accept that it is not what the petition was asking about, but it raises big questions for me.

**The Convener:** There is nothing to prevent anyone from submitting a petition on those issues if they wish to do so. I am keen that the committee is not divided on the petition, so I am trying to get some sense of where we want to go. Gail Ross suggested that we close the petition on the basis that what it has asked for has been agreed but that we would want the Government to reflect on the issues that have been flagged up during our consideration of the petition—in particular, the recommendations on garden design in the DCMS Committee's report. We are very much aware that the petition has been prompted by a specific issue to do with gardens. I wonder whether the committee can agree on that course of action.

**Maurice Corry:** Unfortunately, I do not agree—I think that the petition should be kept open. We need to keep pressure on the Government and the National Trust for Scotland on this issue and reflect on the tourism strategy in relation to gardens. The petition also raises issues in respect of mental health, with regard to people who find solace in the gardens. I would not like us to close the petition at this stage.

**The Convener:** We cannot keep it open on the basis that we are concerned about a specific asset.

**Maurice Corry:** No, no—I have not said that. I have not referred to Geilston. I am talking about gardens in general, as I mentioned earlier. I have had a couple of meetings and discussions with the previous chairman of the National Trust for Scotland and, indeed, with the current chief executive.

**Gail Ross:** No one here is disputing that gardens are good for mental health and wellbeing, as is the outdoors in general, but keeping the petition open will not prevent any of this happening in the future—

**Maurice Corry:** I would like to keep the petition open until we see the Scottish Government's response to the report's recommendations. That is my position.

**The Convener:** It is very unusual for the Public Petitions Committee to divide in this way. I am concerned that we would be keeping open a

petition in order to do something that the petition does not ask for.

**Gail Ross:** It would also give the petitioners false hope on the particular issue that the petition raises, which I do not feel is very fair, because we cannot do anything about that issue.

**Brian Whittle:** I understand where the convener is coming from, but I also understand where Maurice Corry is coming from. If we keep the petition open, we will be drifting away from what the petitioner specifically asked for—I accept that completely. However, the petition has raised other issues, in my view, with regard to the relationship that I described.

I do not think that I can remember a previous division during my time on the committee. If I can be convinced that we will write to the Scottish Government with specific asks, I could be persuaded to close the petition. However, it raises specific issues that—somehow or other—have to be addressed.

**The Convener:** Given the broader issues that have been highlighted, we could refer the petition to the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee.

**Gail Ross:** Agreed. [*Laughter.*]

**The Convener:** We could say that, although the issue that the petition raises has been addressed, questions have arisen with regard to the whole area of tourism and how we understand such assets. The Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee will not be able to deal with the specifics of a particular site, but, if we want it to reflect on the broader question, it could do so.

**Gail Ross:** It could go deeper into the general question. Are we happy with that?

**The Convener:** Is that agreed?

**Maurice Corry:** I accept that. That is exactly the point that I am making—there is a bigger issue, which came out of my discussions with the people whom I mentioned earlier. I am not happy with some of the things that have been going on in other areas such as Aberdeen, Ullapool and Ayrshire. It just so happens that this petition has highlighted the issue in relation to a specific area.

**The Convener:** I think that we have reached an agreement. However, I underline that, although we are agreeing to refer the petition to the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee because we have been persuaded that there is an issue here, we are not, as custodians of the Public Petitions Committee, the only committee that is dealing with a broad range of issues in Scottish public life.

We have to be mindful that we do not spend too long on any one petition just because there are interesting things in it, as there is a queue of people waiting to have their petitions addressed by the committee. We have to ration the amount of time that we spend on each individual petition, or we must ration by having a queue. We have to reflect on that.

We would not want the importance of any individual petition to be the only criterion by which we decide whether we hold on to it. We need to emphasise that aspect time and again. Petitioners sometimes think that, if we are not looking at an issue, it is not being looked at, but the whole Parliament has responsibility and accountability in that regard. I also underline that we cannot guarantee that, in referring the petition to the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee, that committee will prioritise the issues that it raises. We can simply flag up the petition to that committee and say that we think that it raises some important issues for it to consider. Are members agreed?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** We have reached the end of a substantial agenda.

*Meeting closed at 10:38.*



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