



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 6 November 2025

Session 6



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**CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
28th Meeting 2025, Session 6**

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Kenneth Hogg (Scottish Government)

Angus Robertson (Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 6 November 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:01]

Historic Environment Scotland

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning and a warm welcome to the 28th meeting in 2025 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. Our first agenda item is to take further evidence on Historic Environment Scotland. We are joined by Angus Robertson, the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Kenneth Hogg, director of culture and external affairs at the Scottish Government. A warm welcome to you both. Cabinet secretary, I believe that you have an opening statement.

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Thank you, convener, and good morning to colleagues on the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about Historic Environment Scotland today. As the committee is aware, my responsibilities for Historic Environment Scotland are strategic rather than operational. That said, I share the committee's concerns around the leadership of HES, and my officials have been working daily with the board to address those matters.

The first point that I want to place on record is that Historic Environment Scotland undertakes a vital role of investigating, caring for and promoting Scotland's historic environment. The appointment of Sir Mark Jones as chair and the excellent work that is being carried out by HES staff give me confidence that HES will emerge from these challenges a stronger and more effective organisation that will continue to deliver for Scotland for many years to come.

After his appointment, I wrote to Sir Mark Jones on 10 October outlining my priorities to be addressed. Those included taking action to remedy any shortcomings identified in the forthcoming section 22 report from the Auditor General; resolving the situation with the chief executive; and improving the HES organisational culture. The Scottish Government will fully support the chair and the HES board in tackling those governance and leadership challenges.

Although I cannot go into individual staffing matters, I am assured that the board of HES,

under the leadership of Sir Mark, is overseeing the robust investigation of all grievances and disciplinary matters. For example, an independent human resources firm has been appointed to investigate the grievances and performance issues. It is right that HES investigates those matters, and I look forward to being apprised of the outcomes.

I can also confirm that HES, with the support of the Scottish Government, has appointed a recruitment company, after a procurement process, to recruit a chief operating officer. Interviews are expected to take place in the next two weeks, with the appointment being made before the end of this year.

Finally, I am delighted to be able to tell the committee that I have received approval from the Ethical Standards Commissioner to appoint two new interim board members for 12 months. I aim to announce both appointments this week, but cannot name the individuals this morning.

I will be happy to discuss any of those matters in more detail with you.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I will open by asking about the staff at HES and the impact that the situation will have had on staff morale and relationships between leadership and the general staff. How are the staff being supported at this time? Is there an active relationship between the unions and HES that will enable them to move forward together in addressing the cultural issues that have been identified?

Angus Robertson: I know that that is very much a priority for the chairman, Sir Mark Jones, who is dealing with a very difficult situation. I know that he is cognisant of all of those factors. I have met HES staff in formal and informal settings and it is clear that, at all levels of the organisation, there is great concern about the circumstances in which it finds itself. You have seen the reports, as have I, about a range of issues that would cause anybody in any workplace very serious concern, but I think that, with new leadership on the board, we are now in a position where those issues can be addressed.

Everybody who is involved directly and indirectly with the situation at HES says that it is an amazing organisation that delivers on the ground—that is important to us all—and that the challenge is one of leadership. That is why I am pleased that we have a new chair in place, that there is to be a chief operating officer to support the changes that will need to take place, and that I will be appointing two new members of the board.

The committee is aware of the process that has been gone through and has taken evidence on the different layers of challenges that exist, but I can

say that I am confident that we have, in Sir Mark, somebody who will be able to lead these changes. My civil service colleagues and I will be doing everything that is appropriate for us to support those changes being made.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. We move to questions from the committee, starting with Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Cabinet secretary, I think that it is right for the convener to have started the question session by focusing on concern for the staff of HES, but you are here this morning to account to the committee for your part in all this. Records show that previous cabinet secretaries, including Fiona Hyslop, met the HES board in person multiple times a year. Since your appointment, how many times have you personally met the board and in what format?

Angus Robertson: First, the direct answer to Mr Kerr's question is that I have not attended a board meeting. I have not been invited to attend a board meeting. However, the way that things operate is that cabinet secretaries or relevant ministers meet regularly with the chief executive and the chair of the organisation, and I have done that. I can go through the interaction with the Scottish Government, because I think that if I was in Mr Kerr's position, I would be concerned if there was not a very close working relationship between the Scottish Government and HES, given the nature of the challenges that have been raised.

First, to anybody who is watching and does not understand how these things work, the Scottish Government has civil servants in the relevant directorate who have a sponsorship role for non-departmental public bodies—they are known as a sponsorship team. Sponsorship officials meet almost daily with Historic Environment Scotland across the full range of HES directorates and staff. Those meetings include regular catch-ups with the HES chief executive's office, the finance directorate and the people directorate. The Scottish Government estimates that, since the start of May 2025, there have been more than 100 engagements with Historic Environment Scotland. Sponsorship officials have attended all nine HES board meetings since 22 May, following a request by me that they do so. Those board meetings took place on 22 May, 3 July, 21 August, 28 August, 4 September, 11 September, 18 September, 29 September and 15 October. I could go through a range of interactions involving senior civil servants and senior decision makers in HES.

I am keen for Mr Kerr to be aware that there is full engagement at all levels with Historic Environment Scotland, as there is with other non-departmental bodies. If the board of HES wishes me to attend and meet with it, I am happy to do so. As it so happens, I was at the headquarters of

HES yesterday. I do not think that anybody should be under any misapprehensions about the level of involvement with HES and the advice that I receive as cabinet secretary about it.

Stephen Kerr: You say "at all levels", but that is patently not the case, because you have not been engaged personally. "All levels" would include you, but you have not been in attendance at a single meeting. I find it really odd that you say that you requested that officials attend board meetings—I understand why you made that request—but you did not request that you meet the board. I simply point out that Fiona Hyslop, your predecessor, met the board in person at least twice a year—sometimes three times a year—and that is without the organisation being in a state of chaos and crisis. During the time that you have been cabinet secretary, particularly latterly, it has been clear that the organisation is in deep trouble, but you did not choose to meet the board in the way that you requested your officials to do. Why is that? Do you recognise that that absence of engagement undermines the visibility of ministerial accountability?

Angus Robertson: No, I do not accept the charge. I have been involved personally. I have met the chairman and the chief executive personally and I have ensured that the appropriate officials are attending the appropriate meetings and reporting back to me about developments. As I have said, if there is a wish for me to attend a board meeting, I have no objection to doing so, but I am content that we have been attending all meetings that needed to be attended. I am not sure whether Mr Kerr wants to point to a meeting that was not attended. All relevant meetings have been attended.

Stephen Kerr: Not by you.

Angus Robertson: I have been advised by my senior officials about what has been proceeding in these meetings, and that has helped us to be able to make the right decisions, given the role of the Government relative to the senior management of Historic Environment Scotland, which is to make sure that they are being best supported in getting from a very difficult position to a better one.

Stephen Kerr: During the time that you have been cabinet secretary, how many times did you meet Hugh Hall in his role as chairman of HES?

Angus Robertson: I cannot recall exactly. I met him a number of times following my coming into office. I think that the last time that we met was at the opening of lock 16, which is the—

Stephen Kerr: No, I do not mean at events. When was the last time that you had a formal meeting?

Angus Robertson: I would have to check the record, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: I think that you will find that you have never had such a meeting with Hugh Hall.

Angus Robertson: I would have to check the record, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: You would surely remember whether, in four and a half years, you had met the chairman of HES.

Angus Robertson: I remember meeting him. We met in Falkirk, at the—

Stephen Kerr: No, that was at an event.

Angus Robertson: Excuse me. We met at lock 16 in Falkirk at the opening of the new centre.

Stephen Kerr: That is not a meeting, cabinet secretary. If you meet at an event and you stand in line together and you chit-chat together, that does not constitute a formal meeting. There are no records of any formal meetings between you and Hugh Hall when he was the chairman of HES.

Angus Robertson: What sticks in my memory are the meetings that I had with the chief executive when she came into office. Frankly, those meetings were most instructive and important in understanding that, with new leadership in the chief executive's office, there was an aspiration to continue with the significant financial and commercial improvements in Historic Environment Scotland.

I would not want Mr Kerr to not appreciate and understand that I have met the senior management of Historic Environment Scotland—I have done so. I could go on: there is a long list of meetings between my directors general and other senior officials in the Scottish Government and the senior management of Historic Environment Scotland.

Stephen Kerr: Cabinet secretary, there are no records of any formal meetings between you and the board. There are no records of any formal meetings between you and the chairman of HES for the four-and-a-half years that you have been the cabinet secretary. Given the state of HES, particularly in the last 18 months or so, I consider that to be, frankly, a dereliction of duty on your part as an accountable member of the Scottish Government for that very important body.

Angus Robertson: Convener, I think that I have outlined to the committee at great length the interactions that I have had with the chief executive—

Stephen Kerr: None.

Angus Robertson: —the last meeting that I had with the chairman and the regular meetings

that have taken place with my senior officials, who have attended every board meeting since it became apparent that there was a problem at Historic Environment Scotland—

Stephen Kerr: You have not attended a single board meeting.

The Convener: Mr Kerr, please do not interrupt witnesses. The question was asked; the answer is on the record. Can we move on to the next question?

Stephen Kerr: I just do not want the impression to be left that what the cabinet secretary is saying includes his active involvement in any of this, because it does not.

Can you confirm—

Angus Robertson: Excuse me. If you will allow me, convener, I would say, again, that Mr Kerr does not seem to understand how the interaction with non-departmental bodies operates, with—

Stephen Kerr: I do. You do not have to explain it to me.

The Convener: Mr Kerr, please.

Stephen Kerr: I am sorry, but he does not need to explain it to me.

09:15

The Convener: Mr Kerr, the cabinet secretary has—

Stephen Kerr: He is here to be held to account and I do not need that interaction to be explained to me. I do not need how the process is supposed to work to be mansplained to me.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): You need to respect the convener.

Stephen Kerr: Dear, oh dear. This is what passes for scrutiny.

The Convener: Well, we do have a duty to be courteous and respectful.

Stephen Kerr: Right, I will move on.

Angus Robertson: Excuse me, convener, but I was in the middle of a sentence.

The Convener: Cabinet secretary, please continue.

Angus Robertson: I was just stressing how important it is for the committee to understand the day-to-day interaction between the sponsorship team and Historic Environment Scotland or, indeed, any sponsorship team and whatever non-departmental public body it is engaged with. That is the key interface when one is dealing with a day-to-day problem, and I think that it is really important for committee members to understand

that such engagement is an almost daily occurrence. I would not want the impression to be created that the Scottish Government and its officials are not engaging with Historic Environment Scotland, that I am not being updated on progress and that I am not making decisions that are helping Historic Environment Scotland get into a better place. The facts and the timeline make absolutely clear that that is what is happening.

Stephen Kerr: Can you confirm whether HES has at any time in the last year operated without a designated accountable officer?

Angus Robertson: I think that the committee is aware that the accountable officer is the chief executive of Historic Environment Scotland. The committee will be aware that there have been periods when the chief executive has not been in post. Mr Kerr will be aware that we are straying into HR territory here, so I need to be cautious about how I address these matters.

My officials were seized of the matter when it became clear that the chief executive officer might not be returning to work. At various stages there have been interactions with the board to explore whether there should be an interim accountable officer in place, but given that it has not been clear over recent months exactly when the chief executive might return to office—at various stages it was thought that she might—the progress of such a replacement has not been taken forward by the board of Historic Environment Scotland.

We are now in a position where the chief executive is fulfilling her responsibilities as accountable officer back at work. That is appropriate. I have wanted to satisfy myself that at no stage have there been any financial decisions that needed sign-off by the accountable officer that could not be proceeded with or needed to be proceeded with in a different way, and that is indeed the case.

I do not know whether Kenneth Hogg wants to add anything on the accountable officer question. I appreciate why it is an important question, but I wish Mr Kerr and the committee to be assured that we have been very involved in making sure that, were there to be any protracted issue with the accountable officer position, it could be remedied. As I have already pointed out, the accountable officer, who is the chief executive, is fulfilling the responsibilities now.

Kenneth Hogg (Scottish Government): I will add that the chief executive herself, at the point at which she was no longer at work, gave an assurance that there were no upcoming decisions that required the accountable officer to exercise oversight. We also had assurances from the former chair that subsequently there were no

decisions that required the accountable officer to be in place.

Historic Environment Scotland has in place a scheme of delegation whereby decisions can be taken at director level. We have been giving constant attention to the question of an accountable officer, and we have given every help that we can to the board. That included one point when the board determined that it wished to proceed to appoint an acting chief executive. I met the candidate and interviewed them in respect of their suitability to take on the accountable officer role. My view was that the individual was appointable as the accountable officer, and I told the chair and the board that.

The board subsequently decided not to proceed with that appointment, but throughout this entire period it has been foremost on my mind and the mind of my team to make sure that there are appropriate financial governance arrangements in place in Historic Environment Scotland.

Stephen Kerr: That is very helpful because one of the elements of the triggering of the Auditor General's section 22 report is the lack of an accountable officer in the organisation. If I understand you correctly, you have said that the board was fully engaged in a discussion with you about the lack of an accountable officer and that there were mutual suggestions about how that might be dealt with. Is that correct?

Kenneth Hogg: The—

Stephen Kerr: Before you answer, I note that last week a board member sat in that very seat and said something quite different from what we are hearing this morning.

Kenneth Hogg: The framework agreement for Historic Environment Scotland sets out that the chief executive, who is an appointment of the board, should be appointed as the accountable officer. That is the first point.

Stephen Kerr: Right, and last week a board member said that that is Angus Robertson's responsibility.

Kenneth Hogg: It is the Scottish Government's responsibility to make the appointment as to who the accountable officer is, but that is within the context that it is the board's responsibility to appoint the chief executive and that is the individual who should be appointed as the accountable officer.

Discussions were taking place throughout the period—I am talking about the period between the end of May and the return of the chief executive to her accountable officer duties in October. Throughout that five-month period, conversations were taking place, which I cannot go into for reasons that we have discussed before, between

the board and the chief executive about her return to work.

If it had become clear at any point that that was going to be a protracted period, the right thing to do at that point was to consider making an acting chief executive appointment and appointing that individual as accountable officer. However, at various points that was not the situation. As the cabinet secretary mentioned, at various points it seemed possible that there would be a return to work from the chief executive.

This was a continually evolving situation, which we were monitoring closely. Foremost in our minds was making sure that appropriate financial governance arrangements were in place, including asking repeatedly for updates, at the cabinet secretary's request, on whether there were any decisions coming up that required the presence of the accountable officer. One decision that does require that presence is the signing of the annual accounts, and that is precisely the task that the chief executive is currently engaging on, preparing in advance of signing the accounts very shortly.

Stephen Kerr: Is she back to work permanently? Can you tell us that much information?

Kenneth Hogg: She is back in her role as accountable officer. She is not back at work in her full range of duties; she is focusing specifically on her accountable officer responsibilities and supporting Sir Mark Jones in doing that.

Stephen Kerr: I have one last question, convener. I suppose that, at the heart of all this, is putting HES right, because of the important role that HES plays and because of the excellent people who work inside the organisation and who are having to put up with all the noise around the leadership.

In a letter you sent to me yesterday, you highlight the significance of the appointment of Sir Mark Jones—and he was here last week—and that he has rightly set out his priority to ensure that HES has the trust of the public and its partners. Then you go on, in a paragraph that I am happy to share with the rest of the committee, to describe what the Scottish Government will do to support him, which I respect.

As you know, Sir Mark Jones was here last week, and he is giving one or two days a week. He is a non-executive chairman. How on earth is it realistic to expect Sir Mark—who I think that we all respect for the work that he has undertaken on all our behalf in HES—to be able to get to the root of all this without an independent investigation being launched, I think by you, cabinet secretary, to support him?

Sir Mark Jones going into the office one or two days a week will not solve this problem. It will take something far more strategic and far more significant in an independent set out of outcomes, with recommendations that he will be able to enact as the chairman. Do you not agree that, if you are not helping him in that practical way now, we are expecting an awful lot from the chairman, given his commitment, given his two days a week and given the depth of the issues that he has to deal with?

Angus Robertson: There are three parts to the answer to Mr Kerr's question, which is an entirely reasonable question.

First, as I have said to the committee and I have said publicly repeatedly, I have the utmost confidence in the ability of Sir Mark Jones to exercise his responsibility and leadership as chairman of the board of Historic Environment Scotland. We are all very indebted to him because he is acutely aware of the situation that he has come into. I met him personally to impress on him how keen I was for somebody with his track record to take on the task, to be absolutely candid about what I consider the scale of the challenge to be, and to give him the full confidence that he will have any resource at his disposal to be able to do what needs to be done to get Historic Environment Scotland back working in the way that we expect any non-departmental body to do.

I have had a subsequent and follow-up conversation with Sir Mark about the progress that is taking place and the next steps. Part of what is happening to bolster capacity is the recruitment of a chief operating officer. That is happening closely with help and support from the Scottish Government. It is also happening with the appointment of new members of the board with particular skill sets, and I am keen to confirm to the committee who they are as soon as possible, because I think that all committee members will agree that they are very good appointments. That will be a support for Sir Mark on the board as the change programme goes through.

If there is anything else that Sir Mark says that he requires, I have said to him—and I say this to the committee—that I will be very sympathetic to supporting him completely in any ask that he has. Mr Kerr is right: he has an expectation of how many days a week his chairmanship will take up, but we will be as supportive as required.

The second part is to understand that Sir Mark is chairman of the board and he has inherited a range of investigations, internal and involving others, into matters that are well known to the committee—you have been sent the reports, as have I, and I am as concerned as members of the committee are with all of them. Sir Mark is taking forward the on-going issues; he is doing that. It is not appropriate for me to appoint somebody to a

post, to say I have full confidence in him taking that forward, and then to take over responsibility and oversight for such processes. He must be able to start his work as chairman of the board of Historic Environment Scotland and to go through these very challenging issues. If at any stage there is a suggestion that there are things that need to happen for which the Scottish Government has responsibility, we will take that on board.

The third part of the answer to Mr Kerr's question is about the suggestion that there should be an investigation now into what has been going on in Historic Environment Scotland. As I have already signalled, I think that it is the place of Sir Mark Jones, the board and new board members to take those matters forward now. Should at any stage there be a requirement for further investigations, for further, wider or deeper understanding of the nature of the historic problems, or for anything else in the matter, I am not ruling anything out.

09:30

Stephen Kerr: So if Sir Mark asked you, in support of his office, to appoint a truly independent investigator to come up with recommendations for him and the other members of the board to enact, you would be sympathetic.

Keith Brown: It is for Sir Mark to ask. I have said to him that we will support anything that he deems as necessary for him to deal with the challenges at root in Historic Environment Scotland. I will leave it for him to ask for what he thinks he requires, but where he has made clear what he needs in capacity and support, we have made that happen. I will look sympathetically on any suggestion that he might have, and I have ruled nothing out.

Stephen Kerr: Thank you very much.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Good morning. I have a number of questions, but I will follow up on some of the issues that have already been raised. Why did you request that your officials attend those nine meetings? Would they normally have attended, or was that unusual?

Angus Robertson: I think that it is true to say that, in the past, not all board meetings of non-departmental public bodies were attended by sponsorship team officials. It is also fair to say that, by the first quarter of this year, it was obvious that there were issues with Historic Environment Scotland that meant that we—the civil service and Government ministers—needed to have the best insights of where things actually were at the board level, as well as at the other levels at which there are contacts with officials. Because of that, I asked that all board meetings be attended.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: So, you were aware that there were issues, but you wanted to get a better idea of what the issues were.

Angus Robertson: Indeed.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: What were your officials telling you?

Angus Robertson: I am very keen to answer as fully as I can, Mr Halcro Johnston, but you will appreciate that we might well stray into the territory of HR matters, which I am not—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Were they telling you that they had serious concerns?

Angus Robertson: Absolutely. It was apparent to me that there were serious issues in relation to leadership generally in Historic Environment Scotland and that those issues needed to be better understood. You will understand that, by that stage, we had a new chief executive in place and we were approaching the issue of the chairmanship of the board—that was in the first quarter of this year.

I do not have in front of me the exact timeline of when complaints were being made and stories were appearing in the media and so on, but there was a growing general understanding that there were leadership issues in Historic Environment Scotland. As we were becoming aware of that, I was extremely keen for us to be best informed about how the board intended to deal with those issues.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: That did not involve your attending board meetings, which you could have done.

Angus Robertson: No, it involved the responsible officials from the sponsorship team, who are responsible for attending such meetings, attending those meetings.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: So, issues were being raised and leadership concerns were coming into the public domain. It seems that you met with the leadership, despite there being issues with the ongoing leadership, but you did not determine at that point that the situation was serious enough for you, as the person at the very top, to meet, listen to and hear directly from the board, as previous cabinet secretaries had done?

Angus Robertson: I deemed it necessary that the responsible officials who deal with the day-to-day management of the organisation at that level should attend the meeting. That is the normal custom and practice.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Okay. Do you regret not attending, or are you comfortable with not having done that?

Angus Robertson: No. I want to give the committee the assurance that I have the utmost confidence in the senior civil servants who are dealing with Historic Environment Scotland from day to day. Not all of them are present in this meeting, as an additional senior civil servant has been brought into role and is dealing with these matters, in addition to Kenneth Hogg and other colleagues.

Mr Halcro Johnston and other colleagues will be aware—I am sure you can imagine—that I speak with those civil service colleagues extremely regularly about the developments that are taking place, and I want to pay tribute to them. I think that it is absolutely right that the appropriate officials have been in the room at the appropriate meetings, making sure that they understand the circumstances that are being discussed in a variety of fora with Historic Environment Scotland and are reporting what is necessary to me.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Even if there had not been any issues within the organisation, I think that the public who are watching this meeting will ask why the cabinet secretary with responsibility for the organisation did not attend any board meetings and did not have that relationship. I think that they will be particularly surprised, shocked or appalled that, even when you were aware—you have said that you were aware—that there were serious issues with the organisation, you still did not attend board meetings. Do you understand why the public might be concerned about that?

Angus Robertson: They would be right to be concerned if the meetings had not been attended, but they were attended and I was fully informed about what proceeded at them—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Does the buck not stop with you on this?

Angus Robertson: Convener, if I might be able to finish my answer to Mr Halcro Johnston—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Does the buck not stop with you on this?

The Convener: Mr Halcro Johnston—please. I am requesting that every member let the witness give an answer.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I recognise that we have a limited amount of time, convener, and I am just asking—

Angus Robertson: You did not let me finish the sentence, Mr Halcro Johnston.

The Convener: Sorry—I am chairing the meeting. Mr Halcro Johnston, I have asked you not to interrupt the cabinet secretary when he is giving an answer.

Angus Robertson: The normal custom and practice for the cabinet secretary is to meet with

the chief executives of organisations, and I have done that on a number of occasions.

It is important for the public—who might, understandably, not be aware—to know that the interrelationship with non-departmental public bodies is through what is known as the sponsorship team within the civil service. The appropriate officials attended every single meeting—at my request—to make sure that we were best informed about things. The amount of interaction that has taken place between the Scottish Government in my area of responsibility and Historic Environment Scotland is—I could not even guess what the level of engagement is with Historic Environment Scotland relative to other non-departmental public bodies. We are extremely seized of the matter.

I think that the important relationship that I have had, presently and in the past, is with the chief executive of the organisation in question. I have that relationship with the current chief executive officer and, as I said in answer to Mr Kerr, I have met a number of times with the incoming chair of Historic Environment Scotland. As I have also said, if the board ever wished me to come along and attend a meeting, I would be content to do so. However, the appropriate level of interaction for my position is with the chief executive of this or any other organisation, and I must satisfy myself that my officials are dealing with the other levels of the organisation, so that we are best informed.

We now find ourselves at a really important inflection point for Historic Environment Scotland. Not only has a new chief executive been brought into the organisation, but a new chair and new board members have been brought into the organisation, and a new chief operating officer will be brought into the organisation. All of that has taken place with the Scottish Government playing the appropriate role in making it happen.

Would I have wished for the past leadership of Historic Environment Scotland to have dealt with all the issues? Absolutely. Now is, unfortunately, the time that others need to do so.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I do not think that anybody would be surprised that, as you suggest, there has been a great deal of engagement between Scottish Government officials and HES. It is, in effect, an organisation in crisis, so that would be expected. The point is that the buck stops with you, as the cabinet secretary—doesn't it?—and you have not attended the board meetings. Perhaps you can advise whether you were invited to any board meetings or whether you requested to attend any board meetings. It appears that you met with the leadership teams, despite the fact that—as you accept—there were leadership issues. Can you address some of those points?

Were you invited to board meetings, or did you make any request to attend the board meetings?

Angus Robertson: Not only was I not invited to attend any board meetings; more importantly, I ensured that the appropriate officials did attend the board meetings. I have now gone round the houses a number of times with this, convener—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: We are aware of who attended.

Angus Robertson: But the question has been asked again, so I will answer it again. I have not been invited to a board meeting, but the board meetings have been attended by the appropriate officials, to make sure that we best understand what the discussions are in Historic Environment Scotland and that we, as the Scottish Government, take the responsibilities that are ours. I have run through them, but I will run through them again. We are making sure that we are—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Did you request to attend a board meeting?

Angus Robertson: I have not requested to meet the board, because—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Okay. That is the question that I asked, convener.

Angus Robertson: I have already said that. It has been appropriate for me to meet the chief executive and to meet the incoming chair, to make sure that he has all the appropriate support to make the changes that need to take place at Historic Environment Scotland.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Last week, I asked Sir Mark Jones whether any timescales or targets had been set, and he said that they had not. When do you expect the organisation to be back on a relatively even keel?

Angus Robertson: It is really important that there is a new chair in place. That is the foundational change, as I see it, for Historic Environment Scotland getting itself into a better place. Because the different inquiries that are going on internally, within Historic Environment Scotland, and with external support are issues for Historic Environment Scotland, I am not privy to the delivery time or how long the investigations will take. What I do know is that Sir Mark Jones is very keen for me to be informed about their progress and whether there is any concern that any of them might take longer than expected.

As I signalled in answer to Mr Kerr's question, Sir Mark Jones is arriving with a long list of on-going challenges—I think that we all appreciate that it is quite a long list—some of which will be extremely difficult to deal with, so I do not expect the issues to be resolved from one week to the

next. As I have said before, we have made it absolutely clear to Sir Mark Jones that, if there is any issue with the capacity to deal with any of the outstanding questions, we will be supportive, including with resources—human and financial—if that is what is required, to make sure that these processes can take place as quickly as possible.

One thing that has become clear to me—as it will have become clear to committee members, because we have all been sent emails, whistleblower reports and that sort of thing—is that people within HES have felt that either complaints have been made or problems have been on-going and they have not been dealt with. However, I take confidence from Sir Mark Jones and his experience, and I hope that that confidence can increasingly be shared by people within Historic Environment Scotland—perhaps the people who have had cause to complain—that those issues will be dealt with properly and timeously. Were there a feeling that that was not happening, I would wish to be informed about it and, at that stage, I would intervene, were it necessary, to make sure that it would take place. However, I have had no indication that that is the case.

Now, with Sir Mark Jones, a new chief operating officer and new board members, we are seeing the capacity within the organisation to go through this change, deal with the historic issues and get things on an even keel, to use Mr Halcro Johnston's term. I want that to happen as quickly as possible, although I think that we all understand that it is a pretty challenging situation.

09:45

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Okay. You have talked about financial resources. There is a new chief operating officer, and I am not aware—you may or may not be aware—whether that position has been budgeted for. I asked Sir Mark Jones whether there would likely be redundancies, and he was not able to answer—understandably, given his role—but I think that he expects that people will be moving on. Do you expect that people will be leaving HES? Could some of the resources that you talked about be used to make redundancy payments or pay people off? If so, would you have to sign off that additional budget?

Angus Robertson: First, the operational and HR questions are matters for Historic Environment Scotland.

Secondly, there is an on-going discussion with all non-departmental bodies around financial questions. That is an on-going issue, which is why we have sponsorship teams. Were there to be any particular ask, as part of dealing with these challenges, I would look on it as I would look on any request made by any body in my area of

responsibility. However, I have not had that reported to me.

The committee will be aware that Historic Environment Scotland is a very well funded non-departmental body that is increasingly commercially successful. That is something that we have set great store by, and Historic Environment Scotland has been a model arm's-length body.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: But you would have to sign it off.

Angus Robertson: Yes. Ultimately, disbursal to non-departmental bodies happens through the Scottish Government's budget process, and, as a cabinet secretary, I am involved in making the case for bodies and spending in my area of responsibility, as part of the normal budget process. That is how it works, yes.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Thank you.

Patrick Harvie: Good morning. Obviously, there are many aspects to the situation. I would like to focus specifically on the reports of racism and xenophobia in the organisation.

I said this to our witnesses last week. We do not expect answers, either from those witnesses or from you, cabinet secretary, on live investigations or individual staffing disciplinary matters. However, I did ask Mark Jones whether the media reports about the situation were accurate. He said:

"I cannot honestly speak to the entire range of media reports, but I think that, broadly, they are accurate."—*[Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, 30 October 2025; c 12-13.]*

There have been reports of racist and xenophobic language, and reports that the defence offered for that racist and xenophobic language was that the person concerned previously worked in an organisation where racist and xenophobic language was commonplace. That was seen as a defence. It has been reported that the person who raised concerns about these issues was sent on diversity training.

It has also been reported that these incidents have damaged the relationship with the University of Glasgow to the extent that a joint project on addressing issues of slavery and colonialism has been either suspended or in some way damaged—we do not have clarity about that.

Is the Scottish Government taking the view that those reports demonstrate very serious concern about the culture in HES? Would the cabinet secretary share my view that, if the reports are accurate, the organisation appears to have failed to deal appropriately with racism and xenophobia?

Angus Robertson: The first point to put on record is that I abhor racism, as does the Scottish

Government—I would expect that to be the case across the Government and non-departmental public bodies. I would also expect the Government and/or non-departmental public bodies to take any such issues, or allegations of such behaviour, extremely seriously.

That formed part of the conversations that I had with Sir Mark in relation to his incoming responsibilities with Historic Environment Scotland. I wrote to him directly, raising a number of very serious and concerning matters involving governance and leadership in general in the organisation, including the allegations of racism against a Historic Environment Scotland director.

I have asked the incoming chair of Historic Environment Scotland to prioritise the reviewing of procedures and to report his findings to me. I know that Mr Harvie was very careful in asking his question and in understanding that we should not go into specific individual cases. However, I want to be assured that any issues that involve inappropriate behaviour of any kind—there is, as we know, a wide range—are fully investigated. I also want to be assured that the incoming chair and the board—old and new members—are able to look at all these issues as and when the reviews and investigations have concluded.

Patrick Harvie: When I asked Mark Jones what it means to have zero tolerance of racism, we had an answer that was, I think, a little ambiguous. I accept that it may simply have been a matter of being overly careful with language, but Mark Jones said:

"My understanding is that it means that wherever it is encountered it will be dealt with appropriately."—*[Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, 30 October 2025; c 13.]*

"Appropriately" is a very subjective term, and there will, of course, be individuals who are familiar with or are used to using racist or xenophobic language and who do not think that that is inappropriate. "Inappropriate" is another highly subjective term.

Does the Scottish Government set out proactively to organisations such as HES—not just HES, but across the board—how it expects the Scottish public sector to deal with these issues? At the moment, we are in a very challenging time as a society, with overt forms of prejudice of the kind that were more familiar to us in the 1970s and 1980s being normalised at the very highest level of politics, the media and social media. It is clear that simply expecting organisations to apply their duties under the Equality Act 2010, for example, is not adequate or enough to ensure that there is a proactive culture that achieves zero tolerance of racism and other forms of prejudice.

Does the Scottish Government generally leave organisations such as HES to figure these issues

out for themselves as employers, or does it proactively set out expectations about how the Scottish Government's political position on zero tolerance of racism, xenophobia and other forms of prejudice is to be put in place?

Angus Robertson: There is a lot in Mr Harvie's question. On the self-evident point about terms such as "appropriate" or "proportionately" and/or "zero tolerance", any fair-minded person would acknowledge that these are slightly different matters to on which to place judgment. I therefore appreciate that he and I need to await the internal processes in relation to any cases in Historic Environment Scotland. I will rest on that in relation to Historic Environment Scotland for today.

However, I want Mr Harvie to have confidence that this is a matter of real importance and real concern to me, not least because people in senior leadership positions have a particular responsibility for how they act. How they act sends signals, both internally in the culture of an organisation and more generally, at a time when, as Mr Harvie correctly identifies, there is growing concern about the normalisation of certain behaviours and language in ways that I hope most of us would believe had been consigned to the dustbin of history. It is not acceptable.

On guidance within Government and to non-departmental bodies, I will have to forward that on to Mr Harvie. I apologise; I do not have that with me. It will exist, and I will make sure that he and the committee have it. I would be very happy to hear the views of Mr Harvie and the committee if there are any reflections that that guidance is not robust enough. I have not been under the impression that the Government's view on racism and xenophobia is anything other than that they are totally and utterly unacceptable.

Patrick Harvie: I look forward to seeing that further information. I will simply end by suggesting that the issues of interest to this committee in relation to HES ought to be prompting the Government to take a wider, cross-Government approach to the proactive effort that needs to be made to give effect to what the cabinet secretary says: that the Government abhors racism, xenophobia and other forms of prejudice. If we are to respond to the current circumstances effectively, a rather more proactive and cross-Government approach is probably needed. If that effort had been made, I would have hoped that it would have prevented some of the revelations that we have seen.

Angus Robertson: I am happy to take away Mr Harvie's suggestion and satisfy myself that the appropriate guidance is in place. If it is not, I will do what is necessary to make absolutely clear the Government's position, both for ourselves and for our non-departmental public bodies.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. Just on that last point, it has been reported that a group of staff is now considering legal action against HES and the Scottish Government for failures under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 and the Equality Act 2010. How concerned are you that the Scottish Government could be facing legal action?

Angus Robertson: I would need to be advised on that, which I have not been. However, I understand that staff members at Historic Environment Scotland have a range of complaints and concerns. Obviously, legal action is a route that is open to us all as citizens, but I would have to be advised as to the nature of any particular legal complaint before I am able to answer that question.

Neil Bibby: Thank you.

I will go back to the earlier questions about meetings that you have had with HES. I understand what you said about not having meetings with the board of HES previously. I think that you said that you would accept the invitation to attend a board meeting in future, but you have not requested an invitation so far. If one is not forthcoming, will you request an invitation to attend a HES board meeting? Notwithstanding the fact that you have not attended previously and that, obviously, your officials have been working on the issue, will you request an invitation to attend future board meetings that are coming up, given everything that is going on, so that you can see that for yourself and meet the board yourself?

Angus Robertson: Yes, I am totally open to attending such a meeting, but I think that Mr Bibby will appreciate that my primary focus is to support Sir Mark in the most appropriate way as he takes forward new leadership in Historic Environment Scotland. I look forward to being apprised by him of the changes that are taking place in terms of the on-going investigations. As the board changes, of course, no doubt the new members of the board, together with those remaining from the old board, will want to reflect on what has transpired at Historic Environment Scotland.

There is a wider point that emanates from Mr Bibby's question: what are the learnings about how such a situation could come about in the first place, in order to ensure that such a thing never happens again? The range of leadership issues at Historic Environment Scotland are extremely serious, and that concerns us all.

As the board better understands and comes to terms with what has transpired and the solutions to deal with the issues, I certainly would want to be advised by it so that we can make sure that those learnings are available right across the public sector landscape for arm's-length organisations.

10:00

Neil Bibby: You mention learning lessons about how this has come to pass. Do you think that it is just a HES problem? Are there similar issues in other parts of the culture sector or the public sector? Maybe not to the same extent, but—

Angus Robertson: The key determinant in relation to Mr Bibby's question is this: do all organisations have HR issues from time to time? Absolutely. Am I aware of any other organisation that has had this range and scale of issues? Absolutely not. Therefore, we need to understand how the situation could come about and why some of the issues were not dealt with, given that much of this has transpired through the media because people felt that the processes were not in place for matters to be resolved internally. I am greatly concerned about that. The Government's responsibility is not only to make sure that there is new leadership and that the new leadership is best supported to do what HES is supposed to do as an arm's-length organisation, but to be aware of the reasons why the situation transpired in order to ensure that the same situation does not arise in any other public bodies.

Neil Bibby: You mentioned HES bringing in an independent HR team. We have talked about the need for a cultural review of the organisation and have heard about individual processes that need to be followed before that takes place. For clarity, would a cultural review of the organisation be an independent review?

Angus Robertson: I think that that is part of the package of investigations that Sir Mark is taking forward. I will hand over to Kenneth Hogg in a second, in case there is more granular information that I cannot provide to Mr Bibby on that.

Sir Mark has inherited a range of inquiries. Those are on-going, and they are happening in parallel. As I said to Mr Halcro Johnston, it would be everybody's hope that the investigations take place as timeously as possible.

As to the extent of external HR advice, I know that this is an area where we and officials have signalled to HES that the Scottish Government can provide an understanding of different external capacities that might help these processes. That is definitely something that has been offered.

Mr Hogg, do you want to add anything to my answer?

Kenneth Hogg: Perhaps I can go back to Neil Bibby's previous question. The sponsorship team that has been engaging with Historic Environment Scotland also sponsors the other NDPBs in the culture sector: National Museums Scotland, the National Galleries of Scotland, the National Library of Scotland and Creative Scotland. That team,

therefore, has an overview of those organisations. I confirm that the only one in which we see these problems arising is Historic Environment Scotland; it is not a widespread issue.

It is the case that we have given Historic Environment Scotland access to any support that we can. That includes our procurement frameworks to bring in additional support. In summary, what we are seeing within Historic Environment Scotland is an issue of organisational culture, which comes from the top. If further support is wanted and requested by Sir Mark and the board in terms of how they deal with that, we will, of course, give that support. I know that Sir Mark has said is that the first priority is to address the questions that are raised in the forthcoming section 22 report.

Neil Bibby: Thank you. I have two final questions. There have been a lot of discussions about what meetings you have held, cabinet secretary, and with whom. Have you met, or are you planning to meet, the HES trade union representatives?

Angus Robertson: I do not think that I have any meetings at the present time. However, as I have always said, I am open to dialogue with trade unions in any circumstance. I am aware that the trade unions have been involved in relation to some of the internal matters, which, as Mr Bibby will appreciate, I cannot go into in any level of detail. The trade unions' locus, as I understand it, is in relation to their members as part of the staff team at Historic Environment Scotland.

I am not aware of any request for a meeting with the unions. They will appreciate that on these HR issues the locus is not mine. Mr Bibby will understand that. I do not want to give him the impression that I am against meeting with trade unions, especially where there are distressed circumstances. I am not against that, if it is felt that it is appropriate. However, there has never been a suggestion from them that they would wish to meet me, given that I do not have that direct locus in the issues that they are raising.

Neil Bibby: I was asking because we have had a lot of discussion today about problems at the top, but the staff on the ground and throughout the organisation are obviously working hard in difficult circumstances. A meeting may be something to consider.

We have talked a lot about the culture in the organisation. I want to ask about financial planning and financial management. You said that the organisation is "commercially successful". I have raised concerns previously with HES about financial planning in relation to financial strategies and pay awards, and whether the organisation was budgeting sufficiently for pay awards that

were in line with public sector pay policy. Concerns have also been raised previously about changes to pay grades. To what extent are you reassured about HES when it comes to financial planning and financial management? It has, I think, a £73 million budget from Scottish Government.

Angus Robertson: That is correct. HES is also in receipt of about the same amount of resource in commercial income, which has seen a very significant increase in recent years. That is one of the reasons why Historic Environment Scotland has been viewed as a non-departmental public body that has been particularly successful in requiring a reduced level of support from the public purse. We have changed the rules so that it is able to retain more commercial income, which incentivises it to be more commercially successful.

As Mr Bibby reflects, public pay awards are important, and the remuneration of staff is also important—that should be the case in all public organisations. No specific issues with financial management have been raised with me. If Mr Bibby wants to share any concerns that have been raised with him, I will be happy to look at those and for them to form part of the discussions that I will have with senior HES management.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I was not at last week's evidence session with HES; I was away on parliamentary duties. Therefore, I suppose that I come at this from a different angle.

I was surprised by some of the discussion about meetings with the board, to be honest, because I think that most people know how these things work. The meetings that you have said that you have had, cabinet secretary, were with the chair and the chief executive. That is pretty standard when you are sponsoring an organisation. I think that there was an attempt to wilfully misrepresent the proper relationship with the board and chair for other reasons, which I am sure will become evident in due course.

Have members of the board expressed any concern either to yourself or to the Government, saying that there were issues that they would like to discuss with you or the Government officials who are involved?

Kenneth Hogg: I am not aware of any board member requesting a meeting with the cabinet secretary.

In addition to my staff attending all board meetings, all board members were invited to meet the director general, myself and the sponsor team in September. Several of them took up that opportunity. They had requested a meeting with us and that meeting was held. They attended, the agenda was theirs and they were invited to raise

any questions or issues that they had. They discussed the on-going situation with the chief executive's absence, for example. They discussed whether they could progress to appoint an interim chief executive, if that is what the board felt that it wanted to do. I repeated that I had met with the candidate that they had put forward as a potential appointee for an interim or acting chief executive role. I confirmed that we had said that we were happy to appoint that person as the accountable officer, although the board subsequently did not appoint.

However, that meeting is the only one that I can recall that came at their request, and it was held with an open agenda. From memory, I think that it took place on 13 September, but I can check that.

Angus Robertson: I will add to that. We are all in the same position, in that much of the information about particular concerns in relation to senior management at Historic Environment Scotland has been shared with us anonymously. There is one particular whistleblowing source, and I do not know who that person is. That person has never requested to speak with me. I do not know whether they have spoken with any members of the committee, who might therefore know who are. However, whistleblowing gives people a very important opportunity to share concerns. This is a very clear example of a situation where it has been in the public interest for us to be informed about these concerns.

To underline Mr Hogg's point, the opportunity has been there for the board and individual members of the board to share their views with the Scottish Government, and they have done so.

Keith Brown: To get this clear, because I think that it has become confused by some earlier questioning, the proper processes were followed in terms of the relevant minister meeting with the relevant individuals—the chair and the chief executive. You could say that the person with whom the buck stops—that would be you, as cabinet secretary—talked to the people with whom the buck stops in the organisation, as should happen. There was no clamour from the board asking for a meeting with you.

Angus Robertson: That is correct.

Keith Brown: That is all that I want to ask about that.

My other question harks back to an earlier session that we had with Historic Environment Scotland, which I found very unsatisfactory. I will take the chance to raise the issue now. My question stems from my view that Historic Environment Scotland sits on a huge number of extremely valuable and important assets in Scotland and, in my view, fails to make the proper return on those assets. That may be for reasons to

do with budgeting and capital investment, and I accept that there are budget constraints. However, I am looking for reassurance that, with the new chairperson, whom I have not met, we will see more entrepreneurial activity. For example, I asked about a particular property. HES had said that properties were open, but it turns out that they were not open to the public. HES had just finished doing the work that it thought that it had to do. The particular example was Clackmannan tower.

These things can be potentially extremely valuable if they are tied into particular, discrete interests from the Scottish diaspora around the world, for example, and that is not happening. I hope that the new chairperson—at your behest, I hope, cabinet secretary—will take such opportunities very seriously. At a previous meeting, we discussed the huge upsurge in festival attendance and in the vibrancy of festivals. We should capitalise on these assets as well. I look for reassurance from you in that regard.

10:15

Angus Robertson: I want to give Mr Brown total assurance about my personal interest in, and the Government's interest in, ensuring that organisations that have commercial potential are able to secure additional and sustainable funding streams. Forgive me—I am looking for the number, which is not at the top of my head. Historic Environment Scotland now has commercial income of north of £70 million annually, which is significantly more than it has been in recent years. HES is able to do that because the Scottish Government has changed the accountancy procedures that previously acted as a disincentive for it to make more commercial income. That is the first thing.

We have recognised the opportunity that Mr Brown has drawn our attention to. I think that we all understand the challenge facing Historic Environment Scotland, given the nature of our historic estate in Scotland. HES has more than 300 sites. In addition to historical wear and tear, the environmental impact is accelerating the decline at a lot of these very old sites. Anything that can be done to consider a “proper return”, to use Mr Brown's words, and to think imaginatively about how we can marry up the diaspora and other interests with different parts of Scotland and support particular projects.

As Mr Brown knows, I have responsibility for diaspora matters for the Scottish Government. I have also spoken with the new chief executive and chair about signposting particular projects that are under way in Scotland. They might be Historic Environment Scotland projects, or they might be projects with the National Trust for Scotland or Historic Houses. There is a range of different bits

of our historic estate that are, because of wear and tear and environmental damage, in need of significant investment. There is much more that we can do in that regard.

We have made the changes that have begun the process. Is there more that can be done? Yes. Do I believe that the new chief executive and the new chairman are and will be seized of that? Yes, I am. This is one of the grounds for the optimism that I have, notwithstanding the serious challenges that there have been in Historic Environment Scotland. HES's core business and the opportunity that it has to deal with the challenges of maintaining the estate are issues that it will be able to address with the new leadership that is coming into place in the organisation.

Keith Brown: I am grateful for that answer. Given what the cabinet secretary has said, this may have happened already but, to me, that will require a mindset change and imagination, an entrepreneurial spirit and dedicated people. For example, you may be aware of a place up in the north of Scotland called Badbea, where all the highlanders were pushed to the edge of a cliff when the clearances happened, as is commemorated by some people. It is virtually a ruin, as it is on the edge of a cliff. However, the diaspora—especially in Australia and New Zealand—will be very interested in that. In fact, they are the only ones who have contributed to the upkeep of the monument. We need someone to be thinking about what the connections are and how they can be exploited, for want of a better word.

This my final point. If HES can do all that, it will have to keep its eye on its core business, as you have mentioned, cabinet secretary. One example of a place where it has not done that is very close to my constituency, in Stirling. An application to build an Asda and various other buildings on the site of the battle of Bannockburn was approved, with no representations made by Historic Environment Scotland. I cannot think of any other country in the world that would allow such a development or have nothing to say about it. There are still parts of the battlefield that are subject to potential development, and they should be protected. Rather than saying that it has no representations to make and nothing to say about such things, HES must concentrate on its core business, make those representations and defend our historic heritage. I just wanted to make that point.

Angus Robertson: I am sure that the incoming leadership at Historic Environment Scotland will be following this evidence session very closely. The sensible points that Mr Brown has raised will be heard, and I will follow them up in the on-going conversations that I have with the appropriate

people at Historic Environment Scotland. Such conversations have taken place in the past and they will continue to take place.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I will pick up on the meetings and who you met and when. With your officials engaging as regularly as they do, you have a note on what the officials have attended and what has happened at the meetings. Have I picked you up correctly that the whistleblower was the only reason you heard of the allegations and that they never came through the engagement from the Scottish Government?

Angus Robertson: No, that formed part of the emerging picture in relation to the problems in Historic Environment Scotland. Some of the issues have come to light internally, some have come to light externally, and some have come to light through the media. They contribute to a picture that is a concern for us all.

There were issues that we were aware of, particularly in the first quarter of this year, which helped us to understand that there was a problem in the leadership of Historic Environment Scotland. That was added to by whistleblower information, media reports and then growing formal and informal reports of the different issues that we have all become aware of.

George Adam: I will focus on the governance issues in particular. We are all aware of how important Historic Environment Scotland is to the Scottish economy and what it contributes. With Sir Mark Jones now in place, you have already hinted at various support that you will give him. What will you be giving him to make sure that he does exactly what he wants to do, which he said to me when I asked him questions last week, and exactly what you need him to do?

Angus Robertson: We have been very quick to make sure not only that Sir Mark has support from senior Scottish Government officials but that we are helping to build resilience in support of him with the appointment of a chief operating officer, which will be a significant resource. There will also be new board members who have skills that are currently not reflected on the board, which will help Sir Mark.

If anything needs to be put in place—in addition to the reviews, the investigations and the planning that takes place under new management and the new chairmanship of the board—I have said personally to Sir Mark, both before and since his appointment, that I want him to be as supported as he requires and that he need only speak with the relevant officials or with me and we will look very sympathetically at providing that support.

George Adam: When answering one of Mr Bibby's questions, Mr Hogg said that there is not a widespread issue and that the problems are not

happening in other parts of the cultural sector. What is the Government learning from what has happened in HES to ensure that that is the case and that we do not end up in a similar situation with other parts of the cultural sector that the Government supports?

Angus Robertson: In the fullness of time, as some of the issues come out in the form of investigations, I think that it will become clear that we are talking about problems of a different magnitude compared with any other organisation, where there are standard HR issues that come up from time to time. We are talking about extremely challenging circumstances.

As Kenneth Hogg has pointed to, in the sponsorship team within the culture directorate—which deals with the national public bodies in the museums, galleries and Creative Scotland side of things—there is much greater sensitivity to any potential early warning signs of what we believe may have taken place at Historic Environment Scotland. We have no sign of that being the case elsewhere.

We have officials who are very involved, and I have given the committee evidence at some length about the number of meetings and the range of formats with very senior officials informing ourselves about the problems. That institutional memory and understanding within the civil service and with myself would stand us in good stead if there were to be any signs of similar developments elsewhere.

I am not aware of such a range of issues occurring in any other one of the arm's-length, non-departmental public bodies. I have spoken with ministerial colleagues in the Scottish Government to ask, "Is anybody aware of these sorts of developments, at this scale with this range, and the potential reasons why?" Nobody has any memory of there being such an example. Therefore, we will do everything we can to deal with the matter now, and we will also learn any lessons to make sure that it does not happen in future.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: There are other organisations that fall within your remit. Have you attended board meetings for any of them?

Angus Robertson: I was invited to the trustees of the National Museums Scotland at one stage, who wanted to talk with me about fundraising and funding—unsurprisingly. I was invited to attend a board meeting of Creative Scotland at one stage, again to talk about funding. However, in the normal run of things, that would not be how the relationship I have as cabinet secretary with the non-departmental bodies would take place.

There is a regular range of meetings that I have, both formal and informal. Some of them are sit-

down meetings and some of them are at-site visits—there are different formats for the meetings. They tend to be with the chief executive and/or the chair of that organisation, which is the appropriate way to do it, and that happens with great regularity.

The chief executives and—I hope and I believe—the chairs of the bodies across my areas of responsibility are very well aware of my wish to be informed about anything they would wish to raise with me personally. However, both they and I have the greatest confidence in the sponsorship team in the culture directorate, which has the direct day-to-day responsibility, as senior officials, to talk with the senior officials in the organisations to make sure that we are best informed and doing everything that we need to do.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I appreciate why an organisation may want to meet with you as the cabinet secretary, particularly to speak about funding. However, those are issues that could have been dealt with at official level. Would they normally be dealt with at official level?

Angus Robertson: As a general rule—my private office is not here to attest to this but I am sure that it would—when people wish to speak to me, I am very open to requests to do so. We do not always know what people want to talk to us about, formally and informally, and I want to be best informed. I am very well advised by the civil service, but I have a curiosity, as well as a responsibility, in my area of responsibility.

10:30

I have spoken at great length with senior management at Historic Environment Scotland because not only are there the issues of concern but there is the big prize of Historic Environment Scotland, at all levels of the organisation, being able to focus on its primary area of responsibility. That is what I want it to do, and I want to be satisfied that it is able to do so.

Mr Halcro Johnston does not need to have any concerns about my willingness to meet people. I am perfectly willing to do so, but I am also content that the way in which we have managed our relationship through a very difficult circumstance in Historic Environment Scotland has been done in the entirely appropriate and proportionate way that it should be.

The Convener: I have a final question. Historic Environment Scotland is a relatively new organisation. It has only been in existence following the merger of Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland and Historic Scotland in 2015. I would like some reassurance that the problems have not been endemic since that time. It had a difficult time

during Covid, where revenues were cut and it could not open the facilities, which had a devastating impact on its business model at that time. Did the problems start occurring after Covid?

On the core function, one of the biggest threats to HES is heritable skills, which are vital. I know that some colleges have expressed concern that it is not engaging as much with colleges in terms of heritable skills coming through, although I know that it has its own training centres as well.

The current issues will not have helped to enthruse anyone to come and work or seek a modern apprenticeship in HES, given what has happened. How do you reset that position? HES also has the climate challenge, which is having an impact on places such as Arbroath abbey. We have not seen this in the past, but climate change is having a bigger impact.

Angus Robertson: I wish to give you the assurance that that is very much the focus of Historic Environment Scotland and our interest in supporting what it does. Indeed, as I alluded to earlier, I was at the headquarters of Historic Environment Scotland with its senior management and others as part of a strategic partnership to deliver on the “Our Past, Our Future” strategy, bringing together non-departmental and other organisations to deliver on exactly those issues, such as the challenge with skills.

You will be aware of—and I have already made mention of—the opening of lock 16 as a focus for skills in traditional crafts that are acutely in demand for Historic Environment Scotland and, in that case specifically, Canals Scotland. That is an example of where changes are happening and partnership working is taking place. Having had the good fortune to be part of the considerations yesterday, I attest that Historic Environment Scotland is seized of that. Partner organisations such as Skills Development Scotland and Young Scot were also part of the conversation, as were enterprise agencies. Others are part of the process, too.

Therefore, the first thing is to say we are very focused today, for obvious reasons, on the particular leadership issues in Historic Environment Scotland. However, I also want to put on record my appreciation for the excellent work that has been taking place within Historic Environment Scotland in relation to matters such as skills and in partnership working. That work perhaps receives less focus because we are dealing with a significant problem at present, but we should not lose sight of the fact that its day-to-day operations continue. What it does is extremely important, and what it is doing financially is, in many respects, ground-breaking.

You also asked to understand when some of the problems emerged. I would not want to opine about that ahead of the investigations that are taking place under new leadership and the chair of Historic Environment Scotland. I think that they will throw up a lot of the answers to when exactly some of the issues took place, to what extent they were endemic or not, and what the consequences must be.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. That concludes questions from the committee, so we will move into private session.

10:35

Meeting continued in private until 11:19.

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