



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 11 March 2026

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE
6th Meeting 2026, Session 6

CONVENER

*Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)

*Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jyoti Chandola

LOCATION

The Adam Smith Room (CR5)

Scottish Parliament

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 11 March 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:32]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Jackson Carlaw): Good morning, and welcome to the sixth meeting in 2026 of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee. It is also the committee's final meeting after a very happy five years of this parliamentary session.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking business in private. Are colleagues content to take in private item 3, which relates to a decision on the publication of an anonymous submission; item 4, on the consideration of our annual report; and item 5, on the consideration of the committee's legacy report?

Members indicated agreement.

Continued Petitions

09:33

The Convener: Item 2 is consideration of continued petitions.

Anyone following our proceedings will realise that, as this is our last meeting, we will need either to close the petition under consideration or, in a very limited number of cases, to allow the petition to be carried over for the new committee to consider. We do so, fully understanding the implications; were the new committee to close a petition that had been carried over, there would be a bar of 12 months on the issue being raised again. In some instances, closing the petition allows an issue that we think might still have significant mileage to be raised again after the May election through a fresh petition. In other cases, though, we believe that, as a Parliament, we have taken the petition as far as we meaningfully can.

Redress Scheme (Fornethy House Residential School) (PE1933)

The Convener: Our first continued petition is a long-standing one. PE1933, which has been lodged by Iris Tinto on behalf of the Fornethy Survivors Group, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to widen access to Scotland's redress scheme to allow Fornethy survivors to seek redress.

We last considered the petition on 22 January 2025 and, at that time, we agreed to write to the Deputy First Minister and the leader of Glasgow City Council. Although the response from Glasgow City Council highlights a public apology, given at a meeting of full council in June 2024, written evidence from the petitioner notes that a full apology has yet to be made.

The petitioner also highlights that legal proceedings have concluded for one relevant case. She states that, with the forthcoming election, survivors do not want the issue going into the long grass and that, with the Deputy First Minister standing down, she is concerned that they will be left to start the work again. The petitioner also notes that, although the Deputy First Minister met some survivors, it was just one group, and not everyone was included.

In her correspondence to the committee, with whom, I have to say, she has been actively engaged, the Deputy First Minister notes that she has met survivors again and has written to the leader of Glasgow City Council to invite her to meet the survivors, too. However, the leader of Glasgow City Council has since stated in a response that, due to on-going litigation, she has declined to meet the survivors directly. It has also

been noted that the chief executive intends to apologise for abuse that took place at Fornethy house when she gives evidence to the Scottish child abuse inquiry.

In her recent written submission, the petitioner thanks the committee for its work and notes her disappointment that the chamber debate on the petition is unlikely to go ahead. She also makes a plea for the committee to keep the petition open for the next committee. I should say that the chamber debate is not going ahead, simply because a limited number of slots were available to the committee, and we were not able to secure one that we felt would be appropriate. The petitioner's submission also states that survivors still need formal acknowledgement, closure and compensation, and that the on-going decision to exclude them from the redress scheme magnifies suffering.

So, colleagues, this is a petition of long standing. Are there any suggestions as to how we as a committee leave matters?

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): This petition has had substantial work done on it, not only by the committee but by the Deputy First Minister, but I still feel that there are avenues that we could explore. Therefore, it is one of the few petitions that I would like to be taken forward into the next session. My recommendation is that we keep the petition open into the next parliamentary session and that the next committee explores the most appropriate means of progressing its aims.

The Convener: The same view has been widely shared with me by members of all parties across Parliament who have mentioned the petition to me.

Mr Russell, are you content?

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): Yes.

The Convener: Maurice Golden, are you content?

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Yes.

The Convener: Fine. In that case, we will keep the petition open and include it in our legacy report for the next session of Parliament.

Prostate Cancer (Screening Programme) (PE2062)

The Convener: PE2062, lodged by Bill Alexander, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce a national screening programme for prostate cancer. It was last considered on 28 January 2026, when we agreed to write to the First Minister, partly because he had raised these issues in the chamber.

The First Minister's response notes that the United Kingdom National Screening Committee's consultation does not go so far as to consider a recommendation for prostate cancer screening at a population level. He is sympathetic to campaigners' calls for national screening to be explored seriously, but he believes that it is essential for such an approach to be driven by the evidence.

Cancer Research UK has written to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, confirming that it agrees with the UK National Screening Committee's position and stressing that further evidence is required to make positive recommendations on screening. The First Minister states that the Scottish Government will continue to consider how to reach those who are at higher risk of developing prostate cancer and will continue to take actions to improve diagnosis and care pathways in Scotland.

The petitioner has provided a written submission in which he highlighted that the evidence that was gathered by the UK National Screening Committee came from an economic modelling study that was carried out by the University of Sheffield—I have shades of *déjà vu*. He noted that the study used information from the Department of Health and Social Care in England, and he raised a concern that there was no assessment of the difference in the rates of advanced prostate cancer between countries in the United Kingdom.

This is an important matter in relation to men's health. Sir Chris Hoy and other key figures in sport and public life have advocated for a more proactive approach on the matter. However, I wonder whether the issue should be a matter for the next parliamentary session with a fresh petition. Do any colleagues want to share their views?

David Torrance: The evidence is pretty sound that the UK National Screening Committee will not move its position, and the Government is sticking to what it is saying. I suggest that we close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders, on the basis that the UK National Screening Committee's draft recommendation is that population screening should not be recommended as a course of action.

Modelling work found that screening all men in the UK, regardless of their risk profile, might lead to a small reduction in the number of deaths from prostate cancer, but it would also result in substantial overdiagnosis, leading many men to undergo treatment that they do not need. It also found that, regardless of age, the level of predicted overdiagnosis means that screening is likely to do more harm than good.

The Scottish Government will also continue to consider recommendations from the UK National

Screening Committee and will take appropriate action should its recommendations change.

In closing the petition, we could advise the petitioner, if nothing is taken forward, to bring the petition back to the new committee in the next session of the Parliament.

The Convener: I am driven to the conclusion that that suggestion is probably correct, but I am totally underwhelmed by the responses that we have received. There is an awful lot of hiding behind smoke and mirrors while this cruel disease continues to blight lives and kill far too many people. We read all the time of changes in treatment, some of which are proving to be hugely effective, but all the more so if the disease is diagnosed and identified at a stage when those treatment pathways can be pursued.

Although I agree that we should now close the petition, I hope that the petitioner, after looking at the responses that we have received, will finesse the grounds for a fresh petition to allow the issue to be explored further in the next session of the Parliament. I do not believe that this committee has had the time to consider whether we would like to take evidence or pursue the issue further. I am happy to close the petition with that caveat, and I hope that the petitioner will act on that point.

Are other colleagues in agreement?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Specialist Neonatal Units (Centralisation) (PE2099)

The Convener: PE2099 is one of the most consequential petitions that we have received. The petition, lodged by Lynne McRitchie, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to stop the planned downgrading of established and high-performing specialist neonatal intensive care services across NHS Scotland from level 3 to level 2. It also calls for the commissioning of an independent review on this decision in the light of contradictory expert opinions on centralising services.

We last considered the petition on 14 January 2026, when we agreed to write to the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health. The committee sent a substantial submission that drew together the themes of all the evidence that we heard and detailed the parts of the recommendations that the committee accepted, with significant caveats in the areas in which we thought that there was scope and a need for additional work to be done.

The committee's letter set out our position regarding the new model of neonatal care, which includes our outstanding concerns. We stated that, although we recognise that the Scottish

Government's decision was made on the basis of clinical judgment to improve clinical outcomes for the sickest and smallest babies, several points remain unresolved and unclear to us.

Those points are whether adequate resources will be in place to support effective delivery of the new model, what the outcome of on-going modelling work will be and whether the Scottish Government has fully considered the provision of practical support for families, particularly for the small number of families that will be impacted by the new model of care.

The committee's key conclusion was that, in the light of the outstanding issues that have been identified, the level of provision in existing neonatal intensive care units in Scotland should not be reduced until the areas of uncertainty have been addressed by the Scottish Government.

09:45

I believe that we have the petitioner with us in the gallery today and I pay tribute to the extraordinary focus and resolve that she has shown. Again, I thank all those who took the time to meet us at the University hospital Wishaw. They shared their personal experiences and concerns about the new model of care, and those contributions have undoubtedly helped to direct our work and inform our position.

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health has responded to the committee's letter. The minister's response sets out that

"implementation will be a managed transition through a phased approach, with clear ... detailed financial and operational plans by the end of March 2026 submitted to the Task and Finish Group, with the aim to complete implementation by the end of 2026."

The end of March, of course, is after our last sitting day.

On modelling, the correspondence confirms that "capacity modelling has now been completed",

but there is on-going work

"to develop a cross-Board funding model to ensure receiving units are funded for the additional care that they provide".

The minister acknowledges that more can be done on support for families with babies in neonatal care, and the response states that the Scottish Government is

"working with Boards to ensure that the concerns are addressed."

We made a very significant and substantial representation. The minister's response is equally substantial, in so far as she thanks us very much for the bits where we have chosen to agree, but is slightly less than forthcoming on doing anything

different in any of the areas where the committee has expressed its reservations.

Therefore, before the committee decides what we now do, I note that Jackie Baillie has joined us this morning—ever keen to be on stage for the final act. Ms Baillie, is there anything that you would like to suggest to the committee before we draw our conclusions?

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): How could I resist that invitation, convener?

I understand that this is your last meeting, so I decided to rock up in support of what I think is the most consequential petition that the committee has dealt with. Like you, I acknowledge that Lynne McRitchie, a leading light in the Wishaw neonatal warriors, has joined us today. We are hoping that Tammy Johnstone-Little and her son Kai will make it through, but if not—traffic being what it is—we hope to see her at some point.

I will make a general observation before I dive into the petition. I waded through the minister's 14-page submission to the committee. I was equally aware that petitioners only get 1,000 words in which to express their view. I make the point for a future committee that, although committee members do not want to be deluged, it should be a level playing field. Therefore, 14 pages from the Government versus 1,000 words from the petitioner could be addressed for the future.

I have to say to you that it is 14 pages of selective information, which is devoid of timetables. Although I thought you were very kind in your comments about the submission from the minister, I am going to be slightly tetchier.

First, the original best start document referred to a reduction in the number of neonatal units from eight to three to five. That was very clear. It was only at the options appraisal part of the process that it became three. You will appreciate the significance of that in a moment. The original best start document was very clear that it was three to five units—not as the minister contends in the opening paragraph of her letter. It has always been our contention that it is right to reduce the number so that we have the specialist capability across Scotland, but that there did not need to be three units; there could have been four or, indeed, five. That has simply been disregarded by the minister and her team.

The second thing I would say is that the involvement of the parents took place after all decisions were made—once the options were decided. If you read through this letter, it gives the impression that they were involved right from the get-go. That is simply misleading: it is misleading to the committee and does not reflect the reality of what happened.

In the online survey that was mentioned, there was a facilitator. The survey had three questions, which were on psychological support, the young patients family fund and information about the unit. People were not allowed to respond to questions on any other points. The conversation was directed in such a way that people wanting to object to the proposal and give details of their experience were not allowed to contribute in that way. Therefore, I stress to members that to suggest that parents have been engaged is entirely misleading.

On the issue of misinformation, the Wishaw neonatal warriors have consistently, on their social media platforms, talked about the downgrading of the unit but at the moment, local MSPs are indicating that nothing is changing and there is nothing to worry about, which in itself is probably not quite accurate. I will leave that sticking to the wall.

We have real concerns about implementation. It has gone really slowly. I know for a fact that there are genuine concerns about the capacity in different locations to cope with what is happening. I will give an example of that, which happened at the tail end of last year, I believe, to two parents, who I am not going to name. They come from Glasgow. There was no space in any of the facilities in Glasgow, so they were transferred to Aberdeen maternity hospital. Twins were born to them at 24 weeks; sadly, one of the twins did not make it. They feel that they have been unable to grieve. They have been separated from family support, which has been at a distance. They were transferred from Aberdeen to university hospital Wishaw to be nearer to home, then from Wishaw to the Royal Alexandra hospital in Paisley, and then, finally, back to Glasgow. Both parents are suffering considerably as a consequence of that. Both are on antidepressants, and at least one of them remains off work. *[Interruption.]* Excuse my cough—that is the problem with having a cold.

I implore the committee to keep this petition open. I think that this is unfinished business. The committee has invested a huge amount of time in it. This change is just not capable of being implemented at this time. I have given the committee a real-life example of somebody's journey through what might end up being the new system of transfer from hospital to hospital that shows how it is not in the interests of the parents or the children.

I will leave that with the committee, with a plea to keep the petition open. That is the wish of the petitioners. I have explained to them the difference between keeping it open and closing it, and they want to keep it open.

The Convener: Thank you, Jackie Baillie. That was helpful. A lot of what you said seems to tie in with the views that we have heard.

That said, we took considerable evidence at round-tables, and I think that we were impressed with the sincerity of the professional clinicians who had arrived at the decision that they did, whether or not we felt that it was the correct decision and whether or not we were persuaded by it. Prior to taking that evidence, we might have doubted the sincerity of the motives of those who had come to the view that the new model would offer the best possible prospect for small and premature babies.

Having said that, you referred—in slightly tetchier terms—to the substance of the minister's response, with which I was also slightly disappointed.

Davy Russell, do you have a view on how we might proceed? Should the petition be closed and a fresh petition be raised, or have we not got to a point where we should be satisfied, given all the work that we have done?

Davy Russell: I would keep it open. One of the reasons why is that the Government has not explained how it will finance all of this, from infrastructure to ambulance resources—it has no idea. I submitted a freedom of information request. I think that there are too many unanswered questions for us to close it at this time.

The Convener: Let us hear from Maurice Golden, who is joining us online.

Maurice Golden: I agree with all the comments that have been made. There are probably two aspects that the committee should consider. First, there is new evidence today in the *Press and Journal* and *The Courier*, uncovering really concerning information about Aberdeen maternity hospital and whether it has capacity to absorb patients from elsewhere. That is incredibly relevant, and the proposed plans are really worrying.

The second aspect is that the scope of the petition is such that, even though the committee has done so much work on it, it will still be very much applicable in a new parliamentary session. With petitions, the debate and the information often move on and the scope might not be so useful in a future parliamentary session, but, in this case, it is still entirely relevant. On that basis, keeping the petition open is worthy of consideration.

David Torrance: I, too, am happy to keep the petition open.

The Convener: We will keep the petition open. In the legacy report, we will need to make sure that we explain what we have done and why we have

done it. It is still a matter of huge public concern. The worries that the committee has expressed about the realities of delivering the plans on the ground are only magnified by the reports that we have seen this morning from Aberdeen. Therefore, the reality of this situation must continue to be interrogated, and we will keep the petition open into the next parliamentary session. I wish all those at University hospital Wishaw well—[*Interruption.*]

I hope that Ms Baillie does not need to seek urgent medical attention herself. Thank you very much, Ms Baillie, and sayonara.

A96 Dualling (Inverness-Nairn Timeline) (PE2132)

The Convener: PE2132, which was lodged by *The Inverness Courier*, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to publish a clear timeline for dualling the A96 between Inverness and Nairn and the construction of a bypass from Nairn, ensuring that the timeline is made public by Easter 2025.

We last considered the petition in November 2025, when we agreed to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Transport. The response, dated 22 December, indicated that, ahead of setting out a delivery timetable, the Scottish Government has to look at all the possible ways of delivering the road improvement and that, at the time, consideration of the most suitable procurement and funding option for the scheme was still being undertaken. Additionally, the response indicated that any update on the scheme would need to take account of budgetary decisions, the draft infrastructure strategy and the draft infrastructure delivery pipeline.

On 2 February this year, the cabinet secretary provided a further written update to the Parliament in response to a Government-initiated question. She highlighted that the budget for 2026-27 will allow Transport Scotland to continue to take forward the work to determine the most suitable procurement option for delivering the dualling schemes and to develop the business cases. The cabinet secretary emphasised that fiscal challenges mean that the Scottish Government is planning a phased approach to delivery, starting with the Nairn bypass, which will be followed by the remaining sections of the scheme from Seafield, east of Inverness, to Balloch and then on from Balloch to the Nairn bypass.

The cabinet secretary stated that, subject to business case approval and confirmation of funding beyond the spending review period, the capital spending review allows for construction to commence on the A9/A96 Inshes to Smithton link in 2028-29 and on the Nairn bypass in 2029-30. She reiterated that a firm timetable for delivery will be dependent on the completion of preparatory

work and approval of business cases, and that it will be set as part of annual budget processes.

Members will note that we are now almost 12 months past the deadline that was requested by the petition.

The issue at the core of the petition is not dissimilar to the issue of dualling the A9, on which we undertook an extensive inquiry. We closed that other petition on 21 January, but members will recall that, in doing so, we brought to the attention of the next Presiding Officer and the next Parliamentary Bureau of the Parliament our recommendation for a dedicated committee to scrutinise major infrastructure projects in the next parliamentary session and beyond, particularly where the completion of those projects is likely to extend over more than one Parliament. As I have just said, the Nairn bypass construction will commence in 2029-30, which is almost at the end of the next session of Parliament, which will be due to conclude in March or April 2031.

10:00

We should therefore consider whether there is anything that we or our successor committee can realistically achieve with the petition in its current form and whether the matter would be best served by a fresh petition in the next session, when we hope that there will be some clarity about the dedicated scrutiny that we have recommended. I also note that, if the successor committee chooses, it can pursue the recommendation of this committee in relation to the way in which the Parliament monitors and holds to account the progress of major infrastructure projects.

Are there any suggestions as to how we might proceed?

David Torrance: I wonder whether the committee would consider closing the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders, on the basis that the Scottish Government has suggested that setting a timetable for delivery is dependent on the completion of preparatory work, including the approval of a relevant business case, and that it has indicated that work is still under way to determine the most suitable procurement option and to develop a business case. In addition, the publication date asked for in the petition is now obsolete.

The Convener: Do we agree with Mr Torrance's recommendation?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: At this point—I forgot to say this earlier—I should note that we do not have Fergus Ewing with us this morning. He tabled his

apologies, but I know that these are issues with which he has been particularly concerned.

Children (Automatic Expulsions) (PE2139)

The Convener: PE2139, which was lodged by Maria Giordano, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce automatic expulsion for children who are charged on suspicion of committing a crime against another child.

We last considered the petition on 28 January, when we agreed to write to the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland. At that meeting, it was noted that the commissioner had not provided a response to the petition, but, following the meeting, the clerks became aware that a response had been provided, and, due to administrative error, the response had not been processed or provided to the committee in advance of the meeting. Mention of that was made at the meeting subsequent to the one when the petition was last considered.

The response states that the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland shares the petitioner's concerns about the potential for children who have been harmed by a peer to find themselves in the same classroom as the person who harmed them. The commissioner's view is that such situations should be carefully managed to ensure that that does not happen and that, in some cases, it might be appropriate for an accused child to be excluded from school. The submission states that such situations require careful balancing of the rights of both children and that any decision should be made following multi-agency discussion, with an equal emphasis on the rights of all the children involved. That would require individual consideration, so the commissioner's view is that a policy of automatic expulsion or exclusion would not be compatible with children's rights.

The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland has previously raised concerns about the lack of support that is available to child victims. The submission states that there is a lack of specialist support available in many areas, which can leave children feeling unsupported, particularly when contrasted with the type of close support that children who are in conflict with the law receive.

I note that that aligns very much with the evidence received and the concerns that were raised during the committee's consideration of petitions relating to youth crime, during which we undertook on-site visits to various parts of Scotland and met many young people—and their families—who had been affected in that way, all of whom felt that the attention was very much on the

perpetrator, whereas they had very much been left to fend for themselves.

In the light of the commissioner's response, do colleagues have any suggestions as to how we might proceed and how the issue might be taken forward effectively in the next session of the Parliament? It is my view that there is an issue.

David Torrance: I wonder whether the committee would consider closing the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders, given the Scottish Government's position that it would not be lawful to employ a policy of automatic exclusion without considering the individual circumstances of each case, given that the Government has no plans to change the law on exclusions, and given that the committee has undertaken detailed work on broader issues relating to violence among young people.

In closing the petition, the committee could write to the petitioner, suggesting that she submits a new petition in the next session, in the light of the evidence received on this petition. A new petition could, for example, call for a presumption that automatic exclusion would be appropriate in extreme circumstances.

The Convener: We could also pick up on a point that we can lift from the submission by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland about its concern over the lack of support available to child victims. We could try to address that point, and potentially the exclusion of the most extreme cases, directly.

There are two things that a new petition could focus on, noting that the request in the petition before us has been rejected by the Scottish Government.

Do we think that the suggestion made by Mr Torrance, with that caveat, is the right way to go?

Davy Russell: Yes, I think that that is the way to go. In summing up, the commissioner's submission notes that automatic exclusion is a bit severe, and every individual case should be treated on its own merits. That should be the presumption.

The Convener: But if the focus was narrowed to the most extreme cases, it might be easier.

Davy Russell: Yes, but I do not think that it is good for kids not to be in school or in class. We may need a system where they are moved to another class or another school, so there should be a system set up to allow that.

The Convener: Mr Golden, do you have anything to add?

Maurice Golden: No.

The Convener: I think that, in this instance, we will close the petition, but with those recommendations. The issue could be explored further and, if we had had more time, there might have been an option to consider evidence on the issue, which is obviously a matter of considerable concern, and the petition before us ties in with the work that we did on the earlier one. We would close it with those recommendations being made. Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Grooming Gangs (PE2190)

The Convener: PE2190, which was lodged by Mandy McGurk, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to commission an independent grooming gang inquiry to identify and understand the prevalence of child grooming in Scotland. We last considered the petition on 14 January, and we agreed to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. The Scottish Government has now announced its commitment to establishing a public inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland.

The petitioner has provided two further submissions. The first welcomes the intention to establish an inquiry and emphasises that it must be supported by clear safeguards, survivor-led involvement, transparency and firm commitments to accountability. Her submission states that, as well as examining prevalence, the inquiry must examine five other areas: institutional responses and decision making; failure in interagency co-operation; the handling of disclosures and whistleblowing; any patterns of minimisation, misrecording or underreporting; and cultural or systemic barriers that prevented action.

The petitioner states that survivors in Scotland have lived in silence for too long, and that the inquiry has the potential to change that, but only if it is carried out with integrity, independence and meaningful survivor participation.

Do we have any suggestions, colleagues?

David Torrance: I think that the petitioner has achieved her aims. I wonder whether we can now close the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders on the basis that the Scottish Government has committed to establishing a public inquiry into Scotland's response to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation.

The Convener: In closing the petition, we could write to the Government, summarising the points made by the petitioner. She raised the issue with us, it has been picked up in the Parliament and the Government has now confirmed that it will hold an inquiry, but we could state the areas that the petitioner feels ought to be covered in that

inquiry—which I think the committee would be content to support. Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Child Sexual Offenders (Data Collection) (PE2208)

The Convener: Our penultimate continued petition under consideration today is PE2208, lodged by Joanna Kerr, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to place a statutory requirement on public bodies to collect statistics on the nationality, ethnicity, immigration status and religion of child sexual offenders and to collate and publish that data annually.

We last considered the petition on 21 January, when we agreed to consider the petition as part of an upcoming work programme item on the committee's on-going work. As with the previous petition, the Scottish Government's commitment to launch a public inquiry into group-based child abuse and exploitation is a significant development. At our last consideration of the petition, we also highlighted the fact that work is under way to align Police Scotland recording systems to capture the ethnicity data for suspects.

Given that that is the case, do colleagues have any suggestions as to how we might proceed?

David Torrance: In the light of the evidence, I wonder whether the committee would consider closing the petition under rule 15.7 of standing orders, on the basis that Police Scotland is working to align recording systems to capture ethnicity data for suspects; the issue of data collection is being considered in the work being done by the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group; and the Scottish Government has committed to establishing a public inquiry into Scotland's response to group-led child sexual abuse and exploitation.

The Convener: Colleagues, are we content with that suggestion?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: These matters might well resurface in the next parliamentary session, as things progress.

Davy Russell: I would also point out that, when the chief constable was here about six or seven weeks ago, she said that she was working to improve all data recording, regardless of the crime.

The Convener: The proof of the pudding will be in the eating, to borrow the cliché. Should that not be the case, there will be an opportunity for a fresh petition to be submitted to examine whether the matters need to be pursued further by a fresh committee.

Guga Hunt (PE2202)

The Convener: That brings us to the final petition that we will consider in this parliamentary session—PE2202, on stopping the guga hunt. The petition, lodged by Rachel Bigsby, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to amend section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to remove the power to grant licences for taking gannets on Sula Sgeir.

We last considered the petition on 21 January, when we agreed to consider it as part of an upcoming work programme item on the committee's on-going work. Since the petition was last considered, we have received written submissions from the petitioner, Protect the Wild and an individual, Bonnie McKay, as well as three late submissions, which I was looking at earlier. I just want to read into the *Official Report* that the late submissions that we have received, and which colleagues have had an opportunity to consider, are from Murdo MacRitchie, Gen Cannibal and Iain Morrison.

The petitioner's written submission states that the most significant unresolved issue is that the hunt is unmonitored, as licences are granted on trust with no NatureScot staff or independent observers present to verify compliance with the licence conditions. The submission also states that the licence requirement to report sick or dead birds observed during the harvest relies entirely on self-reporting, and the petitioner believes that that presents a conflict of interest.

The submission from Protect the Wild highlights that the hunt has an impact on other protected seabird species whose conservation status is already compromised, and it also states that the disturbance from the hunt is usually stressful and can lead to nest abandonment and chick mortality. Protect the Wild also believes that the continuation of the guga hunt risks undermining Scotland's efforts to be globally recognised as a leader in conservation, biodiversity restoration and sustainable wildlife tourism.

In her written submission, Bonnie McKay explains that she is a resident of the Isle of Lewis and writes in support of the petitioner. Her view is that, although the hunt was once a source of sustenance during times of hardship, that is no longer the case, and her submission states that it is reasonable and necessary to reassess the traditions in the light of modern conservation.

Of course, not all of the other additional representations that we have received agree with those views. Again, representations have been made that very much highlight the long-standing cultural and heritage issues that the matter raises, and it is emphasised that no bird killed goes to

waste and that every bird that is killed is consumed.

The petition engaged the committee, I think, and we kept it open so that we could do a bit of further work and receive representations on it. I wonder whether it is something for our successor committee to consider, but I would just note for those who have an interest in the petition that this is the committee's last scheduled meeting. We can do nothing further on the petition, and nothing further can be progressed until a new committee has considered how it wishes to take the issue forward, if we are minded to keep the petition open.

Mr Golden, do you have any thoughts on what we might do?

Maurice Golden: I agree with your suggestion that the petition should remain open, convener. The key criterion here is that the committee has had only limited time to consider it and a considerable number of issues still need to be resolved. Entirely because of that timing issue, I think that the petition should be held over for our successor committee to consider in the next session of Parliament.

The Convener: Are we agreed, colleagues?

David Torrance: I fully agree with the suggestion that has been made. This is an issue that the committee in the next session of Parliament should explore and hear from both sides on. I have to say that I am not very hopeful about the representations from NatureScot, but I am quite happy for consideration of the petition to be continued in the next session.

The Convener: Although it is very kind of you to give me a further opportunity to comment on NatureScot, Mr Torrance, I will resist the temptation on this occasion. I do not know that I want that to be my personal legacy from the committee.

Notwithstanding that, it is clear that there are strong views on all sides, and they deserve to be given a full opportunity to be aired. Are we therefore content to keep the petition open, as has been suggested?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: As that brings us to the conclusion of the public part of the meeting, I just want to say what an absolute pleasure and privilege it has been to be the convener of this committee in this session of Parliament. I thank the current cohort of colleagues—Fergus Ewing, Davy Russell, Maurice Golden and my long-standing deputy convener, David Torrance, who has been here with me from the start—as well as other parliamentary colleagues who have served on the

committee over the past five years, and the many colleagues from all parties who have taken advantage of the option that we have given to come and represent their constituents directly to the committee.

We feel that we have made a lot of progress on behalf of a lot of people, although we have sometimes been frustrated that people have been left disappointed, because there is no more that we can do. At times, I have had to explain that this is a committee of the Parliament, not a committee of the Government. We are not empowered to do anything; we are here to influence and bring about change, which, in some cases, we have been able to do.

So, I want to thank all those who have had petitions open and might be watching—and to all those who might be considering lodging a petition, I want to say, "Please do so." The Scottish Parliament's public petitions committee is the finest of any example that we have been able to identify anywhere, and your petition will be considered and heard.

With that, we move into private session.

10:18

Meeting continued in private until 10:26.

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