

TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 23 September 2008

Session 3

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TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE **17th Meeting 2008, Session 3**

CONVENER

*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
*Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)
Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD)
Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP)
*David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP)
Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Gavin Brown (Lothians) (Con)
Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Alastair Macfie

ASSISTANT CLERK

Clare O'Neill

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee

Tuesday 23 September 2008

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:02*]

Subordinate Legislation

Public Service Vehicles (Registration of Local Services) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2008 (SSI 2008/253)

The Convener (Patrick Harvie): Good afternoon. I welcome everyone to the 17th meeting this year of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee. Apologies have been received from Shirley-Anne Somerville, but we are expecting Alasdair Allan, who has indicated that he will be late for the meeting. I remind everyone that all mobile devices including phones and pagers should be switched off.

The first of the three items on our agenda is consideration of subordinate legislation. The Subordinate Legislation Committee has made no comments on the regulations; no comments have been received from members; and no motions to annul have been lodged. Do members agree that we do not wish to make any recommendations on the regulations?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Petition

Railway Infrastructure and Services (Inverness, Thurso and Wick) (PE894)

14:04

The Convener: Item 2 is consideration of petition PE894, from the Association of Caithness Community Councils, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to consider investment in infrastructure, rolling stock and timetabling as part of a strategic root-and-branch review of the provision of rail services between Inverness, Thurso and Wick. Do members have any comments on the petition?

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): The issue has been with us since the mid-1980s, when a complete plan for a shortening of the route across the Dornoch Firth and Strath Fleet was envisaged by British Rail. However, when European money had been made available, that was stopped at the last minute by the then Conservative Government and the plan was not carried through. That would have—and still could—cut 45 minutes off the journey from the north to Inverness. I defy anybody to take the journey from Inverness to Caithness and not agree that it is an outstanding problem that should be on the conscience of generations of politicians.

In the past, a social case has always been made for the route. However, after reviewing the minister's remarks, I think that if we look at transport in isolation—Scottish transport appraisal guidance is such that we think just about the known facts at the particular time when such appraisals are made—we might miss the point that some of the major strategic developments in Scotland's economy will take place at the end of that line. I am thinking about renewable energy—tidal power—in particular, for which there might be £2 billion to £4 billion of investment in the next 10 to 15 years. The route will also service the west Shetland oil and gas basin from Scrabster harbour, and it may need to carry large amounts of timber. There is also the Scapa Flow deep-sea container development and, indeed, the scope for increased supermarket traffic, although there are now more supermarkets than we require.

In that light, I think that to close the petition just because the minister thinks that the case has not been made to justify the cost of upgrading those rail services would be to kick the issue into the long grass once again.

It is a problem for us that petitions must come to some sort of conclusion. My concern is that if—as the committee's papers suggest we should—we look at this in terms of the strategic projects

review, we need to have a clear idea that the Government sees the route, which is numbered 236 on the European strategic routes map, as a priority. There are many other priorities. The big problem for most people is that there is a small population in the area and it sounds as though a lot of money is being sought. That has skewed people's thinking away from seeing the route as strategic at all. I am concerned that there are no clear guarantees in the strategic projects review that will allow us to take on board this major rail link. I therefore ask members to think about that.

I also believe that, as growth in the Caithness economy gets under way—next Monday, the First Minister will address the Caithness regeneration conference and there will be a workshop on transport links—people will try to put figures to the costs of improving the airport's radar and upgrading the harbours, as well as to the costs of the rail and road changes that must take place. However, taken as a whole, the investment that is required is a fraction of what is going to be spent on other forms of development in the near future.

My plea is for members to recognise that we have the opportunity to find some way to include the route directly—with specific wording—in the strategic transport projects review note from the committee. Many local people, including organisations in Caithness, have put a lot of money into getting professional studies done that show some of the benefits. Perhaps if more money had been available, we might have been able to look at some of the greater cost-saving elements—for example, whether the road bridge across the Dornoch firth has the structural capacity to enable it to carry passenger trains. That is one suggestion that people might have been able to consider, which could have reduced the costs of the project considerably.

There are too many items that are pertinent to the future economy of the north for us not to have a clear view about how the aims of the petition can be pursued specifically. I am therefore concerned about closing the petition and leaving the subject to the mercy of the strategic transport projects review. If we did that, I would be unhappy, and many people in the north—few as they may be as a proportion of the total Scottish population—would ask whether the Parliament was really interested in such strategic developments and was making a statement to the minister, who merely describes discussions among officials that I would say show prejudice against any development, which we saw in the e-mail traffic that we analysed when we previously considered the petition. It would be best to step back and consider how we should include some of the petition's potential in the transport projects review, because I do not believe that the Government will spend money on

examining the proposal in detail unless it is part of a wider transport projects review.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

I wholly support what Rob Gibson said. People in the Highlands have criticised the fact that transport there has been the poor relation of transport in the central belt, and the situation is even more exaggerated north of Inverness. The unemployment level in the Highlands and Islands is low by historical standards, but many of the jobs there are of low gross value added, to use the jargon; for example, many farming and tourism jobs are low paid. That is one reason why the Highlands and Islands historically qualified for objective 1 funding—the top level of structural funds—which has greatly benefited the area.

I have raised another issue before and will do so again now. Dounreay has about 1,800 workers, who probably earn more than the area's average earnings, but they are working on a decommissioning project. I have met the workforce and the management there and I am worried about other employment in the Caithness economy, for which one of the most vital aspects that everyone flags up is good transport infrastructure. Rail is vital to encouraging not just indigenous employment but employers from throughout the world to locate in the Highlands and Islands. Diversification of the Highland economy is crucial, but that requires good transport links. That is why I have supported the petition and will do so again.

The next step is up to committee members, but I would support any strategy that does not kill off the petition. For example, we could bring it back in six months' time when some of the strategic projects will have been established. Losing sight of the petition altogether would be a mistake.

The Convener: Our options are a little limited because, although the strategic transport projects review was expected to be announced soon, when the minister attended the transport conference in Glasgow, he said, "Not yet." It is difficult to be exact about when we can schedule committee scrutiny of the review, as we do not know when the document will be published, although we hope to see it before the end of the year. Scrutiny of that will give us the opportunity to consider the request in the petition.

It is also unfortunate that, as the committee noted when the cabinet secretary appeared before us the other week, we have no prior information about the projects that have been considered in the run-up to publishing the review. The Government has been rather tight-lipped about that.

I have a question for the members who want to keep the petition open. What can we do in future

discussions of the petition that we cannot do in discussion of the strategic transport projects review, which we hope to have before the end of the year?

14:15

Rob Gibson: I mentioned a couple of points. A review of the Dornoch road bridge's capacity could be done—information about that has become available recently from Transport Scotland sources. The bridge could be adapted to carry passenger trains six or eight times a day. That would not take a huge lump out of car transport, but it might be an interesting option and it would be interesting to know the cost of adaptation. That could take a big chunk out of the cost of the project, and it might bring it nearer to the required cost benefit ratio.

Secondly, people have suggested that different forms of rail vehicle should be considered in the future. We have been stuck with trains that were designed in the 1950s and 1960s—the class 158s on that line are very old-fashioned and perhaps too heavy. We should perhaps be thinking about a new generation of rail transport throughout the country, as we need more flexible vehicles.

Considering those two things would allow us to make more specific comments. I am open to committee members' views on whether we should keep the petition open or make specific points to the strategic transport projects review, but we should make specific suggestions for things that we want to examine, in line with the strategic overview that the route serves an important part of the Scottish economy.

The Convener: I suggest that we agree that our consideration of the strategic transport projects review will include specific consideration of the issues that the petition raises. If we make that commitment, the petitioners will—I hope—accept that the petition is closed but that the issues will be considered in that context.

Rob Gibson: With reluctance, I agree. However, we must make sure that the Government takes the matter seriously. It is essential that we make specific proposals about that particular route in our comments as soon as the Government brings out its proposals. The issue will make a habit of coming back, whether as a petition or otherwise.

The Convener: That is understood. I am sure that it is expected that we will make specific reference to a number of different projects, routes and services throughout the country in considering the review.

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): The committee should keep the issue open but, in

a technical sense, we should close the petition. That strengthens the case rather than weakening it, because it means that a committee of the Parliament has taken it on and will subject it to scrutiny within a strategic context when we examine the Government's thinking on the strategic transport projects review.

Rob Gibson has given us more information about other technical options. It is appropriate for the committee to carry the burden forward, rather than keeping a petition open. I know that the public might perceive the closure of a petition as a negative thing, but we know better. The petition has achieved its purpose, procedurally, in ensuring further parliamentary scrutiny of the issue.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I agree. I would not support leaving the petition open only for nothing to happen with it. Charlie Gordon is right—the petition has come before us, and there will be future discussions on the issue. We should close it now and take some of the issues forward, rather than having it on an agenda but going nowhere, which can happen.

The Convener: Are members agreed that the scrutiny of the strategic transport projects review is the correct context in which to consider the issue, and that we will close the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We record our thanks to members and petitioners who have doggedly pursued the matter.

High-speed Rail Services Inquiry (Witness Expenses)

14:18

The Convener: Do members agree to delegate to me, under rule 12.4.3 of standing orders, responsibility for arranging payment of witness expenses in relation to our inquiry into high-speed rail services?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you very much.

Meeting closed at 14:19.

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