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Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee Comataidh Eaconomaidh Dùthchail is Co- cheangailteachd

Annual Report of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee for 2020/ 21



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Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee

Remit: To consider and report on matters relating to the rural economy within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Tourism and matters falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity.



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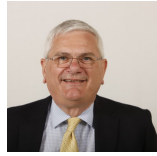
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Introduction

1. This report covers the work of the Rural Economy and Connectivity (REC) Committee during the parliamentary year between 12 May 2020 and 24 March 2021, after which the Scottish Parliament will go into the campaign recess period from 25 March to 4 May 2021. The Scottish Parliament agreed on 3 March 2021 to vary Standing Orders so that committees could not meet during the pre-election campaign period (with the exception of the COVID-19 Committee, which may be convened in an emergency). This decision was taken in response to the Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Act 2021 which provides that the Scottish Parliament will not be dissolved until 5 May 2021 to permit the Parliament to meet to legislate for a new polling date if required.
2. The role of the Committee is to scrutinise the Scottish Government's policies and expenditure on a number of matters including agriculture, forestry, fisheries and aquaculture, crofting, food and drink, transport (including major infrastructure projects), digital connectivity and island issues.

Meetings

3. During the parliamentary year, the Committee met 34 times. Of these meetings, 20 were partly in private. Items taken in private were to consider the Committee's work programme, approach papers, draft reports and to review evidence.
4. Agendas and minutes of all meetings of the Committee, including details of matters considered in private, are published on the Parliament's website.

Membership changes

5. The membership of the Committee changed during the period covered by this report, as follows:
 - Rachael Hamilton (until August 2020) was replaced by Oliver Mundell.
 - Oliver Mundell (until December 2020) was replaced by Jamie Halcro Johnston.

Covid-19

6. The Covid-19 (Coronavirus) outbreak and resulting restrictions impacted on the Committee's work. This meant that non-critical Committee business was postponed in March and April 2020. On 13 May 2020, the Committee was able to meet for the first time since March 2020, and took evidence from Scottish Government ministers on the pandemic impact to date on policy areas within its remit. The Committee also took evidence from transport, agriculture, fisheries, aquaculture and food and drink stakeholders in June 2020 on the impact of Covid-19.
7. In May 2020, the Committee invited interested individuals and organisations to submit written evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on the rural economy and connectivity in Scotland, and received 42 responses from a wide range of sectors. The Committee also conducted financial scrutiny focusing on the impact of the pandemic which is described later in this report.

Legislation

8. This section covers the Committee's scrutiny of primary legislation, legislative consent memorandums for UK primary legislation and secondary legislation.

Agriculture (Retained EU Law and Data) (Scotland) Bill

9. The Agriculture (Retained EU Law and Data) (Scotland) Bill was introduced by the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy on 6 November 2019. The Bill was introduced to provide the Scottish Ministers with regulation-making powers to amend or replace the European Union (EU) Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) elements of retained EU law in Scotland, and to provide new powers for the collection of agricultural data.
10. During the period covered by this report, the Committee considered the Bill at Stage 2 (the first stage where changes can be made to Bills, which are called amendments). The Committee considered Stage 2 amendments in June 2020.
11. The Bill was debated by the Parliament in August 2020 at Stage 3 (the next stage of the Bill where changes can be made by members or the Scottish Government 'amending' the Bill). Parliament passed the Bill on 26 August 2020 and it became an Act on 1 October 2020.

Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill

12. The Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill was introduced by the Member in Charge, Emma Harper MSP, on 14 May 2020. The Bill amends the existing law on what is called "livestock worrying", which is where a dog chases, attacks or kills farmed animals.
13. Emma Harper MSP is also a member of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee but did not participate as a committee member during the Committee's proceedings on the Bill. Christine Grahame MSP attended as a committee substitute for Emma Harper MSP.
14. In the period from September to October 2020, the Committee considered evidence on the Bill, hearing from organisations involved in investigating and enforcing the offence, representatives of dog owners and countryside access interests, representatives of livestock farmers and owners of agricultural land, the Scottish Government and from the Member in Charge of the Bill. The Committee also received 75 written submissions to its call for views on the Bill.
15. The Committee agreed its Stage 1 report on the general principles of the Bill on 14 December 2020. The Stage 1 debate on the Bill took place on 21 January 2021.
16. Stage 2 consideration of the Bill was completed by the Committee on 24 February

2021. At Stage 1, the Committee had expressed concerns about the provisions in the Bill which grant the Scottish Ministers the power to appoint inspecting bodies for the purpose of enforcement. The Committee agreed to Stage 2 amendments to remove these provisions, and so ensure that responsibility for investigating the criminal offence of livestock worrying remains with the police. The Committee had also recommended removing the provisions of the Bill proposing to grant the police and inspectors powers of entry, search and seizure without a warrant in relation to non-domestic premises. At Stage 2, the Committee agreed to amendments which removed these provisions from the Bill.

17. The Bill was debated and passed by the Parliament on 24 March 2021 at Stage 3.

UK Parliament Legislation

18. During the parliamentary year, the Committee considered and reported on four Legislative Consent Motions (LCMs).
19. These included three LCMs on the UK Agriculture Bill, which was introduced to the House of Commons on 16 January 2020. The Bill gave the UK Government broad powers to provide support for agriculture, both for an initial agricultural transition period and for the longer term. Some provisions in the Agriculture Bill dealt with matters within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, as well as altering the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers.
20. The Committee considered an initial LCM (LCM(S5)38) on the Agriculture Bill on 13 May 2020, and agreed to recommend in its report to the Parliament that consent should be given to the UK Parliament to legislate on these issues. The Committee also considered and agreed to two supplementary LCMs for this Bill on 26 August and 30 September 2020.
21. The Committee also considered an LCM on the UK Fisheries Bill (LCM(S5)41) on 19 August 2020. The Fisheries Bill was introduced in the House of Lords on 29 January 2020. The main purpose of the Bill was to provide the legal framework for the UK to operate outside of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), and to create common approaches where required to fisheries management between the Secretary of State and the Devolved Administrations. The Bill also grants Scottish Ministers additional powers to legislate in devolved areas. The Committee agreed to recommend in its report that consent should be given to the UK Parliament to legislate on these issues.

Subordinate Legislation

22. During this parliamentary year, the Committee considered 48 Scottish Statutory Instruments of which 24 were negative, 18 were affirmative and 6 were subject to no parliamentary procedure. Several of these statutory instruments were related to the UK's exit from the European Union.
23. The Committee also scrutinised 33 consent notifications where the Scottish Government sought consent for the UK Government to legislate in the UK

Parliament on matters which are within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament. This applied to secondary legislation arising from the UK's exit from the European Union.

Inquiries

24. The Committee agreed to hold an inquiry into the construction and procurement of ferry vessels in Scotland at its meeting on 30 October 2019, and this inquiry continued into this reporting year. The remit of the inquiry was to identify and address current and future challenges and opportunities in the procurement of new vessels to support Scotland's ferries network.
25. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Committee was forced to pause work on its inquiry in March 2020 and recommenced with concluding evidence sessions with Scottish Ministers in August. The Committee published its inquiry report on 9 December 2020. The Committee received a response to its report from the Scottish Government on 25 January 2021, and a Chamber debate took place on 2 February. The Committee held a further evidence session on ferries procurement, construction and policy with the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and Islands on 3 March 2021
26. The Committee has also continued to monitor progress on the recommendations that it made to the Scottish Government and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) in its 2018 inquiry report into salmon farming in Scotland. The Committee held specific evidence sessions in November and December 2020 with SEPA, Highland Council and the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation (SSPO), Scottish Government officials and the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism.

Other evidence sessions

27. During this parliamentary year, the Committee also held evidence sessions on various subjects within its remit, including:

- Transport
- Agriculture and Fisheries
- Women in Agriculture
- Digital Connectivity
- Updated Climate Change Plan

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Committee was not able to conduct any visits or external meetings during this reporting year.

Transport

28. The Committee has looked at a broad range of transport issues during the reporting year, including bus, road, rail, and ferry services and active travel.

29. The Committee took evidence on matters relating to the performance of rail services in Scotland during the 2020-21 reporting year. On 2 September 2020 and 10 March 2021, the Committee considered a transport update from the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity, which included the updated National Transport Strategy (NTS2) (which presents the Government's vision for Scotland's transport strategy for the next 20 years), and the associated Strategic Transport Projects Review 2.

30. The Committee also received regular updates from Scottish Ministers on major and topical transport schemes. On 7 October 2020, the Committee held a specific evidence session with the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity on Glasgow Prestwick Airport.

31. The Committee continued its series of regular updates to monitor rail network and rail service performance issues. On 13 January 2021, the Committee took evidence from Abellio ScotRail on rail service operations and performance, including the continued impact of Covid-19, and rail franchise issues.

Agriculture and Fisheries

32. On 9 September 2020 and 3 March 2021, the Committee took evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism as part of a series of regular updates to monitor current issues relevant to the agriculture and fisheries sectors, including the impact of EU exit on rural support schemes, fisheries management, and the developing UK Common Frameworks. In addition, the sessions covered food and drink policies, salmon farming, crofting, and women in agriculture.

Women in Agriculture

33. The Committee held a one-off evidence session with members of the Women in Agriculture Task Force on 9 December 2020. The Taskforce was set up to make recommendations to strengthen opportunities for women in the agriculture sector. It published an interim report in June 2018, before publishing its [final report](#) in November 2019. The focus of the Committee's session was to explore issues raised in the report.

Digital Connectivity

34. The Committee continued to scrutinise the Scottish Government on its commitment to achieving 100% superfast broadband in Scotland through the Reaching 100% (R100) programme and other schemes. The Committee also monitored progress in the delivery of improvements in mobile digital connectivity, using 4G and 5G technology.
35. The Committee took evidence from the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands on 19 August 2020 and 17 March 2021 on digital connectivity, receiving updates on the development of the R100 programme and interaction with UK superfast broadband initiatives.

Implications of Brexit for the rural economy in Scotland:

36. The Committee held an evidence session on the impact of Brexit on the rural economy with the Rt Hon George Eustice MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, UK Government on 25 November 2020. The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism subsequently gave evidence to the Committee on these matters on 2 December 2020.
37. On 10 February 2021, the Committee held a one-off session with stakeholders on the impact of post-Brexit requirements on Scottish exports and supply chains in Scotland's agriculture, fisheries and aquaculture sectors.
38. In addition to these specific sessions, the Committee continued to consider the implications of EU exit for agriculture, fisheries, transport and digital connectivity when taking evidence on these areas of its remit.

Climate Change Plan update

39. The Scottish Government's [Climate Change Plan update \(CCPu\)](#), which is an update to the previous Climate Change Plan published in 2018, was laid in the Scottish Parliament on 16 December 2020. The REC Committee was one of four committees scrutinising the Plan, focusing on those aspects of the plan related to rural affairs, agriculture, forestry, transport and digital connectivity. Following a call

for written views, and oral evidence sessions in January and February 2021 (which included taking evidence from representatives of the UK Climate Change Committee), the four committees responded to the Scottish Government on 4 March 2021. A joint committee debate was held on 9 March 2021.

Financial scrutiny

40. At its meeting on 24 June 2020, the Committee agreed to undertake pre-budget scrutiny on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on areas of the Scottish budget falling within the Committee's remit. Pre-budget scrutiny is designed to influence the formation of the Scottish Government's subsequent draft budget, and to examine the outcomes being derived from public spending. As part of the pre-budget scrutiny, the Committee issued a call for written evidence, and in September and October 2020 took oral evidence from stakeholders and the Scottish Government, before making its recommendations via correspondence to the Scottish Government in November 2020.
41. Following the publication of the draft Scottish Budget 2021-22, the Committee took evidence from both the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism and the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity on 17 February 2021.

Petitions

42. During this reporting year, the Committee has considered petitions PE1626, PE1703, PE1715 and PE1733. On 17 February 2021, the Committee considered all four petitions, as it was obliged to decide whether to keep the petitions open at the end of this parliamentary session.
43. PE1626 calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to legislate to regulate bus services in Scotland and to carry out an inquiry into the benefits of bringing bus services in Scotland into common ownership. The petition was referred to the Committee in March 2019 to be taken into account during Stage 2 consideration of the Transport (Scotland) Bill.
44. Although the Committee agreed to close this petition on 17 February 2021, it noted that whilst there are provisions in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 which relate to the provision of local bus services by local authorities and community bodies; bus service improvement partnerships; and bus franchises, these have not yet been commenced. The Committee therefore requested information on the timescales for their commencement from the Scottish Government. The Committee also expects its successor committee will continue to scrutinise this issue in the next parliamentary session.
45. PE1703 calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to deliver superfast broadband internet access to every household and business in Scotland, particularly in rural areas, before 2021. The Committee agreed to consider the issues raised in the petition as part of the Committee's ongoing scrutiny of the R100 programme, which it has undertaken throughout this Session, including directing specific questions to the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands. As superfast broadband internet access is not available to all households in Scotland yet, the Committee intends to recommend to its successor committee that close monitoring of broadband access and roll-out to rural areas should continue during Session 6. On this basis, the Committee agreed to close the petition on 17 February 2021
46. PE1715 calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that the salmon farming industry solely utilises a closed-containment method with full water filtering in Scottish waters. The Committee considered the petition as part of its scrutiny of the implementation of recommendations from its previous inquiry into salmon farming in Scotland. This included requesting specific written information from relevant organisations, and also including this issue in oral evidence sessions with stakeholders and the Scottish Government in November and December 2020. The Committee intends to recommend to its successor committee that scrutiny of Scottish Government on closed containment methods in the context of wider monitoring of the salmon farming sector should continue in Session 6, and so agreed to close the petition on 17 February 2021.
47. PE1733 calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to make the Right to Food part of Scots Law. On 2 September 2020, the Committee agreed to consider the issues raised as part of future scrutiny of food policy, particularly in the context of a decision by the Scottish Government, as a consequence of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, to shelve introduction of a Good Food Nation Bill

during Session 5. The Committee intends to recommend that its successor committee/s should continue to monitor the development of the Scottish Government's policy on food, which will include work on food rights. On this basis, the Committee agreed to close the petition on 17 February 2020.

Equalities

48. The Committee mainstreamed equalities throughout its work in the parliamentary year, which included the Women in Agriculture session mentioned previously, and considering the potential impact on guide dogs and other assistance dogs during scrutiny of the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill.

