

Rùnaire a' Chaibineit airson Cùisean Dùthchail agus na h-
Àrainneachd
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Dear Rob

I welcomed the opportunity to discuss the Scottish Government's Draft Budget 2014-15 with the Committee in October last year.

Following on from the Committee's report in December, I have noted its observations on a range of matters and I am providing comment where a specific recommendation has been made. These comments are attached at Annex A.

RICHARD LOCHHEAD



SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO RURAL AFFAIRS, CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE REPORT ON THE DRAFT BUDGET 2014-15

Please note that the paragraph numbers refer to those in the RACCE Committee Report on the draft budget 2012-13.

7. The Committee considers it a matter of urgency that the Scottish Government works toward establishing an —improvingll status in the indicators which are currently worsening and which threaten the improvement needed in Scotland’s biodiversity and ecosystems, and the full enjoyment of the countryside by the people of Scotland. However, it is not currently easy to determine how the draft budget supports individual National Performance Framework indicators, and therefore to what extent changes to the budget may impact on the status of indicators.

It is a matter of priority that we protect and enhance the health and condition of our biodiversity. We have a refreshed biodiversity strategy; The 2020 Challenge which puts biodiversity at the heart of the Scottish Government’s purpose of sustainable economic growth. As such it provides a strong context for both policy and financial decisions.

11. The Committee also believes it is essential that communities be given as much information as possible about likely broadband provision and speeds at the earliest opportunity so that they can plan ahead in terms of exploring other options via Community Broadband Scotland.

See answer to question 84.

16. However, the Committee reiterates concerns it raised in its scrutiny of the draft of the RPP2 document in terms of the funding of rural land use measures. Funding for the Farming for a Better Climate programme remains at a relatively low level and the Committee is yet to see conclusive evidence of the emissions abatement that the programme is delivering. The Committee is also concerned that tree planting continues to be significantly below the Scottish Government’s stated annual targets and raises questions regarding the adequacy of the budget for tree planting.

The funding for Farming For A Better Climate (FFBC) has steadily increased over recent years, and is now £273k per annum. Importantly, the Scottish Government also makes financial contributions towards industry-led initiatives aimed at providing advice to farmers on climate change mitigation and adaptation. Notable examples of such industry led initiatives include the SRDP Skills Development Scheme support for [Future Proofing Scotland’s Farming](#) and, [Scotland’s Farming Innovation Network](#), delivered by the Soil Association as well as the [Renewable Development Initiative](#) delivered by NFUS. The funding approved by SG for these projects amounts to £321,460 in total.

Evidence on the impact of FFBC measures on the environmental and financial performance of farms has been demonstrated through the FFBC Focus Farm programme. Two of the Focus Farms that participated in the 3-year programme showed a 10% and 11% reduction in their carbon footprint, with associated financial savings of £11k and £37k respectively (see embedded documents below for further details). Based on these successes the Scottish

Government will consider the amplification of FFBC through the advisory services to be delivered under the new SRDP. Additional analytical work to assess emission reduction resulting from the FFBC initiative will be carried out during 2014, making use of, amongst others, Greenhouse Gas Inventory data for 2012 which will be made available in the summer.



~~Team Efficiency... (Linking) Efficiency...~~

19. The Committee does, however, believe that further work now needs to be done by the Scottish Government domestically, particularly in terms of supporting local food initiatives and shortening supply chains.

The Scottish Government agrees on the importance of local food and of efforts to shorten supply chains. The latter point was reinforced by last year's events concerning horse meat. The benefits of local food systems and short supply chains are broad ranging and in recognising these benefits, the Scottish Government have funded the Sourcing For Growth Initiative over 2013-15 which will help shorten supply chains by linking up Scottish food producers with manufacturers interested in sourcing Scottish raw materials. The Government are also funding a Market Driven Supply Chain project over 2013-17 with Scottish Enterprise which will work with a range of stakeholders to help ensure there are efficient supply chains in the food and drink sector. This builds on the Cultivating Collaboration supply chain project from 2008-2012 which helped over 300 companies generate sales and cost savings of £10.92m.

Scottish Government is also working with Scottish Rural University College (SRUC) to deliver 'Think Local' to further develop the local food and drink sector, improving Scotland's reputation as a 'Land of Food and Drink'. In addition, the Scottish Government has allocated £1.2m to a 'Community Food Fund' (CFF) over the next three years to promote food tourism, farmers markets, food festivals and other local food support and events. There are expected to be up to 4 funding rounds each year. To date the fund has provided £205,650 to support 27 local initiatives.

23. The Committee notes with concern that people's use of the outdoors is declining, and that only 64% of people with disabilities are currently accessing the outdoors, compared to 80% of non-disabled adults. The Committee therefore welcomes current initiatives designed to improve the use of the outdoors by equalities groups (such as the work of the Highland Disabled Ramblers group), and recommends that the Scottish Government encourages further projects and ensures that disabled groups are included in informing and developing any such initiatives.

The Scottish Government notes that the Committee's concern about the performance of the National Indicator *Increase people's use of Scotland's outdoors* between 2011 and 2012. However it is important to note that there has been no statistically significant change across the longer term (2006-2012) in the proportion of adults making weekly visits to the outdoors. It is also difficult to be certain of the reasons why there was a decrease in the proportion of adults making weekly visits to the outdoors in 2012, but a number of things may have had an impact such as the wet spring and summer weather, and major events on television, including the Olympic Games and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee.



25. The Committee welcomes the Equality Statement which accompanies the draft budget and believes the rural affairs and environment section to be an improvement on last year's statement. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government continue to build on this in future statements, and provide as many examples as possible of how potential impacts on all equalities groups have been taken into account in preparing the draft rural affairs and environment budget.

The Scottish Government welcomes the recognised improvement in the Equalities Statement and will continue to build on this improvement in future years

61. However, the Committee considers it a matter of urgency that the Scottish Government work toward establishing an —improvingll status in the indicators which are currently worsening and which threaten the improvement of Scotland's biodiversity, ecosystems, and marine environment, and also the enjoyment of the countryside by the people of Scotland.

The marine environment indicator is measured by the *'proportion of key Scottish commercial species landed by Scottish fishing vessels where the TAC limit is consistent with the scientific guidance, calculated over a centred three year average'*. As a result of Iceland and the Faroe Islands increasing their TAC without agreement with other coastal states the total level of fishing for mackerel has been above the level recommended in the scientific guidance. As mackerel accounts for over 40% of the total value of stock landed this automatically led to the worsening position of this indicator. We are actively working to seek an urgent resolution to the mackerel issue, which ultimately is a matter for EU/coastal states agreement.

We are also working to provide more general improvements. Under the reformed Common Fisheries Policy there is a requirement to fish at maximum sustainable yield (MSY) by 2015 where possible and by 2020 at the latest. This change to fishing practices will reduce the incidence of overfishing and lead to the improving status of this indicator.

As part of the forthcoming Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) a range of targets and indicators have been developed which could provide a better alternative to the current performance measure. These MSFD targets and indicators have been consulted upon and submitted to the European Commission, and Marine Scotland will further assess whether they form the basis of a possible replacement to the current measure.

The Natural Capital Asset Index developed by Scottish Natural Heritage provides a comparative measure of the health of a range of ecosystems over past decades. Recent trends shows that after a historical decline in Scotland's natural capital there has been a levelling off and there are signs that Scotland's natural capital is now improving. However we recognise that this overall improvement conceals areas of continued decline and the work of the newly restructured Scottish Biodiversity Committee, chaired by the Minister for Environment and Climate Change, is focussed on improving the condition of our valuable natural resources.

84. The Committee believes it is essential that communities be given as much information as possible, at the earliest opportunity, about likely broadband provision and speeds so that they can plan ahead in terms of exploring other options via

Community Broadband Scotland. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government work with all involved in the step change programme, and in Community Broadband Scotland, to ensure that communities receive all relevant information as quickly as possible.

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that the public are provided with the latest information on the roll-out of the Step Change programme, in a clear and accessible format. The main source of information will be the “Scotland Superfast” website (www.scotlandsuperfast.com), which will be updated regularly to reflect the latest roll-out schedule including quarterly deployment announcements. The website will include a postcode checker, which will allow people to access information on whether their area will be included in the programme and, if so, in what deployment phase.

In addition, the Community Broadband Scotland (CBS) and Step Change teams have a close working relationship, with protocols agreed to ensure information is shared and their approaches are co-ordinated and aligned. This will ensure that CBS is able to provide advice to communities based on the most up to date information available, helping them to make decisions on broadband provision for their area.

The Scottish Government recently announced the first exchanges to be fibre-enabled under the deployment of the Rest of Scotland project and the second phase of deployment for the Highlands & Islands project. These span 37 areas in 13 local authority areas across Scotland. The first exchanges within the Rest of Scotland intervention area are due to go live in Summer 2014, with phased rollout across the intervention area until project completion in 2017. In addition, the first eight areas to benefit from intervention in the Highlands & Islands were announced in October 2013. These eight areas in Inverness and Moray are set to go live before April 2014.

85. Whilst welcoming the £5m that has been given to establish Community Broadband Scotland, the Committee believes it is imperative that it be given as much funding as is necessary in future years to maintain the impetus on bringing broadband to all parts of the country. The Committee therefore recommends that the Scottish Government closely monitor the work of Community Broadband Scotland, the outcomes that the £5m of funding delivers in 2014-15, and the additional income that £5m unlocks, so it can make evidence-based decisions on future funding requirements. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government consider undertaking analysis, at the earliest opportunity, of the effects of investment in different types of infrastructure projects in remote and rural areas in order to inform future spending decisions across a range of portfolios.

The Scottish Government is working closely with Community Broadband Scotland (CBS) to understand its project pipeline and to ensure that it is appropriately resourced. Current projections suggest that the initial £5m funding allocation will be sufficient to cover the first three years of CBS’ activity but we will keep this under review in conjunction with our partners.

Evaluation and analysis of the different types of broadband infrastructure investment in rural areas forms an important element of the Scottish Government’s digital strategy towards 2020. Our evaluation approach is currently being designed and will encompass both the Step Change programme and Community Broadband Scotland. The Open Market Review that was undertaken in 2012 will provide an important baseline against which to measure progress.

93. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government provide further information to it regarding how funding for flood risk management is likely to be distributed in the coming years, and confirm when guidance will be issued to stakeholders on how funding will be distributed, so that they can develop appropriate local flood risk management plans.

In terms of future funding of flood protection scheme the Government is working in partnership with COSLA about the approach to funding flood protection in future years. We currently expect the capital funding distribution to remain as part of the local authority settlement, and to take account of the development of local flood risk management plans. This will support the statutory requirement for responsible authorities to agree funding of measures in the Local Flood Risk Management Plans. We updated local authority partners on this work at the Scottish Government's recent Flooding Summit.

The flooding summit considered the significant programme of work that needs to be undertaken to deliver the first round of flood risk management plans. A report of the summit is currently being prepared and as part of the follow up, in conjunction with SEPA, further guidance on issues such as timetables will be provided to local authorities and other responsible authorities.

On the specific point about potential enhancements to flood warning systems the Minister for Environment and Climate Change as noted recently in the Chamber that he has asked SEPA if there is any additional work that may be done in addition to the work set out in SEPA's Flood warning Strategy to 2016. This discussion followed the excellent feedback received on SEPA's flood warning and forecasting systems over the Festive period where this information had allowed council and other responder agency as well as the public to be prepared and take action appropriate to the level of flood risk.

105. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government undertake an assessment of historic impacts on the water environment and identify the total associated costs to be sure that sufficient funding is made available across the budget.

An assessment of historic impacts on the water environment was made as part of the impact assessment of the first round of river basin plans. We are currently in the process of development the second cycle of river basin management plans which will set out the programme of work to meet our Water Framework Directive obligations and improve the ecological status of our water bodies. This is a challenging programme of work requiring on-going investment. To help identify the most appropriate scale of improvements for 2015-21, we will consult in the autumn on a number of scenarios in relation to the key areas of challenge, including restoring physical impacts on the water environment. SEPA is already committed to directing more resources to deliver an up-scaled programme of work but the scale of improvements will largely depend on the levels of investment available to deliver such on-the-ground improvements. We are therefore looking closely at the multiple benefits that improving the water environment provides and seeking to maximise opportunities to secure benefits from other sources of funding, in addition to the £4.5m available to support water environment improvements as part of the RAE portfolios Natural Assets and Flooding line.

108. Given the comments made above about the importance of improving flood forecasting and warning systems, and maximising benefits from related initiatives such as peatland restoration and forestry (including woodlands), the Committee recommends that the Scottish Government provide more detailed information on the future planned programme of research and development of flood protection and alleviation measures and clarify the total amount of funding available for such measures.

See answer to paragraph 93.

118. The Committee supports the Farming for a Better Climate programme in principle but, as it has previously stated, it would like to see the full effects of the programme better understood so it can be maximised to its full potential. The Committee considers that it is currently difficult to assess the value for money being achieved by the programme, and whether more focus farms⁴⁰ are required, without further analysis.

119. The Committee would therefore welcome additional information from the Cabinet Secretary to illustrate the emissions reductions which have resulted to date from the Farming for a Better Climate programme, to allow the Committee to assess the likelihood of the levels of abatement set out in RPP2 being achieved within the current levels of funding, and to properly consider whether additional funding might be required.

See answer to paragraph 16 above.

124. The Committee believes that the Climate Challenge Fund is an important source of possible funding for communities, particularly those facing specific challenges and containing equalities groups. The Committee therefore welcomes the £10.3m per annum of funding outlined in the draft budget over the next two years for the Fund. The Committee also welcomes the Scottish Government's refocusing of the Fund, given the underspend last year, which should help to ensure it is as accessible as possible to those most in need of it.

Since its establishment in 2008 the CCF has allocated over £54 million to 635 projects, across 465 communities. The CCF Refresh, launched in November 2012, has seen the fund focused on three strands:

- Broaden - encouraging community groups who are traditionally hard to reach, or whose 'raison d'être' is outwith the environment/climate field, to take climate change action, including BME young people, sports clubs, parenting groups etc.
- Deepen - encouraging established and successful CCF projects to take their climate action to the next level and support others who are new to climate action.
- Explore - supporting new, innovative and untried approaches to climate action.

Specific mechanisms have also been put in place which support applications from communities facing specific challenges and containing equalities groups. These include access to development grants, to assist communities get their project off the ground, a streamlined process for low risk low value applications (under 30 k) and the establishment of the CCF Ideas Bank, to help communities get ideas for projects and support to deliver these.

As a consequence of these mechanisms, the CCF Refresh and the successful promotion and marketing associated with this, we anticipate that the CCF will be close to fully subscribed this financial year, and potentially oversubscribed in the 14/15 year.

125. The Committee notes the Minister's comments that the Scottish Government could do better in engaging with black and ethnic minority communities regarding the CCF and recommends that the Minister ensures that efforts are stepped up in this regard. The Committee further recommends that those managing the fund be as flexible as possible in considering bids from groups who are not physically located in one local authority area.

Efforts have been stepped up to increase BME awareness and access to the CCF. This includes the CCF administrator, Keep Scotland Beautiful (KSB), identifying a dedicated resource to support this sector, in addition KSB have formed a successful partnership arrangement with CEMVO (Council for Ethnic Minority Voluntary Organisations in Scotland) to promote the fund and support communities through the application process. As a result a total of 27 Development Grants and 9 Full Grants have been awarded to BME groups in CCF 3 (2012/13-15/16) to date.

134. The Committee notes the issue of funding restoration projects on peatlands that contain trees and recommends that the Scottish Government seeks to make funding available, from within existing budgets, to improve research in this area to better inform peatland restoration work in the future.

The Scottish Government is providing funding for research on peatlands that contain trees, and this is currently being undertaken by Forest Research and the James Hutton Institute. Much of this research is collaborative, and will reflect wider work and objectives, such as the Climate Xchange initiative and the Scottish Soils Framework. An appraisal of current research and an indication of future research directions may form part of the National Peatland Plan, of which Forestry Commission Scotland is a key partner, and which will be developed during Spring 2014.

146. The Committee notes the explanation of the increased £25m in the Business Development budget for 2015-16 as being money available (via the UK Government) for loan finance to sectors which may require intervention. The Committee notes that the Cabinet Secretary has not yet decided how this money should be spent and therefore recommends that the Scottish Government provide the Committee with further detail on the use of this money at the earliest possible opportunity. The Committee also recommends that, in considering how best to use this £25m in terms of loans with the most appropriate return (economically, environmentally and socially), the Scottish Government carefully consider all the evidence given to the Committee, and all the recommendations it has made in this report.

The Business Development budget was increased in 2015-16 as a result of £30m being secured for financial transaction funding. This could take the form of loan finance being provided to sectors requiring intervention and a number of scenarios are currently being considered which could enable investment into the food and drink or fishing industries. The tentative plans are at their very early stages of development and will be considered further in light of the evidence and recommendations emanating from this report, in conjunction with the terms laid down by UK Government. The Committee will be fully apprised of all plans as they are further developed.

151. The Committee broadly recognises that the research budget for 2014-15 is appropriate as long as the research institutions are successful in maximising other sources of income. However, the Committee does have some concerns about the potential negative impact on the levels of excellence being delivered by Scotland's research institutions should the other sources of funding not reach expected levels. The Committee therefore recommends that the Scottish Government monitor the external funding being secured by all of the research institutions, to ensure that the total level of funding, both from the Scottish Government and from other sources, is sufficient to deliver the breadth of research required by the RAE portfolio, and the necessary levels of excellence.

The Scottish Government is regularly and actively engaged in discussions with the research institutions to secure their long term scientific vigour and financial sustainability. A performance management framework provides regular information on levels of income from non SG sources. A review is also underway which will include an assessment of the scientific quality and scientific impact of work delivered as part of the current portfolio.

160. However, the Committee notes with concern that the budget for Marine Scotland shows a trend of declining each year, from £49m in 2013-14, to £48.4m in 2014-15, and to £47.9m in 2015-16. While these reductions are relatively small, the Committee notes the importance that the draft budget places on marine expertise and capability, and the ever-increasing demands for research in the marine environment. The Committee therefore recommends that the Scottish Government put effort into maximising the full potential of data gathered by the skippers and fishermen in the Scottish fleet.

A baseline transfer from Marine Scotland of £0.4m into another budget line has meant that the level of decline is not as great as the figures suggest and will be largely managed through the achievement of greater efficiencies.

In respect to 'citizen science' we have made extensive efforts to involve fishermen in gathering data and carrying out research trials over the last year. Last spring we agreed a wide-ranging programme of survey and monitoring work to be carried out by fishing vessels to assess the state of fish stocks on the West Coast of Scotland. As part of the programme, a funded training event was held at Aberdeen University for skippers and crew to learn the basics of fish sampling. Vessels with trained crew are now participating in quarterly surveys carried out between December 2013 and September 2014. Each survey event utilises 5 vessels and covers the entire west coast of Scotland. We have also carried out discard-free research trials using fishing vessels; these included a demersal trial last year and a trial carried out by a pelagic fishing vessel.

We run a partnership-based Discards Steering Group with the industry and as part of this Group's work we are currently examining proposals from the industry to use additional fishing vessels to undertake further research work in preparation for the landing obligation (discard ban). This Group is also supporting an initiative taken by a number of fishing vessels in Shetland to research current levels of discarding and to use this evidence to help identify ways of implementing the landing obligation.

167. The Committee was also concerned by the significant reduction in the national park authorities' budget in 2014-15, and the trend of reductions continuing in 2015-16.

The Scottish Government notes the Committee's concern about the apparent reduction in the National Park Authorities' budget in 2014-15. However, there are no changes proposed

in the draft Budget to the National Parks' budget set at the Spending Review 2011. The only change that the Scottish Government has made to their budget over the Spending Review period has been to increase agreed budgets in 2012-13 (by £2.9 million) and 2013-14 (by £1.8 million) to fund Capital projects that have been important to the protection of the environment, as well as being hugely significant in supporting the rural economy and communities. The budget reduction proposed in 2015-16 is mainly the effect of the Parks' estimated reduced requirement for 'non-cash' to cover the cost of depreciation of assets.

The draft Budget for 2014-15 will enable us to continue to invest in our National Park Authorities to: support the delivery of their National Park Partnership Plans, enhance biodiversity and visitor experience, generate sustainable economic growth, develop thriving communities; and provide leadership in balancing development and conservation in some of Scotland's most treasured landscapes.

173. The Committee believes that further work now needs to be done by the Scottish Government domestically, particularly in terms of supporting local food initiatives and shortening supply chains, and therefore welcomes the Scottish Government's planned refresh of its food policy and recommends that any refresh be subject to a full public consultation. The Committee asks the Scottish Government to keep it updated on its progress on this issue

The Scottish Government notes the Committee's interest in the refresh of our food and drink policy and will keep it informed of progress

174. The Committee also recommends that the Scottish Government examine the outcomes being achieved by the Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society with a view to considering increasing its funding in future budgets.

The Scottish Government is in regular dialogue with SAOS about its work programme and will explore the issue further in the light of our refresh of our food and drink policy.

188. However, the Committee cannot fully assess the extent to which the £36m is sufficient to deliver the required level of tree planting necessary to meet the targets, given that the target of 10,000 hectares a year has been missed for the last two years. The Committee is concerned that these targets have been missed, especially given the importance of tree planting to meeting climate change targets in the future, and asks that the Scottish Government provide evidence to the Committee of how it plans to catch up on planting year-on-year, and how much funding this will require, until the target of 100,000 hectares of new woodland is reached in 2022.

As a result of improvements to the SRDP and activity on the national forest estate, new woodland creation nearly doubled between 2009-10 and 2010-11, from 2,700 hectares to 5,100 hectares. A further significant increase was achieved in 2011-12 with a rise to 9,000 hectares. The level of planting fell in 2012-13 to 7,000, in part due to the coldest spring in 50 years restricting the opportunity to plant trees. However Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) are expecting there to be about 9,000- 10,000 hectares of new planting in each of the next two years and this will largely be funded through the SRDP, but also including planting on the national forest estate. To date the main issue limiting the amount of woodland creation has been the low number of applications. In most years FCS have struggled to achieve 10,000 hectares per year despite approving all the acceptable standard applications received under SRDP.

So far the £36m SRDP forestry budget has been adequate to fund all the woodland creation applications that have been received. The issue has generally been that FCS haven't received enough applications to fully spend the budget. Furthermore when they have supported enough applications, up to 10% of approved contracts haven't been delivered. We have therefore started to account for the anticipated level of drop out by approving beyond the annual target area and spend.

Within existing budgets, there is some potential to catch up in future years, for example where we can make use of unspent budgets from previous years. This is possible as the SRDP Euro budget is set over 7 years and if funds are not used in the early years they can be drawn on in later years. Approximately £4m (in Euros) of the SRDP forestry budget which wasn't spent on forestry projects has been carried over from earlier years and will be available, in addition to the £36m budget, for funding woodland creation projects in 2014/15 and 2015/16. Therefore we can be confident that the current £36m budget will be adequate for 2014/15 and 2015/16.

Turning to new planting from 2016 onwards, this will mainly be funded by the SRDP 2014-20. FCS are planning to make improvements to the new scheme, so that it is simpler to apply for and more attractive to applicants. It is expected that adjustments will be made to the grant rates to better target the types of woodland the Scottish Government wishes to see, so that some grant rates will be increased and whilst others will be reduced. The net effect is that we expect there to be increased interest and demand for woodland creation, but the average cost per hectare will be slightly lower than at present. Most, approximately 80%, of the SRDP woodland created to date has been native broadleaved woodland, the cost of which is much higher than for other types of woodland, such as conifer woodlands.

FCS are also planning to include a mechanism to negotiate a lower grant rate for larger planting schemes where there are economies of scale. This will allow FCS to ensure that we improve the value for money where the cost of delivering schemes is less per hectare because of the large size of the planting area.

FCS will not know how successful the next SRDP will be until after it opens in 2015. However, they will then be able to quickly assess whether there is sufficient interest in woodland creation to be able to catch up against the targets. If the planned SRDP improvements and changes lead to an increase in demand there would also need to be a review of the SRDP forestry budget at that point. If the revised SRDP does not lead to an increased level of woodland creation FCS will have the opportunity to make further revisions to the woodland creation options, by for example adjusting the rates of grant. At this stage it is the view of FCS that they remain confident that the planned changes to the SRDP will lead to a significant increase in the level of interest in woodland creation.

206. The Committee asks the Scottish Government to update it on how the rural equalities review mentioned in the Equality Statement has been funded and how it will influence future spending decisions.

The rural equalities review was produced in-house by a Research Officer within RESAS. The work has already been used to inform the Equalities Impact Assessment for the development of the Scottish Rural Development Programme and will be available for to inform the Equalities Impact Assessments of other Policy areas in the future.

215. The Committee notes with concern that performance against the indicator which measures people's use of the outdoors is currently worsening, and that, within that, the number of disabled people accessing the outdoors is only 64%, compared with 80% of non-disabled adults.

See response to paragraph 23 above.

216. The Committee welcomes initiatives, such as the work highlighted by the Minister between the Forestry Commission and NHS Scotland to enable access to forest estates for use by hospital patients and the wider community, and emphasises the need for such projects to also ensure access is possible for disabled groups. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government encourage further projects and does all it can to promote the use of access initiatives.

The Scottish Government and its agencies will, as set out in the Equality Statement, continue to support initiatives to improve access to the outdoors. Making the outdoors more accessible for disabled people and people in other equalities groups is certainly a priority for Scottish Natural Heritage and something they aim to deliver through work with partners and in the delivery of their grants.

217. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government familiarise itself with the work of the Highland Disabled Ramblers group, and other such groups and projects working across Scotland to improve access to the outdoors for disabled groups, with a view to including details of such work in future draft budget equality statements.

The Scottish Government is aware of work across Scotland to promote access to the outdoors for people with limited mobility. For example the Scottish Borders Council Countryside Ranger Service has worked with the Borders Disability Forum, *Walkit* Group and The Katherine Elliot Centre in producing a booklet "Countryside Visits: Easy Access to the Countryside" listing over 30 places to visit with some access for wheelchair users. *Walkit*, largely funded by NHS Borders, aims to encourage people to take up walking as part of a healthier lifestyle.

Access authorities (local authorities and National Park Authorities) have also been required, under the access legislation, to draw up a core path plan to give the public reasonable access throughout their areas. Many people prefer to use paths, and a well-marked, clearly defined system of core paths, is intended to encourage more people to enjoy the outdoors. The core paths system as a whole is intended to cater for all types of user (e.g. walkers, cyclists, horse-riders and people with disabilities), although not all core paths are designed for every type of user.

218. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government, as part of its work to provide more transparent links between the National Performance Framework and the budget in future, also provides a more explicit link between the National Performance Framework and equalities issues.

Information on the links between the National Indicator *Increase people's use of Scotland's outdoors* and equalities issues is provided by the 2012 Scottish Recreation Survey. This shows that around a fifth of adults living in Scotland have a long-term illness, health problem or disability which has lasted or is expected to last at least 12 months and which limits their

ability to participate in outdoor recreation. In terms of the Indicator measure, 31% of those with a health problem or disability visited the outdoors on a weekly basis, compared to 42% of all adults.

The Survey shows that adults with a health problem or disability attributed their lack of participation almost entirely to 'poor health' (mentioned by 66%) and/or 'old age' (mentioned by 21%).