



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 14 June 2011

Session 4

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PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2011, Session 4

CONVENER

*David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Bill Walker (Dunfermline) (SNP)

*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

Committee Room 4 and Committee Room 5

Scottish Parliament

Public Petitions Committee

Tuesday 14 June 2011

[Bill Walker opened the meeting at 14:00]

Interests

Bill Walker (Dunfermline) (SNP): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Bill Walker, the oldest member present. As such, I am pleased to welcome you to the first meeting of the Public Petitions Committee in the fourth session of the Scottish Parliament.

I remind all those present, including members—I have just remembered myself—that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be turned off completely because they interfere with the sound system, even if they are on silent. Please put them off completely, as I will do with mine right now.

We have a full house and no apologies.

The first agenda item is a declaration of interests. In accordance with section 3 of the code of conduct for members of the Scottish Parliament, I will invite members to declare any interests that are relevant to the committee's remit. I remind members that any declaration should be brief but sufficient to make clear to any listener the nature of the interest.

I will start by making my own declaration and then ask each individual member to make his or her declaration. Members will all have received an envelope with a reminder of what they have said previously.

I am still a Fife councillor and will be for one year until next May. The issue might come up from time to time, so I will make the appropriate declaration if it does. Being a councillor, I also serve in a voluntary capacity on other bodies and I will make the appropriate declaration at the right time. Those are all the interests that I have to declare.

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I have no interests to declare.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I have no registrable interests relevant to the committee's remit.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Given the nature of the petitions that come before the committee, I declare membership of the following organisations: the National Trust for Scotland; Historic Scotland; the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Scottish Wildlife Trust. I am also a member of the Unite trade union. I am

declaring those interests because I am aware that some of those organisations will be asked to give evidence or will submit petitions to the committee during the coming months and years.

Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP): I, too, am a local government councillor until next year, and I am sure that from time to time I will have interests to declare when something about local authorities comes up. I am also the chair of two sub-groups of the Association for Public Service Excellence: the United Kingdom social care sub-group; and the Scottish sports sub-group. Those might be an issue at some point. Other than those, I do not have any interests to declare.

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I have no interests to declare that are immediately relevant to the committee. However, like John Wilson, I am a member of the National Trust for Scotland and of the RSPB, and those might require a declaration at some point in the future.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I am a councillor on Renfrewshire Council. I also know members of the Renfrewshire parent council forum, which has a petition lodged. I am also a member of the trade union Unite, which might be asked to give evidence at some point in the future.

Bill Walker: I thank everyone very much.

Convener

14:04

Bill Walker: Our second item of business is to choose a convener. The Parliament has agreed that only members of the Scottish Labour Party are eligible for nomination as convener of the committee. That being the case, I seek nominations for the position.

Sandra White: I nominate David Stewart MSP.

Richard Lyle: I second that.

Bill Walker: There are no further nominations. Are you prepared to serve, David?

David Stewart: I am.

Bill Walker: We have received only one nomination, so I ask the committee to agree that David Stewart MSP be chosen as convener of the committee.

David Stewart was chosen as convener.

Bill Walker: I congratulate David Stewart on his appointment and hand over the chair for the remainder of proceedings.

The Convener (David Stewart): I thank committee members for choosing me as convener.

Deputy Convener

14:05

The Convener: Item 3 is to appoint a deputy convener. As members will be aware, the clerk's note—paper 2—sets out the procedure for doing so. Members will see that the procedure is very similar to that for selecting a convener.

The Parliament has agreed that members of the Scottish National Party are eligible to be chosen as deputy convener of the Public Petitions Committee. That being the case, I invite nominations for the position.

John Wilson: I nominate Sandra White.

Richard Lyle: I second that.

The Convener: One nomination has been received, and I therefore ask the committee to agree that Sandra White MSP be chosen as deputy convener of the Public Petitions Committee.

Sandra White was chosen as deputy convener.

The Convener: I congratulate Sandra White on her appointment.

Work Programme

14:06

The Convener: Item 4 invites the committee to consider its approach to developing a work programme. I refer members to paper 3, which the clerk has prepared; I trust that members have had an opportunity to consider it. While I do not intend to have a full discussion on the work programme today, it would be helpful to have members' indications of and views on any areas of particular interest. I invite comments.

Sandra White: It is very important that we have a planning event, as the paper proposes. The Public Petitions Committee is a fantastic committee: a mix of petitions come in, and it is incumbent on us all to familiarise ourselves with the subjects that are raised. I propose that we have a further meeting, perhaps in August or maybe even before, to go over the work programme. If any specific interests are raised in the petitions, we can get expert advice not only from the clerks but from other experts too.

Nanette Milne: I endorse what Sandra White has said. It is important for us to have a meeting at the start of the session to discuss the way forward. I was a member of the Public Petitions Committee in the previous session of Parliament, as was John Wilson. We had a very busy session in which we dealt with an increasing number of petitions, and it was quite hard work to get as many of them resolved as we did before the session's end.

We need to progress the petitions that we have already been dealing with, and I presume that quite a lot of new ones have come in since the dissolution of Parliament. We need to sit down and discuss what we are going to do.

Neil Bibby: I agree with the previous comments about the need for a business planning meeting over the summer. We need to look at the 43 petitions that have been carried forward, and we need to get through a number of new petitions. A planning meeting will help with that work.

John Wilson: As Nanette Milne has indicated, as members of the previous Public Petitions Committee we tried to clear up as many petitions as possible before the new session. Unfortunately we did not manage to clear the decks completely and there are a number of on-going petitions, including those on the bus safety campaign.

In March, prior to dissolution, Keith Brown, in his then role as Minister for Transport and Infrastructure, attended a committee meeting to update us on discussions with the United Kingdom Government about Government departments' remits and roles and whether issues relating to

bus safety can be devolved to the Scottish Government. I suggest that we invite Keith Brown to our next meeting, to update us further on discussions between the UK Government and the Scottish Government about how we take the issue forward.

It is clear that we need a work planning day, so that we can map out how to deal with petitions that have been carried forward as well as new petitions that have been brought to the committee.

The Convener: Thank you. That point is in my list of action points. If members will bear with me, I will go through the action points after you have all commented.

Bill Walker: I agree that we should invite Keith Brown to the committee. In view of the nature of the petitions, it would be good to get him here. Did I hear correctly that the plan is to have a meeting in August?

The Convener: Yes.

Bill Walker: I wanted to make sure of that. I had better not plan any holidays then.

The Convener: For clarity, the intention is that the clerk and I will liaise with all members to get an appropriate time for what in the old jargon was called an away day but is now called a business planning meeting. It is important that the committee has an opportunity to consider its strategy for the next five years. No date has been cast in stone. The clerk and I will get back to you on that.

Richard Lyle: I agree with members' comments about the planning day and the proposal to invite the Minister for Housing and Transport to the committee. Bus safety has always been a concern for my council—North Lanarkshire Council.

The Convener: I thank you all for your helpful comments. I throw something else into the pot. The previous committee's legacy paper is excellent and contains helpful pointers for this committee for the future. For example, we could consider the role of external visits. A number of members of the previous committee made visits around Scotland, which is good in the context of the Parliament's outreach work.

I particularly liked the idea of the young petitioners meeting—a day that was only for young people—which was an excellent initiative. I also liked the idea of video conferencing and using the Parliament's technology to ensure that people do not always have to come to the Parliament. That makes a lot of sense in times of strict climate change legislation. I noticed, too, that the previous committee carried out in-depth inquiries—I think that it did three such inquiries, which were very helpful. There are different tools, which we should perhaps consider in depth. The business planning

meeting would be the appropriate time for us to do that.

We have a series of decisions to make—one or two members have indicated their view on some of the issues. It is suggested in the work programme paper, first that we consider holding a business planning event at some point during the summer. Do members agree to have such an event?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you. The clerks and I will liaise with members on the details of the event and make arrangements to prepare the necessary papers.

Does the committee agree to meet on Tuesday 28 June to consider eight of the carried-forward petitions?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Okay.

I think that I know what members will decide on the next issue, which is whether to invite the Minister for Housing and Transport to our next meeting to provide an update on issues that have been raised in the school bus safety petitions. An alternative suggestion is provided, but I think that members made it clear that they want the minister to appear. Do members agree to invite him?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you. Finally, does the committee agree to consider the new petitions at our next meeting? If so, do members want to invite any of the petitioners to make a short presentation at the meeting?

14:15

John Wilson: Nanette Milne might want to comment on this. The convener and clerks of the previous committee always had to make hard decisions about which petitions to bring forward for oral presentation. I would like to think that we can continue the previous committee's approach, whereby the convener and clerks would consider the issue very carefully. We cannot have an oral presentation on every petition—if we did that, we would have even longer meetings than we had in the previous session of the Parliament. I ask the convener and clerks to bear in mind that we should make clear to petitioners who are not invited to give a presentation the procedures that the committee adopts for selecting petitions for oral presentation, because in the previous session some petitioners were less than happy when they were told that they would not be given that opportunity. We should ensure that people who are called understand the importance of the presentation; we should also ensure that people understand that not being asked to give a

presentation does not diminish the seriousness with which the committee will consider their petition. I wanted to put that on the record.

Nanette Milne: I agree with John Wilson. By and large—*[Interruption.]*

The Convener: We are having a technical problem, as they say on the BBC. We will pause for a moment.

14:16

Meeting suspended.

14:25

On resuming—

The Convener: I reconvene the committee in this new room—we promise to pay the bill next time. *[Laughter.]* Sorry for the inconvenience.

I remind the committee that we were looking at whether we should consider new petitions at the next meeting and, if so, whether we wish to invite any of the new petitioners to make short presentations at that meeting. Nanette Milne was halfway through her contribution; perhaps she could start again.

Nanette Milne: Yes—I think that I can remember what I was going to say.

As John Wilson said, in the previous committee it was usually left to the convener and the clerk to decide which of the petitioners would be invited to speak in person, and often there were three or four individual petitioners at a meeting. By and large, that worked well. Just occasionally, there would be informal consultation with other committee members on particular petitions, raised by either committee members or the convener. That system worked pretty well, and I would be happy for it to continue.

The Convener: Are there any contributions from other members?

Neil Bibby: If it has been the procedure before, I am happy for the convener and committee clerks to agree the new petitions on which oral evidence will be given. I would particularly like to draw attention to the petition from the Renfrewshire parent council forum. I know that it has been involved in a number of issues, and I think that it would be helpful for the committee to hear evidence from it in future, although I am happy to leave that decision to the convener.

The Convener: We are considering new petitions at the meeting on 28 June—that is what we agreed earlier. I think that it would be useful to go into more detail on the wider issue of the role of the convener and clerks in the filtering approach at our work planning meeting, at a date still to be

determined. I will obviously look carefully at what happened in the previous committee, and I welcome the comments from committee members who have experience. I will certainly involve Sandra White, as deputy convener, in regular meetings and will take her advice, as she has a lot of experience on the committee. I thank members further.

If there are no other points that members wish to raise, I will close the committee meeting formally but ask that members stay behind for a few seconds as we have some housekeeping points that we need to determine about the next meeting. The *Official Report* of this meeting will be available on Thursday.

Meeting closed at 14:28.

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