

Meeting of the Cross-Party Group in the Scottish Parliament on End of Life Choices

Tuesday 28th September 2021
at 18:00
Online, via Zoom.

Scottish Parliament Headquarters
Holyrood, Edinburgh EH99 1SP

AGENDA

1 Welcome, introductions and apologies

Attendees: Liam McArthur MSP, Karen Adam MSP, Elena Whitham MSP, Joe Fitzpatrick MSP, Katy Clark MSP, Douglas Lumsden MSP, Rona Mackay MSP, Collette Stevenson MSP

Non-MSP attendees

Dr Sorcha Hume (Friends at the End)
Alyson Thomson (Dignity in Dying)
Fraser Sutherland (Humanist Society Scotland)
Jack Norquoy (Office of Liam McArthur MSP)
Josh Aaron-Mennie (Office of Karen Adam MSP)

Apologies from Jackson Carlaw MSP, Neil Gray MSP, Meghan Gallacher MSP, Amanda Ward (Office of Liam McArthur MSP)

2 Office bearers

Co-conveners to be Rona Mackay MSP and another (Liam McArthur MSP to speak to Douglas Lumsden MSP/Rachael Hamilton MSP/Jackson Carlaw MSP offline)

Secretariat to be held by Dr Sorcha Hume, CEO of Friends at the End

3 Matters arising

Public consultation

Liam advised MSP colleagues to direct people to the smart survey rather than e-mailing him directly. Consultation has had over 1400 responses so far with over 95% in support of the Bill. Liam encouraged colleagues to promote the consultation between now and its closure on Wednesday 22nd December.

When asked how we keep momentum going with consultation, Liam advised that the campaigning organisations would be on top of this. Alyson Thomson explained that Dignity in Dying would be publishing a report on individuals who have taken their own lives in this country, which will be accompanied by a public facing ad campaign. She suggested that a way that MSPs could help maintain momentum was by publishing columns or opinion pieces in local newspapers. The various campaigning organisations can help with providing copy for this purpose.

Opinion change

Karen Adam asked why the group felt that the public has changed its opinion on assisted dying in recent years and suggested that it might be due to the pandemic; people being more aware of their mortality and end of life choices. Liam answered that we have over 20 years of international evidence of how assisted laws work effectively in other jurisdictions and posed that more individuals have lived experience of loved ones having a bad death. Alyson further explained that in the early months of the pandemic, visits to Dignity in Dying's sister website, Compassion in Dying, which contains information about how to prepare for the end of life, soared. She believes that the pandemic focused people's minds on mortality-based issues and that the general feeling amongst the public is that we need a new standard of how we die; the public want to discuss end of life issues.

Pensions

Collette Stevenson asked if anyone knew what would happen to pensions if it were in someone's will that they want an assisted death in certain circumstances. Liam explained that he had met with the Association of British Insurers prior to the consultation being launched in order to get a steer from them. It appears that nothing needs to be put into the legislation as payments of life insurance are generally paid upon diagnosis of a terminal illness but that he would meet with them again in due course. Alyson explained that in other jurisdictions, the cause of death is noted on death certificates as the terminal illness that the person suffers from and not 'assisted death,' so death in service benefits would be payable.

Debate

Liam explained that it was important that MSPs remember that with momentum behind us and with a change in attitude amongst MSPs in general, that the upcoming debate needs to be about the actual proposals being brought forward; to focus on the detail of the Bill and not extremes of opinion. We need to make sure that the Bill passes, it is not assured. Professional organisations such as the BMA can now engage in the debate as they have changed their stance from one of opposition to one of neutrality.

Committee

Joe Fitzpatrick asked which committee the Bill would be considered by. Liam confirmed that it would be the Health & Sport committee.

Disability groups

Rona Mackay asked whether disability groups should be invited to meetings. Liam agreed that this was a good idea. He explained that he had recently met with Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP who is opposed to assisted dying but doesn't plan to actively campaign against the cause or be a spokesperson for the opposition. She offered to facilitate discussions with disability groups. Liam acknowledged that the assisted dying debate could open the forum for advancing debate in other areas, such as equality for disabled people.

Canada

Elena Whitham highlighted the extension of assisted dying legislation in Canada and shared her concern that some people may be worried that similar may happen here. Liam suggested that we contact representatives from groups in

Canada to speak to how well the law works there at future CPG meetings. Alyson added that in Scotland, it is the parliament that creates and amends laws, not the courts. The law that we enact will be the law that we get. Conversation can be shifted to places where the law has not been extended. We can also remind people that Canada has seen an increase in investment in palliative care and an improvement in doctor/patient relationships since the law was passed there.

7 Any other competent business

Liam asked colleagues to come back to Sorcha and/or Rona with ideas for a focus for future CPG meetings.

8 Date of next meeting

TBC once CPG has been re-registered with the SPPA committee