



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

Tuesday 8 March 2016

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WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

5th Meeting 2016, Session 4

CONVENER

*Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab)

*John Lamont (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

*Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP)

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)

*Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Robin Haynes (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Simon Watkins

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Welfare Reform Committee

Tuesday 8 March 2016

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Hugh Henry): Good morning, and welcome to the fifth meeting in 2016 of the Welfare Reform Committee, which will be our last meeting in this parliamentary session. Christina McKelvie is stuck in traffic. Everyone should please make sure that mobile phones and other electronic devices are switched off or turned to airplane mode.

Under agenda item 1, do we agree to take item 4 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Subordinate Legislation

Council Tax Reduction (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2016 (SSI 2016/81)

10:30

The Convener: For item 2 on our agenda, we have with us Robin Haynes, who is head of the council tax unit in the Scottish Government. We will take evidence on an instrument that is subject to negative procedure, which will amend the principal regulations concerning council tax reduction in order to reflect the United Kingdom Government's uprating of social security benefits for 2016-17, and make a number of additional and consequential amendments. I invite Robin Haynes to brief the committee.

Robin Haynes (Scottish Government): Good morning and thank you. Myself or one of my colleagues have put in an annual appearance at the committee at a similar time since the council tax reduction scheme was introduced in 2013. The statutory instrument that has been laid and which is the subject of this morning's discussion continues that pattern of reflecting changes made to the social security system by the UK Government. That very much reflects the policy commitment that Scottish ministers gave when council tax benefit was abolished that all individuals' net council tax liability would remain as it would have been had council tax benefit not been abolished. Our nearest comparator has been the housing benefit scheme and changes that were made to that, because historically, entitlement to council tax benefit and to housing benefit have been subject to exactly the same criteria, so it has been used as a yardstick.

In essence, the changes reflect amendment to the working-age regulations—the Council Tax Reduction (Scotland) Regulations 2012. Normally, the allowances within the applicable amount are uprated using the consumer prices index by the UK Government, but in the relevant period the CPI was negative, so the allowances are unchanged. The equivalent amendments to the pension-age regulations, the Council Tax Reduction (State Pension Credit) Regulations 2012, reflect the UK Government's triple lock on all entitlement for pensioners.

There are one or two other bits and pieces of legislative reference updating—for example, regulation 4 will change some references to reflect new policy schemes. I do not know how many people from Wales who are subject to the criteria will come, but there is bound to be at least one if this update is not done—hence the changes to regulation 6.

The Convener: You mentioned that in the period concerned, CPI was negative, so there is no change. What period was that?

Robin Haynes: September.

The Convener: Do you mean the year until September?

Robin Haynes: I think so; I will have to get clarification, but my notes say that September CPI was negative: it was -0.1 per cent.

The Convener: Right. Is that still the case? For this year, therefore, any changes would be in September.

Robin Haynes: The reference period would be to September, but the scheme from week 17 onwards will be a matter for an incoming Scottish Government.

The Convener: Does that include the uprating method that is used? Could the Government decide not to apply CPI and to revert to what was used before?

Robin Haynes: A new Government could change just about anything in the scheme, if it so desired. The scheme is enabled under powers in the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and the scheme is set in secondary legislation.

The Convener: The power to determine what method of uprating to apply lies with the Scottish Government. If, for example, it was felt that CPI was inappropriate, unfair or did not properly reflect cost-of-living increases, could the Government change to the retail prices index or something else?

Robin Haynes: Yes it could, absolutely.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that. No members have questions.

Item 3 is to ask whether the committee has any comments on the subordinate legislation. Are members happy to make no recommendation on the instrument?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Just before we go into private session, I want to say that this is our last meeting of this parliamentary session and my last committee meeting as a convener. I was convener of the European Committee and was then interrupted by a stint as a minister. I have twice been convener of Public Audit Committee and latterly of the Welfare Reform Committee. I have enjoyed my time as a convener; I think that the committees of this Parliament are important and were regarded, for a while at least, as being at the cutting edge. I hope that in the new session of Parliament, whatever its composition, the committees will be robust in holding the

Government of the day to account, because that is the least that the public expects of us: it is an important facet of parliamentary democracy.

To members who will be attempting to come back—I will not quite wish everyone good luck, because I have my political prejudices—I say that I am sure that you will enjoy the next few weeks. Although I will be engaged in campaigning, I can certainly say that there is slightly less pressure in not being a candidate, which is quite a nice feeling.

I thank committee members for the work that they have done on welfare reform—I know that Kevin Stewart has been here from the beginning. Although this is a relatively new committee, it has made its mark. With the impending changes, there will be exciting opportunities to influence the political agenda. There will also be challenges—there is no doubt about that. Whichever committee handles welfare reform—whether it is this committee or another, if Parliament decides to restructure its committees—I am sure that there will be some fascinating and interesting discussions.

I thank Mr Haynes and wish good luck to the new committees in the next session of Parliament.

10:37

Meeting continued in private until 10:38.

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