

# **LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 13 December 2005

Session 2

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## LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

† 33<sup>rd</sup> Meeting 2005, Session 2

### CONVENER

\*Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab)

### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)

\*Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con)

\*Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)

\*Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab)

\*Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)

\*Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)

\*Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP)

### COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Colin Fox (Lothians) (SSP)

Mr Bruce McFee (West of Scotland) (SNP)

John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)

Murray Tosh (West of Scotland) (Con)

\*attended

### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Martin Verity

### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Alastair Macfie

### ASSISTANT CLERK

Euan Donald

### LOCATION

Committee Room 4

† 32<sup>nd</sup> meeting 2005, Session 2— held in private.



## Scottish Parliament

### Local Government and Transport Committee

*Tuesday 13 December 2005*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:02*]

#### Item in Private

**The Convener (Bristow Muldoon):** I welcome members to this meeting of the Local Government and Transport Committee. The first item on the agenda is to seek the committee's agreement to take item 4—consideration of the appointment of an adviser for our freight inquiry—in private. Is that agreed?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Subordinate Legislation

### Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland Amendment Regulations 2005 (SSI 2005/589)

14:03

**The Convener:** The second item is subordinate legislation. No member has raised any points on the regulations, no points have been raised by the Subordinate Legislation Committee and no motion to annul has been lodged. Do members agree that we have nothing to report on the regulations?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Petition

### Home Safety Officers (PE758)

14:03

**The Convener:** The third item is consideration of petition PE758. The petition was lodged by Jim Black of the Scottish Accident Prevention Council's home safety committee and calls on the Parliament to urge the Executive to place a statutory requirement on local authorities to employ home safety officers and to provide the funding for that. This is the first occasion on which the Local Government and Transport Committee has considered the petition, although the petition has been before the Public Petitions Committee.

A paper has been prepared setting out three options for the committee. Option A is for the committee to undertake further consideration of the issues that the petition raises and, potentially, to carry out some research into them—that could take the form of letters or oral evidence taking. Option B would be for us to come to a view on the petition and conclude the petition, as set out in paragraph 12 of the paper. Option C would be any other action that members suggested in response to the petition. I seek members' views on how we should deal with the petition.

**Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):** It is significant that only half of Scotland's local authorities responded to the Public Petitions Committee about the petition. That leads me to believe that we should seek the views of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities before we take the matter further. I have concerns not only about the financial implications, but about how, in larger local authorities, a home safety officer would contribute effectively. We need to look into the matter further, but our first step should be to get a better response from local authorities through COSLA.

**The Convener:** The papers that accompany the petition contain a response from COSLA to a letter from Michael McMahon, although you may not believe that that is a sufficient response.

**Mr Arbuckle:** I realise that, but I would like a further response. The financial implications for local authorities could be onerous.

**Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab):** Having dealt with the petition at the Public Petitions Committee, I think that there is much merit in what is proposed. I agree with Andrew Arbuckle that there are cost implications, but there are also cost implications in not having home safety officers. We are talking about simple things, such as an elderly person tripping over their carpet because it is not nailed down properly.

The point is that savings can be made from not having people ending up in accident and emergency units in hospitals. If we spend money on having home safety officers in local authorities, we will save a lot more through reducing the burden of rehabilitation on the health service and local authorities. That money can be saved simply by giving people good advice.

The committee could investigate the matter in detail. I hope that we will invite the petitioners, representatives of COSLA and, if possible, the Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform to come before us so that we can examine the cost implications in detail. Andrew Arbuckle may look at the petition from the perspective of costs but, having dealt with the petition, I am convinced that there is a much bigger issue. The petition proposes something that local authorities could do not only to help themselves, but to help the health service. If the committee can look further into that, we might do the Parliament a service.

**Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab):** That is exactly where I am coming from. If we can prevent accidents, that will have an impact on the health service. The Parliament has not covered that debate in any substance. It would be helpful to hear not only from the minister with responsibility for local government, but from the Minister for Health and Community Care, to see whether there would be any mileage in research or in an inquiry to identify the possible savings to the public purse that would result from the prevention of accidents.

The issue has been discussed for a long time—there were discussions about it when I was in local government. Several local authorities have considered the matter, but nobody has gone to the trouble of taking action. Doing what the petition suggests would be to take action, although I am not convinced that it would not be a knee-jerk reaction, so I would like to see more evidence that home safety officers would make a difference. The Parliament's debate on the issue must cover a wide range of areas, including health and local government. I would like to hear from the Executive how it intends to respond to the petition.

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP):** Reading through the papers, I was impressed by the petitioners' arguments. Nevertheless, I understand the rationale behind the varied responses of local authorities—some authorities supported the petition, whereas others said that they were already doing equivalent things. I agree with Michael McMahon and Paul Martin that we should give the matter more serious consideration. We should ask COSLA to come before us, although I note from its short response to the petition that it seems unwilling to support the proposal.

There are other ways in which to deliver the objectives of the petition than simply having designated home safety officers. I do not want to imply any insult to any local authorities, because many of them, including Aberdeen City Council, have demonstrated that they are already tackling the issue in different ways.

COSLA and the petitioners should come before the committee. It would be useful to hear the petitioners' response, particularly given that, as Michael McMahon will know from his work on the Public Petitions Committee, one of them works as a home safety officer.

I suggest that, if we have an evidence-taking session, it might be useful to have an exchange of correspondence first to give people notice and to give members more time to think about other ideas. Social work departments and health boards also play a part in the prevention of falls. I know from my work with the National Osteoporosis Society that the financial and human costs of falls in the home are colossal. For example, after a lady has had one fracture because of osteoporosis, her mortality is very much reduced. The costs to the national health service are colossal.

The petition raises a serious issue, although I am not convinced that having extra employees as home safety officers is the way to solve the problem. I hope that, as well as hearing from COSLA and the petitioners, we can consider having witnesses from the National Osteoporosis Society and voluntary bodies such as Crossroads that work with the elderly and so have an insight into the issues to which Michael McMahon referred.

**Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con):** I support the suggestion that we should take a close look at the matter. There is a requirement for a cost-benefit analysis of every scheme that is suggested. The issue that the petition raises relates to community planning, under which local government works with health boards, the fire and rescue service and various other organisations, such as the Scottish Ambulance Service. Could we get somebody—perhaps somebody whom COSLA nominates—to come to the committee to talk about the issue from a community planning perspective?

One of the problems is the silo system of budget control. That system will change with the new community health partnerships, as local government will also participate. The CHPs seem a natural forum for taking forward the issue. We certainly need to know more about the costs. I agree with Mr Ewing that we should write to organisations such as the NHS Confederation, which could give us documented figures so that we can understand the scale of the problem in relation to the health service and all the aftercare

that must be provided. Of course, the issue is also relevant to care homes and so forth, as they operate under strict regulations, so perhaps we should hear from the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care. We should take some time and examine the issue properly.

**Bruce Crawford (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):** We should have evidence sessions for all the good reasons that have been mentioned. However, I sound a note of caution. Local authorities are not statutorily required to lay on public toilets, provide skips for waste, look after town halls or provide football pitches and swimming pools, even though those are many of the basic services that local authorities deliver. Having a statutory requirement does not necessarily mean that a service will be provided effectively. Local authorities could be providing an appropriate service now without there being a statutory requirement, although I recognise that such a requirement would be an inducement to authorities to do it properly. I add that caveat. We must examine the issues properly and consider whether we need a statutory requirement to make what the petition suggests happen.

**Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab):** From a past life as a teacher and teacher trainer, I know that safety was a key aspect in the science curriculum. If we think that it is worth while instructing children about safety, we should tackle the issue in the wider community. I agree with the comments made by David Davidson and Fergus Ewing that the issue is not just about local authorities; it applies across the board in the health sector and so on.

Fergus Ewing mentioned some groups that we might try to access for information. The opportunities that those groups present might be as important in ensuring safety as having people who inspect in the home, although I am not sure about that particular angle. If local authorities or other bodies decide that the suggestion should be pursued, we might want to tag on other safety issues. Water safety has been raised with me; it, too, might be brought in under this umbrella.

14:15

**Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP):** I agree that we should not dismiss the issue. Everyone is agreed that we should investigate further. At the very least COSLA, the petitioner and the Executive should be invited to give evidence on the petition.

Dundee City Council's letter in support of the petition is persuasive. It provides statistics on deaths from home accidents and refers to how the council already works effectively with home safety officers. Some people ask whether employing one

person in a big authority will make a difference. A lot of symbolism and message sending is involved. If the employment of home safety officers in each local authority was a statutory requirement, the profile of home safety would automatically be raised. The committee can ensure that that happens and I would like us to investigate the issue further.

**The Convener:** There is a clear consensus that we should have at least one evidence-taking session and there is broad consensus around Michael McMahon's proposal that we should have a minimum of three invitees—the petitioner, the Executive and the local authorities through COSLA.

To draw together the issues that were raised by Fergus Ewing and others, we could take evidence from witnesses from the health service on the overall health impact, such as the number of people involved and the effect of accidents at home on their health and the health service. We could take evidence from a representative of the health professions. We could also hear from a representative of the fire and rescue service on its role in responding to fires and on its advisory role with regard to fire safety in the home. Local authority representatives could perhaps talk us through housing and social work issues and the work that they have undertaken.

If members are content to take those suggestions on board, I will ask Martin Verity to draft a programme for a meeting and to try to identify witnesses. We will bring the paper back to the committee, but we will commit to having at least one session on the issue.

**Mr Davidson:** I suggested the NHS Confederation because it represents management across the service. It also has a statistical back-up system, so we might be able to get some facts and figures from it. Those seem to be the issue, as opposed to how one particular health board might have a problem.

**Bruce Crawford:** I have one tiny matter by way of background, which might help us to fashion our thoughts on whether there should be a statutory requirement for officers. It would be useful to have from the Scottish Parliament information centre a list of things that local authorities do for which they are and are not statutorily responsible, so that we can decide on priorities.

**The Convener:** In committing to carry out work on the issue, we are not saying that the solution has to be a statutory officer. We are saying that a legitimate and significant issue has been raised by the petitioner and we want to explore the best way to respond.

**Bruce Crawford:** I accept that.

**Fergus Ewing:** Plainly, there is unanimous approval for the idea that the petition is worth spending time on. Lots of ideas are coming forward. Would it be helpful if the committee clerk prepared a paper suggesting the way forward? Perhaps some of us have other suggestions about possible witnesses and the shape of the inquiry. Might we revisit the issue with the benefit of a paper from the clerks, to whom we can feed in other suggestions?

**The Convener:** I think that I said five minutes ago that we would bring a paper back to the committee.

**Fergus Ewing:** I should pay closer attention to you, convener.

**The Convener:** In that spirit of consensus, I suggest that we agree to take the issue forward and carry out further work on the petition as discussed.

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** We should also write to the petitioner to ensure that he is aware of the action that we intend to undertake.

That brings us to the end of the public items on the agenda.

14:19

*Meeting continued in private until 15:42.*



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