

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 11 September 2001
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

22nd Meeting 2001, Session 1

CONVENER

*Trish Godman (West Renfrew shire) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

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

*Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

*Iain Smith (North-East Fife) (LD)

*Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Irene Fleming

ASSISTANT CLERK

Craig Harper

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

Local Government Committee

Tuesday 11 September 2001

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:00*]

The Convener (Trish Godman): Okay, comrades, we will start. Neither Iain Smith nor Michael McMahon has sent apologies, so I am sure that they will be here in a minute or two. I formally welcome Tricia Marwick and Sandra White to the committee. This is their first meeting as members of the committee, although Tricia attended last week's meeting. I hope that they will find the committee informative and not too onerous—I am sure that it will not be.

We have a relatively light agenda today, although I have said that before and the meeting has not worked out like that. We do not normally have such an agenda. I have tried hard to put the committee on to fortnightly meetings, but that will not be possible in the foreseeable future in this parliamentary term or the next. However, that shows how important the committee is.

Interests

The Convener: If necessary, new members must declare any interests. The committee has not been notified of any interests that need to be declared, but perhaps Tricia Marwick wishes to say something about her sister. That sounds ominous.

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I have no interests to declare, but some of my best friends, and my sister, are councillors. I will not let that affect my judgment.

The Convener: I am sure that it will not. Most committee members have been councillors and I am sure that, although councillors might not talk to us, we will still talk to them. According to Keith Harding, I do not talk to him if I can help it. I take it that no one else has anything to declare, so that we can get this item out of the way.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I have no interests to declare. I was a councillor in a previous life and I have many friends who are councillors. I thank the convener for the welcome that she has given us and the clerks for sending the papers so speedily and for the welcome that they gave us.

The Convener: The clerks to the committee are

exceptionally good. The reports that they give us are not long, winding or never-ending. The clerks are always available, if you have any queries for them, before or during the meeting.

Items in Private

The Convener: I now proceed to the agenda item that our new members' fellow SNP member, Kenny Gibson, did not like. He hated my asking for items to be taken in private, but members will appreciate that these things must be done. Do we agree to take agenda items 5 and 6 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Petition

The Convener: Petition PE356 calls for the Scottish Parliament to establish a mechanism and an appropriate forum for the resolution of disputes between local authorities and owners of former local authority homes. Members will have noted the briefing from the clerk, the petition and correspondence from the Scottish Executive, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and Dumfries and Galloway Council. The committee has considered the petition before, and Gil Paterson and I wanted to reconsider it.

The essential point to bear in mind is that mechanisms are in place for resolving such disputes, including arbitration, the local government ombudsman, the Accounts Commission and the courts. The papers provided contain no evidence that Dumfries and Galloway Council acted improperly or illegally. It is the responsibility of the buyers to establish the condition of a property before making a purchase, as in normal circumstances. The general issue of repairs as they affect former local authority properties such as flats does not fall within our remit; it falls within the remit of the Social Justice Committee.

I propose that we take no further action on the petition. We could refer it to the Public Petitions Committee with a comment that we do not intend to take the petition further because the general issue falls in the remit of the Social Justice Committee. We could ask that committee whether it will investigate the issue. Keith Harding is frowning. Do you want to say something?

Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): We all acknowledge that common repairs are a problem throughout Scotland. Cannot we suggest that the Social Justice Committee take that into account when it considers the housing improvement task force report? An issue needs to be addressed.

The Convener: We can refer the petition to the Social Justice Committee with those comments in my letter, if members agree. The petition lies not with us but with that committee.

Iain Smith (North-East Fife) (LD): I endorse the suggested approach. Some of the issues about common repairs were raised when we took evidence on the Housing (Scotland) Bill earlier this year. Such issues may be addressed when the proposed title conditions bill finally makes its way through the system. However, it is worth doing what Keith Harding suggested and asking the Social Justice Committee to investigate the issues.

Mr Harding: If we can, it is important that we resolve the issues before the big stock transfers start, as the transfers will create even more problems.

The Convener: We are happy with that.

Proposed Local Government Bill

The Convener: As members will know from the Government's legislative programme, we expect to receive the proposed local government bill early next year, in about March. As always on the committee, we want to be prepared. I seek members' agreement to appoint an adviser, as that will give us time to recruit.

As was said in the chamber, the thrust of the bill will be best value and community initiative, or what used to be known as the power of general competence. We are looking for the committee's agreement that we appoint an adviser who will support us when we are considering the bill and taking evidence. In our experience, having an adviser has been helpful. It would help to have someone with knowledge of best value, although Donald Gorrie suggests that no one knows what that is. He might be right. If so, we would need to put that in our report.

I take it that members have read the paper. Do we agree to the Scottish Parliament information centre's producing a list of suggested advisers, to allow us to be well prepared for the bill when we receive it at the turn of the year?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The meeting is going too quickly. Something awful is bound to happen.

Tricia Marwick: The committee is missing Kenny Gibson.

The Convener: I think that you might be right, although that is for you to say, not me.

14:07

Meeting continued in private until 14:28.

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