

AUDIT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 14 November 2000
(*Afternoon*)

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AUDIT COMMITTEE

18th Meeting 2000, Session 1

CONVENER

*Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Nick Johnston (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

*Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab)

*Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con)

*Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)

*Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)

*Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP)

*Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)

*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Callum Thomson

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Anne Peat

ASSISTANT CLERK

Seán Wixted

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

Audit Committee

Tuesday 14 November 2000

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:01*]

The Convener (Mr Andrew Welsh): I have received an apology from Annabel Goldie, who has a meeting with the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee that clashes with ours. Are there any other apologies? I see that there are none.

I inform the committee that items 1 and 2 on the agenda will be taken in public session, and item 3 will be taken in private, as was agreed at the meeting on 24 October.

It is good to be back after my sabbatical, even though I am only here for part of the session. I thank the deputy convener. I watched you all on the monitors, and I congratulate the committee on the way in which it has operated.

I welcome Lloyd Quinan and Karen Whitefield as members of the committee and ask them to make any declarations of interest that they have.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I have no declaration to make.

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): I have no declaration to make, either.

Convener, please excuse me. I am also starting on the European Committee, and I came here just to register my lack of interests. I will try to join you later in the afternoon.

The Convener: That is understood. Thank you for your courtesy in letting us know.

Scottish Ambulance Service

The Convener: Item 2 on the agenda is a consideration of the Scottish Executive health department response to our report on the Scottish Ambulance Service.

I apologise. I have been remiss. I welcome everyone else to this meeting, including officials and the Auditor General.

Members will remember that our report was published on 15 June. On the whole, the Executive's response has been quite positive, and the recommendations and conclusions of the committee have been accepted with one exception, which relates to the provision of ambulances to meet at least average demand. It is likely that ambulance deployment policies and practices would change if priority dispatch were introduced. Bearing in mind that one of the main recommendations of the committee was that this policy be reviewed, I suggest that it is probably not for the committee to take any action in this area, because we have had a pretty fair response from the Executive. However, I will take the committee's advice. Are we agreed that we will leave it at that?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: There is a second problem in regard to timing. The Executive response says that it will not be able to report back on the main issues until December 2000. The response states that the SAS board should have reported on its appraisal of priority dispatch to the health department by December, but the SAS board says that its appraisal of priority dispatch will be reported to the health department by March 2001, and the department will thereafter report back to the committee. Consequently, our time scale will be missed. As the health department is generally doing what the committee has asked of it, it might be appropriate for the committee to request that the Ambulance Service provide us with a short memorandum on what has been happening instead of sticking to our demand that the service should keep to our original timetable.

Work on areas such as priority dispatch is continuing, and we should expect that there has been sufficient progress to make an interim report worth while. Are members agreed to ask for an interim report instead of demanding a report by our initial date? Usually, if the committee demands that a report should be submitted by a certain date, we must ensure that we mean that particular date; but given that these matters are continuing, it might be appropriate simply to ask for a memorandum stating the progress that has been made.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): I am happy enough with that. Although I know that my colleague Margaret Jamieson has a few points about the report, I feel that our recommendations have been seriously considered and that the response has been positive. As we are already in the middle of November, I am not unhappy with a slippage of three months and a report in 2001. I am also happy to have a memorandum in the meantime, as long as it does not distract the service's attention from undertaking the necessary work to complete the report by March 2001.

Nick Johnston (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Convener, although I do not want to deviate too much from your recommendation, I think that we should point out strongly that, in normal circumstances, when the committee comes up with a suggested date for a report, it expects that date to be complied with. As for Cathie Craigie's point, the report will be presented to ministers in March 2001, so we really do not know when it will be presented to the committee. Ministers are not noted for their ability or alacrity in turning around reports and it could be summer—June almost—before we receive it from them.

The Convener: I am in the committee's hands. If we want to demand what the Ambulance Service has at the moment, that is fair enough.

Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): The response mentions the special health board, which will report to the board of the Scottish Ambulance Service this December. The department then says that it expects to receive the findings in March 2001. What is happening in the intervening period? At the bottom of page 5 of the response, the health department says:

"The software will be compatible with that being procured for supporting the Scottish equivalent to NHS Direct".

That suggests that we do not need to wait until 2001. We are already halfway to saying that we should go down the road of priority dispatch. Perhaps I am reading too much into it.

The Convener: I like to insist on the idea that if we give a deadline, we expect it to be met. If the Ambulance Service appears to be moving in the right direction, we could ask it to give us everything it has now and demand the report at the other date. That said, it is open to the committee to ask the service to give us what it has right now.

Margaret Jamieson: The response suggests that the committee has to wait until the minister has made a decision on the report. That is not what the committee was recommending. If the Scottish Ambulance Service is going to discuss and evaluate the findings in December, it can

meet with our time scale. We did not say that it had to be an all-singing, all-dancing report.

The Convener: I am in sympathy with that point of view. Do other members have any comments so that I can get the feeling of the meeting? Do members wish to insist on the initial date?

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): No.

Cathie Craigie: I do not think so.

Brian Adam: Perhaps we could express the point that Nick Johnston raised that, in usual circumstances, we expect that people will report within the time scale. Given all the other things that the service has done, it is not unreasonable to go along with its suggestions.

The Convener: As a way of making progress, could we say that although the committee is disappointed that the date will be missed, we note that this is a continuing process, and that we expect the report at the earliest opportunity, certainly by March?

Cathie Craigie: Perhaps we can also have clarification on Margaret Jamieson's point about the procurement of the software and the amount that might be spent if the service decides not to go ahead with the system.

The Convener: The clerk has enough information to pen such a letter. If there are no other comments, I will take it that members are agreed on the committee's course of action.

I now give up the chair as the committee moves into private session for the third item on the agenda. I look forward to working with the committee again. Perhaps I should also take this opportunity to thank members who are moving on to pastures new for all their work.

14:10

Meeting continued in private until 15:55.

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