

RURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 29 June 1999
(*Afternoon*)

Meeting 2

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CONVENER :

*Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

*Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con)
*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
*Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
*Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
*Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
*Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
*Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
*Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)
*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)
*Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
*attended

COMMITTEE CLERK:

Richard Davies

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK:

Richard Walsh

ASSISTANT CLERK:

Tracey Haw e

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs Committee

Tuesday 29 June 1999

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 16:16*]

The Convener (Alex Johnstone): Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen, for your indulgence during the informal briefing session that took place before this meeting. I should take this early opportunity to offer the committee's gratitude to those who contributed to the informal work we were able to do today. We were particularly glad to welcome the Minister for Rural Affairs, Ross Finnie, and the Deputy Minister for Rural Affairs, John Home Robertson, whose contribution was valuable. We hope that we have established a sound working relationship with those two men. I also thank Mr John Graham, Mr Andrew Brown, Mr David Dickson, Mr George Thomson and Mr David Henderson-Howatt, who were also present at the briefing and who were able to contribute to our discussion.

Interests

The Convener: For the first formal business today, it falls to me to ask Cathy Peattie to make her formal declaration of interests relevant to the work of this committee.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): The only one is that, until October, I am convener of the Council of Voluntary Service Scotland, which is made up of council voluntary services throughout the country. Half the council voluntary services in CVS Scotland work in rural areas, and are funded through Rural Forum Scotland or through the Scottish Office.

The Convener: Thank you. I should point out to members who are unaware of it that, because Cathy was unable to attend the first meeting of this committee, she was not present when all members were asked to make their formal declarations. That is why Cathy was asked to do so at this point.

Work Programme

The Convener: The main business of this meeting is to consider the committee's initial work programme. We have already had a substantial informal discussion and we have come to a loose agreement on the issues we would like to put forward for consideration by the committee. They are: employment, housing and poverty in rural areas; the implementation of the EU common agricultural policy, including Agenda 2000; a strategic vision for fishing; an examination of the beef-on-the-bone problem and the attempts to lift the export ban; transport in rural areas; and Scottish forestry strategy. We also include assessment of the impact of land reform on rural areas, and of the forthcoming bills, in our list of priorities.

The list was effectively chosen by means of a poll of members—members ticked priorities on a list. The issues that I have mentioned came top. After informal discussion, one or two of the priorities were combined and they have been added to the list of proposals.

Is it the wish of the committee that, in our initial work programme, we proceed with the priorities I have mentioned?

Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): With the inclusion of the additional items we grouped together.

The Convener: Yes.

Mr Munro: The suggestion that the strategic vision for fishing should include the salmon farming industry and, in particular, the issue of infectious salmon anaemia, was predictable.

The Convener: Yes, the strategic vision for fishing will include fish farming and the problems associated with that industry.

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Can you clarify the outcome of our discussion on the Scottish fisheries zone?

The Convener: Is it the opinion of this committee that the definition of the Scottish fisheries zone should be among our initial priorities?

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I thought that we had agreed that it was not going to be. Was not that agreed during our informal discussion?

The Convener: The informal discussion was, indeed, an informal discussion. Any matter can be raised at this committee.

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): I think the conclusion we came to was that we would revisit that item to decide whether we want to consider it after the consultations between the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Scottish Fishermen's Federation and the industry.

The Convener: We will take the view that the Scottish fisheries boundary will remain a very high priority for this committee, and that we will assess it in the light of future reports.

Is there any specific research that members wish to request into the areas that we have defined?

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): Is it feasible for the Scottish Parliament information centre to produce some initial papers to get us started in our discussions? Given our work load with the other committees, is that possible, or do we need to prioritise further which research papers we wish to receive first?

The Convener: Do members have any opinions on which research papers they wish to receive first?

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): I suggest that the order that we have agreed is compatible with the substance of our informal discussion, and that the committee would be well served if we were to proceed on that basis.

The Convener: Would you wish these papers also to be circulated to members on completion?

Lewis Macdonald: Yes.

Alasdair Morgan: There is one caveat—the business of the beef export ban. Proposals are before one of the veterinary committees in Europe, and the topic is of some immediacy. The date-based scheme may be approved next month,

perchance, but we all know that that will not be the end of the story and that a lot of work is needed to recreate the market. I suggest that that issue should be fairly high up the list—not necessarily as a big item, but as one we can consider fairly quickly after the recess.

The Convener: Richard, do you want to add anything?

Richard Lochhead: Given that we have a list of priorities at least, would it be appropriate to contact interested organisations in order to flag up the fact that we have identified these issues, in case there are aspects that they want to draw to the committee's attention?

The Convener: Do you think that that would be appropriate?

Lewis Macdonald: I think that it would be, in terms of the committee's identified priorities—the seven items that you listed.

The Convener: Are there any specific organisations that you would like to contact?

Richard Lochhead: Perhaps the clerk will be able to advise us. I do not think that we should take decisions about priorities when organisations that are concerned about those priorities do not know that the Rural Affairs Committee has taken such decisions.

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I wish to make a broader suggestion. Perhaps the clerks ought to draw up a database of organisations that would be interested in almost anything we discuss. Organisations could choose the most relevant bits and draw our attention to anything they can add to our discussions. Such a mailing list should inform them not only about the issues that we are to consider but about our programme of meetings. That is useful information that external bodies need to know, so that they can send delegates along or ensure that they are aware of where and when such meetings take place. A comprehensive mailing list is not a bad idea.

Cathy Peattie: That would be particularly important when we consider unemployment, housing and poverty. When we move around the country, we should ensure that local voluntary organisations and community representatives have an opportunity to speak to this committee and that we gather evidence across the community, rather than examine Government agencies and local authorities alone. We need to be inclusive and to trawl as much information as possible.

Dr Murray: I understand that the minutes of these committee meetings are public documents. How widely are they distributed to interested parties so that they may become aware of the

topics that we are discussing and how we are thinking?

The Convener: I am told that the primary method of distribution is the website. Is that an appropriate way for the minutes to be distributed or do members feel that we need to do something better?

Cathy Peattie: A number of voluntary organisations do not have access to computers.

Richard Lochhead: A lot of paperwork and expense would be involved if we started writing to everyone in the country who has an interest in rural affairs. Perhaps an initial letter could go out to interested organisations, asking how they want to be updated—whether they are happy to check the website or whether they would like a note of each meeting sent to them.

The Convener: I suggest that we proceed on the basis that we establish a database of interested organisations with which we wish to communicate. The list should be circulated to members of this committee and an initial letter sent to open communication with those organisations at an early stage. Given the closeness of the recess, the letter should be sent to the organisations on the list as soon as it is prepared. Members should assess the list and inform us if they feel that anyone has been missed from it. We could then do a second mailing of the initial letter as soon as members' comments are returned.

Dr Murray: It is also possible to invite organisations to contact us—through the media or whatever—in case organisations exist of which we are not aware but which might want to make an input. Can we invite people to be proactive and to suggest to us that they would like to be included in our database so that they can be kept informed about what we discuss?

The Convener: Have you any suggestions about how we could get that information out?

Dr Murray: You could put out a press release or something of that sort via the appropriate media.

The Convener: We could try that.

Mr Munro: We seem to be approving the inclusion of Scottish forestry strategy, but we do not know enough about it to approve—

The Convener: No, I think that we need to take it that that item refers only to Scottish forestry strategy. The initial suggestion on approval and implementation may take us beyond the remit of this committee—considering the Scottish forestry strategy as a whole would be the appropriate topic for this committee.

Mr Munro: There was a suggestion that we should get further information or a paper on this

topic. I think that the committee might benefit from that. The issue has an effect on the whole of the rural economy of Scotland in as much as most of the Forestry Commission's activities are undertaken in remote glens and areas of the countryside where there is limited access. As members will understand, that has a knock-on effect on transport and the road system in those fragile areas. We should have a paper on the long-term strategy of the forestry industry and how it proposes to support the communities in which its activities take place. I know that local authority roads and transport departments would dearly like the Forestry Commission to accept much more responsibility for the road systems in the areas where it is active.

Lewis Macdonald: On the title of the investigation that we have agreed to hold into beef, we should consider how to promote the beef industry and beef exports rather than suggest that the beef-on-the-bone ban should be the lead topic. It is important that we get it the right way round and show that we are looking at the industry and its prospects as a whole.

16:30

The Convener: Can you suggest a title?

Lewis Macdonald: Initiatives to promote Scottish beef including consideration of the beef-on-the-bone ban.

Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con): And the beef export ban.

Lewis Macdonald: Yes. That is a long title.

The Convener: We could call it consideration of the Scottish beef industry and drop the specific issues from the title, accepting that they will still be included.

Alex Fergusson: If we start to promote the Scottish beef industry—which I favour—we must not forget an agricultural industry in Scotland that is in a worse state, if that is possible: the Scottish pig industry. We must promote Scottish agriculture as a whole.

The Convener: The idea behind giving priority to the beef industry was that we wanted to promote it. We must look for a title that will narrow that down again: consideration of beef exports and the beef-on-the-bone ban?

Richard Lochhead: It is important to avoid constantly committing ourselves to huge investigations. We should have quicker investigations and longer ones. The pig industry is a valid subject for a quick investigation, because it is only one aspect of the agriculture industry. We could also have more wide-ranging investigations into Scottish agriculture as a whole. When we

suggest an investigation into a particular aspect of agriculture, we must avoid saying that we should also investigate x, y and z.

The Convener: If we define it as consideration of beef exports and the beef-on-the-bone ban, would that be an appropriate focus?

Richard Lochhead: Yes.

Lewis Macdonald: We have agreed on our priorities. We should now return to the committee's remit.

The Convener: If members do not have comments on other priorities, it is the view of this committee to ask the research department to produce any information that is available to it on the issues that we have prioritised. We have also agreed to ask it to identify interested groups with which we might want to make contact, and that we should establish such contact as early as possible.

Lewis Macdonald: Contact with groups and individuals with expert knowledge.

The Convener: Yes. We have crossed over slightly. We are talking about expert groups and individuals, and groups we want to inform of the committee's work. Would it be appropriate to suggest that those would be two different lists, although there may be overlaps?

Cathy Peattie: This committee should openly work towards gathering information from community and voluntary organisations, rather than just listen to what they have to say on issues, which is quite different.

The Convener: As long as we are clear on what those two definitions mean.

We have come to the end of the agenda. Is there anything else that members would like to contribute?

Mr Rumbles: I am still a bit confused. We agreed our seven priorities, and Richard reminded us that we had agreed to consider the definition of the Scottish fisheries zone. Then you seemed to imply that that was included in those seven priorities. Will you clarify that that issue is not included in the seven immediate priorities that we agreed?

The Convener: No, it is an issue that is being dealt with by the Parliament. We would like to retain an interest in it, and revisit it in the near future, if necessary. However, it falls outwith our initial seven priorities.

Alex Fergusson: I would not want anyone to think that just because an item is not on the list that we discussed at our informal meeting it cannot come before this committee. I have received a lot of mail recently about theoretical legislation that would ban hunting with dogs. If it

came to the fore, I hope that we would be able to discuss that matter, although it is not on the list. I presume that we have no no-go areas for discussion.

The Convener: This committee is open to any suggestions at any time on issues that it ought to consider. Were the Parliament to decide to act on that issue, it would immediately become a priority for this committee to consider any legislation that was introduced.

Richard Lochhead: It is important for us to clarify our terms of reference and to remind ourselves that the committee is independent of party politics and the Executive. We should be able to investigate any issue that has an impact on rural communities and to make decisions as an independent committee. The committee must respond to the actions of the Executive, because part of our responsibility is to scrutinise those actions and to hold the Executive to account. We should also respond to concerns throughout rural communities in Scotland as an independent-minded committee.

The Convener: I have no problem whatever in agreeing with Richard's definition of this committee's role.

Lewis Macdonald: We agreed at the previous meeting that our remit would cover all aspects of rural development and anything impacting on it. That should remain our remit.

The Convener: Is there anything else that we should cover?

Mr Munro: As Mr Macdonald said, any aspects of the economy that affect rural communities are appropriate subjects for discussion by this committee. My particular concern is the reluctance of the Scottish Office to fund new community halls in rural areas. Many communities have solicited quite large sums of money from various groups and agencies. One such community has accumulated £430,000 from various sources, but the Scottish Office's piece of the jigsaw has not been forthcoming. That community's dilemma is that, unless that money is forthcoming, it will probably not go ahead with the project and it will lose the funding that it has so far secured. Is this committee able to address that situation, or would it more appropriately be addressed by another committee?

The Convener: If we were given a rough outline, we could inquire whether that case falls within the remit of this committee.

Mr Munro: I have written to the minister, from whom I hope to receive a response.

The Convener: For future reference, we should mention those circumstances to discover whether they fall within the remit of this committee.

Any other comments?

Richard Lochhead: Are we going to take decisions today to begin investigations into any particular issues? I would not like to think that, when most other committees are beginning to investigate issues, the Rural Affairs Committee will go away for the recess without initiating any investigations.

The Convener: It has been suggested that we would have to define very clearly how we wanted to proceed with an investigation. Do you have any suggestions?

Richard Lochhead: I have suggested that some issues could be investigated quickly. Perhaps one of those subjects could be investigated over the summer. Other, more wide-ranging issues, could be investigated over a longer period. I would like to know other members' views on that.

Alasdair Morgan: Yes. On the promotion of beef, we are writing to organisations for evidence or submissions. A lot of those submissions will be received over the next few months. Surely, between ourselves and the clerks, it would be possible to suggest a panel of potential interviewees to whom we would like to speak as soon as we return. That approach could apply equally to any other subject.

The Convener: Do members agree?

Lewis Macdonald: We agreed that employment, housing and poverty in rural areas should be at the top of our agenda. Having had discussions and having come to that agreement, we should not go back on that. If there is a specific issue within that subject area that we can investigate—Initiative at the Edge was suggested earlier—perhaps we should consider doing that.

The Convener: I am not familiar with that project.

Lewis Macdonald: Initiative at the Edge is an initiative to protect employment and the economy in the more fragile rural communities. It has now existed long enough to merit some examination by this committee.

Dr Murray: Some groundwork can be done. For example, in employment we can consider where employment is being lost; the patterns of loss of employment and the growth areas. If the loss of the younger population is an issue, is it because employment is being lost? A scene-setting exercise can be done so that we are aware of the truth behind the stories and so that we know where we are losing employment, what sort of employment is being lost and what sort of employment is growing.

The Convener: Are you suggesting that,

initially, we should try to investigate the pattern of job losses in rural Scotland?

Dr Murray indicated agreement.

Mr Rumbles: I am in danger of lengthening this discussion, but I support Alasdair's view. When we come back at the end of August, beef on the bone and the promotion of the beef industry should be this committee's No 1 priority. I know that we have just said that creating and sustaining jobs is our No 1 overarching priority, but if the beef-on-the-bone ban has not been lifted by the end of August or the beginning of September and if the beef exporting situation has not improved by then, the beef industry will expect this committee to do something to move the issue along. If we initiate an investigation into anything, that is what we should be investigating.

The Convener: Given that we have assessed the situation and that we feel that some issues will be longer term than others, I suggest that it would be appropriate for us to investigate initially the pattern of job losses in rural Scotland and the beef industry and the continuing effects of the export ban.

Alasdair Morgan: I think that it would be appropriate for you to set an agenda for a first meeting. If things develop to such an extent that you feel it would be useful to have witnesses at that first meeting, you should take the initiative and arrange that. That way, when we have our first meeting, we will do something rather than discuss, yet again, what we are going to do.

The Convener: I would not organise witnesses without consultation. My plan would be to consult all members of this committee, let them know what is happening in advance of the meeting and to have their informal approval.

Have we established a pattern with which we would like to continue? Is it appropriate at this stage to schedule a meeting during the recess? Do members feel that that is necessary?

Alasdair Morgan: What for?

The Convener: The standing orders state that it would not normally be the practice of this committee to meet during the recess.

Lewis Macdonald: I think that it is appropriate to follow those orders. Given your commitment to consult all members on how to proceed, should circumstances change during the recess such that you feel it is necessary to have a meeting, we would obviously expect you to contact us and discuss it with us.

The Convener: Is that the view of all members? Would it be fair to say that the next formal meeting will take place after the recess at the earliest opportunity? We have an informal invitation for

members of this committee to visit the Scottish Office agriculture, environment and fisheries department to meet officials. If it can be organised for a suitable time, do members think that it is appropriate to have that meeting during the recess?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Can I have a rough indication of when would be suitable?

Lewis Macdonald: Mid-August.

Several Members *indicated agreement.*

Several Members *indicated disagreement.*

The Convener: The third week of August might be suitable.

Richard Lochhead: Would it be in order for the committee to visit any of the agricultural shows that are taking place over the recess?

The Convener: I think that all members of the committee should be visiting all the agricultural shows.

Richard Lochhead: But what about visiting them as a committee? Perhaps we can do that next year.

The Convener: Is there anything else that we need to raise during this meeting?

If there is nothing else that we need to discuss, I would like to thank you all for your attendance. I am grateful for the effort that you have all put in. It has been a long afternoon given the informal session that went before this formal meeting. I thank you all for your commitment to rural Scotland. I hope that we all achieve what we want to achieve when we return from the recess and get the results of the investigations. Thank you very much for your help.

Meeting closed at 16:45.

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