

SOCIAL INCLUSION, HOUSING AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR COMMITTEE

Wednesday 8 November 2000
(Morning)

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SOCIAL INCLUSION, HOUSING AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR COMMITTEE

34th Meeting 2000, Session 1

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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

*Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con)

*Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD)

*Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)

*Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab)

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)

*Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)

*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lee Bridges

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mary Dinsdale

ASSISTANT CLERK

Rodger Evans

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee

Wednesday 8 November 2000

(Morning)

[THE DEPUTY CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:34*]

The Deputy Convener (Fiona Hyslop): Good morning. We have received apologies from one of our new members, Sandra White, and from Keith Raffan. Lloyd Quinan and Margaret Curran have resigned from the committee.

Interests

The Deputy Convener: I welcome Johann Lamont and Brian Adam, who are new members of the committee. I hope that they will enjoy the work as much as we have. As they might have gathered, they come at an interesting time. We are finishing off a number of reports, but it is a good time to join the committee, because we are about to embark on work on the housing bill.

Does either Johann Lamont or Brian Adam have any interests in relation to the work of the committee that they would like to declare?

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I am never quite sure which things qualify for being declared and which are just potentially relevant, so I will identify a number of interests that I believe may be significant.

I am a member of the Transport and General Workers Union, which has an interest in a lot of issues in this field. I am also a member of the Co-operative Party, which takes a particular interest in housing and certain forms of common ownership of housing. I sit on the interim management committee of the Glasgow housing association, which will have a key role in the future of housing in Glasgow. I am married to a Labour councillor in Glasgow City Council. I am not sure whether that is relevant, but I mention it on the off-chance that it may be held against me at some stage in future.

The Deputy Convener: Brian, do you have any interests that you want to declare?

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I do not think that any of them are terribly relevant, but I try to be up front about all the minor shareholdings that my wife, my children and I have. Some of them might just impinge on the work of this committee.

The Deputy Convener: Is there anything specific?

Brian Adam: I have a few shares in Aggregate Industries, which is involved in building, Hanson and George Wimpey. I also have shares in some of the utility companies: British Gas, Centrica and Scottish and Southern Energy. From time to time, we may deal with issues that are related to their work. I do not think that there is anything other than those.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you.

I ask members to agree that we will take item 5, on our future work programme, in private. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Petition

The Deputy Convener: The next agenda item is petition PE242 from the Action of Churches Together in Scotland, the Scottish Refugee Council and Amnesty International, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to give asylum seekers rights of access to various support services and to amend legislation to restore the entitlement of asylum seekers to accommodation and cash-based support. Members have a paper from the clerks, which outlines the petition. I understand that members have also received briefings from the petitioners, which give further background. I invite comments on the substance of the petition and on the clerk's recommendation.

Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab): I am convener of the Public Petitions Committee, which dealt with the petition and referred it to the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee for its information. At the time, Sandra White, I think, pointed out that many of the issues that are raised in the petition fall within the remit of this committee. The Public Petitions Committee passed the petition to us only for our information and the recommendation is just to note it. However, we have all received a number of subsequent petitions from various groups, including the Action of Churches Together in Scotland, Amnesty International and the Scottish Refugee Council, asking the committee to take up the matter, because it relates to a number of serious social exclusion issues, for example excluding asylum seekers and refugees from cash-based support, restricting them to certain areas of the United Kingdom and denying them access to expert legal immigration help.

We have a heavy work programme, but we may want to appoint a member of the committee to investigate the circumstances further and report back to us on the issues. I think that those are issues in which the committee should take an interest and which we should attempt to pursue.

Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): I suggest that we do not simply note the matter. Some aspects of the petition are clearly within the remit of the Parliament and of this committee. The letter from Iain Gray—in his previous role as Deputy Minister for Community Care—is clear, but it talked about undertaking a review after 18 months, which would be about this time next year. John McAllion raised a number of issues. Various groups, including Friends of the Earth, and individuals have also raised issues in e-mails that we have all received. I propose that we take evidence on the matter.

The Deputy Convener: I am very sympathetic to that idea.

Mike Watson: I would certainly like to take evidence from some of the organisations that have been involved, which have been mainly in Glasgow and the surrounding area. I have a further, more specific, suggestion. Unless Lee Bridges tells us differently, the draft work programme says that the business for Wednesday 13 December is still to be advised. I suggest that we slot in an evidence-taking session on that date.

The Deputy Convener: I would like to hear any other comments that members may have on that, especially if anyone has a contrary opinion. There might be another possibility: given that we will be taking evidence from Church organisations on the proposed housing bill, we might be able to schedule evidence on both matters on the same date.

Mike Watson: I am not thirled to the date; it was the principle that I wanted to push.

Brian Adam: I sympathise totally with what has been said: we can and should deal with the matter.

Johann Lamont: From my work on the Local Government Committee, I understood that there was a commitment to examine this whole issue, in particular the support that is available to local authorities, the pressures that they are under and the experience that people have been having with local authority services. I was not able to speak to the convener of the Local Government Committee before today's meeting, but it might be worth contacting that committee to clarify exactly what it intended to consider. We may be able to work together with the Local Government Committee, as this is a big issue for local authorities. That committee would be more involved in the delivery of the services that we might identify as important.

The Deputy Convener: The mood of the committee is that we want to do something—it is a question of whether we hold an inquiry or take evidence. If we do, we will have to contact the Local Government Committee.

Johann Lamont: I reiterate that I think it would be useful to work with the Local Government Committee in a co-ordinated way.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): I agree with what has been said, but what we do must be fairly narrowly focused, and we need clear guidance about the extent of our powers on the matter. There is a question of overlap. That does not stop us investigating the matter, and we could make incidental reference to other things, but the emphasis must be on the housing side, with perhaps a look at advice and other issues that are raised in the documentation that we have received.

The Deputy Convener: It is a question of social exclusion: we need to find out about people's experience and whether any of it has been racist in nature.

Robert Brown: To return to Johann Lamont's suggestion, I appreciate the idea of our liaising with the Local Government Committee. We want a short, sharp report, which could be passed on; members of other committees might then be able to get involved.

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): I concur largely with what has been said; clearly, issues of concern are raised in the petition and in the correspondence that we have all received over the past couple of days. However, I emphasise that any inquiry that we undertake will have to fall within clear, narrow parameters. There will have to be liaison with the other committees that are involved. I suggest that we seek to have one evidence-taking session and that we define beforehand exactly which aspects of the matter we want to investigate. Our report could be complementary to that of other committees.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I agree that it is important for us to consider the representations that have been made to us by the many organisations that work in this area. We should also consider carefully how to ensure that we are focused, so that we can promote some positive recommendations and make some suggestions about how to proceed. It might be good if the deputy convener could speak to the convener of the Local Government Committee, as Johann Lamont suggested, and draw up a work programme to suggest to the committee. That would avoid any overlap in our work and in the taking of evidence.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): Basically I agree with the sentiments that have been expressed by all members, but I agree particularly with Karen Whitefield about focusing on the areas for which we have responsibility. If we find anything wrong in those areas, we can act on it. We need to take action quickly. We need not have a long drawn-out inquiry as long as we set ourselves targets and focus on the most important aspects; perhaps we should invite written evidence from the people involved. As Bill Aitken said, we could also have one oral evidence session.

The Deputy Convener: That is a good suggestion. When we examine our work programme under agenda item 5, we will consider the possibility of holding an evidence session before Christmas. I ask the clerk to request written evidence from the relevant organisations. We could deal with the remit of the inquiry at our next meeting. We should make the inquiry tight and focused, and relevant to our committee remit, as

Robert Brown suggested.

We have a responsibility on the matter. We cannot wait 18 months to have a review, to get evidence on the record and to ensure that the pertinent, extremely worrying concerns and issues are brought to the attention of the Executive and of the authorities that provide the relevant services.

Johann Lamont: It would be relatively easy for us to liaise with the Equal Opportunities Committee on the matter, given the overlap in the two committees' clerking personnel. This matter has also been referred to in the Equal Opportunities Committee, and it might be useful to reflect with members of that committee on how our work might fit in with theirs. They might wish to read our report later.

The Deputy Convener: We now have a good sense of how we want to proceed.

Robert Brown: I have one point to make from the perspective of convener of the cross-party group on human rights. In essence, human rights is the counter-side to social inclusion. The most definitive angle to take would be to ask how we are treating people, and how we are fulfilling our international and other obligations in this sphere.

The Deputy Convener: I will work with Lee Bridges to draw up a remit for an inquiry. We can return to this matter in private session, when we discuss our future work programme under item 5.

10:45

Meeting continued in private until 12:18.

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