

# **SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE**

Wednesday 15 May 2002  
(*Morning*)

Session 1

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## SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE

8<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2002, Session 1

### CONVENER

\*Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)

### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP)

### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD)

\*Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)

\*Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP)

\*Mrs Lyndsay McIntosh (Central Scotland) (Con)

\*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

\*attended

### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jim Johnston

### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mary Dinsdale

### ASSISTANT CLERK

Craig Harper

### LOCATION

Committee Room 1



## Scottish Parliament

### Social Justice Committee

Wednesday 15 May 2002

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER opened the meeting at 10:03]

### Items in Private

**The Convener (Johann Lamont):** Welcome to the eighth meeting of the Social Justice Committee in 2002. Item 1 is to consider whether items 3 and 4 should be taken in private.

I declare an interest in item 3, as I was a member of the working group that developed the consultation entitled "Striking the Balance: a new approach to debt management".

The reason for asking that item 3 be taken in private is that it relates to a housekeeping issue: setting the timetable for and discussing the committee's approach to taking evidence on the general principles of the Debt Arrangement and Attachment (Scotland) Bill at stage 1. Item 4 is consideration of a draft paper. Is it agreed to take items 3 and 4 in private?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD):** I add to the convener's declaration of interests my declaration that I am a member of the Law Society of Scotland. I am not a member of any other legal body. I also declare my involvement with Ross Harper and Murphy.

**Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP):** I declare an interest as someone who owes a lot of money.

**The Convener:** We will not start talking about people who do not open their bills when there is a problem but put them behind the clock.

## Fuel Poverty

**The Convener:** Item 2 is on fuel poverty. At our previous meeting, the committee took evidence on the Scottish Executive's consultative draft of the Scottish fuel poverty statement. The clerks have prepared a summary of the evidence. I seek members' views on areas on which they want specific recommendations to be included in our response to the consultation.

The committee should also note that we agreed that we should send a letter to the Executive on the skills shortage, which was pointed out to us sharply in evidence. The letter has been drawn up and sent to the Executive. It focuses particularly on the shortage of skilled workers to carry out central heating installation work.

Does the committee wish to go through the paper page by page?

**Robert Brown:** It is a superb paper, which draws out many of the issues. Anything that I have to say is purely marginal. Perhaps we need to think about the recommendations. The recommendations are actually there already; it is just a question of drawing them out.

**The Convener:** That is right. I thank the clerks for the paper. As Robert Brown has indicated, we are looking for specific recommendations. Rather than go through the document bit by bit, I ask committee members to comment on recommendations. The final draft of the paper will come back to us next Thursday to be signed off.

**Mr Gibson:** I agree that it is an excellent paper, so I will not speak for the sake of speaking. When we took evidence, I raised a point regarding the definition of fuel poverty. I understand that Scottish Power, Scottish Gas and others made comments on a United Kingdom-wide definition of fuel poverty. Just because the definition is UK-wide, that does not mean that it is right.

The definition that we have is not the one that I would like. If anything, I would rather that the definition was changed south of the border and that we had a definition that reflected the real level of fuel poverty. The definition given by organisations that are mentioned in the paper, such as Energy Action Scotland, is based on disposable income after housing costs, which gives a more accurate picture of disposable income.

The argument that the definition must be the same throughout the UK does not hold water, given that the issue is devolved. As I have said, I would rather that the definition south of the border be changed than that we change to the wrong definition.

**Robert Brown:** I agree with Kenny Gibson's point, but I have a slightly different one. The definition of fuel poverty is a moveable target. The paper makes the point that, if gas and electricity prices go down, millions of people come out of fuel poverty, but it is reasonably clear that that does not tackle fuel poverty, however helpful it is in the short term. The difficulty is that if the country suddenly became 10 per cent more prosperous or benefits went up by a certain amount, the definition of fuel poverty would alter without a real change in the position of the fuel poor.

It is difficult to monitor fuel poverty when the definition deals not with an absolute target, but with one that is related to disposable income. I am interested not so much in what the definition should be—I share Kenny Gibson's view on that—as in whether we are getting anywhere in tackling fuel poverty and whether there are temporary ebbs and flows in fuel poverty that have nothing to do with Government policy but are caused by the ups and downs of gas prices.

**The Convener:** Do you want something to go into the paper to reflect a desire for definitions that allow us to make progress on the impact of intervention?

**Robert Brown:** Yes.

**Mr Gibson:** The concern is that we could invent a completely new definition. The witnesses have rallied round one or another definition—either the one that Scottish Gas, Scottish Power and the Executive have or the one that other organisations, such as Citizens Advice Scotland, have suggested.

I understand what Robert Brown says but, if an unemployed person's income doubles because they get a job, they are not by definition in fuel poverty, because they can afford to purchase fuel. They may have issues regarding the insulation of their home and whether they are energy efficient, but they are not fuel poor. The same is true with gas prices. If gas prices go up, that puts more people into fuel poverty.

It is difficult to define fuel poverty, other than as having to spend 10 per cent—or whatever percentage happens to be applied—of one's disposable income on heating. To suggest that the definition should be based on how many houses are fuel poor as opposed to how many people are fuel poor is possibly the wrong way to go about defining fuel poverty.

**The Convener:** I am not sure whether that helps the clerks much.

**Robert Brown:** It is a bit of both: the argument about the fuel poverty definition is one thing, but I want something to firm up our ability to monitor the progress that we make.

**Mr Gibson:** Robert Brown and I are not talking against one another. There is energy efficiency on the one hand and fuel poverty on the other. There is obviously a considerable overlap, but they do not necessarily apply to the same groups. My house, for example, is not energy efficient—that is something that I need to address—but I am certainly not fuel poor.

**The Convener:** The final draft of the paper will be circulated before the next meeting. We will be able to go through the recommendations and agree them or disagree them. If it is possible, we will reflect the discussion in the body of the paper. If committee members have strong, clear ideas of recommendations that they want to be included in the paper, they should get them to the clerks by the close of business tomorrow. We will define "close" as 3.30 pm. That will allow us to consider properly what everybody wants to recommend in the paper. We can then come to a committee view, which will not necessarily be the same as the view of individuals. Is that an acceptable way to proceed?

*Members indicated agreement.*

**Robert Brown:** There is one minor problem. Paragraph 15 of the paper mentions the scale of the problem, as highlighted by Energy Action Scotland. That is a major issue. Perhaps it should be moved to the beginning of the paper and included in the general issues. That is a presentational issue.

**The Convener:** It is significant that a strong consensus exists that there is a big problem. Many witnesses gave evidence that came from that point of view. There was a commitment to addressing the problem. There was no debate about whether there is a problem.

I was struck by the energy providers' desire to be part of the solution. We can debate the extent to which what they are doing is as effective as we would wish it to be—and we had such a debate in the committee—but they certainly have a strong desire to be engaged. I was particularly struck by the desire of the witnesses from the Eaga Partnership to make what they are doing work.

**Mr Gibson:** Everyone is pulling in the right direction. Different organisations may have different focuses, but everyone wants the problem to be solved by 2016.

If the committee agrees, I would like a recommendation on vulnerable groups. I realise that there are issues about elderly people who have one or two heaters in their house and about expanding the central heating programme among the elderly, but now that we have tackled the issue of the elderly who are in fuel poverty, we should focus on those with long-term illness or disability. We should try to move those vulnerable groups up

the agenda. I appreciate that there is a commitment to installing central heating for pensioners for four more years, but we must focus on which groups should benefit next. We should consider those with long-term illness or disability.

**Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab):** If we reflect on the evidence that we have taken, we see that most of it says that the Executive has got the priority right by targeting those who have no form of central heating at all. However, there are vulnerable people who have heating systems that are not effective or energy efficient and which cost them more money to run than would a proper central heating system.

We should not suggest to the Executive that it rethink its policy immediately and change its target group from those without central heating, but we must be aware of and ready to deal with those who have partial systems. Perhaps a way of prioritising them would be to introduce the idea of vulnerability, which Kenny Gibson has suggested.

**Robert Brown:** Vulnerability perhaps also applies to those who are on meters. That is not a bad indication—although it tends to be a rough and ready one—of those who already have problems in dealing with heating.

**Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab):**

Even though we have written to the Executive about the shortage of gas fitters, the paper must flag up that we are asking the Executive to consider the issue in the light of the evidence that we have taken. We covered the issue at great length at our previous meeting and took considerable evidence on it.

**The Convener:** The issue should be considered throughout the Executive; it is not only a social justice matter.

I ask committee members to give the clerks any specific recommendations that they want to have included in the paper by 3.30 pm tomorrow. We will revisit the paper at our next meeting on 23 May. Is that agreed?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

10:15

*Meeting continued in private until 10:44.*





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