

EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 21 May 2002
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

16th Meeting 2002, Session 1

CONVENER

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
*Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
*Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD)
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP)
*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Martin Verity

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Susan Duffy

ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

Education, Culture and Sport Committee

Tuesday 21 May 2002

(Afternoon)

[THE DEPUTY CONVENER *opened the meeting at
14:33*]

Interests

The Deputy Convener (Cathy Peattie): Good afternoon and welcome to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee. I ask everyone present to turn off their pagers and mobile phones.

We welcome Karen Whitefield, who is the committee substitute for the Labour party. Karen is substituting for Karen Gillon, who is on maternity leave. This is Karen Whitefield's first meeting as substitute, so I advise her to declare any relevant interests that are included in the "Register of Interests of Members of the Scottish Parliament".

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I have no interests to declare.

Items in Private

The Deputy Convener: The next item is to invite the committee to agree to discuss items in private. I invite the committee to discuss in private item 5, which is on a draft committee report on the budget process 2003-04, which will be sent to the Finance Committee. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Deputy Convener: I invite the committee to discuss in private item 6, on a draft proposal for a committee bill. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Deputy Convener: I invite the committee to agree to consider in private at its next meeting on 6 June a draft stage 1 committee report on the School Meals (Scotland) Bill. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Deputy Convener: I invite the committee to consider in private at its next meeting on 6 June the reports from the committee's reporters on the proposal for a committee bill. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

School Meals (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Convener: The next item on the agenda is the School Meals (Scotland) Bill. It is the committee's role to consider the evidence that has been taken at stage 1 of the bill. Advisers' reports have been circulated to members.

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): If this item concerns the preparation of the committee's stage 1 report, it would be normal for us to discuss it in private.

The Deputy Convener: Absolutely. I have raised the same issue. Apparently, it was agreed that it would be considered in public. However, as we are considering reports from our advisers, and because we have not had the opportunity to discuss the evidence that we have taken from the numerous witnesses, it seems to me that the item should be discussed in private. I have spoken to Martin Verity, the committee's clerk, about the matter. Apparently, Frank McAveety agreed that the item should be considered in public. However, that will make it difficult to discuss how we can progress the bill.

Michael Russell: The committee knows how immensely reluctant I have been to agree to discuss items in private. It is therefore unusual for me to make such a request, especially with the press present. Nonetheless, the principle that we have previously operated on is that, if we are discussing the detail of the way in which the committee will report on an issue, we all take positions on what should be included in the report. I have no objection to making my position known in public, but in the past such items have always been discussed in private, as they are preparatory to a stage 1 report.

The Deputy Convener: Does the committee want to move into private session to discuss the report?

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Is that competent? That is not on the agenda.

The Deputy Convener: Yes, it is competent. It is what normally happens.

Michael Russell: Would it be possible to re-order the agenda to discuss the item at the end of the public session and then move into private session? If aspects of a stage 1 report were leaked, there would be an inquiry. It is possible that they could be leaked through our discussion.

The Deputy Convener: Absolutely.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Would it be appropriate to consider in public further questions that we want to raise, or would that have to be done in private?

Michael Russell: It would be acceptable to consider those questions in public.

The Deputy Convener: Yes. We can discuss in public any specific issues that members want to raise, then discuss in private the wider evidence that we have taken.

Jackie Baillie: In that case, the two would be separated.

The Deputy Convener: Yes. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Michael Russell: Will we first consider the rest of the agenda in public?

The Deputy Convener: I am happy for us to do that.

Michael Russell: That would be easier on the official reporters and others.

The Deputy Convener: That makes sense.

Aberdeen Visits

The Deputy Convener: The next item is discussion of our Aberdeen visits. The committee is considering participating in two visits when the Parliament meets in Aberdeen. The first visit is to Pittodrie stadium and the second is to an event at the Town House in Aberdeen, in response to an invitation from Aberdeen City Council. Unfortunately, both events would take place at the same time; therefore, we must decide how to proceed.

Ian Jenkins: We could ask for one of the events to be shifted or we could split the committee, with some of us going to one event and some of us going to the other. However, it might be that the whole committee wants to be present at both events.

The Deputy Convener: We have suggested that. Martin Verity has the details.

Martin Verity (Clerk): We understand that it would not be possible for Aberdeen City Council's education department to shift the meeting that it has planned, because so many people are involved. The date for the visit to Pittodrie was organised on the basis of members' availability, so there is a clash. We approached the convener of the cross-party sports group, Dennis Canavan, who has intimated his interest in attending the Pittodrie visit, perhaps with one or two members of the cross-party group. Perhaps some committee members would like to go to one of the functions and some to the other. It would help if members could indicate their preferences now or during the next hour or so.

The Deputy Convener: Do members have preferences?

Michael Russell: We are happy to split, as the SNP does from time to time.

The Deputy Convener: Never.

Michael Russell: The SNP always does so amicably. Irene McGugan will go to Pittodrie and I will go to the Town House event.

Karen Whitefield: I would like to go to the Town House event.

Jackie Baillie: I will go to Pittodrie.

Ian Jenkins: I have difficulty with this. Are both visits on Thursday?

The Deputy Convener: Yes.

Ian Jenkins: On reflection, I think that I should go to the Town House event.

The Deputy Convener: We will ask Brian Monteith which event he wishes to attend.

School Meals (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Convener: We return to the School Meals (Scotland) Bill, and to a discussion of general issues. We will move into private session to discuss the draft report that we have received.

Ian Jenkins: It would be worth asking the Executive to give us more information on certain aspects of the proposals, such as the cost of providing free school milk to different sectors of the school population and in different quantities. A general statistical account of how much that would cost would be helpful in considering the bill. In addition, the issue of capital expenditure was raised. Only one council gave us an estimate of how much it would cost it to make the required capital adjustments to dining hall facilities and so on. Councils could be invited to give us further estimates.

Jackie Baillie: I have a number of points to raise, some of which are small and some of which seek clarification, but they are worth drawing out. Some of the papers that we have received refer to nutritional guidelines. I am conscious that we have received written evidence on food-based groups. Could the nutrition adviser indicate what is wrong with using food-based groups, so that our consideration is full?

I would like to receive more information on the provision of free milk. Is there evidence on the age range at which free milk should be provided to avoid dental caries? I am sure that free milk would have a different impact on 16, 17 and 18-year-olds than it would on children aged up to 5, or older.

We talk often about Sweden and Finland, which are referred to in the adviser's paper. Are we talking about free school meal provision in those countries in primary and secondary schools or just in one sector? Clearly, that will have implications when we consider how to move forward.

The bill's promoters say that the bill is a health improvement measure as well as an anti-poverty measure, but there is a debate about the statistics. We should ask the Executive for precise figures on the number of children who live in poverty and the number who are entitled to free school meals, and information on why, in the Executive's view, they are not claiming their free school meals. We should also ask for information on other benefits, such as the working families tax credit, so that we have a comprehensive view of the measures that are in place and where the cut-off points are.

At our last meeting, we asked the bill's promoters for evidence of their cost-benefit analysis, because they made claims about benefits that would accrue from the bill. I accept that it will be enormously difficult to quantify the

benefits, but I ask the clerks whether we have received any evidence, because it is important that in giving the bill adequate consideration we take those points on board.

Last, I am conscious that we have a letter from one of the bill's promoters. Will you deal with that later, convener?

The Deputy Convener: Yes. Have we received any information on cost-benefit analyses?

Martin Verity: No.

14:45

Michael Russell: The provision of free or subsidised water, or even water that is sold at a lower price than that at which it is available commercially, but which produces funds for schools, is a concern of mine. I spent the morning at Dalziel High School in Motherwell, where they sell bottled water that has the school's name on it. I had intended to bring a bottle to the meeting, but I can show it to members later if they like. That water raises money for school funds, and means that water is freely available in the school. Coke is available, but it is kept next to the radiator, while the water is kept in a fridge. That is a pretty neat way of ensuring that there is good uptake. The water sells like hot cakes, if that is not the wrong thing to say.

I would like more information on how many authorities provide free water—as in the Highlands—and on how many provide water that is subsidised or for sale. I would also like information on whether that has been successful, and whether it is reckoned to be useful. It would be helpful to ask the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities for that information.

On uptake initiatives, we do not, as Jackie Baillie said, have enough information on children who are entitled to free school meals but who do not take them. Are studies available from south of the border on that? There is experience south of the border of statutory nutritional standards. It would be useful to have more information on that.

My colleague Irene McGugan will want to talk about fruit and berries, but we have heard little about initiatives to provide children with free fruit and berries, the provision of which has been highly successful elsewhere. I lay down a strong marker on behalf of the SNP that we are interested in that.

We should refer to the letter that Tommy Sheridan sent to the convener—which each of us received—which says that he does not think that we have taken enough evidence. I am sure that we will want to discuss that. We need certain information. I am sorry that I was not at the committee's meeting last week, but from what I have read of the meeting, some of those who gave

evidence were not well treated by the promoters of the bill; in fact, some of them were disgracefully treated by the bill's promoters. I would be reluctant to put anybody else through that.

The Deputy Convener: Irene, do you want to talk about fruit and berries or other things?

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Not really, because fruit and berries have been flagged up enough, and we can deal with them later. I remind the committee that the expert panel on nutrition and school meals will report at the end of the month. We must bear in mind that time scale when we consider our own time scale, so that we have an opportunity to take on board the information and recommendations from the expert panel, and the extent to which that will or will not impact on our consideration of the bill.

The Deputy Convener: Absolutely. It has been suggested that we ask the Executive and COSLA for a number of pieces of information and costings, such as information on uptake and how widely free water is available in schools. Letters requesting that information should be sent urgently, because we need the information long before we sit down to make our final decisions on 6 June. I am concerned about our time scale, so those letters must be sent tomorrow to allow us to receive the information in time, which we are right to request of the Executive. Irene McGugan is right that we need information on nutritional standards, so that we can consider that issue in deciding on our recommendations on the bill.

Michael Russell: I have one other point. Could the Executive give us information on phase costing, for instance for the first three years in primary schools? I am seeking variations on the total cost, because there are alternatives that have not yet been adequately explored.

The Deputy Convener: Should we ask the Executive for that information?

Members indicated agreement.

The Deputy Convener: If there are no other points, we will move into private session.

14:49

Meeting continued in private until 15:31.

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