



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

RURAL AFFAIRS, CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 15 June 2011

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RURAL AFFAIRS, CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2011, Session 4

CONVENER

*Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP)

*Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

*Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD)

*Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP)

*Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lynn Tullis

Simon Watkins

LOCATION

Committee Room 5

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee

Wednesday 15 June 2011

[Rob Gibson opened the meeting at 10:00]

Interests

Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Good morning, everybody, and welcome to the first meeting in this session of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. I understand that I am the oldest member of the committee and therefore will be in the chair for the first part of the meeting. Mr Fergusson and I will need to get out our birth certificates.

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I am happy to give way.

Rob Gibson: Indeed.

Under the standing orders, I will chair the meeting until a convener is chosen, but first all members must declare their interests. Members should have a brief note of their declarations of interests. It is advisable to begin with things that you think are necessary; voluntary interests should also be declared.

I do not believe that I have any statutory interests to declare. My voluntary interests include membership of the Scottish Crofting Federation, Slow Food International and the Soil Association.

I ask members to state their interests. Annabelle Ewing, who is about to be elected deputy convener, can start.

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): I never asked you to jump the gun, but who knows?

I do not see that my mandatory registrable interests are relevant to the committee's remit, but my voluntary declarations are potentially of interest, so I will repeat them. I am a member of the Law Society of Scotland and I hold a practising certificate. I am not entirely sure that that is relevant, but I have put it out there. Between around September 2007 and May 2009, I worked on a consultancy project-support basis for Comrie Development Trust, which is a local development trust that is based in Comrie in Perthshire, where I live. That may become relevant at some point.

Alex Fergusson: I have some interests to declare—in particular, heritable property interests. Do you want me to read them out or detail them?

Rob Gibson: Just detail them generally.

Alex Fergusson: I own a house, cottage and farmland in south Ayrshire. The house's value is between around £150,000 and £200,000, the cottage's value is between £50,000 and £100,000, and the farmland's value is between £200,000 and £250,000. The rental income from that property is declared under my remuneration entry as between £15,000 and £20,000 per annum. I also have an agreement with Scottish and Southern Energy Ltd over land that is owned by me that was developed as part of a wind farm, from which I receive a rental income of between £45,000 and £50,000 per annum.

Under the voluntary category, I declare membership of Scottish Land and Estates; it became that two days ago, I think—it was formerly the Scottish Rural Property and Business Association. I am also a member of the Scottish Blackface Sheep Breeders Association—that is not to be sniffed at—and the Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland, of which I am the president elect for 2011-12. I have not yet declared that, but I will do so.

I think that is everything.

Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD): Under the statutory register of interests, I am a partner in John Hume and Son, which is a hill farming business in the Scottish Borders.

My other relevant interests are that I am a member of NFU Scotland, and I have been a director of that organisation and its environment and land use director, and I have been Lothians and Borders National Farmers Union president. That was all pre-2007, but I am still a member of that union.

I am a member and a past trustee of Borders Forest Trust, a member of Scottish Land and Estates, a member of RSPB Scotland, a past director of Scottish Enterprise Borders, for which I was chairman of the land-based advisory group, a past chairman of the Borders Foundation for Rural Sustainability, and a past member of the Forestry Commission's south of Scotland regional forum. I am a member of the Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland, but I play no active part. I am also a member of the Cheviot Sheep Society, which is far more important than the Scottish Blackface Sheep Breeders Association. [Laughter.]

Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP): For the moment, I have no registrable interests. That is set out in the register of members' interests, which the Parliament will publish in July.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): I do not have anything to declare under the mandatory categories. I do not think that I have anything to

declare under the voluntary categories, except that I am a season ticket holder at Carnoustie Golf Links—I do not know whether that is relevant.

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I do not believe that I have any relevant interest to declare.

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): I do not have any registrable interests. A couple of years ago, I was a guest of the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation in order to find out a bit more about the aquaculture industry. I have voluntarily declared that and a number of other things because the organisation paid for my accommodation.

I am a member of Unite the Union—formerly the Transport and General Workers Union—which I suppose could have some influence on the Scottish Agricultural Wages Board, for example. I am also a member of RSPB Scotland, the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Dumfriesshire and Cumbria Greyhound Rescue, Dumfries and Galloway Canine Rescue Centre and Oxfam, but I give them money—they do not give me any.

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): My only declaration is that I am a member of Aberdeen City Council and, through the council, I am currently a member of the north-east Scotland agricultural advisory group, which is a cross-authority group formed by Moray, Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City councils. However, it is not a membership that I intend to continue for very long as I am looking to reduce my council commitments to focus on the work here.

Rob Gibson: Thank you. As the interest declarations have been made, we will move on.

Convener

10:07

Rob Gibson: The second item on our agenda is to choose a convener. The Parliament has agreed that only members of the Scottish National Party are eligible for nomination as convener of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. That being the case, I seek nominations for the position of convener.

Aileen McLeod: I nominate Rob Gibson.

Rob Gibson was chosen as convener.

The Convener (Rob Gibson): Thank you very much. It is an honour to serve in this post, and I look forward to working with you all. I thank you all for choosing me, which means I will remain in the chair for this meeting.

Deputy Convener

10:08

The Convener: The third item on our agenda is to choose a deputy convener. Members will have before them a note from the clerk that sets out the procedure for selecting a deputy convener. It has been agreed that members of the Scottish National Party are eligible to be chosen as the deputy convener of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. That being the case, I invite nominations for the position of deputy convener.

Graeme Dey: I nominate Annabelle Ewing.

Annabelle Ewing was chosen as deputy convener.

Annabelle Ewing: Thank you very much. I am honoured.

The Convener: Congratulations, Annabelle. I look forward to working closely with you during this session.

Work Programme

10:09

The Convener: Agenda item 4 is slightly more extensive. Our approach to developing a work programme is an important part of our early thinking and will extend over more than just this meeting. I refer members to the note from the clerk and to the legacy papers from the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee and Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee.

Although it is not my intention at this meeting to have a detailed discussion on our forward work programme, it would be helpful if members would flag up ideas for future areas of work. I have a few ideas, which I will raise during the discussion. It will allow the clerks and the Scottish Parliament information centre to prepare further information on those topics for full discussion in the future.

It is our job to scrutinise the work of Government in a huge slice of Scottish life: social, economic and environmental aspects. Obviously, the effects of European Union and world issues impinge considerably on our detailed business. Therefore we have an extremely wide remit, which means that we will have to prioritise. However, we should find out what members' ideas are now, and in due course consider how to prioritise and to devise methods of working.

Annabelle Ewing: I am new to the Parliament and to the committee system and I would not by any means profess to be an expert on these matters. I would be interested in hearing from more experienced members about how we should reach a reasonable balance between own-initiative items and issues that we are required to address, such as legislative scrutiny. Own-initiative measures are important; committees should be strong bodies, so given this committee's important remit, I hope that it will prove to be very strong indeed.

I imagine that in any event our remit will deal with issues concerning reform of the common agricultural policy and concerning the common fisheries policy, particularly with regard to discards.

The issue of community assets is close to my heart and was raised by many people in Scotland throughout the election campaign.

It is important that, as far as we can, we get the balance right between our scrutiny remit and our efforts to put our own stamp on important debates on rural affairs, climate change and the environment.

Elaine Murray: As Annabelle Ewing indicated, there is always an issue in committees about the amount of time we spend on legislation. The legislative part tends to come later in the session. We will have more time to do inquiries early in the session.

I am a survivor of the previous session's committee, the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee. I was not put off by the Reservoirs (Scotland) Bill, which put a lot of people off coming back. It struck me in that committee that we always come to fishing quotas around the time when official discussions are taking place. Those discussions can be slightly repetitive—it tends to be the same people coming back and making similar points every year. Instead of having that slightly repetitive debate every year, it might be helpful if we could do more inquiry work on broader issues to do with fishing earlier in the year. It might be useful to do more in-depth work on the sustainability of Scotland's fishing industry and that sort of thing.

CAP reform will be a big issue, in which we will have to be very engaged. The previous committee did not seem to have the time to do some of the post-legislative scrutiny, although we did a bit on land reform. We might want to return to some issues to do with the land reform work of the previous session.

The Convener: I offer Mark McDonald a chance to speak because he may have to leave us slightly early.

Mark McDonald: Thank you, convener. The wonders of parliamentary scheduling mean that I have to dash off to the Public Audit Committee at 10:30. I appreciate your flexibility in allowing me in early.

It struck me, from reading the legacy paper and from a conversation with Maureen Watt, who was the convener of the previous committee, that rural affairs can all too often be viewed as being basically about farming, fishing and, occasionally, food. There is often not enough about the wider context of rural Scotland, which the committee perhaps needs to consider. Within that, there is the particular issue of resilience of rural communities. A number of rural communities have lost vital services such as post offices, banks, schools and libraries. It would be interesting to find out the impact of that. Beyond loss of services, a number of rural towns now have large supermarkets situated either within them or on their periphery. It would be interesting to see what impact that is having on small local businesses, and on rural high streets in particular.

10:15

Alex Fergusson: Following on from that, I invite the committee to visit Dumfries and Galloway, if it wishes. I think that Elaine Murray and I would agree that it is a prime example of an area that has experienced exactly the sort of changes in rural life to which Mark McDonald referred. I agree with what Elaine Murray said about opportunity in the earlier days or years of the committee, given that we are in a five-year Parliament. Legislative scrutiny will come later, so there is an opportunity now to do useful work.

I do not disagree with what has been said so far about non-agricultural aspects, but I would like some work to be done on the Scotland rural development programme. The SRDP has three years to go, and there is considerable uncertainty in the rural sector about what the priorities, on which we need clarity, are going to be. There is also considerable concern about the complexity of the application process, which a lot of smaller operations find very off-putting, not least because it costs quite a lot of money. We could look at what is, in essence and theory, a very good scheme in order to try to make it even better for the next three years of its life. I would like to go into a myriad of other things, but I am sure that other members will bring them up.

Jenny Marra: A non-legislative issue that I would like to suggest for consideration for an inquiry in the early days of the committee is the biomass proposals from Forth Ports for Dundee, Leith and Grangemouth. I think that the issue falls within the committee's climate change and environment remit. We should perhaps bear it in mind—if not be concerned—that our committee does not have energy in its remit, and that the Government's 100 per cent renewables target is such an issue for this session. We must therefore ensure that we work hand in hand with other committees to scrutinise properly the biomass proposals and ensure that they do not fall through the cracks.

Jim Hume: I concur with what has been said already, but perhaps we should emphasise the CAP, which is being reformed at the moment. If you like, the concrete is being mixed and the policy will be set in stone thereafter. So, if anything needs to be looked at soon, I would say it is the CAP. The SRDP is part of the CAP, and if we do not have the CAP, we will not have other things that help rural communities. What Mark McDonald said pertains to that point.

Another issue that could be considered at some stage is forestry targets and the potential clash with land users in certain parts of Scotland regarding mass forestation. We can decide when to consider that issue—it is not, perhaps, as urgent as the CAP.

Aileen McLeod: I, too, congratulate Rob Gibson on becoming convener and Annabelle Ewing on becoming deputy convener. It is good to see the south of Scotland so well represented on this committee.

Alex Fergusson: Hear, hear.

Aileen McLeod: I look forward to working with my colleagues to address many of the challenges that affect our rural communities.

A number of key policy issues affecting rural Scotland are on the European Union's agenda so it will be important to ensure that the United Kingdom Government in London listens to the view of the committee and the Scottish Parliament as we approach the crucial negotiations on the future shape and reform of the EU's common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, which will undoubtedly have significant implications for our farming, rural and fishing communities.

Also on the agenda for reform is the shape and direction of Europe's cohesion policy and the European funding programmes post 2013, including the Scotland rural development programme. We have the review of the state-aid rules to consider, and the development of the EU's research and innovation policies through the framework 8 programme for research and development. All of that can only help to improve the economic resilience of our rural communities.

We are well aware of some of the challenges that are facing our rural communities in transport infrastructure and the digital infrastructure, such as rural broadband. I hope that the committee will have an opportunity to consider some of those issues.

In addition, we must bear in mind the fact that a key challenge that is facing our rural communities especially is the ageing population, so it would be interesting for the committee to look at how we can improve local health and social care services.

Graeme Dey: I suppose that the downside of coming last is that I will end up echoing everyone else's comments. I start by echoing Alex Fergusson's point about development grants. We should look at whether it is possible to simplify the process and perhaps speed up the payments without compromising the system's integrity.

I also agree with Mark McDonald about sustaining and protecting our rural communities; that is a major issue. However, for me, the biggest issue is rural broadband, because it is a major issue across Scotland.

The Convener: Indeed. Thank you very much.

We have such a wide remit that we will have to spend a little bit of time working out how we

should decide what is most urgent. I will take some of what members have said as a start.

We have to see the CAP proposals before we can look at them in detail. We cannot second-guess what will happen, but two of our members—Aileen McLeod and Annabelle Ewing—are on the European and External Relations Committee, so we can link up with that committee's thinking.

That leads me to the point about the need to work with others. Jenny Marra mentioned biomass and the environment, and we need to explore how we can work with the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee to discuss those issues. I agree that there should be more collaborative working with other committees whenever we can, especially at this early stage when we do not have legislation to deal with immediately.

The CAP will come along a little later in our timetable, but there are proposals on the CFP for July, so we have a timetabling issue with that. Because it is such a wide issue, the committee will want to have formed its view well before December, as Elaine Murray suggested. Other issues have been highlighted by the major campaign on discards. The Rural Affairs and Environment Committee's legacy paper suggested that the committee should look at the views of fish processors, as opposed to catchers, for a change.

There are different ways of dealing with those issues, but I suggest that we think about the possibilities. In a minute or two, I will let members back in to have a bit of a discussion; first, I will reflect on some of the comments that have jumped out at me.

I will stick with immediate agricultural issues, because, as I said, the CAP will come up in due course. The issue of food production versus forestry definitely looms in each part of the country. During the election, I was tasked by a lot of tenant farmers in Sutherland to deal with that issue—I suspect that we all heard about it. The sheep tagging question is also pretty urgent. We might want first to dig into the reasons why it has come up as it has, and then look at the implications. It is very much an on-going matter—it is in the press today.

With regard to the CFP, the discards issue is quite high profile: there is an excellent article about it in the current issue of *Holyrood* magazine, and I think that we should examine the matter closely. That again flags up the issue of our EU representation: the Scots members of the European Parliament have often worked together on these matters to try to get the best deal, and we want to be well abreast of the situation.

There are also issues relating to inshore fisheries development and the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010, which applies in every part of the

country. We can take some more comments from Elaine Murray on that, as she went through the Marine (Scotland) Bill process. We need to get up to speed with how inshore fisheries have been set up and how the regional and area management provisions in the 2010 act are beginning to impinge on each area. There are issues in my part of the world that relate to the need for better management. The area around Loch Torridon and Gairloch is one example, but we might also want to mention other areas such as the Solway Firth.

Somebody mentioned land reform; there is a series of such issues in the legacy papers that relate to post-legislative scrutiny. The tenant and landlord situation needs to be examined—the committee must consider how we can tackle such a big subject properly. We also need to examine the very current issue of the Crown Estate Commissioners and that body's impact on Scotland's land and seas.

As Mark McDonald said, rural development is a much wider issue. Community assets—the way in which we use the land and the potential wealth from energy creation and so on—will, I believe, be the subject of a Government bill, so we may want to examine the issue in more detail.

Broadband and mobile coverage is an issue that affects us all and is close to everyone's heart. Even when I travel through Fife on the train it becomes utterly annoying to go through blank spot after blank spot, but that is nothing in comparison with what happens when one travels further north. That flags up the need for us to know—and to let the public know—exactly where broadband and mobile coverage is. We need to map that and see where the blanks are, and then confront the bodies that are responsible for supposedly providing a service.

Climate change is bound to loom regularly in our activities. As a member of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee in the previous session, and from dealing with the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, I know that proposals and policies are produced annually. There are adaptation strategies, and a land use strategy that relates to the biodiversity provisions in the 2009 act, some of which were amended by members from all sides of the chamber.

The 2009 act will throw up pressing issues to do with flooding, coastal erosion and landslips. Such things will affect people more as we experience more extreme climate change, so we need to consider them, especially as a raft of secondary legislation will come through regularly.

Crofting and aquaculture are yet further issues—I could go on, but members have raised a series of issues that we need to prioritise and we must work out a way of dealing with those,

although we cannot do so today. We have the opportunity to ask questions of the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment and the Minister for Environment and Climate Change at committee next week, if we so choose; I think that the cabinet secretary has to be in Europe the following week. That would be our first chance to raise these matters, and to focus on issues on which we would like answers. We can use the legacy papers to inform some of those questions, and add the issues that we think are important. We should crystallise that information by having SPICe come along beforehand to give us an overview. We have been sent papers, but it is always good to have people speak about these matters, recognising that they will help us to focus. If we are going to do that, we will have to agree that in a little while.

We must also consider the potential for having a business planning day, whether we want to hold it externally, what form it might take and so on. Quite a bit of preparation must take place.

Do committee members want to come back on any of those issues or on the process?

10:30

Jim Hume: You mentioned working with the European and External Relations Committee on the common agricultural policy. I was on that committee and remember that it wanted to look at the CAP. There were even thoughts of putting a rapporteur from that committee on the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee, but at that stage the European and External Relations Committee said, "No, that's our business." To be honest, the issue got a little bit lost between the two committees, so I urge caution there.

I am sorry to focus completely on the CAP, but you said that we are waiting to see what comes out of Europe. I am more interested in influencing at an earlier stage than in reacting at a later stage, when things may have gone a step too far. There is a bit more urgency around the CAP than may first be thought.

Elaine Murray: You mentioned the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010, convener. We may want to ask the cabinet secretary about the extent to which that act is being implemented. I do not know whether we are yet beginning to look at the way in which the regional marine planning authorities are working or whether they have even been set up. The act is comprehensive and has a lot of different aspects. We might want to ask the cabinet secretary how its implementation is going and what stage all those things are at.

The forestry versus food argument comes under part of the land use strategy, which was published in its final form during the election campaign.

Although the previous committee considered it in draft form, we have not had much opportunity to consider it in its final form.

The previous committee also did quite a bit of work on the CAP and the CFP. One of the reasons for the spat was that we were already working on those issues when the convener of the previous European and External Relations Committee wanted to get involved. A bit of a territorial argument went on, which I am sure we will manage to avoid this time. The issues span the two committees and we may need to find some working agreement on the way in which we progress with them. Like Jim Hume, I believe that we should be looking at those things now, rather than waiting to see what Europe decides to do. A lot of issues came out of the Pack report, and there are other matters that we might want to look at.

The breadth of the issues that members have raised today indicates that we probably need to have a business planning day, but there is always a bit of a fight to get money to go somewhere external. Maybe we should bank that until we hold an inquiry for which it is important that we engage with a community, rather than using up our credit on an external business planning day. I would favour our having the business planning meeting in Edinburgh so that we can make an argument later about the need to go elsewhere to take evidence.

Alex Fergusson: I underline my agreement with Jim Hume and Elaine Murray about the desirability of looking at the CAP sooner rather than later. I believe that one of the UK's problems with Europe is that the UK has always been reactive rather than proactive. If there is an opportunity to be proactive in relation to a serious and major reform that will bring a lot of changes in support and in the patterns of financial support throughout the country, it is important that we take it. Even if we were not to do so, there would still be an argument for looking at the SRDP, which has until the CAP reform to run, as there is a need to consider what the priorities are between now and then. We are absolutely right to prioritise. If we do not, I will be asking how many times a week we are thinking of meeting. I hope that once a week will be enough.

I also agree with Elaine Murray that we should have our planning meeting here in Edinburgh and bank the external excursions for what might be more important occasions later on.

Annabelle Ewing: I do not know what has happened in the past with regard to working with other committees, and I listened to what Elaine Murray said—that might have been just a misunderstanding or misplaced territorial ambition. I think that it is important for the committees of the

Parliament to work together on crossover issues. That happens in other institutions, with varying degrees of success. I hope that, on an issue as important as the CAP, the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee and the European and External Relations Committee can establish a close working relationship on the issue early on. That might involve the conveners and the clerks of the respective committees having a discussion. Aileen McLeod and I both have the pleasure of sitting on the European and External Relations Committee, and we would be happy to progress that joint working, but an institutional framework is also required to facilitate it.

On the timing, I agree with what Alex Fergusson said. Having worked in Brussels and having witnessed the UK Government's involvement—or lack of involvement—in European issues over many years, I know that the UK has frequently failed to have its voice properly heard, as it has been far too reactive in how it has gone about its business in Brussels.

Having said that, I think that it would be useful to find out exactly where we are with the CAP proposals, with regard to which stage of the formal, legislative part of the process we are at and, more important, where we are with the various working group and corporate meetings, which is where the key decisions are made. That would be helpful for informing the committee about the timetable that we need to adopt, in a proactive way, to deal with the issue.

As for where we might meet, I understand what has been said and I note that budgets are tight, but I put in a plea that we at least consider the importance of showing people in rural Scotland that we are a committee for them, and that we are very much open for business. Perhaps it would be useful to hold our first substantive meeting, when we are discussing issues, somewhere else in Scotland, outwith the confines of the Parliament building. Wherever we decide to go, perhaps we could combine that meeting with an event that involved members of the public. That would send an important signal that we are open for business and will listen closely to what people across Scotland have to say about the matters that come under our remit.

Alex Fergusson: I hesitate to disagree so early in the session with the deputy convener—

The Convener: We had better get used to it.

Alex Fergusson: I am not going to disagree with everything that is said by any means, but occasionally one has to.

I understand what Annabelle Ewing is saying, but we need to choose the right time to go out to other parts of the country. As a former convener of the Rural Development Committee, I absolutely

champion the right of this committee, above all others, to go out and about in rural Scotland. The Rural Development Committee was active in doing so; indeed, that was when your brother was my deputy convener, Annabelle—happy days. We need to choose the right time to do that, however.

A work planning meeting is essentially a behind-closed-doors exercise, when we have a completely free and open exchange of views. My view is that it would be better to hold that in Edinburgh, and that we should bank the opportunities to meet externally for inquiries, for instance, when people can come and take part. It is a more engaging process for the public if we hold meetings such as that outside Edinburgh, but not events such as a work planning meeting. That is my view, anyway.

The Convener: I will discuss the matter with the clerks and we can come up with some suggestions for the next meeting about a business planning day. There are reasons why we should not meet on the grass outside just because this is a rural committee; we should be out on the wider grass further afield. Such events can include a public-facing part. If we have a large amount of work to do, however, we will need to think about that carefully.

On the wider matter of dealing with the European dimension, under the pilot scheme that was started in the previous session—rather too late to be effective—a member of each of the subject committees was identified to deal with the European and External Relations Committee, so that such liaison would take place. It will be interesting to hear what the convener of the European and External Relations Committee says about carrying on that pilot and how the liaison will work with each of the different committees, but it is vital for us to know about that early on. Although I will take the committee's advice, I suggest that we ask the European and External Relations Committee to give us a briefing on that at an early stage so that we can be involved.

Simon Watkins (Clerk): A European reporter will be selected at the next meeting.

The Convener: In that case, we have been round the houses for a start and I suspect that we will go round them quite a lot more. In order to make progress, we therefore have to make certain decisions. The committee is asked to agree that we meet on 22 June to take evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment and, I suggest, the Minister for Environment and Climate Change.

Simon Watkins: I am not sure that the minister is available.

The Convener: Okay, but we can always ask.

That is the first proposal. Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We would hold a short informal briefing with SPICe before the cabinet secretary gives evidence to the committee, because he can come only at a certain time. I have forgotten what that time is.

Simon Watkins: We would hold the informal briefing immediately before the full committee meeting, which we are scheduling for half past 10.

The Convener: The briefing will be at half past 10, and the cabinet secretary will give evidence after that.

Simon Watkins: The briefing will be before, at 9.45, and the cabinet secretary will give evidence at half past—

The Convener: Okay, so we can meet at—

Annabelle Ewing: Sorry, is the briefing at 9.45?

Simon Watkins: Yes.

The Convener: That is slightly earlier—I hope that that is not an inconvenience to people.

Do we agree to that?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We agreed to hold a business planning day—perhaps an external one. However, bearing in mind what members have said, we will have a look at the matter with the clerks. It will certainly be held in the summer recess; I suggest that it should be held towards the end of August.

Aileen McLeod: It would be useful if we also invited to the business planning day our Scottish MEPs to help our thinking on CAP reform, given that the European Parliament's Agriculture and Rural Development Committee has just adopted its position on the Commission's communication on CAP reform. I am conscious that two of our MEPs are on that committee.

The Convener: We can take that suggestion on board. We need to collaborate with all the different Parliaments and their representatives. The business planning day might be a good place to have an off-the-record discussion about that, since it is an internal meeting. Thank you for that suggestion.

I suggest the last Monday in August as a possible date, but we will need to find a date that is suitable for everybody—that is the trouble.

Alex Fergusson: I will not be here that day.

The Convener: What about the Wednesday?

Alex Fergusson: What date are you talking about?

The Convener: Wednesday, 31 August.

We will have to get a list of when members are available in August. We can do that immediately after the meeting. I ask members to tell the clerks when they are available and we can see whether we can find a suitable date. As far as I am concerned, the later in August, the better.

Elaine Murray: The festival of politics is also on in August, so we would want to avoid that week.

The Convener: That is true, but you are making the assumption that we would hold the meeting in the Parliament.

Let us see if we can get some dates together. That will probably prove quite difficult, but we can perhaps deal with the matter after the meeting.

We also have to discuss and agree a work programme at the business planning day. We will give the clerks time to prepare some ideas for us before then so that we can agree what steps to take when we return in September and take up our duties on a weekly basis. As members can see, it will be necessary for us to meet weekly.

Are we agreed on that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Are there any other matters that need to be decided now?

Alex Fergusson: For clarity, have we agreed that Scottish MEPs be invited to our work planning day, or is that only a proposal?

The Convener: It is only a proposal.

Alex Fergusson: I want to think about that suggestion a little bit before I endorse it. I am not against the proposal, but I would like to think about it.

The Convener: It is important that we take on as much information and as many ideas as we can so that we can distil them and make decisions, but we are not making decisions now. We are making proposals, but the decisions that we have made are about the process that we will follow to reach decisions later on.

Elaine Murray: On that point, the Scottish Parliament employs somebody in Europe who used to give fairly regular briefings—every three months—to the committee. It might be worth inviting him, because he used to brief us on the various discussions that were taking place. It might be useful for us to have a briefing from him. His name has escaped my mind.

Jim Hume: Is it John Duncan?

Members: It is Ian Duncan.

The Convener: We will stick with the Scottish version of his name. I think that he has agreed to

attend committee meetings. If we so choose, we can ask him to brief us as we see fit.

As members have no other points, that completes today's business. The committee's next meeting will be on 22 June. Thank you for attending.

Meeting closed at 10:46.

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