



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 14 June 2011

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2011, Session 4

CONVENER

*Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con)

*Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Douglas Thornton

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 14 June 2011

[Claudia Beamish *opened the meeting at 14:15*]

Interests

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):

Good afternoon and welcome to the first meeting of the Equal Opportunities Committee in the fourth session of the Scottish Parliament. Under the standing orders, I, as the oldest committee member, have been asked to convene the start of the meeting—that is all good in terms of equal opps, I suppose, so here I am. I will be in the chair until a convener is chosen.

I remind everyone who is present, including members, to turn off completely their mobile phones and Blackberrys, because they will interfere with the sound system even if they are switched to silent. No apologies have been received.

Item 1 is the declaration of interests, in accordance with section 3 of the code of conduct for members of the Scottish Parliament. Members have been issued with a short note on what a declaration should include; the procedure should be straightforward. I remind members that declarations should be brief but sufficiently detailed to make clear to a listener the nature of the interest.

I will begin and then invite each member in turn to declare interests that they regard as relevant to the committee. In relation to the Equal Opportunities Committee, I have no interests to declare.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): I have no relevant interests to declare.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I am a member of North Lanarkshire Council, a member of the British Computer Society and a member of the National Union of Journalists, all of which carry out equal opportunities work.

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): I have no relevant interests to declare.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am a member of Highland Council and I am involved in the council's equalities working group.

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am a former member of the Scottish Trades Union Congress disabled workers committee.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West)

(SNP): I declare an interest in the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association—I am a guide dog owner. I am a blind person and I have an interest in any group that works alongside people with visual impairments. I have been a member of the equalities forum in Aberdeen and in Moray, and I have attended cross-party groups on visual impairment and disability. I should probably also declare that I have worked with the Royal National Institute of Blind People in campaigns over the years, given that the RNIB is a large national organisation.

Claudia Beamish: Thank you. All members of the committee are present, so all the declarations of interest have been made.

Convener

Claudia Beamish: Agenda item 2 is the choice of convener. The Parliament has agreed that only members of the Scottish Labour Party are eligible for nomination as convener of the committee. I seek nominations for the position.

Siobhan McMahon: I nominate Claudia Beamish.

Claudia Beamish: I do not think that I have to look for a seconder, but I am happy to take one.

Margaret Mitchell: I am happy to second the nomination.

Claudia Beamish: Thank you for your support. As only one nomination has been received, I ask the committee to agree that I be chosen as the committee convener.

Claudia Beamish was chosen as convener.

The Convener (Claudia Beamish): Thank you very much for choosing me as convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I will do my best to represent everybody across Scotland, with the help of the committee and many other people in this wonderful country.

Deputy Convener

14:19

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is the choice of deputy convener. Members have a paper on the item. The Parliament has agreed that only members of the Scottish National Party are eligible to be chosen as deputy convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I seek nominations for the position.

John Finnie: I nominate Stuart McMillan.

The Convener: Only one nomination has been received. I therefore ask the committee to agree that Stuart McMillan be chosen as deputy convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee.

Stuart McMillan was chosen as deputy convener.

The Convener: Congratulations.

Stuart McMillan: Thank you very much.

Work Programme

14:20

The Convener: Agenda item 4 is the approach to developing our work programme. I refer members to paper EO/S4/11/1/3, which is among the papers prepared for us by the clerk, Douglas Thornton. It includes a note on the committee's remit and the predecessor committee's legacy paper.

It is suggested that we agree to meet again before the recess to have a work planning discussion and that we hold a business planning day subsequent to that. I invite members to comment on that suggestion.

Margaret Mitchell: I am happy to approve that proposal, convener. It would be good to have another meeting to consider the forward work programme and a possible away day.

Stuart McMillan: It would certainly be useful for the committee, at the beginning of a new parliamentary session, to have an away day or work day. It is also important that we have another committee meeting before the summer recess.

The Convener: Is the committee agreed that we will proceed in that way?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: To allow the clerk and our research specialist, who is sitting at the side of the room, to prepare further information on the topics for full discussion in the future, it would be helpful if we could get an idea of topics on which we think that it would be useful to go forward. I invite members to make any initial suggestions, without any binding commitments being given, of issues that we want to consider focusing on.

Stuart McMillan: I spoke to the convener about the matter on Thursday. It would be useful for the committee to conduct post-legislative scrutiny of the housing legislation that the Parliament has passed. As members of the Scottish Parliament, we will receive a tremendous amount of correspondence and much of it will be about housing-related issues. An issue that has been raised not only in this committee but in other committees is that there does not seem to be enough time to do post-legislative scrutiny in the Parliament. The first year of a new session offers the ideal opportunity to undertake such work.

I suggest that we do some work on the equalities aspects of some of the housing legislation that the Parliament has passed. There would be a tremendous amount of interest among the relevant bodies outside the Parliament and I am sure that we would also produce a lot of

recommendations for possible future legislation, by this Government or future Governments.

The Convener: We will take an inclusive approach to taking note of suggestions. Do members have any other suggestions?

John Finnie: On pages 16 and 17 of the legacy paper, mention is made of a possible case study to assess the effect of the pay freeze on public sector workers and the equality issues around that. The longer-term impact on earnings and indeed the potential impact on pensions, although that is not specifically mentioned in the paper, could have an equalities dimension. I wonder whether that would be a suitable topic for consideration.

The Convener: The legacy paper also suggests that it is important to be aware of developing the equality statement in relation to future budgets. I think that that would also be a way forward, if members are agreed on that.

Are there other ideas that members would like to mention?

Margaret Mitchell: This is not so much an idea; I just agree with Stuart McMillan that looking at the housing legislation would be of great interest. I am particularly interested in looking at the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003 now that it has been in operation for about eight years. In the past, committees have not had time to do much post-legislative scrutiny, so it would be good if that was part of our work programme.

More generally, all that I would say is that the budget will always be important. It was useful in the past for the committee to have a budget adviser. When that approach was taken for the first time in session 3, members found that there was immense value in having someone to look at the budget and advise the committee on it. The new committee might consider that.

Siobhan McMahon: On post-legislative scrutiny, we should look at the Transport (Scotland) Act 2005, focusing not only on the concessionary travel aspects but on the accessibility of transport and whether we have moved forward in that area.

The Convener: Are there any other things that members would like us to consider including in our work programme?

Dennis Robertson: I have no ideas at the moment, convener, but is there a timeline within which you will continue to accept suggestions before our next meeting?

The Convener: Thank you for raising that point, Dennis. It has been suggested that we e-mail any further ideas to Douglas Thornton, as the clerk. It might be useful if they could be copied to the other

members of the committee. I think that we all have each other's e-mail addresses, but we can organise that in whatever practical way we need to, and we can have further discussions as well.

The clerk advises me that, if we e-mail ideas to him in the first instance, he will send them on to other members so that they are aware of the suggestions that are coming in. We can then discuss them at our next meeting and our business planning day.

Dennis Robertson: Would the clerk like to give us a timeline?

The Convener: Any time before the next meeting.

Dennis Robertson: Thank you.

The Convener: Right up to the wire. [*Laughter.*] It would be helpful to have suggestions within the next week if that is agreeable, because I think that our next meeting is set for two weeks today, although we do not yet have a time for it. Is that a realistic timeline? Is that all right, Dennis?

Dennis Robertson: That is fine. Thank you.

The Convener: Are there any other suggestions at this stage?

I would like clarification of the proposed case study that is mentioned in the legacy paper on the impact of the pay freeze. It is in the appendix at the back, I think. I wonder whether we could check how far that has gone, because it would seem to be a good way of looking at the impact on the budget of any cuts, and the pay freeze specifically. Sorry—I am not being clear. We can look into that, if that is all right with other members.

We can discuss the way that we will work at our away day. If members feel that it would be appropriate to have a one-off evidence-taking session, a longer inquiry or a round-table discussion, it might be worth saying so at this stage. However, we can look at such matters at our business away day. Are there any other issues?

14:30

Clare Adamson: Can we have a briefing paper for our next meeting on the Government's legislative priorities that might have equality impacts?

The Convener: I am sorry—which priorities?

Clare Adamson: The Government legislative priorities that are coming through—

The Convener: In the future?

Clare Adamson: Yes. It would be good to have such a paper for discussion at the away day.

The Convener: Yes. That is great; thank you.

Dennis Robertson: I suggest that equalities are interwoven with all future legislation. I cannot think of any piece of legislation, or committee, that would not have an equalities agenda.

The Convener: Okay, that point is taken. If possible, it would be useful to know what is coming up so that we can focus our minds on what scrutiny we should prepare for when we return from recess.

Margaret Mitchell: Dennis Robertson makes a fair point. Equally, Clare Adamson might be thinking about the implications of the Equality Act 2010 as far as Government business and various public bodies are concerned. It would be good to see where we stand in relation to the 2010 act, which is relatively new legislation.

The Convener: Okay. If members have no other points to make about our work programme, we will move on.

We are still on agenda item 4. We have agreed to have another meeting on our work programme before the recess. It is usual practice for such a meeting to be held in private to enable us to have a free-ranging discussion without making commitments. Are all members happy to proceed on that basis?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Do members have any preference for the timing of the business planning day? We might have it in the last week of the recess, if convenient, or in the first week of what is called the new term in my papers—I am no longer a teacher, but suddenly I feel like I am back at school. We could have the meeting in the first week after coming back to the Scottish Parliament. Have members any preferences on timing?

Margaret Mitchell: Can we make that decision next week when we have a better idea of where we are and what we are doing?

The Convener: Okay. As a new member, I agree strongly.

One or two points have been raised about the committee's remit, which I shall put on the agendas for our next meeting and the business planning meeting. Do members want to raise any other points at this stage?

Dennis Robertson: I have just one point. It would be advantageous—certainly for me—to know which clerks are present at any given meeting and anyone else who is here. I know who is here today, but if that changes at any time, or if any other members of the Parliament staff are with us during our meetings, it would be good to know.

The Convener: Thank you for pointing that out, Dennis.

Meeting closed at 14:34.

It just remains for me to thank all members, the clerks, official reporters, researchers and members of the public who have attended today's meeting. Our next meeting will be on Tuesday 28 June at a time to be stated.

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