



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 17 January 2012

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STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE
1st Meeting 2012, Session 4

CONVENER

*Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Helen Eadie (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Margaret Burgess (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

*Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP)

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

*Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Paul Wheelhouse (South Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Gillian Baxendine

Catherine Fergusson

Alison Walker

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament
Standards, Procedures and
Public Appointments Committee

Tuesday 17 January 2012

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 14:15*]

Interests

The Convener (Dave Thompson): Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to our first meeting in 2012. I wish any of you whom I have not seen until now a good new year. I remind everyone to switch off mobile phones and BlackBerrys, so that we are not interrupted during proceedings.

Agenda item 1 is a declaration of interests. I welcome Margaret McCulloch to her first meeting of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. It is good to have you here and I hope that you enjoy your time with the committee. I invite you to declare any relevant interests, please.

Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab): My only interest is that I rent out a residential property in South Lanarkshire. Previously, I have been involved with Government-funded training programmes.

Decision on Taking Business in
Private

14:16

The Convener: Item 2 is a decision on taking business in private. Do members agree to take in private items 4 and 5?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Cross-party Groups

14:16

The Convener: Under item 3, we have four applications for new or repeat cross-party groups. One of the groups was active in the previous parliamentary session and the other three were not—they are new.

First is the proposed cross-party group on funerals and bereavement, which was active in the previous session. Members will see from the group's application in the papers that are before them that the group meets all the criteria for registration.

Paul Wheelhouse (South Scotland) (SNP): I declare an interest as I am listed as a member of the proposed CPG.

The Convener: The registration form says that the group will receive £5,400 plus VAT per year from the National Association of Funeral Directors through Brevia Consulting Ltd, which will do the group's secretarial work and so on. Nanette Milne has provided information about Brevia Consulting. Do members have questions about the group or the information that its co-convener has provided?

Margaret Burgess (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Is Brevia Consulting a lobby group for the National Association of Funeral Directors or is it simply a consulting group?

Catherine Fergusson (Clerk): Brevia Consulting has been described as a consultancy firm. I do not know many more details about its activity, but I know that it performs the same role for the all-party parliamentary group for funerals and bereavement at Westminster.

The Convener: Are you happy with that, Margaret, or do you feel the need to find out a bit more?

Margaret Burgess: Am I correct in saying that the proposed cross-party group is not new?

The Convener: Yes.

Margaret Burgess: Did the group previously have the same secretariat?

The Convener: Yes.

Margaret Burgess: On that basis, I accept that the position has been checked out.

Margaret McCulloch: I have a general question about cross-party groups—I apologise if it is stupid. I understand that probably more cross-party groups have been registered since 5 May 2011 than were registered in the previous session. I am a member of a couple of cross-party groups. How productive are such groups? Is that

measured in any way? Are numbers of people who attend the groups measured? Do they have action plans for the year that include expected outcomes so that it can be seen whether they achieve their objectives, or do people just have cross-party groups for the sake of having them? If the groups are not measured in such ways, should they be?

The Convener: The basic criterion for cross-party groups is that they provide information and so on for MSPs. They must assist MSPs, although they also do wider things. What is the total number of registered cross-party groups this session?

Catherine Fergusson: If the four groups on today's agenda are approved, that will take us to 66.

The Convener: I think that there were more than 70 in the previous session.

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I seem to remember that there were 74.

Catherine Fergusson: There were 78 CPGs at the end of the previous session.

The Convener: We are getting up to the same sort of level, although it will probably tail off a little bit. One thing that concerns me slightly—we will come to this when we consider one of the other groups—is that we need to be careful about cross-party groups beginning to overlap in what they do. As part of our work programme, we will inquire into cross-party groups and how they work, what their functions are and all the rest of it. I say to Margaret McCulloch that we can get stuck in to the detail at that point; we will take evidence from various people and work out where we want to go with the cross-party group agenda, which might answer the points that concern her. Many cross-party groups have been very useful and effective in the Parliament over the past 12 or 13 years—perhaps some more so than others.

Paul Wheelhouse: In the context of funerals and bereavement, there are going to be some significant changes in terms of how people are registered when they die. There are also significant issues in terms of cross-border traffic with regard to, for example, people from Scotland who die in England or abroad and regulation of that. That is just one example.

I know that parliamentary activity will be conducted in a number of the CPGs that I am involved with. So, to answer Margaret McCulloch's question, there will be good ones and bad ones, but my impression is that most of them have sincere parliamentary activity at their hearts.

Alex Fergusson: On a slightly more general point, but with reference to the funerals and bereavement group and questions about Brevia

Consulting, it used to be the practice that when a cross-party group was going to be approved at committee, somebody from the potential cross-party group would be at the meeting to answer questions. Is that still the case? I note that since I became a member of this committee, nobody has come from a CPG when we have been considering its approval. It can be a waste of time if everybody says that it is a great CPG and it just goes through, so it would have been handy to have had a member of the funerals and bereavement group here to answer any queries about Brevia Consulting. I am quite happy knowing that that company has the same role at Westminster, but there might have been an issue there.

The Convener: That is a very good point. In the past, conveners of the groups have come along to answer questions when we have asked them to do so. We obviously did not ask them to do so in this case. Perhaps that is something that we should think about a bit more carefully. That is also an issue that we can pick up in our inquiry and we can ask whether it should be normal practice.

Alex Fergusson: That is fine.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Is the committee happy to accord recognition to the proposed cross-party group on funerals and bereavement?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The second group is the proposed cross-party group on Germany. It was not active in the previous session, but all the criteria for registration under the current rules have been met by the group. Do members have any questions about the group?

Members: No.

Alex Fergusson: Nein. [*Laughter.*] I do not mean nine questions, convener. [*Laughter.*]

The Convener: In that case, do members agree to accord recognition to the proposed cross-party group on Germany?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The third proposed cross-party group is on the middle east and south Asia. It was not active in the previous session. Members have a note on the application; you will see that the group meets all the criteria for registration.

Members might want to note that a number of existing cross-party groups focus on parts of the middle east and south Asia. That point relates to what I was saying earlier. Do members want to seek information on whether the proposed group has considered how its work might overlap with the work of existing cross-party groups?

The proposed group does not include member organisations. There would be one non-MSP individual member and the other members would all be MSPs. I wonder how the group will get the information and support that it needs. How will it operate if it has almost no members who are not MSPs?

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): I apologise for arriving late; I was delayed.

You have made a reasonable point, convener. However, the group on Germany that we have just approved includes one non-MSP individual member, and the member organisation is the consulate general of the Federal Republic of Germany. We are not talking about a throng of interested stakeholder groups who are desperate to find out more about Germany. It is worth bearing that in mind as we consider the proposed group on the middle east and south Asia.

However, the convener's point is important. The group's proposed area of interest is very broad—certainly compared with that of the cross-party group on Germany. The convener's point chimes with the discussion about the purpose and focus of cross-party groups that was going on when I arrived. I am minded to support the group's registration, on the basis that we should be consistent in our approval of groups, but the application flags up some general themes.

Margaret Burgess: I agree with Bob Doris. We will have to consider the issue when we review cross-party groups. I am slightly concerned about the non-MSP membership of the proposed group that we are considering now and the group on Germany: cross-party groups are about informing members, but it seems that these two groups would operate the other way round, which is not quite the purpose of a cross-party group, as I understand it.

Margaret McCulloch: Rather than form a new group, has anyone considered whether an existing group could include additional geographical areas?

The Convener: I take the point that Bob Doris made and which Margaret Burgess endorsed. We should maybe ask the convener of the proposed group to come to our next meeting, so that we can tease out some of the issues with him.

Alex Fergusson: I was going to make the same suggestion. That would be a useful step to take. I do not know who Umbreen Khalid is—I have no idea, to be honest.

The Convener: I suggest that we delay approval and invite the convener to our next meeting, with a view to getting him to address points that have been made.

Alex Fergusson: I am happy with that.

The Convener: Are other members happy with that approach?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: The final proposed cross-party group is on video games technology. It was not active in the previous session and it meets all the criteria. My only comment is that the first bullet point under heading 2, "Group Purpose", is not relevant to the group's purpose and is just a statement on the value of technology companies. Should we suggest that the group remove that paragraph? It does not add anything, and the second paragraph adequately explains what the group is about.

Alex Fergusson: Yes—that paragraph is just a justification, is it not?

The Convener: Aye, it is. Are members happy to approve the group on that basis?

Members *indicated agreement.*

14:29

Meeting continued in private until 15:03.

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Published in Edinburgh by APS Group Scotland

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e-format available
ISBN 978-1-4061-8163-0

Printed format published
ISBN 978-1-4061-8227-9

Printed in Scotland by APS Group Scotland