



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE

Thursday 14 March 2013

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STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE
4th Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

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

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Helen Eadie (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Brian Adam (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)

*John Lamont (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

*Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Gillian Baxendine

Alison Walker

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 14 March 2013

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Dave Thompson): Good morning, members. Welcome to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's fourth meeting in 2013. I remind members to turn off mobile phones, BlackBerrys and so on. We have apologies from Brian Adam, and George Adam is sitting in for him.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take items 4 to 6 in private. Those items deal with a paper on post-legislative scrutiny, a paper on our approach to the review of parliamentary reform and a paper on our approach to procedures for consideration of Scottish Public Services Ombudsman special reports. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Cross-party Group

09:31

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is on a cross-party group application. The committee will take evidence from Margaret McCulloch on the proposed cross-party group on towns and town centres. Members have a paper and Margaret is with us. Do members have any questions on the application?

Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP): Good morning, Ms McCulloch. I compliment you on your registration form, which is excellent. It is certainly along the lines that the committee wanted.

Paragraph 1 says:

"To analyse policy prescriptions and develop ideas and innovations."

What do you mean by "policy prescriptions"?

Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab): The Scottish Government and the Westminster Government are conducting reviews of towns and town centres. We are waiting on Malcolm Fraser, who is conducting the Scottish Government's review, to produce his report, which we will look at. We will consider the ideas and suggestions in that and the report of the Westminster Government's review, which looked at how we can put some life back into town centres and towns.

Helen Eadie (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): Good morning, Margaret. Paragraph 2 says:

"There is no overlap with other Cross Party Groups. Angus MacDonald MSP had an initial meeting to look at starting a group but didn't proceed with it."

Do you have any idea why that was the case?

Margaret McCulloch: I phoned Angus MacDonald to ask him why. His workload did not allow it, so he did not take it forward. Initially I was concerned that there might not have been interest in a group, but that was not the case.

The Convener: The third point in the description of the group's purpose says:

"The group will ... consider how best to take forward recommendations from the town centre review and the government's regeneration strategy."

That review is time sensitive, in the sense that once it is done and looked at, it will be in the past. However, it will remain as part of the group's purpose, although you will have dealt with it over perhaps the next six months or whatever. Does it need to stay in the purpose? Would it not be better under paragraph 3, as one of the issues to be addressed by the group as part of its agenda?

Margaret McCulloch: I am happy to move the item. I have no problem with that; it is quite a good idea.

The Convener: Are you content to do that?

Margaret McCulloch: Yes; absolutely. That is no problem.

The Convener: We will note that and amend the form accordingly.

I have one final question, which is on the financial benefits that you have declared. I see that you have calculated the secretarial costs, which will be met by Scotland's Towns Partnership, at £360 plus £100 for sundry expenses, which is £460. That is below the £500 limit. Have you calculated the cost not just of the person attending the group's meetings, doing the minutes and so on but of the work of organising the meetings beforehand, chasing people up and following things up afterwards? The person in question might well spend a couple of hours a week outwith the actual meetings on such work.

Margaret McCulloch: We have allotted three hours per meeting, but we do not think that meetings will last longer than two hours. The remaining hour should cover the admin work before and after a meeting. That said, we could monitor the situation and, if the time taken for admin work appears to be creeping up, we will inform the committee and provide up-to-date information on the financial side of things.

The Convener: That would be very helpful in allowing us to ascertain the exact figures. After all, until the group starts, you do not know exactly how long the person will spend on the work. It would also help us by providing a good marker for other groups.

As members have no other questions, I thank Margaret McCulloch for her evidence—that was excellent. Now the committee must decide whether to recognise the cross-party group.

Helen Eadie: I am happy to endorse the group's establishment. I seem to recall that there was such a group in the previous session, which I thought was important, given the problems faced by such places the length and breadth of Scotland. I am not making a party-political point—the problems are not of any particular Government's making—but I really feel that, the more we can all work together to reinvigorate our town centres, the better things will be. In my area—Cowdenbeath—there are something like 41 empty shopfronts on the High Street alone, never mind the other streets.

I did not sign up for the group for the reason of pressure of work that Margaret McCulloch alluded to—I did not want to overcommit myself—but that will not stop me, when I can spare the time,

dipping into the meetings of what is a really worthwhile organisation to have in the Parliament.

Richard Lyle: I agree with Helen Eadie. The application has been completed to the required standard, and the subject is as close to my heart as it is to Helen's. Unfortunately, the problem is widespread, and town centres in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales are feeling the pinch, simply because they are not getting any footfall now that people are using the internet. The problems faced by town centres are highlighted quite a lot on television. As the cross-party group is concentrating on such a subject and as it does not affect any other group in the Parliament, I agree that we should pass the application.

Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am happy to accept what is a procedurally excellent application. However, I note that some of the boxes that have been filled in are slightly mixed up and I wonder whether that is because of the website or because of the way in which the applicant has been forced to fill out the form online. For example, the names of organisations and individuals are in the wrong places.

The Convener: That is a good question. The clerks will look into that and check how the system is working.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): This is an excellent cross-party group on what is an important issue in my constituency. I know from experience that every single time the media want to look at a high street they drive down from Glasgow and take pictures of the one in Paisley. Because of the issue's importance, I will probably do more than dip into the group's meetings; I will probably go to them quite regularly.

The Convener: It looks as though we agree that the application should be approved. Like other members, I think that the application is very good; indeed, we will probably point those who are submitting applications for other groups in its direction as an example of the comprehensive information that we need to make our decisions.

With that approval of the application for the cross-party group on towns and town centres, we move into private session for the rest of the meeting.

09:40

Meeting continued in private until 11:20.

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e-format first available
ISBN 978-1-78307-588-1

Revised e-format available
ISBN 978-1-78307-604-8

Printed in Scotland by APS Group Scotland
