



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE

Thursday 2 April 2015

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STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE
7th Meeting 2015, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con)

*Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)

*Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

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

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Gillian Baxendine

Alison Walker

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 2 April 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:31]

Cross-party Group

The Convener (Stewart Stevenson): Welcome to the 7th meeting in 2015 of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. I remind everyone to switch off mobile phones, because they affect the broadcasting system.

Agenda item 1 is evidence from Bruce Crawford on a proposed cross-party group on tourism. I welcome Bruce Crawford to the meeting and invite him to make an opening statement about the group's purpose.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): Thank you very much, convener. I am delighted to be here. I will take a couple of minutes to say a few words about the proposed cross-party group.

The year 2014 was a remarkable one for Scottish tourism. We had—to name but a few—the Commonwealth games, the Ryder cup, armed forces day and the hugely successful Bannockburn live. I am aware of 1,000 other events that took place, and which attracted more than 2 million attendees.

As we all know, the tourism industry is a key contributor to the Scottish economy. Annually, overnight-visitor spend is more than £4.5 billion and day-visitors spend is £6.2 billion, which accounts for 200,000 direct jobs. The plan is to grow overnight-visitor spend to between £5.5 billion and £6.5 billion by 2020. The year 2014 was a champagne year and there are big plans for the future.

It struck me towards the end of that remarkable year that, despite the vital importance of tourism to the Scottish economy, no cross-party group exists to support the industry. One was established in the Parliament's early days, but there is now a glaring hole in the architecture of cross-party groups. Why is the group needed? It is important that one of our biggest industries has a parliamentary focus to discuss how to grow and develop the tourism product. The group would create opportunities for tourism players to meet MSPs to improve politicians' understanding of that key industry. It would also enable the tourism industry to gain an improved awareness of the influences and constraints of the governmental and parliamentary frameworks.

Early work that the cross-party group could be involved in is the 2020 tourism strategy, in order to gain a greater understanding of its impact and how it will be delivered. There are skills-gap issues and a number of sectoral challenges to be addressed.

Ten MSPs from across the political parties have indicated their support for the cross-party group and I am confident that that number will grow. I have been contacted by 90 organisations that want to be members of the cross-party group and, of those, 50 are national or regional organisations.

I am aware of potential crossovers with other cross-party groups, but I am confident that we can be complementary rather than competitive.

I am happy to answer questions.

Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Good morning, Bruce. It is nice to see you before us this morning.

I have a question about the overlaps with other groups that you mentioned. I was the convener of the cross-party group on psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis. Other folk with skin conditions approached me to ask that a second group be formed to deal with other skin conditions. After a period of discussion with the existing group, which was not without its difficulties, we eventually reached agreement on forming a new group that would broaden the existing group's remit. The new group is called the cross-party group on skin and associated rheumatic conditions. More people are coming along, and we are looking at the whole range of skin conditions. That is an example of a group transforming itself and broadening out its remit, because I felt that it would not be particularly beneficial to have two groups.

I am looking at paper SPPA/S4/15/7/1. That has a list of the other cross-party groups with which your proposed group may overlap, which includes groups on golf and on recreational boating and marine tourism. Could those two groups come together under the umbrella of your group? I suggest that they would both fit quite nicely with it.

Bruce Crawford: It is not for me to make a decision on whether it would be appropriate for those groups to fall within the proposed cross-party group on tourism. Obviously, individual MSPs have come to this committee—others have gone through some other but similar process—and been able to provide evidence to Parliament that those are niche areas.

I would be relaxed if the other cross-party groups wanted to go in that direction, but that would be entirely a matter for them. Page 2 of paper 1 outlines the various groups with which there might be overlaps. I cannot imagine that the cross-party group on the Scottish economy would want to be embedded in the tourism group, but

there are other groups listed that may want to think about doing that.

Dave Thompson: Would you be amenable were the committee to suggest that there might be discussions between the conveners of those two groups and you?

Bruce Crawford: I am always amenable to discussions with people in such circumstances. Were that to lead to something positive, that would be fair enough. However, I do not want them in any way to see that proposal as being a threat to their cross-party groups, because I do not feel that it would be.

Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab): I also want to ask about the overlap issue. Dave Thompson has raised the main points. Where there are overlaps between other cross-party groups, they are encouraged to have joint meetings; they have perhaps one of those a year. Because of commonality among groups, that can be quite useful. Joint meetings are something that you may want to think about.

Bruce Crawford: Indeed. I mentioned in my opening remarks that there is an opportunity to look at sectoral issues. I am sure that during the proposed cross-party group's life, it will want to develop arguments in particular areas. For example, there may be a general interest in golf, food or culture. Were there a desire in the proposed cross-party group to discuss such topics, it would be important for me, before any of that proceeded, to discuss that with the relevant cross-party group conveners—first, in order to ensure that they do not feel threatened and, secondly, to see whether there is an opportunity for joint working.

The Convener: I see that no one else has anything to ask. That exchange will inform the committee's discussion.

I thank Bruce Crawford for his attendance. We will consider his application shortly after he leaves the meeting. We will let him know as soon as we reasonably can what our conclusions are.

Bruce Crawford: Thank you very much, convener. I am very grateful for the opportunity to appear before you.

09:39

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is to consider whether we accord recognition to the proposed cross-party group on tourism.

Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con): The only comment that I will make is about the number of overlapping cross-party groups. Is there any way to get them working together? As Dave Thompson said, there is a lot of crossover. I see from the list

in our paper that one of the other groups even mentions tourism in its name.

There seem to be a heck of a lot of cross-party groups. If they have a joint meeting once a year, that is fine, but is there any limit to their number? It is more a comment than a criticism, but I feel that there are an awful lot of cross-party groups and I am always being asked to join them. I have put my name down for the one that we are discussing because it is interesting.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I know that there is some crossover, but golf is a sport as well as a major part of our tourism strategy. There is, therefore, a reason for having a specific group in which to discuss it. There is a similar argument for having a group on Scotch whisky.

There is a CPG on neurological conditions and a CPG on multiple sclerosis. Those groups will sometimes work together on issues in the way that Bruce Crawford suggested, but there will be times when they will want to talk specifically about their individual subjects and explore what those communities want to be discussed in the Parliament.

There are a lot of cross-party groups, but I think that it would be good to have a separate tourism cross-party group. There is a time to work together but there are times to talk about specific subjects on their own.

Dave Thompson: That is a valid point. However, I refer back to my comments about the cross-party groups on psoriasis and skin conditions. The skin conditions group gave an assurance to the folk who were on the psoriasis group that there would be regular discussions on psoriasis and that it would be on the agenda pretty much all the time. The psoriasis group members were worried that, if they went into a broader skin group, the focus on psoriasis would be lost. However, there is a wide range of other skin conditions, including eczema and Behçet's syndrome, and people were telling me that we could do with a group for each of those. I was sympathetic but, given my experience of being on this committee over the years and having been through the review of cross-party groups, I felt that it would not be helpful to maintain the psoriasis group and also to have a group for all other skin conditions. It was not easy to get agreement. Some people left the group and there was a lot of angst around, but I felt that it was the right thing to do.

We have a huge number of cross-party groups and I am being encouraged to help to form another two in very specific areas that I do not think overlap with existing groups. However, a lot of cross-party groups do overlap. George Adam mentioned the group on ME—

George Adam: It is MS.

Dave Thompson: Sorry, I meant MS.

George Adam: You see—you have started another rammie.

Dave Thompson: It was a slip of the tongue. The MS issue could be discussed within the broader neurological group.

There is increasing pressure on MSPs, and I am going to write to ask the committee to consider what constitutes a quorum for a cross-party group because there is a big issue brewing in relation to that. It is incumbent on us not just to approve every group that comes to us but to look critically at what they are trying to do. Golf is a sport, but it is very much part of the tourism industry and I think that recreational boating and marine tourism also fit extremely well within the broad parameters of tourism. I wonder whether we should ask Bruce Crawford to meet the conveners of the groups on recreational boating and marine tourism and golf. He can then say that he has been instructed by us to do that.

I would not suggest that the cross-party group on the economy would fall within the parameters, because the economy is a separate issue. Whisky and food are also separate issues, although culture may possibly be related. I do not think that it would do any harm to send out the message that where there are overlaps CPGs should make efforts to link with existing groups and not just say that it is up to those groups to decide whether they want to do that, which was Bruce Crawford's answer. I did that with the group on psoriasis, and I think that that is the right thing to do.

I would not go to the wall on this, but I feel that the committee needs to do its best to ensure that we are not just rubber-stamping everything that comes before us.

The Convener: Mr Crawford will have the opportunity to read your views, which are now on the record.

I suspect that the committee should try to use as light a touch as possible while protecting the integrity of the parliamentary process and reputation. To some extent, the number of groups is limited by the number of MSPs. However, there is almost certainly a case for our having a look at the situation before the session is out, so that when all the groups that have to apply to be recognised in the new session do so, that happens against the backdrop of our having considered some of the issues that have been raised. Committee members are nodding.

Cameron Buchanan: Do cross-party groups have to reapply at the beginning of each new session?

The Convener: Yes. They fall at the end of a session, so there will be an opportunity for the new committee to consider the broader picture. My personal view—I am not speaking now as the convener—is that we should use a relatively light touch. Margaret McDougall raised the possibility of joint meetings, and I hope that Bruce Crawford and the group take tent of that appropriate intervention. Although groups might have distinct remits that have been approved by the committee, they should, nonetheless, seek and exploit opportunities for joint working.

Are we agreed to accord recognition to the CPG on tourism?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We now move into private session—not for terribly long, probably—so the press and public should leave. We will resume in public for the next agenda item.

09:46

Meeting continued in private.

09:57

Meeting continued in public.

Complaint

The Convener: On behalf of the committee, I would like to make the following statement in relation to a complaint against an MSP. In accordance with the rules, I will first cover whether the committee agrees with the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland's findings in fact and conclusions on the complaint, and then move on to cover the committee's decision on sanctions.

The committee has considered a complaint from Connor McElwaine about Roseanna Cunningham MSP. The complaint is that Roseanna Cunningham failed to register in her register of interests within 30 days of acquiring them shares with a value of more than 1 per cent of the share capital of a company. The Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life investigated the complaint and found that Roseanna Cunningham had failed to register and that that being the case she was in breach of the relevant provisions of the Interests of Members of the Scottish Parliament Act 2006 and the "Code of Conduct for Members of the Scottish Parliament".

The committee is unanimous on the decisions that have been reached on the complaint. First, the committee agrees with the findings in fact and the conclusion of the commissioner. Secondly, the committee does not consider that the breach in question justifies any sanctions being imposed on Roseanna Cunningham. In reaching the decision on sanctions, the committee was mindful of the purpose of the register of interests, of the fact that the breach was clearly an oversight with no intention of avoiding registering, and of the decisions of predecessor committees in similar circumstances.

The code of conduct explains that

"information about certain financial interests of members must be registered. The types of financial interest which must be registered are those which might be thought to influence a member's actions, speeches or votes in the Parliament."

The register is therefore intended to capture significant financial interests that are of interest to the public in order to maintain transparency and accountability. The cost of the shares that are held by Roseanna Cunningham was £50 at the time when she acquired them, and they appear not to have increased in value or to be likely to. The committee questions whether shares of such value, or potential value, could reasonably be considered to influence a member's actions. The committee also notes that as soon as Roseanna Cunningham became aware of her failure to

register, she immediately registered the shares, then took steps to dispose of them.

The committee wishes to make it clear that it takes all breaches of the 2006 act and the code of conduct seriously. The register of interests plays an important role in ensuring transparency and accountability; it is in place so that details of members' significant financial interests are publicly available, thereby providing sufficient information to members of the public who seek to scrutinise the behaviour of members.

Although we do not consider that any sanctions are justified in this case, we remind every member of the importance of maintaining the Parliament's high standard of compliance with all the requirements of the 2006 act and the code of conduct, including the register of interests. It is the responsibility of every member to understand and meet those requirements, and the committee emphasises that to Roseanna Cunningham and all other members of the Parliament.

Full details of the complaint and the commissioner's investigation will be included in the committee's report, which we expect to be published later this afternoon. Thank you.

10:01

Meeting continued in private until 10:03.

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