



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Social Security Committee

Thursday 16 June 2016

Session 5



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SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2016, Session 5

CONVENER

*Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green)

*Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con)

*Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)

*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

*Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Simon Watkins

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Social Security Committee

Thursday 16 June 2016

[Sandra White opened the meeting at 10:00]

Interests

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Good morning. Welcome to the very first meeting of the Social Security Committee. As the oldest member of the committee, it is my duty to take the chair for the moment. I remind everyone to turn off mobile phones, as they can interfere with the recording equipment.

Agenda item 1 is the declaration of interests. I will start, then we will go around the table.

I have no relevant registrable interests to declare.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I have no relevant registrable interests to declare.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I have no relevant registrable interests, but I have a couple of voluntary interests that I would like to declare. I am the patron of the Scottish Disability Equality Forum and a member of Renfrewshire Access Panel, which may have some dealings with the committee.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I have no relevant registrable interests to declare.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I have no relevant registrable interests to declare.

Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con): I have registrable interests that may not be relevant to the committee, but I will declare them here. First, I am a practising advocate and a member of the Faculty of Advocates; I own heritable property in Edinburgh and West Lothian, from which there is rental income; and I have a holding of Royal Bank of Scotland shares. Details of those interests will be in the register of members' interests.

Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): I have three relevant registrable interests to declare. I am the John Millar professor of public law at the University of Glasgow, and I am in receipt of income there as an employee of the university; I am in receipt of irregular, modest conference fee income; and I am in receipt of royalties for the too many books that I have written on constitutional law.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I have no relevant registrable interests to declare.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I have no relevant registrable interests to declare.

Convener

10:02

Sandra White: Agenda item 2 is the selection of the convener. The Parliament has agreed that only members of the Scottish National Party are eligible for nomination as convener of this committee.

I ask members of the Scottish National Party to nominate a member for convener.

George Adam: I nominate you, Sandra. I have known you for a very long time, so I know that you will be suited to the role.

Sandra White was chosen as convener.

Deputy Convener

10:03

The Convener (Sandra White): Agenda item 3 is the selection of the deputy convener. The Parliament has agreed that only members of the Scottish Labour Party are eligible for nomination as deputy convener of this committee.

I invite members of the Scottish Labour Party to nominate a member for deputy convener.

Mark Griffin: I nominate Pauline McNeill as deputy convener.

Pauline McNeill was chosen as deputy convener.

The Convener: I congratulate Pauline McNeill, who I have known for a very long time, on her election as deputy convener. I look forward to working with you, Pauline.

Next Meetings

10:04

The Convener: Agenda item 4 is on future meetings of the committee. We will have one more meeting before the summer recess and I suggest that we invite a minister to come and give their views on the social security aspect of their portfolio. Are members happy with that suggestion?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: The next suggestion is that we consider proposals for round-table meetings. The predecessor committee started its work with a couple of round-table discussions with stakeholders. We could do something similar, to get stakeholders' views on the priorities for the committee and the powers that are coming to the Parliament. Given that we do not have any immediate business, perhaps September would be a good time to have such round-table discussions.

Adam Tomkins: Sorry, but I did not hear that. When would be a good time?

The Convener: September. Would that be all right?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: The next point that we have to consider is the option of having a business planning day late in the summer recess, to plan our longer-term work programme. I would welcome members' views on that, so I will go round the table.

Mark Griffin: I am happy to take part in a planning day. Obviously, this is a new committee and we have a lot of work ahead of us with the new powers that are coming. It would be worthwhile to have a planning day, and some time late in recess would definitely suit me.

The Convener: Pauline, do you have any comments or thoughts on that?

Pauline McNeill: Yes. It would make sense to do that. It would help in trying to understand the mechanics of our remit and exactly when the powers will transfer to the Scottish Parliament. We should be clear about the mechanics before we decide our work programme. We absolutely should have a planning day.

The Convener: What about yourself? Do you have any ideas on that?

Adam Tomkins: Me?

The Convener: Yes, sorry—I should use names.

Adam Tomkins: Thank you, convener. First, I congratulate you on your election to the convenership of the committee, and Pauline McNeill on her election to the deputy convenership. I look forward to working with everybody here. I hope that we will not always sit in party groups round the table, because I think that committees work much better when they are not arranged like that.

I would like to draw one matter to the committee's attention. The fiscal framework that was agreed between the two Governments in February, states:

"The implementation dates for welfare will be agreed by the Joint Ministerial Working Group on Welfare."

The joint ministerial working group is part of the United Kingdom's architecture of intergovernmental machinery, and there is a written agreement on parliamentary oversight of intergovernmental relations, which was agreed between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament near the end of the previous session and published in a Devolution (Further Powers) Committee report in March this year. I very much welcome that agreement and commend the Scottish Government for having entered into it. It is an important agreement that will improve the ability of committees such as this one, and indeed the Scottish Parliament generally, to hold the Scottish ministers and UK ministers effectively to account for the intergovernmental operations that they engage in.

Under paragraph 11 of the agreement, the Scottish Government has agreed

"to provide, to the relevant committee of the Scottish Parliament ... Advance written notice ... prior to scheduled relevant meetings",

which means relevant intergovernmental meetings. It continues:

"This will enable the relevant Committee to express a view on the topic ... in advance of the intergovernmental meeting."

Under paragraph 12 of the agreement, the Scottish Government agrees to

"provide the relevant committee of the Scottish Parliament with a written summary of the issues discussed",

ideally "within two weeks."

I suggest that we are the relevant committee when it comes to meetings of the joint ministerial working group on welfare, and I understand that that working group is meeting today in Glasgow. I therefore ask, first, whether the Scottish Government gave any indication to you, convener, or to the clerks that the meeting was going to take place?

The Convener: Thank you very much for your suggestion—we will certainly take it on board. We knew about the meeting today, but we certainly were not officially told. It would have been good if we had been able to go along, but obviously the committee is just starting, so we could not.

Adam Tomkins: No, indeed.

The Convener: But thank you for raising that point.

Adam Tomkins: I have two further issues arising out of that, convener, if I may—

The Convener: Excuse me, but can I stop you there? I have a letter from Stephen Crabb MP, which was sent to me as convener and which I will read out at the end of the meeting.

Adam Tomkins: I see.

The Convener: It answers some of your questions. Basically, we are talking about the committee's forward business. I am sure that we can answer any of your questions at the next meeting.

Adam Tomkins: Absolutely.

The Convener: I am sure that, when we get a relevant minister here, they will be able to answer the questions that you have raised.

I will go round the committee and ask members to comment.

Adam Tomkins: Could I just finish the point?

The Convener: Is it a point about the forward business or are you going to ask questions?

Adam Tomkins: It relates directly to the operation of the joint ministerial working group on welfare, which is meeting today. The committee should take formal notice of the fact that it is meeting today.

The Convener: We have already taken formal notice that the working group is meeting. We do not know exactly what is happening at the moment with that working group. Similarly, we are just starting this committee now.

Pauline, do you want to come in on that?

Pauline McNeill: I presume that Adam Tomkins is raising the issue because we are about to go into recess. We need to be clear before we agree our work programme that we are in possession of all the relevant information. Perhaps you, as convener, could ensure that the committee gets a report of the meeting as soon as possible.

Adam Tomkins: That is all that I was going to ask.

The Convener: Obviously, as convener, it is my job to chair our meetings, and I like to ensure that

committee members get an opportunity to come in and have their full say. I was going to sum up afterwards, and one of the suggestions would certainly be that we ask for any relevant minutes to be sent to us.

Mr Lindhurst, do you want to comment on any of the points that have been made about future business?

Gordon Lindhurst: I add my congratulations to you and the deputy convener.

I certainly think that holding a meeting for the forward planning of business is a useful and essential thing to do. As for the timing, I think that it is for the clerks to liaise with the members of the committee, because some people may have commitments, even in recess, that will have to be worked around. However, I have nothing in principle against having a meeting towards the end of the recess—or, depending on commitments, it may have to be in early September.

I associate myself with the comments that Adam Tomkins and the deputy convener have made. We need to know what the relationship is between this committee and the on-going ministerial discussions.

The Convener: Thank you. Alison, do you want to comment?

Alison Johnstone: Yes. I, too, congratulate the convener and deputy convener.

Good intergovernmental relations will be key to optimising our ability to scrutinise properly and maximise the work that this committee can do. We are having more powers devolved, but in order to deliver on them properly, we will have to work closely and better together. Organisations such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation raised that in the Scotland Bill Committee meetings.

We are waiting for other information to come forward that will enable us to best set out a work programme, but it would be helpful for the committee to meet and discuss how we can be most effective.

The Convener: Absolutely. Ben?

Ben Macpherson: I, too, congratulate the convener and deputy convener.

I fully associate myself with the view that it is a priority to have a planning meeting to consider business and how to go forward with this new committee and the challenge of implementing the new powers effectively.

The Convener: Thank you. George, do you want to comment?

George Adam: Yes. I congratulate you and your deputy convener. We are a long way from Renfrewshire Council, Sandra.

As a full-time MSP, I am quite flexible about an away day or business planning meeting. It is important that we make time so that we can get the work done and get our work planned. Some of Mr Tomkins's ideas could have been brought up during the away day. I am happy to leave it in the hands of the convener and deputy convener to ensure that we get all of this sorted out between now and the recess and our away day.

The Convener: Thank you, George. Ruth, do you want to comment?

Ruth Maguire: I formally congratulate you, convener, and the deputy convener and I look forward to working with you both.

I absolutely agree that it would be ideal to have a forward planning meeting, at which we can have good, frank discussions and decide how best to move forward. As a full-time MSP, I am also available in recess.

The Convener: Thank you. This has been an interesting first conversation and several ideas have come up. I imagine that our next meeting will be on 30 June. Given the suggestions of committee members, we could raise with the cabinet secretary or the minister the issue of the meeting that is taking place today. If members agree, we could try to get them to give us information about what happened at that meeting. That would be about 10 days away.

Adam Tomkins: It would be two weeks away, would it not?

The Convener: Yes.

Adam Tomkins: Could the convener perhaps write formally to the Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities today to ask her to supply this committee with a written summary of today's meeting of the joint ministerial group on welfare in time for us to be able to consider that at our next meeting, which would be in a fortnight?

10:15

That arrangement would be perfectly in accordance with what the Scottish Government has voluntarily and prudently agreed to do in paragraph 12 of the written agreement on the parliamentary oversight of intergovernmental relations, which I referred to a few moments ago.

It would be helpful for this committee to have a note of what ministers are discussing with their UK counterparts today in advance of speaking with whatever minister the Scottish Government chooses to send to us in two weeks—assuming

that any minister is available—about the state of play, if I can put it in those terms, in the joint ministerial working group. Would that be a sensible suggestion?

The Convener: I do not see a problem with that. I think that the committee is open to that suggestion.

George Adam: If Mr Tomkins had said that right at the start, we could have saved ourselves about 10 minutes. I think that that is a perfectly reasonable request.

The Convener: I do not have a problem with that suggestion at all. The clerks and I will pen a letter to that effect.

Adam Tomkins: Thank you very much.

The Convener: I did mention before, Mr Tomkins, when you raised that particular issue about the Department for Work and Pensions, that I received a letter from the DWP. I will read it out—it came just the other day. It says:

"Congratulations on your appointment ... My colleague Priti Patel, the Minister for Employment, met with the Welfare Reform Committee informally last October and made a commitment to return following the elections. We both want the Department for Work and Pensions to continue to build on the engagement that has been taking place with the Scottish Parliament, and for this engagement to continue going forward.

I look forward to meeting with the Committee in due course to discuss the delivery of the new welfare powers and obtain members' views on how the UK and Scottish Governments can better work together.

I have also asked my officials to be on hand to offer factual briefing that you and new committee members may find helpful about the current welfare system."

I would say that that is a pledge from Stephen Crabb MP that either he or Priti Patel MP will come to this committee and I look forward to being able to raise some issues with them.

If there are no further comments or questions, that ends the meeting on a positive note—

Adam Tomkins: Again, I hope that, on behalf of the committee, you would be able to write back to Mr Crabb to thank him for his letter and to say that we appreciate the fact that he is volunteering to come or to send his ministerial team to speak to us and that we look forward to that happening early in the autumn.

The Convener: Yes. I think that that commitment to attend was made to the Welfare Reform Committee. We will certainly send back a letter thanking him for his courteous letter.

If there are no further issues to raise, I will close the meeting on that positive note.

Meeting closed at 10:17.

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