



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

COVID-19 Recovery Committee

Wednesday 23 June 2021

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Wednesday 23 June 2021

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COVID-19 RECOVERY COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2021, Session 6

CONVENER

*Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)

*Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)

*Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

*Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Sigrid Robinson

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

COVID-19 Recovery Committee

Wednesday 23 June 2021

[John Mason opened the meeting at 09:15]

Interests

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Good morning, and welcome to the first meeting of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee in the sixth session of the Scottish Parliament. I am convening the committee for the first two items because, as it turns out, I am the oldest member of the committee. I have to say that it was something of a shock to learn that, but there we are.

I welcome all members to the committee, and I look forward to working with you. For the benefit of new members, I find that committee work, including working with colleagues across the parties, our clerks and the advisers and experts who meet us, is among the most fulfilling things that I do in Parliament. I am looking forward to being part of the committee and to the months ahead.

I remind everyone to switch off their mobile phones, or at least to switch them to silent. We have no apologies from members; all six are present.

We will move on to declarations of interests.

I have no relevant interests to declare.

I will now go to each member in alphabetical order and ask them to make a declaration. I remind members that they do not need to touch their microphones—the sound will be handled by broadcasting. I will go to Siobhian Brown first.

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): Thank you, and good morning to the committee. As per my entry in the register of members' interests, I am a councillor at South Ayrshire Council and, until I resigned on 7 May, I was a part-time caseworker for Allan Dorans, the member of Parliament for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Good morning, committee members and anybody who is watching. I am delighted to be on the committee, and I have no registrable interests in respect of it.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Acting convener, you are doing a fine job so far.

As per my entry in the register of members' interests, I am a member of the Law Society of Scotland, although I am not currently practising as

a solicitor. I also own some property from which I derive rental income.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I have no relevant interests to declare.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I, too, have no interests that are relevant to the committee.

John Mason: Thank you, everyone.

Convener

09:18

John Mason: The second item on our agenda is to choose the convener of the committee. The procedure is explained in the papers that have been circulated.

Further to motion S6M-00393, the Parliament has agreed that only members of the Scottish National Party are eligible for nomination as convener of the committee. The nomination of a candidate for the post does not require a seconder to support the nomination. I invite a member of the SNP to nominate a candidate for the post of convener.

Jim Fairlie: I nominate Siobhian Brown.

Siobhian Brown was chosen as convener.

John Mason: I congratulate Siobhian Brown on being elected as the convener of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, and I hand over to her for the rest of the meeting.

The Convener (Siobhian Brown): Thank you, John, and I thank the committee. It is a true honour to be elected as convener of a really important committee. We should all take comfort from the fact that at least the word "Recovery" is in its name. We are all acutely aware of the responsibility that we have in our roles on the committee, not only to the Parliament but to all people in Scotland, as we work our way through the journey of recovery. I am really looking forward to working with the clerks and with all members of the committee.

Deputy Convener

09:20

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is to choose the deputy convener. In accordance with motion S6M-00393, the Parliament has agreed that a member of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party shall be nominated for the post of deputy convener. I invite a member of that party to nominate a candidate.

Brian Whittle: I nominate Murdo Fraser.

Murdo Fraser was chosen as deputy convener.

The Convener: Congratulations, Murdo. I know that you bring a wealth of experience to the committee. I welcome you, and I look forward to our working together.

Murdo Fraser: Thank you very much. I look forward to working with you and the other members of the committee in the weeks and months ahead.

The Convener: Thank you, Murdo.

Work Programme

09:21

The Convener: Agenda item 4 is consideration of our approach to developing a work programme. The clerks and the Scottish Parliament information centre have provided some background information on the committee's remit. Members have also been provided with a copy of the session 5 COVID-19 Committee's legacy report.

Members will have seen that there is a suggestion that we delay making longer-term plans on the committee's work programme until after the summer recess, when we will know more about the priorities of other committees for their scrutiny of Scotland's Covid recovery and about the Covid situation more generally.

In the meantime, there are in paper 3 two action points on the work programme for the committee to consider. There is a suggestion that we may wish to hear from the Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery in early course after the summer recess. The purpose of that session would be to receive an update on the Scottish Government's priorities and commitments for responding to Covid-19. The other suggestion is that the clerks arrange a business planning session towards the end of the summer recess, during which we could explore in more detail our remit and priorities for scrutiny.

I invite members to comment on those two suggestions and to provide any other general comments about our remit or areas that they may wish the committee to explore further in future business planning sessions. I ask Murdo Fraser, as deputy convener, to go first.

Murdo Fraser: I thank the clerks and SPICe for putting together the background papers, which are very helpful.

I support the two proposals. We are about to go into the summer recess. By the time we come back, at the beginning of September, the world may have changed quite significantly, so getting an update as soon as possible thereafter from the cabinet secretary would be very useful and would help to guide our future programme.

On broader topics, it will be important to look at the economic situation when it comes to recovery from Covid, and at the health service situation. However, we have to be conscious of the fact that we do not want our work to overlap with any work that other committees of the Parliament are doing. For that reason, I am sure that our clerks will liaise with those of other relevant committees, in order to make sure that we keep abreast of what those committees are doing and that we do not duplicate any work that they are planning. When we get

together in late August, that work will give us a good steer on the sorts of areas in which we could usefully provide a contribution and which areas it would be less useful to look at.

Brian Whittle: I broadly concur with what Murdo Fraser said. On top of that, I am interested in how we ensure as part of our recovery that our population gets access to services for physical and mental health. How do we kick-start the world of sport and physical activity again? How do we ensure that everybody gets access to facilities for mental health? I warn everybody that I am interested in that direction of travel as part of what we do.

John Mason: I echo what Murdo Fraser said about other committees. I am a little unclear about where our remit ends and those of other committees start. I am also a member of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, which will look at the budget impact of Covid; I assume that the Economy and Fair Work Committee and the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee will also look at Covid.

I assume that we will look at all the stuff—such as the vaccination programme and new variants—that the previous COVID-19 Committee covered. We hope that nothing will happen in July or August but, if a new variant appeared or the vaccination programme was delayed, could our committee meet in the recess if it needed to because of exceptional circumstances? I would be happy for the convener and the deputy convener to decide on that. That is my only question.

I very much support the holding of a planning or business day, for which I hope that we could meet in person. That would help the committee and allow us to throw ideas around and do brainstorming. It would be good to do that at the end of August.

Jim Fairlie: I put an R in the chat bar but, in all honesty, we are probably saying the same things. We must definitely consider where the crossovers are. Before we started the conversation, I was thinking about sectors of the economy such as hospitality and travel and about health. What aspects of those areas will come under our remit? With that in mind, we should look for regular updates from the clerks and the relevant ministers. To echo what John Mason said, the committee should be available to meet at any time if anything happens. I would like us to focus on aspects of the sectors that I mentioned, if they turn out to be in our remit.

Alex Rowley: I feel compelled to say something, given that everybody else has spoken. There are a few areas to consider if no other committee covers them. I watched the Westminster select committees' recent interviews

with Mr Cummings. As has been said, it is easy to be a professor of hindsight, but it is clear that Governments in the United Kingdom were not prepared for a pandemic. We might say, "Why would they be?" To make a mistake once is one thing, but we should not make it twice. There are questions about how Governments prepare and how we in Scotland prepare, given that scientists say that such events could occur more frequently. How can we be better prepared?

When we come back after the recess, I would like the committee to do early work on something that relates to what Jim Fairlie raised. Out there, it is strange that we can go into some places to meet people and feel almost as if everything is back to normal. That is the case in some industries and key sectors; indeed, some people have worked as usual throughout the pandemic. However, other sectors are not back to normal and will not be back to normal soon. The aviation sector jumps to mind. Who knows where we will be with it?

We need to know what challenges those key sectors face, including those that Jim Fairlie has such an interest in, and which are worst hit. We need to know that, because the Government needs to know it quickly. Where will additional support be needed? Even if we open up and go back to zero later this year, some sectors will still be struggling. The committee's having a better understanding of that would help us in our work and help us to focus on holding Government to account in supporting those sectors.

09:30

The Convener: You have raised some valid points.

I go back to the suggestion about reconvening during the recess. As we know, the situation with Covid is fluid. I hope that we will not be called back, but do members agree that, should an emergency situation arise, we could reconvene during the recess?

Everybody seems to be happy with that suggestion. I will speak to the clerks about that, and they will be in touch with members.

Would members like to make any other comments?

Jim Fairlie: I go back to what Alex Rowley said. What has happened has had a specific and detrimental effect on certain sectors. I think that it would be very useful to do something that committees have done in the past. Forgive me if I am being a naive newbie, but it would be very useful to get people who are directly affected, whether they are people who run the airports, hospitality events, such as big festivals,

restaurants or hotels. We want to hear from them so that we know exactly what they need in order to recover.

The point that the convener made right at the start was about recovery. How do we recover from the pandemic? We need to know from industry bodies what it is that they need to recover.

I do not know whether we will touch on the long Covid issue, but I know that around 80,000 people now live with long Covid. The question of how people recover from it will probably come up in the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, but do we need to include it in our remit? Getting real-life experience is vital in taking the committee forward.

The Convener: I agree with that. I wonder whether that is where there might be a bit of a blur between the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee and us. However, I am sure that the clerks will point us in the right direction with regard to our remit.

No member has indicated that they wish to contribute further, so I thank you for all your comments. We all agree to hold a business planning session and to take evidence from the Deputy First Minister in due course. The clerks will take note of the suggestions for the business planning day and will provide further information and arrangements to members in due course.

That concludes the first meeting of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee.

Meeting closed at 09:33.

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