



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee

Wednesday 15 June 2016

Session 5



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2016, Session 5

CONVENER

*Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con)

*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)

*Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)

*Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD)

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

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee

Wednesday 15 June 2016

[Stewart Stevenson opened the meeting at 10:00]

Interests

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I welcome everyone to the first meeting of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. I remind everybody to turn off mobile phones, as they can interfere with the sound system. The use of computers and similar devices is permitted.

We have received no apologies today.

Agenda item 1 is declaration of interests. That is to allow committee members to declare any interests that they have that are relevant to the work of the committee. Members have been provided with background information in the note from the clerk on this issue.

Let me start by declaring that I jointly own a registered agricultural holding of under 2 hectares, from which I derive absolutely no income.

I will go round the table in turn, starting with the convener and then the deputy convener, asking each of you in turn to declare relevant interests.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I have an interest in a farming partnership with an ancillary residential property letting business. I also have an interest in a rod and line fishery on the River Spey. Full details are disclosed in the register of members' interests.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): I am a member of the Scottish rural parliament. I am also a member of the board of directors of North Highland College.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I am vice-convener of Friends of the Far North Line. I am a Co-operative Party member and a member of Unison too, which might have a bearing at some point, but I do not think that those have a huge bearing on the committee's work.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): I have no registrable interests to declare.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I have nothing that I have to declare. On a voluntary basis, I would say that I am a chartered accountant and a member of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland.

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I wish to declare that I visited Taiwan last year, paid for by the Taiwanese Government. I am the honorary president of Orbiston bowling club and an honorary member of the Scottish Showmen's Guild. Yesterday, I had to register a badge that I have received from Scottish Racing, which entitles me to enter any racecourse in Scotland. That badge is worth between £1,000 and £1,500.

Stewart Stevenson: Lucky you.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I have no formal declaration. However, I voluntarily registered my participation in an internet business that owns domains and I have a strong background in the connectivity area.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I have no financial interests to declare. Something that might come up in the future is that I am a partner in a bed and breakfast business that is part of the tourism industry in Dumfries and Galloway.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I have an extensive list on the register of members' interests, but none of the entries is relevant to the work of this committee, I would say.

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): I am a partner in a farming business called P Chapman & Co. I am also a director of a wind turbine business called Redbog Renewables Ltd. I am a member of NFU Scotland. I am a director of Aberdeen and Northern Marts Group. Everything is declared in the register of members' interests.

Stewart Stevenson: Thank you very much, colleagues. Of course, members will need to make declarations at the appropriate point in future meetings when things come up.

Convener

10:03

Stewart Stevenson: Item 2 is the choice of convener. The procedure has been explained in paper 2, which was provided to members.

The Parliament has agreed that only members of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party are eligible for nomination as convener of the committee. I invite Peter Chapman to nominate a member for the convenership.

Peter Chapman: I have great delight in nominating Edward Mountain for this position. Edward will be an excellent convener of the committee and I have no hesitation in putting his name forward.

Stewart Stevenson: Are there any other nominations for the position? No.

Edward Mountain was chosen as convener.

Stewart Stevenson: Congratulations, Edward. I will now swap places with Edward so that he can convene the rest of our meeting.

Deputy Convener

10:04

The Convener (Edward Mountain): First, I thank you all for making me convener of the committee. I look forward to working with you all closely over this session of the Parliament.

The committee's next task is to choose a deputy convener. The Parliament has agreed that only members of the Scottish National Party are eligible for nomination. I believe that John Mason has proposed Gail Ross as deputy convener—is that correct?

John Mason: Yes.

Gail Ross was chosen as deputy convener.

The Convener: I congratulate Gail on her appointment and look forward to working closely with her over the course of this committee.

Subordinate Legislation

Common Agricultural Policy (Direct Payments etc) (Scotland) Amendment (No 2) Regulations 2016 (SSI 2016/178)

10:05

The Convener: Item 4 is consideration of a negative instrument. Paper 3 summarises the purpose of the instrument, which is to extend the deadline in which farmers in Scotland can apply for common agricultural policy subsidies in 2016.

I advise members that the instrument was considered yesterday by the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee. In its report, that committee drew the Parliament's attention to the fact that the instrument came into force on 18 May, the day after it was laid in the Scottish Parliament, and that that breached the required 28-day period between the laying of an instrument and its coming into force. The DPLR Committee found the failure to comply with the requirement to be acceptable in the circumstances. The reasons for that were outlined by the Minister for Parliamentary Business in his letter to the Presiding Officer dated 17 May, which members have seen—it is annex A to paper 3.

No motions to annul have been received in relation to the instrument. Do members have any comments?

Stewart Stevenson: With regard to the 28-day period, it is always slightly uncomfortable when a piece of secondary legislation has to be tabled and come into operation almost at once. It was necessary in the circumstances that the Government found itself in. Just as the DPLR Committee has indicated that it accepts that there are good reasons for it, I think that we might similarly find that that is the case.

Peter Chapman: We do not want to see that statutory instrument run on and on—it needs to come to a conclusion and we know where we are.

The Convener: I take that point. We are discussing the instrument, and we can maybe come on to how it works later.

Is the committee agreed that it does not wish to make any recommendations in relation to the instrument?

Members indicated agreement.

Work Programme

10:08

The Convener: The final agenda item is consideration of the committee's approach to the development of its work programme.

Members will see from the papers provided that it is proposed that we invite Fergus Ewing, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Connectivity, to give evidence on 29 June on the issues relevant to his portfolio and the committee's remit. We have had an informal briefing from the Scottish Parliament information centre in advance of that meeting. It appears that responsibility for certain major transport projects, such as the Forth replacement crossing, will be the responsibility of Keith Brown, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work, as opposed to Mr Ewing. Given the recent announcement that the completion of the Forth replacement crossing is to be delayed, the committee may therefore wish to consider inviting Keith Brown to give evidence on 29 June as well.

It is proposed that we hold a business planning meeting towards the end of the summer recess, to allow detailed discussion of our approach, priorities and work programme.

To help inform that approach, I would like to hold a brief discussion with members on 29 June, after we have taken evidence from the cabinet secretaries, to obtain their individual views on the areas of work that they would like the committee to pursue.

I invite comments on those proposals.

John Finnie: I do not think that there is any point in us wasting Mr Brown's time. We heard a statement from him recently and were assured that there would be updates.

Apart from that point, I think that the planned approach is appropriate.

Rhoda Grant: I disagree. The Forth replacement crossing is one of the biggest infrastructure projects that are going on. If we are to have responsibility for transport, we should start as we mean to go on and at least get an update before the summer recess. There will then be two months in which we will not be able to ask questions on the issue. It would be a good idea to have the cabinet secretary here.

Stewart Stevenson: I am relatively neutral on the subject of the bridge, which will still be delivered a month ahead of the planned schedule. However, members may wish to hear from Keith Brown.

More fundamentally, I support the proposed approach to developing a work programme: it makes sense. I urge the clerks to communicate with all members individually about the date for the committee's planning day because—speaking personally—the diary is filling up. I have two away days in the last week of recess before we come back, which I suspect is the week that will be considered. I see that I will not be alone in that regard, from looking round the table. It is important, even though we do not know what we are going to do.

I suggest that we consider—but not necessarily decide, today—linking the away day to a visit that is relevant to the business of the committee. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of suggestions, but there could be a visit to a farm or rural business. There is quite a range of options, and I have no fixed views on the matter. A day spent sitting in a darkened room might to some extent be lightened if we were to touch the real world as well, if we can.

The Convener: I absolutely share that opinion—we need to get the date in the diary sooner rather than later. I also share the opinion that we need to make sure that the location is an equitable travel distance for all of us so that we make sure that it is relatively easy to attend. To see something that would be of interest to us all would also be very useful.

Mike Rumbles: I agree with Rhoda Grant; I would like Keith Brown to come to the committee. The Forth replacement crossing is an important issue. It is the biggest transport project in Scotland and there are lots of questions that we need to ask. I certainly have a lot of questions.

From a personal point of view, I agree with Stewart Stevenson—I have booked holidays for the last 10 days of August and so I will not be around then.

Stewart Stevenson: Excellent!

Mike Rumbles: Okay—we will start as we mean to go on, Stewart. [*Laughter.*]

The Convener: That was “Excellent!” because you were telling us in advance—nothing else.

Mike Rumbles: Oh, really? [*Laughter.*]

John Mason: It is important that we hear all of our ideas, as well as what the ministers might say. I presume that we can ask the ministers anything that we want.

The Convener: Yes.

John Mason: Do you want us to raise our ideas in a fortnight's time rather than today?

The Convener: My idea was to spend some time with each of you and the clerks to find out

what issues you would like to raise, so that I am fully aware of them, and then to make them known to the rest of the committee.

John Mason: That is fine. On transport, I would like to hear from Keith Brown not just about the Forth replacement crossing but about other transport projects.

The Convener: We can ask him about all his responsibilities.

John Mason: Although I live in the city, I like going out of the city and have a lot of road and rail issues—for example, rail links—that I could raise with him. I see the subject as being wider than just the bridge.

If we are having the away day during recess, I am, as someone who lives in the central belt, happy to spend two or three days going to a more remote place. We should get out of the central belt and the away day would be an opportunity to do so, if we have it during recess.

The Convener: The point is taken.

Peter Chapman: I agree with much of what has been said. It is important that we get Keith Brown in front of the committee. We need answers on the important issue of the rail link from Aberdeen to Edinburgh, as well as on the bridge.

Fergus Ewing also needs to speak to us; we need an update on common agricultural policy payments.

I also think that it is a good idea to get out and about. Much of what has been suggested is the correct way forward. I agree that we need to get our thoughts to the clerk of the committee, then we can move forward.

10:15

The Convener: Richard Lyle?

Richard Lyle: I thought that you were going down the line.

The Convener: No one else caught my eye. If anyone wants to speak, they will catch my eye.

Richard Lyle: Okay.

I agree with John Mason: we should ask Keith Brown to come along to talk about the bridge. I have another major infrastructure situation with the M8 and M74 in my constituency. I have quite a number of questions that I would like to ask with regard to that.

The Convener: Perfect. That is within Keith Brown's responsibility, so that will be fine.

Emma Harper: I am thinking about declarations of interests. I suppose that it is relevant that I am now Fergus Ewing's parliamentary liaison officer.

In my area we have major connectivity issues that need to be looked at, involving roads, rail and broadband—everything that a rural area needs help with. I urge the committee to explore that.

The Convener: Thank you.

Jamie Greene: I echo what Emma Harper said. It may be helpful to define what areas the committee will cover specifically. Connectivity is about more than just broadband, roads and rail. It is also about ferries and could encompass a wide range of subject matters, and so for that reason it may encroach on the areas of a wide range of ministers and cabinet secretaries. Mapping the committee's areas of responsibility to the relevant ministers would be a nice exercise. Each of us will have interests in one or more of those areas. I would find it very helpful if we could define the committee's objectives for the session.

John Finnie: For the avoidance of doubt, convener, of course I am not suggesting that the largest infrastructure project should not be the subject of detailed scrutiny by the committee. I was suggesting that I doubt that we would learn terribly much, given that our next meeting will take place only a fortnight after we hear a full ministerial statement. It is important that we hear from Keith Brown. As John Mason is, I am keen that we focus on rail and its opportunities and, in particular, on the limitations of its infrastructure, as Peter Chapman alluded to. We should also focus on our ferry infrastructure.

Gail Ross: I broadly agree with everything that has been said. We all have different interests, which is what makes this committee so interesting. We definitely need to define the role and remit of what we are responsible for. Our remit will cross over different ministers, and there will also be some crossover with other committees. We need to discuss how we will interact and work with those other committees.

The Convener: I agree that the committee's remit could be so big that we could be completely lost in it. There is a good opportunity for the clerks to get together and draw up a map of all our responsibilities. At a later date, the committee should consider where we interact with other committees and consider whether we could do some joint working with them to ensure that areas that are relevant to us and them are covered. We could legitimately ask the clerks to do that for us.

I very much take the points that you have all made about getting out, early planning and ensuring that we take note of everyone's interests. They will be on the work agenda and the clerking team and I will be in touch to try to make that work for everyone.

I think that there is broad agreement that it would be appropriate to call both cabinet

secretaries to the next committees meeting, to answer questions in relation to the Forth bridge infrastructure project and any other questions that we want to raise, including questions of Fergus Ewing about farm payments and any other business.

Do we agree to do that?

Members indicated agreement.

Jamie Greene: Given that members might want to raise an issue about a specific patch of road, rail line or bridge, and that the meeting is in two weeks' time, is there a process for the submission of questions in advance to the ministers, so that they have time to research adequately and respond?

The Convener: I can help you slightly with that. My understanding is that the clerks will help with questions on topical issues but that our questions should not be limited to those ones. Members of the committee can ask any question that they think is important and relevant.

Stewart Stevenson: This might be obvious but, if you want an answer on an issue that is relatively local, it might be helpful if the minister were made aware that the issue will be raised. However, I think that that is a matter between the member and the minister rather than being an issue for the committee.

The Convener: I would say only that I think that we will be short of time on that day, and that we should concentrate on the bigger issues. However, members will determine what the big issues are.

Stewart Stevenson: Given that we have decided to invite two cabinet secretaries to our meeting and that if it is possible for them to come we will, I presume, have two separate question-and-answer sessions, will we be considering an earlier start than usual?

The Convener: We still have to find out when the cabinet secretaries are available. Once we know that, we will get back to members with more on times. I should say that we also want to have a pre-meeting before we speak to them.

That concludes today's business. I look forward to seeing you all at the next meeting on 29 June.

Meeting closed at 10:22.

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