



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 8 September 2022

Session 6



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STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE
17th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Katy Orr

LOCATION

The Sir Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 8 September 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Martin Whitfield): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the 17th meeting in 2022 of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take agenda items 4, 5 and 6 in private. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On the item on consent in relation to United Kingdom Parliament bills, I want to clarify that that relates just to the letter and not to all future consents to bills that we might consider.

The Convener: I can confirm that. Even if that were the intention at this stage, we could still overrule that at a later meeting in order to hold in public an evidence session or, indeed, our consideration.

Are members content to take agenda items 4, 5 and 6 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Cross-Party Groups

09:31

The Convener: Under agenda item 2, the committee will consider applications for recognition from two proposed cross-party groups: the proposed cross-party group on nature and climate and the proposed cross-party group on families supporting children's learning. I welcome the proposed convener of the proposed cross-party group on nature and climate, Mark Ruskell. Good morning, Mark. Will you explain to the committee the purposes of the group?

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Yes. The subject is the nature and climate emergencies. There has been a lot of discussion among members, particularly in the previous parliamentary session, about the interrelationship between those emergencies, how the climate crisis is affecting nature and how some of the solutions to mitigate climate change can come from nature—for example, blue carbon and peatland restoration. It is about bringing together conversations involving people who work in different subject committees across the Parliament and in different spaces.

From discussion with non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders, we thought that creating a CPG space in which we could explore some of the interrelationships between the climate emergency and the nature emergency would make sense. We had initial informal meetings to discuss the way forward, and that brought good cross-party interest. That interest has continued into this session, including among members who now sit on the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee and the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee in Parliament.

I think that it will be a good cross-party group. I have been a convener of previous cross-party groups and a member of this committee, and I recognise that a lot of cross-party groups are currently in operation. We will be looking at topics that interest a wide variety of members and also at the agendas of other cross-party groups to see whether joint meetings on areas of mutual interest are possible.

The Convener: That is very helpful.

I note from the completed registration form that a number of existing CPGs that cover some but not all of the intended purposes of the proposed CPG have been identified. I appreciate the evidence that you have given on outreach with regard to stakeholders and other MSPs. Has there been any formal contact yet with existing CPGs about the potential for joint work?

Mark Ruskell: No. I think that some members who were at the initial meeting and who are members of other CPGs would be interested in raising the potential for meeting topics that might be of interest to those CPGs as well. However, I think that the remit is pretty clear. If we brought together a programme of potential events, we would reach out to others and see whether there was interest in hosting some of the events jointly. There is a clear focus on the nature and climate emergencies. That space for discussion does not exist at the moment. To get a joined-up debate and interest going, such a CPG would—

The Convener: You have confidence in the broad cross-party representation of MSPs who have indicated interest. Obviously, many of them sit on other CPGs, but that contact could be used as the network.

My other question is about the secretariat, which is “ScotLINK”. Will you explain what “ScotLINK” is?

Mark Ruskell: Scottish Environment LINK, as it is formally known, is the umbrella body for the environmental NGOs in Scotland. It is a very experienced and well-resourced organisation, and it has staff who would be able to discharge the duties of the secretariat, working with my office. I am pleased to have worked with Scottish Environment LINK in the past, and I think that it has the confidence of all the members of the group.

The Convener: So, in many ways, the relevant organisations are actually much broader than the list that you have submitted, given the forum nature of Scottish Environment LINK.

Mark Ruskell: Yes.

The Convener: I thank you for your comment on the responsibility that you and your office would have with regard to the CPG. We might address that aspect at the end of the meeting, although not specifically in relation to your proposed CPG.

Do members have any questions?

Edward Mountain: Before I go any further, I ought to declare that I am joint convener of the cross-party groups on crofting and rural policy, neither of which is mentioned in Mark’s list of groups with which he feels there might be some overlap. I am just concerned about that overlap and how you would manage it. Many of the subjects that you mention are already covered by those groups. Will you explain whether you have reached out to them to find out about that? Have you looked at their work programmes to see whether the work of this cross-party group would fit neatly into the gaps or whether it might be doing the same work?

Mark Ruskell: We have not reached out on the detail of the work programmes of each CPG. We are aware of their interests but, to be honest, the nature and climate emergencies are a very specific area. Although, for example, the cross-party group on crofting might be interested in the impact of climate change, it would not cover that and the nature emergency as specific topics.

Members of the proposed group would be open to exploring opportunities for joint meetings and cross-over, but I do not see anything in the remit of the other groups that is explicitly on the topic of the nature and climate emergencies.

Edward Mountain: The topics list does not specifically include climate emergency, but it does include many topics that are covered by the other groups.

I have another question, which is on the organisations. Given that many of the subject areas that you will wish to discuss are covered by other user groups, why have you just gone for environmental groups in the organisations list and no user groups on the areas that you propose to discuss, such as aquaculture, agriculture, forestry and national parks?

Mark Ruskell: That is the initial set of organisations that have come together to propose the new group. They have a specific interest around climate, nature and the relationships between the two. However, membership of the group would be open, so if other organisations were interested in coming into the space, they would be welcome to do so. We would welcome broad conversations about how we might tackle both emergencies together. If the process is to be meaningful, we will need those groups to come in to enable us to have proper debate and discussion.

Edward Mountain: Okay. I am happy with that.

The Convener: Do members have any other questions?

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning, Mark. You have outlined the need for such a group to come together with others and to collaborate. That represents an opportunity, because the existing groups are of quite long standing and they will have been looking at the system over the past session and even prior to that. You mentioned connections, and there is no doubt that those exist.

You said that you want to influence future Government policy and that the group would consider how to achieve that. How do you envisage that taking place? If you have an agenda to that effect—ensuring that you are running parallel with Government policy or aiming to influence it—how would you achieve it?

Mark Ruskell: I would hope that members of the Government would be involved in the cross-party group. Indeed, we intend to invite a Government minister to one of our proposed early discussions. It would be for the Government to recognise the CPG, attend its meetings and listen to and respect its work.

I would hope that the CPG, in acting as a forum for discussion of policy ideas and programmes that could be pursued to tackle the nature and climate emergency, would be of benefit to officials, Government ministers and others. We want to make the group a success and an important forum where ideas can be discussed. Government, individual MSPs and stakeholders can learn from one another.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Thank you, Mark, for coming forward with this proposal. I will be slightly parochial about the proposed group's remit. Would there be items on your agenda regarding lowland peat restoration and lowland deer management?

Mark Ruskell: It would be up to members of the group to discuss that with regard to the early agenda topics. Some topics have been discussed already. There is quite a lot of interest about land use and about the marine environment—in particular, about how blue carbon can both restore marine environments and lock up carbon. I would urge you to come to a meeting. If you want to have a discussion that covers lowland land use as well as upland land use, I am sure that that would be very welcome.

Clearly, there are topics that apply to the whole of Scotland, and we are trying to have a broad, well-rounded conversation about what the solutions and challenges might be.

The Convener: It would be disappointing if a proposed CPG did not put out an invitation to members of the committee to come along and influence it—which is useful.

Mark Ruskell: I am trying my best to sell it.

The Convener: Absolutely.

This point is not just pertinent to this particular application, but are you satisfied with the responsibilities that you would take on as convener and as an MSP, with regard to both the requirements of the CPG and the notice periods? You are happy with that, are you?

Mark Ruskell: Absolutely—and I have been a CPG convener in the past. I have resisted taking on too many CPGs, both as a member and in any kind of convening role, but I feel that this group represents a genuine space where there is interest and enthusiasm for the topics that will be covered. I am prepared, and my office is prepared, to work

with the secretariat and make the group a success.

The Convener: Excellent.

Thank you for attending this morning. The committee will consider the application at its next agenda item, and the clerks will notify you in due course. I wish you all the very best for the rest of today.

Mark Ruskell: Thank you very much, convener.

The Convener: I now welcome Michael Marra, who is the proposed convener of the second proposed cross-party group before us today, which is on families supporting children's learning. Good morning, Michael, and welcome to the committee.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Good morning, convener.

The Convener: Would you like to explain the purposes and ideas behind your proposed CPG?

Michael Marra: With pleasure. Thanks for taking the time to listen this morning. I thank the committee for its consideration.

Essentially, the cross-party group on families supporting children's learning aims to bring a focus and to provide a forum for parents, carers, families, parents organisations, MSPs, educators and other interested groups to discuss and debate matters relating to the links between families and the education system.

There are a couple of pertinent and current issues. A broad reform agenda is being pursued by the Government on education, and it is vital that families' voices are heard with regard to that agenda. Specific challenges have been highlighted to the various members who are signatories to the group regarding the post-Covid environment and the challenges that families have faced in accessing schools and education and in playing their active role in the education of their children and discussing their education with formal educators in the school while better understanding their role in the home. The aim is to ensure that we have a positive influence in the post-Covid environment, taking into account the impacts on young people, which we know are long lasting.

The pandemic highlighted the real and material role of parents, carers and guardians in education when the formal school settings were not allowed. Some good experiences came out of that in relation to the kind of learning that went on in the home, and we need to capture those before they become part of folk memory rather than possible policy. Therefore, it is an apposite moment to set up the group.

09:45

The Convener: Thank you for that. The description of the proposed discussions in the application is full. That is helpful and I thank you for it.

It is proposed that Connect provide the secretariat. Will you put on the record what Connect is and what coverage it would provide?

Michael Marra: Connect is a national organisation that represents parents and parents groups throughout Scotland. We have had wide discussions with it and it is keen to provide the secretariat function for the group. Obviously, we will reach out well beyond one individual group.

Connect is well aware of the need to engage as widely as possible, but it would provide the right kind of services and focus. In essence, it is an engagement group. It is a group of people who are involved in trying to bring others to the table, and it is well suited to doing the work to ensure that we have a representative discussion.

The Convener: One thing that is absent from your application is individuals from outside the Parliament who would be involved with the group. Are you confident that Connect can provide access for individuals who want to come along? I presume that the CPG would also welcome direct contact from individuals who might have experiences to share.

Michael Marra: That would be critical to ensuring that we have a breadth of voices represented. There are voices that feel that they have not had enough representation in the education system and some that feel that they are well represented in it. It is important that we capture good practice and spread it as widely as possible.

Connect is well placed to do that form of engagement work. That has formed a central part of the early discussions we have had with the organisation about how we ensure that it is a representative voice and that we draw as widely as possible on different individuals.

The Convener: That is helpful.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Mr Marra, thank you for coming along to explain the purpose of the proposed cross-party group and to seek approval for it. I have some potential concerns. I emphasise the word "potential" but I want to scrutinise them.

I am always concerned when I see only one non-MSP member on a cross-party group. I get that Connect is an umbrella organisation that engages with others, but I am keen to see individual groups directly involved in cross-party groups rather than all being filtered through one

body. I need to get to know Connect better, so I make no judgment on it. I am sure that it is a wonderful organisation, but will you tell me a little bit more about it and how it ensures that it reflects the views of a massive range of groups and families across Scotland?

Michael Marra: Its role in the CPG is not to directly reflect those views; it would be to provide the secretariat function and to try to bring other people to the table. Connect has its own purpose as a group, but the role that it would play as the secretariat would be in helping to make the CPG work and in helping us with broader engagement.

Connect undertakes wide surveys. It engages and has online discussion groups and communities on families' engagement in education. It has a good reach into many parts of the country and to a large number of individuals. It is fair to say that the nature of its work—talking about how parents and families can become involved in education—probably surfaces more problems at times. It surfaces people who are frustrated about the need to engage in their young person's learning and who perhaps find barriers. As I said to the convener, it is important that we draw on positive examples as well as people who find frustrations. That broader engagement is critical.

We need to get the cross-party group set up and running and engage formally with other stakeholders and groups that have an interest in the agenda. From the discussions that we have had, the topic has felt somewhat neglected. Sometimes, parents' voices have not found a place within education policy discussion, and that is part of the issue. We need to raise the profile of it and bring a focus to it.

Bob Doris: That is helpful.

I have a couple of other questions. First, do you anticipate that, if we were to look at the cross-party group this time next year, we would see more non-MSP members than Connect? You can address that along with my next question.

You mentioned that opportunities for families to engage might be lacking in the Parliament's cross-party groups, and I note that you mentioned the cross-party group on children and young people. I looked at the minute of its most recent meeting, which was attended by YouthLink Scotland; the group looked at its pandemic impact study. At that meeting were Families Outside and Parenting Across Scotland. That is an example of parents' groups being able to directly engage with a cross-party group, specifically on matters of Covid, which you have mentioned as being one of the subjects in which you are interested.

I did not see Connect listed in that minute. Perhaps I have got that wrong. Has Connect tried

to join that cross-party group in order to put into play its experience and its network? That would avoid duplication and could enhance that cross-party group. Have you spoken to that cross-party group? It seems a really obvious vehicle for raising all the issues that you have listed in your application form.

Michael Marra: On your first question, the answer is certainly yes. In a year, the involvement of other groups would be a signal of success and demand in the area. In order to understand what the broader demand is, I would be keen to set the group up and see whether there is the real demand that I believe there to be—and that other members have expressed to me that they, too, see—for a particular forum on these issues. Testing that demand through the establishment of the group would be the right thing.

I understand your point about the existence of other meetings and forums. However, within parts of the communities that we all represent, there is a frustration that parental voices are perhaps not given a high enough profile in the general discussion. As a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee—as you are, Mr Doris—I think that we could perhaps reflect more broadly on that.

You cited a specific example of a recent meeting. I am not entirely clear about what was done. I could ask Connect whether it was aware of, and engaged in, that meeting. However, as I have said, it is not just about having a forum for Connect. The proposed group would be a specific forum for issues on long-term policy trends and the engagement of families in education policy and the education of their young people. Education is a broad issue that touches on many areas of policy, and there will clearly be different forums for it. Giving this topic specific focus would be the right thing to do.

Bob Doris: I do not doubt the importance of the subject or the good will and public interest involved, but we are going to get to a stage at which there are more cross-party groups than there are back-bench MSPs in the Parliament. There is an onus on us to make sure that there is no duplication. I am therefore concerned.

I looked at Connect's website, and my child's parent council is listed there. I am not sure whether the website just lists all the parent councils in Scotland or whether individual parent councils have a voice. I am unsure what Connect's involvement has been with the other cross-party group. From its website, it is clear that it is a worthwhile and important organisation—I cast no doubt on that. However—this is not directed at Mr Marra's proposed cross-party group, convener—I use this public forum to signpost to other MSPs that perhaps we need to find out about demand

before we bring forward for approval proposals for cross-party groups. That is not specific to your proposed cross-party group, Mr Marra; there is a real frustration among committee members. I will bring you back in to reflect on those points.

I cannot deny the significance and importance of making sure that parents, families and communities have a direct voice in this place. Clearly, Connect is a strong, valuable and worthwhile vehicle for making that happen, and I absolutely agree with you that that is the intention of the proposed cross-party group. However, as you can see, there are tensions about how cross-party groups operate more generally across the Parliament. Will you reflect on the idea of gauging demand and of maybe liaising more carefully with other cross-party groups before bringing a proposal for a cross-party group to the committee?

The Convener: Michael, you are obviously aware of the questions that have been raised about CPGs and, in particular, about the balance of work that MSPs have to undertake. I am more than happy for you to give your views on that to this committee, but it will also form part of our business going forward. That is not to detract from Bob Doris's question, because it would be interesting to hear about that outreach and about your confidence that there is an interest among individual parents and groups of parents outwith this place.

Michael Marra: I would say that there is interest. I would be happy to hear directly the views of the members of this committee, but, because of the conversations that I have had with other members about their case loads and the number of people who address those issues with them, I think that there is a need and a demand and that the cross-party group would be well used.

In relation to what Mr Doris said, we could set some tests for what that demand looks like in a year's time. If, in a year's time, the forum was not working successfully and it was felt that it was duplicating other work, I would happily recognise that. However, the very reason for proposing the cross-party group is that families feel that they do not have a voice and are not represented in the broader discussion. Finding a place for that voice within the Parliament, in order to test that ground, would be the right thing to do.

At the very least, we should test to see whether there is demand for the group. I have always felt that, if something does not work, we should stop doing it. I do not think that we do that enough in public policy. Therefore, if this group does not have success, I do not think that the Parliament should persist with it in the long term. However, I think that, at this moment, it will give an opportunity to raise particular issues of concern, and we can see what life it will have after that.

Edward Mountain: A lot of the questions that I wanted to ask have been eloquently put by the deputy convener.

Michael, I bet you wish that you had got the group up and running really early on, when we were not worried that there were more cross-party groups than back-bench MSPs. I think that we are into triple figures now, which causes us concern. I observe that a lot of your members are sitting on more than four cross-party groups, and I think that four is probably pushing it if they are to give each group their full attention.

I am taken by the subject area that you want to look at. Every local authority has a slightly different approach to that area. To be parochial, how will you rope the Highlands into something that will be happening down in Edinburgh? How will you include Orkney and Shetland, which might take a slightly different approach than is taken in the Western Isles? I am interested in how you will touch on that.

Michael Marra: Those are very pertinent points. Different local authorities use a variety of engagement mechanisms for families, and that practice varies from school to school, from institution to institution and from nursery to nursery. Different places have different approaches to how much the parents, guardians and families of young people are involved in their education. There are a plethora of approaches and a wide variety of practice across the country. It is partly about understanding what works and what is the best that can be achieved.

Although frustration comes with the difference in those practices, that is not to say that we should have a universal approach, because it is about understanding what works and where the success is. That presents a problem, and part of the focus of the group will be to understand what works and the extent to which we can encourage and recognise the primary role of the family as educators. It will also be about recognising that our young people spend far more of their time in the family home and learn far more there than they do in a formal setting, particularly in the early years.

In response to the point that Mr Mountain makes about outreach and how we engage with more remote and rural communities, I note that those areas will clearly face particular challenges that are different from those faced in urban environments in relation to the involvement of families in young people's education. It would be absolutely right to address that issue in the group, so we must make sure that, as well as meeting in the Parliament building, we have accessible online meetings, which could be in a hybrid format. We should recognise that it is vital to give the forum

the imprimatur of the Parliament and a formal setting where we can have those discussions.

10:00

Edward Mountain: I will leave it there, except to say that I will be watching closely at the end of a year to see how you have managed to integrate. I am also taken by the fact that you said that, if you do not think that the group is working, you will not continue it. That is honest and helpful, and it makes it easier for me to give it a go. We will come to that at the next bit.

The Convener: Yes, that is the next agenda item.

Collette Stevenson also has a question.

Collette Stevenson: It is more an observation about the gender balance among members of the group, which I make in relation to every proposal for a CPG. I note that there is only one female on the group, who is currently on maternity leave. I wonder what actions you have taken to see whether there could be a better gender balance and representation of women.

Michael Marra: It is fair to say that there is definitely more work to do in that regard. In conversations that I have had with colleagues, they have expressed concerns similar to those that Mr Mountain expressed. They have said, "It's a really important topic. I am on so many CPGs already, but I'd be keen to attend and see how it works." Female colleagues I have spoken to are certainly very much of that view, but they have perhaps been less inclined to put their names down in the first instance, having signed up to many CPGs already. The secretariat is female led, which will certainly provide an initial balance to the leadership of the group, but I appreciate that there is more work to do.

The Convener: I would push for contribution rather than leadership, given that the leadership rests with the MSPs.

Bob Doris: I feel as though I have been both good cop and bad cop in the one meeting. I acknowledge that Meghan Gallacher, who is listed as being on the proposed cross-party group, is also the co-convener of the cross-party group on children and young people. I am sure that that will lead to some strong partnership working, and there may be acknowledgement that there is a gap. However, it was not for me to say that; it was for me to ask the question and for Mr Marra to make the case that there is a gap.

We both sit on the Education, Children and Young People Committee. Given the significant changes that there will be to Scotland's education system—whether in assessment, in the senior phase within schools or in the Scottish

Qualifications Authority—and given the key role of parents and families, it is important that parents' voices are heard. What priority would you give to those on-going changes in the work of the cross-party group, should it be approved?

Michael Marra: I thank Bob Doris for his reflection about the cross-over between Meghan Gallacher's positions and about recognising the absence. It is a point well made, which should perhaps have been made in my own case. However, I focused on the gap in the initial pitch, if I can put it that way.

The reform agenda, which I have already mentioned, is absolutely critical. We should not underestimate the scale of the potential changes that the Government could bring to the table. We are kicking off a national conversation that has been stimulated by Ken Muir's report, and it is vital that families are involved in that. It is vital not only that their role as educators is recognised and supported in that process, but that families have faith in and buy in to the education system, understanding its role and what impact the changes will have on them and on young people in years to come.

It is about making sure that there is a space in which to have the formal engagement. At times, there is an absence of parental voice in some of the conversations that we have in Parliament on the specifics of the reform agenda. I am reflecting more on that even during this conversation. The Education, Children and Young People Committee commonly—and rightly—engages trade unionists, youth voices from the Scottish Youth Parliament and other learners. We engage on that basis, but we seldom have structured or outreach conversations with families specifically about how they are involved in education and about the impact that things will have. Even considering how we ask the Parliament to better reflect those voices could be critical. If we are going to make the reform agenda work, doing that work will be absolutely central.

Alexander Stewart: Mr Marra, you identify a gap in the process—there is no denying that. The families that engage with the process at the moment are those who have youngsters who have a challenge, a need or a disability. They are much more likely to be highly engaged in ensuring that their children's needs are being addressed. The engagement is important, but there are elements within families, guardians and parents that do not engage because they are hard to reach, and schools have identified that as a problem in making sure that they cover the basics for all children.

I see where you are trying to take this, and it is laudable to take the matter in that direction, but there is a concern that not everyone would

necessarily be captured. How will you ensure that the engagement is meaningful and that parents, guardians and families feel that their voices are heard and make a difference?

Michael Marra: That is a pertinent point in relation to the mix of parental and family voices that will be prevalent in different areas. Alexander Stewart is right in saying that some families have a particularly strong set of needs and have to become strong advocates for their young person within the education system. We also recognise that middle-class voices are more prevalent in certain establishments, because they are more adept advocates for themselves in the situation that their families face. There are challenges in making sure that we have a breadth of voices, but that is identified in the description of the work of the CPG.

It is about trying to ensure that we have a representative breadth of voices, rather than only people who have a specific and long-standing advocacy on particular issues. It is right that those voices are heard, and we should applaud those parents and families for being advocates for their young people, but the purpose is to make sure that we have a representative breadth of voices in our system. However, that is not easy to do; if it was easy, it would be being done. Some places are doing it better than others, and it would be good to see if we can learn, as a Parliament and as a policy-making community, how that work could be supported.

The Convener: Thank you for attending the meeting. As a final comment, which you will have heard in relation to the previously proposed CPG, you propose to have co-conveners, but do you understand the individual responsibility that an MSP has as a convener to ensure that the group is compliant and that you respectfully, hurriedly and on time respond to any email that this committee should send you through its clerks?

Michael Marra: Certainly.

The Convener: We will take the decision in the next agenda item, and the clerks will notify you in due course.

We now move to agenda item 3, which is consideration of whether to accord recognition to the proposed cross-party groups on nature and climate and on families supporting children's learning. Before I formally put the question, would anyone like to make any comments on the proposed CPG on nature and climate?

Edward Mountain: It is not for me to object to any particular cross-party group, but I echo what the convener said and what, I think, we all feel, which is that there is a huge number of cross-party groups. The one on nature doubles down on what is being done by other groups. That does not

mean that it should not be approved, but the committee will have an obligation at the end of the first full year to look at all the cross-party groups to see whether they are working properly and achieving their aims.

I am sorry, convener but I cannot see how MSPs—notably, those who, although I would not call them group hoppers, are members of several cross-party groups—are not snowed under. In fairness, I am a member of four groups, and I am snowed under. I just have that concern. I do not want to vote against the proposal. If those groups had come in the first tranche, they would probably have had an easier ride; it is unfortunate for them that they are in the last tranche. As I know you acknowledge, convener, the committee needs to do some work on how all the groups are working, because I fear for them.

The Convener: I am grateful for that. As there are no other comments specifically on the proposed cross-party group on nature and climate, are we in agreement to accord recognition to it?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Excellent.

I invite comments on the proposed CPG on families supporting children's learning.

Bob Doris: When it comes to that area, there is genuinely a gap in the Parliament's cross-party groups. There is a strong case to be made.

I felt a little guilty, convener, about the comments that I made to Michael Marra, but I was trying to make the point that we need to carefully scrutinise each and every proposal for a cross-party group that comes before us. Michael Marra did amply well in demonstrating that there is a need. Asking certain questions in a certain way does not mean that a member does not support the intention of a cross-party group.

Maybe it was a bit unfortunate that the witnesses came today to propose their cross-party groups. I reflect on the fact that the Parliament and previous incarnations of the committee have taken a permissive view to cross-party groups: "If you form them, we shall grant them, and they shall happen irrespective of whether there are enough MSPs to make them meaningful." That is not a reflection on the two witnesses from whom we heard today, who, I am sure, will do a sterling job with those cross-party groups.

There is a gap because of Covid and because of the significant education reforms. The cross-party group will do a real service to the Parliament—I may even join it myself, convener. However, it is important that, whoever comes to the committee to propose a cross-party group, we scrutinise the proposal carefully.

Alexander Stewart: I agree, convener. Michael Marra has identified a gap in the system. However, I have some reservations about how successful such a group can be. We have heard about how different local authorities do different things and about how some individuals within the process are much more aligned to lobbying and making things happen—I acknowledge that. Nevertheless, it is courageous to try it.

It would be advantageous to see what happens after the group's first year—whether it has made the impact that is intended or whether it has ended up having impacts in certain geographical areas that may be more aligned to doing something, instead of covering the whole of Scotland. There is merit in giving the group the opportunity to go forward at this stage. However, as I have said, its future will depend on its success.

The Convener: That is helpful.

The issue that Bob Doris raised is important. The wide and varied group of people who take an interest in the committee will be aware of our growing concern, which we articulated early on. We are even perhaps protecting MSPs from themselves, because the job is difficult and challenging. Nevertheless, there is an important role for CPGs in giving access to the Parliament and a voice into Government. We will return to the matter once a full year of CPG registrations has passed.

Alexander Stewart talked about asking CPGs where they have got to after a year and about reaching groups that, sometimes, are otherwise hard to reach. It was quite refreshing that Michael Marra committed to winding the group up if nothing had happened. That is the first time that I have heard such a commitment in relation to an application, and it gives a bit of confidence.

Are we happy to accord recognition to the proposed CPG on families supporting children's learning?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I am grateful for that.

Before we move into private session, I note that this will be the last public committee meeting at which the committee is supported by Joanna Hardy, who has been a valiant stalwart behind the scenes for just over seven years, over three sessions. From my huge experience of chatting to her, I can certainly say that, if anyone wants an expert on the "Code of Conduct for Members of the Scottish Parliament", they can do no better than to find Jo. I thank her for all her efforts, particularly since I became convener, because I have found her advice enlightening and helpful. Rightly, at times, she has placed the taxing questions to be considered. On behalf of our

predecessor committees and the current committee, I thank her very much for her huge amount of work in supporting us. [Applause.]

10:15

Meeting continued in private until 11:14.

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