Committee to host conference on local government Bill

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE is set to hold a major conference to consult on the forthcoming local government Bill at Stirling Management Centre on 25 March.

Funded through the Parliament’s civic participation budget, the conference is aimed at senior members and staff of local authorities and representatives of local communities and the voluntary sector. ‘We want to attract people from across the spectrum in local government,’ says committee convener Trish Godman. ‘There will be members and officials of councils there, but we are even more keen to hear from ordinary people who are affected by the way councils run services.’

Last September the Scottish Executive announced plans - as part of its modernising agenda - to bring forward a major local government Bill in Spring 2002. The Bill, likely to be introduced in late April, is expected to provide a statutory framework for Best Value, give councils powers and duties of community planning and will also give them a ‘power of well being.’ The committee - if, as likely, it is named lead committee by the Parliamentary Bureau - will be asked to report to the Parliament on the general principles of the Bill by around the end of September. The Committee hopes that this conference will help it gauge opinion about the impact the Bill will have.

Plans

‘We want to find out what the Bill will mean in reality for councils, their local partner organisations, their members, their staff and, most importantly, for the people at the sharp end of council services, says Trish Godman. ‘Will the Bill really help to modernise Scottish Local Government? Is it sufficiently forward looking and innovative to move Scottish Local Government on to the next phase of its development? What is missing from the Bill?’

Hoping people from local communities can attend is one thing, but them actually doing so may be another. How easy will it be for ordinary users of services to attend the conference? Trish Godman is determined every effort will be made. ‘We are not charging for the conference, and we hope that councils will help us by identifying and supporting local people who could attend,’ she said.

Parliament committees normally ‘take evidence’ at Stage 1 of Bills by calling key witnesses in front of them to comment on the Bill. This will happen in the case of this Bill, but the conference is designed to enable the Committee to consult with the widest possible range of people and organisations within the local government field.

If you are interested in attending please call Event Consultants Ltd, 0131 226 5050
Message from The Convener

As Convener of the Scottish Parliament Local Government Committee, may I welcome you to this first edition of what we intend will be a regular newsletter.

In the newsletter we aim to provide information about the Committee, its activities and work programme and the procedures under which it operates. We will also provide some information about the members of the Committee, although I should stress at the beginning that this will be a non-partisan publication which will not offer political views or take stands on any political issues. Nevertheless, we believe it is important for readers to be able to find information about the Committee’s members if they wish, and you can find some introductory information about all our members in this first issue.

The newsletter is aimed at the wider local government constituency which we hope will include members and officials of all 32 councils, COSLA, organisations which work closely with local government, like Audit Scotland and academics with an interest in local government. The newsletter is being made available in both electronic and paper versions, and is also being sent direct to all community councils in Scotland.

Unfortunately the legislative programme has left the Committee with no time for fact finding and civic participation meetings outside Edinburgh in the last 18 months. We hope however, in the year or so that is left of this session of the Parliament to ‘get out more,’ and we begin that process with the consultation conference on the forthcoming local government bill, which is mentioned elsewhere in the newsletter.

The Committee is aware that this is a time of rapid change for local government. The advent of devolution, changes in the way finance is allocated from the Executive, the creation of a Standards Commission, the prospect of civil marriages in different venues and the possibility of innovative pilot schemes for local government elections are just some of the changes which the Committee has been involved in. Because the Committee is aware of some of the rapid changes which are taking place, members are always grateful to councils for the professionalism and commitment they show in giving evidence to the Committee, often at fairly short notice. Thank you and we look forward to seeing more of you in the next year.

Trish Godman, Convener
Local Government Committee

Looking to the Future

The key issue set to dominate the Committee’s workload from April onwards is the forthcoming Local Government Bill.

A number of options for local government modernisation have been on the table since devolution. In December 2001, Ministers published an outline of proposals for a wide ranging local government Bill, expected to be introduced to the Parliament by the end of April.

The so-called modernisation agenda can be traced back to (and before) the McIntosh Commission in 1999, which looked at relations between local government, the Parliament and central government. Following McIntosh the Renewing Local Democracy Working Group (The Kerley Committee)—which examined the composition of councils, electoral systems, remuneration of councillors and much else, and the
Leadership Advisory Panel which advised on political management arrangements of council—were established. The Executive has also consulted on other issues including best value, a power of community initiative and community planning.

The Committee has been proactive in examining modernisation issues and has:

• Visited councils to discuss the McIntosh report,
• surveyed councils views of the Kerley Report;
• Held a major inquiry into local government finance

Members may decide to look at other aspects of the modernisation agenda over the coming year.

Proposals for the Bill—as set out in the consultation document are wide ranging. (see box) The Bill will also be used as a vehicle to progress a few miscellaneous issues related to local authority functions.

Bill proposals do not cover any aspect of the local government electoral system. But in November last year First Minister Jack McConnell announced a commitment to publish a White Paper on the future of local government based on the principles of the Kerley report including:

• future governance
• councillors’ allowances
• options for electoral reform

The white paper is due for publication in late March and following consultation the Executive is to set out the next steps after summer.

The Committee is using its full resources to scrutinise the Bill. This includes the one-day civic participation event on March 25 (for further details see p 1). Views gathered at this event will be supplemented with evidence from witnesses—which may include a number of individual councils, as well as relevant associations and professional bodies—during the Committee’s Stage 1 scrutiny of the Bill. An adviser has also been appointed to assist the Committee with the Bill.

The proposals in the Bill

Giving councils a general power to promote and improve the well-being of their area, and change the rules on commercial activity to fit.

This power will allow councils to act in the interests of their areas unless there is a specific restriction, limitation or prohibition contained in legislation. There is also a proposal for a mechanism to repeal legislation that unnecessarily restricts use of the power. The overall aim is to assist councils in developing a broader and more innovative role.

Providing a statutory underpinning for community planning through a duty on councils and key community planning partners.

Community planning provides a process through which a council, other organisations and the local community come together to plan, provide and promote the well-being of their communities. The statutory underpinning is designed to promote more effective joint working between agencies in the effective delivery of services, although it is also recognised that training and skills development is necessary to create effective working cultures.

Introducing a statutory duty of Best Value and updating the existing audit and intervention framework to support it.

Local authorities have already implemented Best Value on a voluntary basis. The proposals are intended to provide a statutory framework to support it.

Finance inquiry report set for publication

The long awaited report of the inquiry into local government finance will be published by the Committee on Wednesday 20 March.

The wide-ranging inquiry, which has taken 18 months, investigated many aspects of the Scottish local government finance system, and took oral and written evidence from a large number of witnesses, including many councils across Scotland. The Committee also commissioned external research - carried out by Heriot Watt University - into the impact of possible revaluation and re-banding of the council tax.

The report will be available on the Committee’s webpage at www.scottish.parliament.uk from 20 March.

www.scottish.parliament.uk
FAQ File

Why are so many meetings held in private?

It is very rare for the Local Government Committee to hold whole meetings in private. Meetings are routinely held in public, and may go into private session towards the end of the meeting for specific purposes. These would include:
- Where the Committee is considering a draft report and consideration in public could give a false impression of what the final report would say
- Where the Committee is agreeing its approach to and witness details for an inquiry and would not wish the merits of specific witnesses to be discussed in public.
- Where the Committee is considering the appointment of an adviser.
- Where the Committee is considering its forward work-plan.

Can I attend meetings of the Committee?

The public is allowed to attend, but may not speak, at any public session of any parliamentary committee. You will need to reserve a seat by phoning the Parliament’s public information office on 0131 348 5411.

Where can I see the papers?

The Public Information office holds a limited number of hard copies of papers for members of the public attending meetings. If you have Internet access you can see all the public papers on the Committee’s homepage at www.scottish.parliament.uk. The agenda is also published in the Parliament’s Business Bulletin, which is also available on the web.

How often does the Committee meet?

That is a matter for the Committee. The Local Government Committee has tended to meet weekly, although in common with other committees it has previously made a commitment to move towards fortnightly meetings when time permits. In practice however the pressure of legislation which has come through the Committee has meant that weekly meetings are almost always required to fit the timetables agreed by the Parliamentary Bureau for Bills.

How do I get things on the agenda?

The Committee meeting agendas are mainly a matter for the convener, and to some extent, for the Committee as a whole. There is no mechanism for the public or for representatives of outside organisations to get items on the agenda. However, you can write to the Convener asking that the Committee hold an inquiry into something or investigate a specific matter. It will be a matter for the Convener whether or not this is agreed to.

Why are the minutes so brief?

The Minutes record only what the committee considered in public session and what decisions were made. However a ‘substantially verbatim’ record of public sessions of the Committee is produced by the Official Report. This is normally published on the web-site within a few days of the meeting taking place.

What staffing does the Committee have?

The Committee is staffed by a small team led by the Clerk to the Committee. The team includes a Senior Assistant Clerk, Assistant Clerk and an Admin Assistant. The Committee also has two dedicated research staff within SPiCe.

Local Government Committee Members

CONVENER

Trish Godman, Labour member for West Renfrewshire

Trish has been Convener of the Committee since its inception, and is a former member of Strathclyde Regional Council and Glasgow City Council. Trish has a background in social work.

Deputy Convener

Dr Sylvia Jackson, Labour member for Stirling

Sylvia is the Committee’s second Deputy Convener, taking over on 12 December 2000 from Johann Lamont. She was previously involved in education as a teacher, education researcher, lecturer and adviser in Education to Lothian Regional Council.

Members

Mr Keith Harding, Conservative member for Mid-Scotland and Fife

Keith is the Conservative Party’s spokesperson on local government. He remains a Councillor on Stirling Council where he has been a member since 1986. He was Leader of the Council from 1991 to 1995. Keith is also promoting a members bill on dog fouling.

Ms Sandra White, SNP member for Glasgow

Sandra joined the Committee in summer 2001. She is a former member of Renfrewshire Council and former Justice of the Peace.

Committee staff

Eugene Windsor - Clerk to the Committee
Irene Fleming - Senior Assistant Clerk
Neil Stewart - Assistant Clerk
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