

## Public Petitions Committee Official Report 9 November 2005

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### Scottish Parliament

### Public Petitions Committee

Wednesday 9 November 2005

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:03*]

### New Petitions

#### Scottish Civic Forum (Funding) (PE895)

**The Convener (Michael McMahon):** Good morning and welcome to the 17<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Public Petitions Committee in 2005. I have received apologies from Rosie Kane.

Item 1 is new petitions, the first of which is PE895, by Dr James Crowther. It calls for a parliamentary debate on the implications of the recent decisions by the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body about funding of the Scottish Civic Forum. Before the petition was formally launched, it was hosted on the e-petitions site, where in the period 29 September 2005 to 4 November 2005 it gathered 934 signatures. The usual e-petition briefing has been circulated to members. In addition, the committee has received a number of letters in support of the petition and a further 15 signatures in hard copy.

Dr Jim Crowther will make a brief statement in support of his petition; he is supported by Jane Meagher. I welcome you both to the committee. You have a few minutes to speak, after which we will discuss the petition.

**Dr James Crowther:** Thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak to the committee. We are from the Edinburgh active citizenship group, which is made up of a number of local authority and voluntary sector community education workers. The petition derives from that group of people. The Edinburgh active citizenship group runs participatory public seminars to debate key issues of the day. I will emphasise several points in the petition that we think need to be taken into account.

The first point is that because we are from community education we see the Scottish Civic Forum through the lens of the community educator. We see it as an organisation that creates possibilities for political—we emphasise not party-political—education in communities. The Scottish Civic Forum creates public fora throughout the country in which people can debate policy issues on which Parliament is legislating and can raise issues that can be fed into Parliament. Since April 2002, more than 3,000

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people have participated in those seminars and 71 per cent say that they have not previously participated in such events.

The Scottish Civic Forum has developed a reputation for independence and it has developed expertise in engaging with people whose voices are not usually heard in politics. In the context that citizenship education—particularly among young people—is a national priority, organisations such as the Scottish Civic Forum are more likely to be effective in engaging with disaffected groups. The

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their responses?

**Members indicated agreement.**

### **Listed Buildings (Consultation on Disposal) (PE896)**

**The Convener:** PE896 is from Ms Florence Boyle, on behalf of West Dunbartonshire Heritage Ltd, and calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to require local authorities to conduct structured and meaningful public consultation before any disposal of listed buildings, common land or related endowments that are held in public ownership or trusteeship.

Before being formally lodged, the petition was hosted on the e-petition site, where it gathered 48 signatures between 5 and 30 October 2005. The usual e-petition briefing has been circulated to members.

The petitioner recently became aware that there is no statutory requirement on local authorities to consult the local community on the sale of listed buildings that are held in public ownership. She argues that, as listed buildings form an important part of the built heritage of the community, the current process for disposal is inadequate.

Do members have any views or recommendations on how we should deal with the petition?

**Jackie Baillie:** The matter is partly on my patch because part of my constituency is in West Dunbartonshire. For me, there are three separate issues. The first is the need for public consultation when local authorities—or, indeed, health boards and others—dispose of assets that are held in the common good. I seem to recollect that we received another petition on a similar matter and I wonder whether we could associate the two in some way.

Secondly, it is clear that the petitioner is talking specifically about listed buildings. It might be worth

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while to explore that specific point rather than consider all assets that are held in public ownership.

Thirdly, my understanding is that a listed building is a listed building, irrespective of whether it is in council ownership, other public ownership or private ownership. I suspect that many local authorities take the view that they are unable to maintain buildings that are gifted to them so they look to others to maintain them. There is a fine line between whether it is preferable for such buildings to be in the public sector or in the private sector. The opposing argument is that we do not want to lose public enjoyment of a building.

Having said that, I think that the petition falls into the general category of the need for public consultation when a public body disposes of assets that are held in common ownership. On that basis, I wonder whether we should look back and see whether the petition is indeed similar to the other petition that we discussed two or three weeks ago. In any event, we should write to the Scottish Executive, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Historic Scotland and the Scottish Civic Trust.

**John Scott:** The earlier petition was about the creation of a list of assets that are held in the common good by councils. Petition PE896 is slightly different. There may be a link, but I think that PE896 stands alone. It is related, but it is on a different subject.

**The Convener:** That is probably right. Although the two petitions are in the same territory, we will have to keep them distinct.

**Helen Eadie:** I endorse Jackie Baillie's suggestion for action.

**John Scott:** Yes. I am happy to endorse that suggestion.

**The Convener:** Do members agree?

**Members indicated agreement.**

### **Residential Care (Charges) (PE897)**

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