

Excerpt from
Justice 2 Committee Official Report

Thursday 9 September 2004

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Towards the end of your presentation, you mentioned the Scottish Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council. For the purposes of our discussion, I will just call it the advisory council. From the responses that we have looked at, there seems to be a general acceptance that the body should be abolished, yet there is a desire to have it replaced with something else.

Ian Snedden: Yes.

Jackie Baillie: Why have you expressed the view that the existing body is "cumbersome"? If you are going to replace the advisory council, what are you going to replace it with? Unison was concerned that, unless there was a statutory duty on ministers to consult fire service bodies and trade unions, the consultation might be inadequate. Could I have your views on those three points?

Ian Snedden: The Scottish Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council is a big body and its decision making is unwieldy. A minister has always chaired the council and, in many respects, its meetings have become an opportunity for the members of the council to have a go at the minister, quite often on matters over which the minister does not in fact have any control or responsibility. Often, it is concerned with issues about how the fire service responds in particular circumstances. The range of issues that come before the Scottish Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council is diverse. Often, they should be sorted out at a different level. We would like to put in the council's place arrangements that are more appropriate to the kind of functions that we expect the advisory council to carry out.

We will be consulting, and we have told stakeholders that we will consult, on the whole question of what replaces the advisory council structure. In England, a three-tier structure has been adopted, which comprises a very small ministerial group; a practitioners' group, which involves staff associations and the fire authorities; and another group that deals with much broader issues around fire safety as it affects industry and businesses.

We are not sure that such a three-tier structure would be the best way to take things forward in Scotland. *In our consultation paper, we asked for suggestions. We did not get a lot of help with what we might put in the advisory council's place, although there were calls for some kind of advisory structure to be enshrined in the legislation. I would not say that we would rule that out, but that is for ministerial decision.*

Jackie Baillie: I would like to press you on that. You are not wedded to the English model, and no particular suggestions came forward from the consultation, but is a model being developed by the Scottish Executive that you would care to share with us?

Ian Snedden: The short answer is no—a model is not being developed at the moment. We are looking across the Executive to see whether we can get advice from other areas in which there is an issue around consulting stakeholders about the advisory structures that might apply to them. All I can say is that we will produce a paper that sets out some options and we will consult the stakeholders, the staff associations, the fire authorities and others to get their views before we make up our minds.

The Convener: What is the timescale for that, Mr Snedden?

Ian Snedden: We are looking to produce our paper within the next couple of months.

The Convener: Before the legislation is passed?

Ian Snedden: Absolutely.

Jackie Baillie: I would like one final point of clarification. If I have understood you correctly, the issue is not the duty on ministers but the fact that the structure is cumbersome.

Ian Snedden: Absolutely.