

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Thursday, January 6, 2022

Video Conference

Organizational and Agenda Setting

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Melissa Sheehy-Richard (Chair)

John White (Vice Chair)

Danielle Barkhouse

Tom Taggart

Nolan Young

Fred Tilley

Lorelei Nicoll

Kendra Coombes

Suzy Hansen

In Attendance:

Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel



HALIFAX, THURSDAY, JANUARY 6, 2022

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Melissa Sheehy-Richard

VICE-CHAIR

John White

THE CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the first meeting. I want to call it to order.

This is the meeting of the Standing Committee on Community Services. I'm Melissa Sheehy-Richard, and I'm the MLA for Hants West.

I just want to go over a few reminders. Everyone is to keep their mic muted until you're called upon by me to speak. Indicate if you wish to speak by raising your hand physically so that I can see you, and keep it up until I acknowledge. Please make sure that your phones or watches are on silent or vibrate too.

I would like the committee members to introduce themselves. I will go around in order of my list here, and start with Mr. White.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: This is the first meeting, as I said, of the Community Services Committee. It's known as the organizational meeting. The committee is going to review procedures and make decisions in that regard. Selection of topics and witnesses to appear before the committee will also be conducted in today's meeting.

First of all, I'd like to go over some organizational business and review the committee procedures. The mandate of the committee states that the Community Services Committee is established for the purpose of considering matters relative to community services, culture, heritage, human rights, municipal affairs, recreation, and sports. In addition to committee members, legislative staff, caucus, researchers, Legislative Counsel, and office staff also attend these meetings of the committee.

Meetings are televised and live-streamed. While today's meeting is being held virtually, meetings are open to the public to attend when they are held in person. Witnesses are invited to appear before the committee, they can make presentations prior to question and answer period, and they can make a brief closing remark when questioning is concluded.

If members have motions that they intend to bring forward at a meeting, they should email them to the clerk, Ms. Langille, who will distribute them to the members when the motion is introduced during the meeting. Also, if members are intending to read from a document that has not already been provided, a copy should be emailed to the clerk who will distribute it to the committee members.

We will review and confirm some of the procedures that this committee has been working from in the past. The committee usually meets the first Tuesday of the month at 10:00 a.m. until noon. We did tweak a little bit this session because of the holidays, but we would like to resume meeting the first Tuesday of every month at 10:00 a.m.

Does the committee wish to continue with this meeting time? Just a show of hands if everybody is in favour with continuing with that. Great.

The committee usually does not meet during the Summer months - July and August specifically - or when the House sits. Does the committee wish to continue with this practice?

Mr. Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: If, for some reason, there was an urgent need to meet during the Summer, this motion we just passed doesn't preclude us from doing that. Is that correct?

THE CHAIR: I just have to check with the clerk on that. It wasn't a motion.

Ms. Langille.

KIM LANGILLE: Certainly the committee can agree to meet outside of its regular meetings, that's for sure. If it's an emergency meeting, certainly that can happen. The typical practice is that we wouldn't meet when the House is sitting or during July and August, but if something came up that required it, the committee could certainly agree, yes.

TOM TAGGART: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Any other questions on that? Are we good to carry on in that regard? None opposed? Okay.

Next, the witness questioning procedure. The past practice for witness questioning was that the Chair was to keep a speakers list. Members signal to the Chair that they would like to ask a question, and the Chair will maintain a list of speakers and call upon the members to ask their questions.

Questioning may also be done by allotting equal amounts of time to each caucus to ask questions. There would be two rounds of questions. The first round would be 20 minutes and the second would typically be 10 to 14 minutes, depending on the amount of time remaining in the meeting and allowing time for some committee business at the end. The order of questioning would be Official Opposition, third party, and then the governing party.

How does the committee feel on which way they would like the questioning to happen? Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: If we keep proceeding in a virtual manner - I don't know what the decision's going to be here from the committee. For virtual meetings, I would say that the time allotted in the past has worked better, because it's often hard to see members raising their hands in this form.

I just want to put that out there to the committee, that if we are virtual, we might want to look at that as well. Just putting it out there as a thought for virtual meetings at the moment.

THE CHAIR: Are there any other comments on the procedure for when we are virtual versus when we are in person?

Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm for the allocation of time. I think it's a fairer practice and much easier to keep track of.

THE CHAIR: If everybody is in favour of the 20-minute rounds, we can go with that procedure while we are meeting virtually. We can then have another look at that when we can eventually meet in person, which hopefully will be maybe by the next meeting, if Public Health is so willing.

We'll move on to the agenda-setting procedure. The recent agenda-setting practice has been that each caucus is able to select a certain number of regular or emergency topics

as follows: three topics from the government caucus, two from the Official Opposition, and one from the third party.

The preferred scheduling order is PC, Liberal, PC, NDP, PC, and then Liberal. However, the clerk will have flexibility to deal with issues along the lines of availability of witnesses and have the ability to switch the order if necessary in order to continue with the meetings and not miss a month.

Does the committee wish to continue with this practice? Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Yes, I have a question regarding outside requests to appear. Are we going to continue the same as other committees, where we can add it into the schedule rather than taking a topic away from another party?

THE CHAIR: Say that again? How is it?

KENDRA COOMBES: Sometimes committees get requests to appear. An outside organization or group will want to appear before us and they'll request it, and that would come through the clerk's office.

My question is: Are we going to continue the way the other committees are continuing? That is, the request comes to the clerk's office and the clerk brings it to us. Then we can add it to the schedule, rather than taking a topic away from the NDP or the Liberals or the Progressive Conservatives.

THE CHAIR: I don't think we'd be taking a topic away. We just might have to switch the order if the availability for your witnesses couldn't come on the week or the month.

KENDRA COOMBES: No, I think you're misunderstanding. I'm talking about requests to appear. This is not us asking - this is requests outside of the committee asking to appear.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Langille.

KIM LANGILLE: Yes, that does happen on occasion where an organization may send in a request to appear. What has happened quite frequently is that it would be an additional item. I would send it out to members, it would be put on the agenda, and it would be discussed. Then members would either decide, yes, they would like to hear from that organization or witness, or no.

Depending on what the decision is, if it's yes, then it's just added in and scheduled after the other items have been scheduled. If it's not agreed to, I would just advise whoever asked, that it hasn't been agreed to at this time.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Just for clarity, what you're asking is that if we're approached through the clerk by an outside organization, then it comes back through the committee for a vote whether or not we're going to put that topic on, similar to other committees. Nothing is really changing the same process we're using already? Okay, thank you.

THE CHAIR: We're on to presentations. The committee has a practice of hosting witness presentations to its webpage after the meeting. Does the committee wish to continue with this process? It's been done this way in the past. Everybody's okay with continuing that way?

The committee also has a practice of posting requested information to the website, subject to review. For example, if a question was asked and the information wasn't at the meeting, it would then later be put on the page as well. Does the committee wish to continue with that practice? Good.

When meetings are being held virtually, previously, committee meeting documentation - the agenda, correspondence, lists of topics, et cetera - was provided electronically to members prior to the meeting. The Committees Office would like to continue this practice as it is environmentally friendly and was found to be more efficient. Members have the option of viewing the documents electronically or printing them if they wish. Does the committee wish to continue with this practice, even when the meetings are held in person? Okay.

Once the agenda has been set, the committee will begin the meetings with the witnesses. As you are aware, in order to adhere to the current Public Health directives, in-person meetings are not possible at this time in the Committee Room. There is a maximum number of people that can be accommodated in the Legislative Chamber. Today's meeting was being held virtually. However, it would be helpful for the committee to decide how it wishes to deal with the future meetings. I just wanted to open the floor to discussion on this.

Ms. Nicoll.

LORELEI NICOLL: I know you said earlier, hopefully by February 1st we'll be able to meet in person. I think it's a personal comfort place that we need to be in that regard. I would like to have the option of having a virtual meeting joined that way, even if you are meeting in person going forward.

THE CHAIR: You're suggesting perhaps a hybrid model where some would be in person and some would be virtual?

LORELEI NICOLL: Yes, I think so. I think that would be good. Also, I know that there are members here who would have to travel a certain distance as well. I think that this would be good at this early point of the committee's meetings, and where we are with public health.

THE CHAIR: Are there any other comments? Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I think it's fair that we look at month to month with the numbers and the caseloads. I'm okay if the clerk wants to send out polls to see where we are, see where our numbers are, and take that directive.

[10:15 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Mr. Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I understand what's being said there about when we decide to have in-person meetings, but I think Public Health will make that determination. I support it if we want to go to a hybrid, I guess. I don't support us deciding whether we have a meeting if Public Health has told us that the gathering limits don't permit it in our meeting chambers. That should be the first decision, I would say.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Young.

NOLAN YOUNG: Just to emphasize MLA Taggart's point there, as long as the direction from Public Health is for distancing requirements and stuff, I prefer month to month. Once Public Health says it's okay to meet in person, I'd rather continue to conduct business the way the other committees are conducting business in person as well.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Tilley.

FRED TILLEY: I would tend to agree with MLA Young on that. Once we get the direction from Public Health that we're good to go in person, I think it would be certainly best for the committee and the witnesses that we were in that vein. We can look at it prior to each meeting as we did for this one. That's my piece.

THE CHAIR: We will need a motion to confirm our decision. We can make a motion - somebody perhaps - to suggest that the clerk polls the committee or we follow the Public Health directive. We'll look at it prior to the next meeting, which would be coming up for February 1st. Then it's dependent on what Public Health is suggesting, and we will follow Public Health's guidance. The clerk can notify us which way we want to do it, virtually or hybrid - if that is the directive of Public Health.

Ms. Nicoll.

LORELEI NICOLL: I'm willing to put that motion on the floor as you just said it. I don't have to reword it. I think you did mention to look at it from month to month.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Langille, is that a clear enough motion? Okay, perfect.

Everybody has in their package the topics that were put forward.

KENDRA COOMBES: Excuse me. We didn't vote on any of that.

THE CHAIR: I'm getting excited. (Laughter) All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Now we will move on to the members list of proposed topics. I invite first the PC caucus to put forward their three topics. I would ask that they put forward each topic and witness individually so that it's not as confusing, and we can see if there is any discussion on them.

Mr. White.

JOHN WHITE: I move for the first topic of the PC caucus to be early childhood intervention to provide support for families who have children with disabilities. We would bring in as our witnesses: Deputy Minister Tracey Taweel, representing the Department of Community Services and Status of Women, as well as the Executive Director of the East Preston Family and Resource Centre, Trina Fraser.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion on the motion? All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Ms. Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I move that the second topic of the PC caucus would be supportive housing. The witnesses would be Deputy Minister Tracey Taweel, Deputy Minister Paul LaFleche, Executive Director of Phoenix House Tim Crooks, and the Executive Director of the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia, Jim Graham.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion on the topic? All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Mr. Taggert.

TOM TAGGERT: I move that the third topic of the PC caucus be recreational facilities - impact and recovery from COVID-19. For this topic, we propose Executive Director Jennie Greencorn with the Facilities Association of Nova Scotia as our witness.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion on the topic?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

I would invite the Liberal caucus to put forward their motion.

FRED TILLEY: Madam Chair, I would like to move the following topic: wrap-around supports for homeless Nova Scotians. We would call the following witnesses: Deputy Minister Tracey Taweel, Department of Community Services; Executive Director Linda Wilson, Shelter Nova Scotia; and President and Chief Executive Officer Sara Napier, with the United Way.

THE CHAIR: Great. Is there any discussion on the topic?

Ms. Langille.

KIM LANGILLE: I just have a question. On the list that I have, one of the witnesses was the Executive Director of the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Society. Are you no longer wanting them as a witness, or did I miss that when you were listing off the witnesses for that?

FRED TILLEY: You know what, I think it's been changed. My apologies. So it would be Tracey Taweel, Linda Wilson, Executive Director Pam Glode-Desrouchers, and also Sara Napier.

KIM LANGILLE: Okay, so all four.

FRED TILLEY: Add that one, please.

KIM LANGILLE: Okay, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Langille.

Mr. Tilley.

FRED TILLEY: The second topic is titled housing options for Cape Breton. We would call the following witnesses: Director of Student Affairs John Mayich, from Cape Breton University; Deputy Minister Paul LaFleche, from the Department of Housing; and Client Services Manager Rami Kayed, from the Cape Breton Island Housing Authority.

We are going to make a third motion to amend that list of witnesses, Ms. Langille, if that's the way you'd like to proceed.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Langille.

KIM LANGILLE: You can simply just read off the witnesses that you want, and then there's no need to amend it. You can just read them off here in your motion now.

FRED TILLEY: Okay, great. I will start over.

The second topic titled housing options for Cape Breton, calling the following witnesses: Director of Student Affairs John Mayich, Cape Breton University; Deputy Minister Paul LaFleche, from the Department of Housing; and Shawn Luker, Director of the Cape Breton Island Housing Authority.

THE CHAIR: All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Moving on to the NDP caucus. Ms. Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Our proposed topic is the progress update on the phasing out of Adult Residential Centres and Regional Rehabilitation Centre Facilities. The witnesses would be: a representative from the Department of Community Services, whoever that might be - Deputy Minister Taweel or another representative thereof. Also, the Disability Rights Coalition of Nova Scotia Community Action Group - whichever representative they wish to send.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion on the topic?

Ms. Langille.

KIM LANGILLE: I just wanted to make sure - did you say the Disability Rights Coalition of Nova Scotia as well, or just the department and the Community Homes Action Group?

KENDRA COOMBES: The Disability Rights Coalition of Nova Scotia and the Community Homes Action Group - whichever representatives they would like to send.

THE CHAIR: All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Next up is setting the date for the next meeting, which we've discussed. The next meeting will be on February 1st, 2022. We've agreed on a time of 10:00 a.m. until noon. The topic is to be determined. Hopefully, we will be able to meet in person. If not, we will make arrangements to meet virtually again.

Is there any other business the committee would like to discuss today?

Thank you everybody. We'll see you on February 1st. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:26 a.m.]