

17 February 2016

Dear Tom, Dear Glenda
c/ all members SOPA Committee

Future of SOPA

We write with reference to the meeting of the SOPA Committee on Thursday, 18.2.2016, and to our comments not only at recent meetings of the Committee but also in the meeting that you both had with SPF and SSA at STUC Offices on 13.1.2016.

At that meeting, we expressed the very serious concerns that our organisations have about the haste with which decisions on the future of SOPA seem to be pushed through. We are equally concerned about the absence of a range of options as to that future and the lack of a clear rationale for the option that you are promoting. Further, we have particular concerns about your proposals for SOPA to apply to become a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO), not least given the imminent prohibitions on charities in receipt of government funding lobbying government. We also have many concerns about the draft constitutions presented for consideration.

We accept that the decision by Edinburgh City Council to withdraw its support for SOPA with effect from 31.3.2016 does present some challenges. However, we believe that these challenges could be satisfactorily addressed by any one of a number of possible solutions, that would not require fundamental decisions to be made that will (pre-) determine the longer term future of SOPA and might indeed compromise that.

In addition, though we recognise the vigour with which you have approached your roles with SOPA and are appreciative of what you have done to help take things forward over the past few years, we are of the view that this has been at the cost of transparency, inclusive decision-making and democratic accountability, all of which seem to us to be essential to what we thought SOPA was intended to be and could still become.

In making these comments, we wish to stress three important things that may be lost sight of in the current drive towards your preferred solution:

1. the origins of SOPA in the efforts of many individuals and of several older peoples' organisations (SPF and SSA included) over a number of years to secure an older peoples' parliament/congress/assembly in Scotland
2. the on-going work of such organisations in representing the views of Scotland's older people through democratic membership structures and the strong membership base that they are able to draw on
3. the fact that SOPA was envisaged as and, in our opinion, should still be an umbrella for such work and its efforts focussed exclusively on the Annual Assembly, with any campaigning actions agreed by the Assembly taken forward by such organisations and their members on a carefully planned, articulated basis.

Our concerns, that we know are shared by others, are of such an order that we are copying this letter to all members of the SOPA Committee, drawing their attention to our alternative to the proposals that you have put forward, for consideration at Thursday's meeting.

We trust that the agenda for that meeting will include equal time for presentation of the case for your proposals and our counter proposals and that consideration of both proposals will be continued between now and the subsequent meeting on 3.3.2016. This would allow time not only for proper deliberation on the options (including any further proposals that may come forward in the interim) by the organisations represented on the SOPA Committee but also for discussion of these with key stakeholders, including the Scottish Government. In line with our concerns about transparency, inclusive decision-making and democratic accountability, we are firmly of the view that that such discussions should be attended by several representatives of the SOPA Committee, alongside representatives of the other relevant membership-based organisations active at the national level in Scotland (e.g. SPF, SSA and NCPS).

In light of the same concerns, we further suggest that a substitute from within the Committee take the chair at Thursday's meeting to ensure that there is no conflict of interest between the role of chair in that meeting with advocacy of a particular way forward.

We are mindful that a split over the future of SOPA would have a potentially very divisive and long-term negative impact on the older peoples' movement in Scotland. We wish to avoid this but at the same time we see it as vital that the future of the Annual Assembly is secured in a way that respects the collective ownership of the Assembly. We are sure that you would not wish to do anything that would undermine that.

Rose Jackson	Chair, Scottish Pensioners Forum (SPF)
Jeanette Pieper	Vice-Chair, Scottish Pensioners Forum & Current SPF Representative on SOPA Committee
Jim Bradley	Vice-Chair, Scottish Pensioners Forum
Bill Johnson	Chair, Scottish Seniors Alliance (SSA) & Current SPF Representative on SOPA Committee
Agnes McGroarty	Vice-Chair, Scottish Seniors Alliance (SSA) & Former Chair, SOPA
Brian Martin	Current Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) Representative on SOPA Committee

Our Proposals

In order to provide adequate opportunity for due deliberation of options regarding the future of SOPA,

1. The time allowed for presentation and proper consideration of such options should be extended to, and if necessary beyond, the meeting scheduled for 3.3.2016
2. That in the interim, (a) the costs of three options of securing temporary desk space etc for the period 1 April to 31 July 2016 are ascertained, (b) an amendment to the Constitution is made to create the offices of Treasurer and Secretary and elections to these offices are carried out as a matter of urgency (c) thereafter the Treasurer investigate and come forward with proposals for opening a dedicated SOPA Bank Account to receive any SOPA funds remaining with Edinburgh City Council as of 31.3.2016 together with any interim funding to be received from the Scottish Government, with decisions being made as to which of the options under (a) and (b) to pursue at the meeting on 3.3.2016
3. That an ad-hoc working group be established to bring forward plans for the Annual Assembly 2016, this comprising the Chair, Administrator and representatives of SPF, SSA and three of the other membership-based older peoples organisations represented on the SOPA Committee, **these plans to be presented in outline to the meeting of the Committee on 3.3.2016** for decisions
4. All future decisions regarding the future of SOPA, each Annual Assembly and the use of funding granted to SOPA to be made by a vote within Committee, only organisations directly representing older people through a membership being eligible to vote².

¹ Together with any associated additional changes.

² This is not to downplay the value of having other organisations (including service providers) involved with/in SOPA but for SOPA to have any real legitimacy as a "voice of older people", we firmly believe that the contributions of such

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