



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 25 October 2011

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CONTENTS

	Col.
SUBORDINATE LEGISLATION	91
Forced Marriage etc (Protection and Jurisdiction) (Scotland) Act 2011 (Commencement) Order 2011 (SS1 2011/352)	91
DRAFT BUDGET 2012-13 AND SPENDING REVIEW 2011	92
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	120

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

6th Meeting 2011, Session 4

CONVENER

*Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con)

*Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Nuala Gormley (Scottish Government)

John Swinney (Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Douglas Thornton

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 25 October 2011

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 14:01*]

Subordinate Legislation

Forced Marriage etc (Protection and Jurisdiction) (Scotland) Act 2011 (Commencement) Order 2011 (SSI 2011/352)

The Convener (Claudia Beamish): Good afternoon everybody and welcome to the sixth meeting of the Equal Opportunities Committee in the fourth session of the Parliament. I remind everyone who is present, including members, that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be turned off completely as they interfere with the sound system, even when they are switched to silent.

No apologies have been received.

Round the table we have Siobhan McMahon, Clare Adamson, John Finnie, Margaret Mitchell, Dennis Robertson, Stuart McMillan, and our budget adviser, Colin Lee. I am Claudia Beamish, the convener. We also have Douglas Thornton, clerk to the committee, Simon Wakefield from the Scottish Parliament information centre and colleagues from the official report. At the bottom of the table we have broadcasting and production services. We also have Debra Gourlay in support.

We welcome John Swinney and his officials. If they will bear with us, we must deal with one item on the agenda. I do not imagine that it will be very long and then we can come to the important item on the budget.

The first item of business is to consider the commencement order. I refer members to paper EO/S4/11/6/1, which explains that the order is not subject to any parliamentary procedure other than to be noted by the lead committee. The committee is therefore invited to note the order. Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Draft Budget 2012-13 and Spending Review 2011

The Convener: I am pleased to welcome John Swinney MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth, to give evidence to the committee. The cabinet secretary is joined by Yvonne Strachan, the head of the Scottish Government's equality unit, and Nuala Gormley, the senior principal researcher for the Government. I welcome you all this afternoon and we look forward to the deliberations that we hope will take forward equality for Scotland.

I invite the cabinet secretary to make introductory remarks before I open the floor to members to ask questions. Members can start to indicate now whether they have any questions. I intend to take questions in order and will give some leeway for supplementaries. We will try to bring out some main themes in the discussions, rather than jump about too much, but I hope that the cabinet secretary will bear with us because we have not structured the questioning in too much detail.

John Swinney (Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth): Thank you, convener. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the draft budget and spending review with the committee. I, along with my officials, am delighted to answer any questions that the committee might have about the issues that are raised.

As I said in my statement to the Parliament in September, the spending review falls at a defining moment that is uniquely challenging: we have a fragile global economy and significant reductions in the real value of the Scottish budget. The Government does not underestimate the challenge or the potential impacts of those factors on our people and communities.

The budget, alongside our economic strategy and the programme for Government, sets out a robust framework for responding to that challenge. The Government has set an ambitious programme for delivery. At its heart is the achievement of economic growth and recovery, complemented by measures that help shift the focus of our spend and our approach to prevention and early intervention, and will protect jobs and household incomes.

Underpinning that is a clear recognition that our success as a nation depends on building a society in which people achieve, regardless of their background, and where the barriers to participation and opportunity are removed. Inequality detracts from our economic performance and our social wellbeing as a society.

Deciding how we spend money involves some of the most important decisions that we have to make as a Government. In the current context, those are neither simple nor easy. As part of our budget preparations we have sought evidence on how people are experiencing the challenging times of today and we have used that alongside our equality analysis to make the most informed decisions that we can make.

The budget equality statement provides information on how our spending contributes to advancing equality and how we have considered the potential impacts of our spending plans on those groups of people whose lives are affected by discrimination and inequality. However, it is not designed to be a statement of all that we are doing on equality.

Giving due recognition to the views of the previous Equal Opportunities Committee and the work of the equality and budget advisory group, to which I am immensely grateful, we have continued to seek improvements in our approach to the budget. We have continued to embed equality considerations throughout the budget process and have worked hard to ensure that decisions were informed by equality analysis.

The equality statement can only capture where we are at this point in time. It is a live document to be used alongside the consideration of the draft budget. I intend for the first time to update the statement in the light of the budget scrutiny and changes to the budget that might arise as a result. As the committee will appreciate, that is work in progress. I am committed to improving further our approach to budget setting and equality analysis. There will be new challenges around equality analysis and assessment as we engage further in public sector reform and make progress in shifting the focus of our public services towards prevention and early intervention.

We will have to consider how we can best use these challenges together with our partners. I intend to work with the equality and budget advisory group, which has provided me with first-class advice in the period in which I have dealt with it, to get further support on that proposition. I will of course be grateful for the input of the committee, which has had a long-standing interest in how we can improve the process that we are now considering.

I look forward to the discussion and I am very happy to answer questions.

The Convener: Thank you very much. That was an extremely helpful introduction that set a broad context within which we can discuss equalities.

The first question that we would like to ask you relates to preventative work in the strategic context of the budget.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):

Thanks for your comments, cabinet secretary. You talked about shifting the focus to preventative spend. I would like to ask specifically about the change fund for older people's services. I have some knowledge of initiatives in Highland in that regard. Will you comment on the anticipated return from the change fund, please?

John Swinney: The financial return?

John Finnie: Yes.

John Swinney: It is difficult for me to provide specific numbers to the committee, but the return that we expect to achieve from the change fund relates essentially to how we are able to deal with what all the data show to be a growing challenge in the provision of elderly care in a satisfactory fashion to members of the public as a consequence of the increased longevity of the population and the increasing number of individuals who therefore require assistance.

The change fund has two objectives. First, it is intended to ensure that the type of care that is provided for individuals is appropriate to their needs. That could involve ensuring that they are treated or supported at home rather than in an acute hospital; it is clearly much more expensive to treat somebody in an acute hospital than to support them at home, particularly when being in an acute hospital might not be in their best clinical interests. Secondly, it is intended to ensure that we meet the expectations of individuals and ensure that the support and care that are in place for them are appropriate to their needs. Among all that, the Government expects the arrangements that we have in place to have the capability to meet the needs of individuals within the care environment. Clearly, if we do not act in this fashion the cost to the public purse, particularly in some areas of the public sector, will be increasingly difficult for us to sustain. We must find a sustainable model and, essentially, the change fund assists us in doing that.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): I am a member of the Parliament's Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee as well as this one and the issue of shifting some £200 million from revenue to capital has been discussed in the committee as well as more widely. Wearing my Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee hat, I look on that as a positive step, but as a member of the Equal Opportunities Committee I can understand why some people might have some concerns. As fewer people from ethnic minorities are employed in the construction sector, it is suggested that this shift in spending might have an adverse effect on equalities. What would you say to that?

John Swinney: The purpose of the shift of revenue from resource budgets to capital is designed to ensure that we have a capital budget that can meet the expectations of our society and invest in the long-term interests of our country. In the funding settlement from the United Kingdom Government the capital budget will be £2.474 billion in 2013, whereas 12 months ago it would have been in excess of £3.3 billion. Our capital budget is the best part of £1 billion adrift from where it has been historically, so I have taken the decision to do a number of things. The non-profit-distributing model of capital investment will support our activities, but there will also be a shift of about £200 million in 2012-13 from resource into capital.

The judgment in answering Mr McMillan's question hinges essentially on the question of the long-term benefit of that capital expenditure. For example, there might not be a high proportion of individuals from ethnic minorities employed in the construction sector—although I do not have data in front of me that can tell me whether that is proportionate to the share of the population or not—but all our citizens will benefit from an enhanced and improved infrastructure. Once a health centre is built, for example, it is there to benefit everybody in the relevant community.

In the long term, I do not see any issue arising as a consequence of that shift of emphasis because, ultimately, it will enable us, as a country, to have a stronger capital infrastructure than we have at present. Whether, in the interim, it will restrict opportunities for people from ethnic minority communities depends on an assessment of the remainder of the Government's interventions. The Government is making a host of interventions to support people, wherever they have come from, into the labour market through the opportunities for all programme, the modern apprenticeship programme, the further education sector and the wider activities that we undertake to promote the interests of individuals from ethnic minorities. When we look at the issue in the round, I do not think that we find the negative outcome that Mr McMillan has raised as a possibility.

14:15

The Convener: In the context of employment in the construction industry, has an equality impact assessment been done in relation to black and ethnic minority groups or, indeed, to gender groups?

John Swinney: An equalities assessment will have been done across each of the portfolios of Government expenditure, so the issue that Mr McMillan has raised of the resource to capital transfer will have been assessed for equalities purposes. I do not think that the Government has

done a standalone assessment of the equalities issues in the construction industry, but if that is not the case, I will write to you, as convener, to confirm that.

The Convener: Is that something that you might consider, in view of the concerns that have been expressed by some black and ethnic minority groups about relative levels of employment in the construction industry and in relation to modern apprenticeships, although that is perhaps a different issue?

John Swinney: The key point here, which I am extremely interested in, is about ensuring that the opportunities that are open to our citizens to gain training or learning support in Scotland are available to everyone. If there are particular issues that our interventions are not addressing—if, for example, some of the wider support that is available to ensure that people from all backgrounds can access Government programmes is not being made available to the extent that we would all consider desirable—clearly the Government will want to act. We have embarked on a programme that we call opportunities for all. Bluntly, it has to mean it, so if we find that the opportunities are not available to everyone, the Government will intervene to ensure that that is the case.

I know from the work of organisations such as Skills Development Scotland that they have their own equalities requirements and duties. SDS is involved in placing individuals in modern apprenticeships and ensuring that people receive the proper training and support, so it will be conscious of the issue and will have to respond to it as part of its general activity.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): It is my understanding that a high number of people from black and ethnic minority groups stay on in education much longer than people from other groups. Could we consider a scheme for postgraduate entry into some of the modern apprenticeships for people from those groups? That might address the problem that I believe exists in the construction industry. It may be a perceived problem, but I think that there is some information from the Scottish Parliament information centre to suggest that black and ethnic minority people have fewer opportunities to go into that industry. Is it a possibility that a scheme could be set up for postgraduate entry into modern apprenticeships for people from black and ethnic minority groups?

John Swinney: Mr Robertson will probably be aware that the Government has embarked on the making training work better review, which is under way. If memory serves me right, it will report by the end of this calendar year. The review will consider issues to do with graduate-level modern

apprenticeships. When the Government has received that report, ministers will take decisions accordingly. I imagine that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning will report to the Parliament on that. Now that the issue has been raised in the committee, I will ensure that, when Mr Russell comes to a conclusion, the convener is notified as to the approach that is being taken.

The Convener: Thank you—that is helpful. Do members have any further questions on finance, employment and sustainable growth?

Stuart McMillan: I have a brief one on the Government's no compulsory redundancies policy. Will an EqlA of the policy be undertaken towards the end of 2012-13 in relation to the third and public sectors?

John Swinney: The issue has been raised with me by people in the third sector, where there is a concern that one implication of our stance on no compulsory redundancies might be simply to shift the problem into the third sector. I am acutely aware of that point. However, that view does not take into account the fact—on which I have been clear with the Parliament on many occasions—that there will be a loss of public sector employment in the coming period. That is absolutely unavoidable, given the challenges that we face, but the Government wants to manage the process in an orderly fashion and without the threat of compulsory redundancies hanging over individuals.

As a consequence, there is a way in which we can work constructively with the third sector to ensure that its operations are sustained in this difficult financial climate. The third sector budget has, in essence, been protected in the coming period. The Government provides a range of funding streams to third sector organisations directly and many are provided by local authorities. I intend to work closely with the third sector to ensure that what we might characterise as unintended consequences for the third sector of the commitment on no compulsory redundancies do not occur.

Stuart McMillan: On that point about funding streams, what funding will be available to start-up social enterprises, and particularly to ethnic minority and disability-led groups, to help develop their capacity to trade?

John Swinney: By coincidence, this morning I was in Kirkcaldy to visit the successful social enterprise Furniture Plus, which provides a truly exceptional but simple local service. It picks up furniture that has become unfashionable in people's houses, although it is high-quality stuff, and presents it marvellously in a showroom in Kirkcaldy, selling it at prices that are affordable for

people on low incomes. That is absolutely first class. Today, I opened a training and employment facility in which the company trains people to take scratch marks off the tables and other items that people consider to be so unsightly that they must get rid of them, so that they can be sold on.

I cite that excellent example to demonstrate the great opportunity for social enterprises in Scotland. The Government has made it its business to encourage the development of the social enterprise sector. We have put in place the just enterprise programme, which is an advisory and funding support programme that supports the activities of social enterprises. One of the partners in delivering the programme is the Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations, and a number of organisations from the black and ethnic minority community are now benefiting from just enterprise support.

The channels of advice and support are there. I take the opportunity, as I did in Kirkcaldy this morning, to reaffirm the Government's determination to support the development of the social enterprise sector, which contains some great gems of activity within our society.

Stuart McMillan: Are there any specific funds for groups in the ethnic minority community or disability-led groups or is it just the main funding streams that anyone can apply for?

John Swinney: The funding streams that they can access are not exclusively available to groups from ethnic minority backgrounds, but we have enough focus within the programme to ensure that we can provide relevant support to organisations that require it.

The Convener: I have a brief supplementary question. The need for financial support and capacity building in new black and ethnic minority organisations has been highlighted to us. I take your point that there are not specific funding streams, but how can such support be focused on in relation to the equalities remit?

John Swinney: The Government already provides financial support to a number of organisations, principally the Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure in Scotland and the Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations. Support is available to assist with capacity building within those communities. Following the line of Mr McMillan's question, I would be reluctant to have particular funds that were available for, let us say, social enterprise development within the black and ethnic minority community. I would much rather support the community in general and have specialist support available for the development of social enterprises, which may have a character around the ethnic minority organisations, and for those organisations to be supported in making

applications and seeking support through that channel. An opportunity exists for that to happen.

John Finnie: The cabinet secretary has probably answered the question that I was going to ask. The approach that he described would be characterised as positive action. It is support to help people to provide support, rather than taking a different route for ethnic minority communities.

John Swinney: Yes. The model that I am trying to explain is that we support organisations that have a focus on advocating for and building capacity within the ethnic and minority communities. If, from that work, there is an aspiration to, let us say, form a social enterprise, there are other forms of more general advice on forming a social enterprise that are available to any organisation, whether it is a furniture organisation in Kirkcaldy or an organisation for a black and ethnic minority community. It would essentially be tailored in that fashion.

The Convener: We move on to questions and thoughts about health, wellbeing and cities.

14:30

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): Good afternoon, cabinet secretary. You may be aware that Pauline Craig from NHS Health Scotland gave the committee some interesting information. To paraphrase, she said that over the past five years there has been a lot of activity in conducting equality impact assessments but very little evidence of their effect. Can you comment on that?

John Swinney: I certainly think that the focus on ensuring that our health service is mindful of its duties on equalities when it undertakes its operations and activities should be part and parcel of its activities. It is part of our duty, so we should ensure that that is the case.

Steps are taken to assist that work. A team of equalities officers operates in the national health service in Scotland to ensure that NHS organisations focus on the delivery of their equality duties. There has been particular focus on issues of mental health and racial equality, and there has also been a focus on translation, interpreting and communications support and on health conditions that might affect particular groups. Those are examples of where I see progress being made, but if there are areas where it is suggested that we could do more the Government will be happy to consider them.

Margaret Mitchell: That would probably be helpful, because you will appreciate that, without evidence on the effect, the equality impact assessments become tokenism. The committee would be reassured if you were to give some

guidance on how NHS boards that have devolved decision making on services and budgets ensure that there is quality assurance and on how that can be improved.

John Swinney: The examples that I have cited are tangible examples of activity that has been undertaken to address the issues. There is information on Government-funded race equality and mental health programmes that are targeted specifically on the needs of individual groups so that we can properly understand the distinctive needs, issues and perspectives within individual groups. Anecdotally, I notice in my interactions with the health service—when I visit Ninewells hospital in Dundee, for example—that the accessibility of services to individuals from different backgrounds is pretty obvious in the way that services are provided.

If it helps the committee to provide more information, I will be happy to do so. A lot of good work has gone on.

Margaret Mitchell: You mentioned mental health. What are the equality impacts of the £6 million that is allocated to mental wellbeing and the £16.2 million that is allocated to mental health legislation and services?

John Swinney: The money essentially supports the implementation of the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003, which is based on 10 principles, including non-discrimination, equality, respect for diversity and participation. Support has also been put in place for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender centre for health and wellbeing, to assist mental health interventions for individuals in the LGBT community. NHS Health Scotland has developed a mental health and race equality programme, which is focused on how to improve mental health services for individuals from different groups. A range of applications is being developed within the funding streams to support individuals from an equalities perspective.

Margaret Mitchell: That is welcome, as is anything more than can be done. Mental health is an issue in the population at large as well as in the ethnic minority groups.

I have a final question. It is not clear whether the budget for carers and young carers will be retained. In 2011-12, £3 million was invested in short breaks provision by the voluntary sector and £4.9 million was allocated to the health boards for carer and young carer identification and support. Can you confirm whether that budget is likely to continue?

John Swinney: I expect that next year the budget for carers and young carers will be of the order of £8 million in total. That will be focused on supporting some of the information strategies that

NHS boards develop to support carers, and it will also support the young carers festival. There will be support for carers and young carers in the black and ethnic minority communities, and there will be a focus on supporting the Scottish young carers services alliance. The short answer to your question is therefore yes.

Margaret Mitchell: More specifically, will local government continue to work with the Scottish Government towards maintaining the extra 10,000 weeks of respite provision? I take it that that will be provided.

John Swinney: Yes. That is part of the dialogue that we have with local government in focusing on our shared priorities.

The Convener: I have a brief supplementary question about how the activities involving carers and young carers will be evaluated by the Government. I attended the young carers festival, and there was an immediate evaluation that it went down well with all the young carers. Beyond that, how will work to support black and ethnic minority young carers, for example, be evaluated?

John Swinney: In the interests of the public purse, we should probably have taken that anecdotal assessment of the young carers festival and not bothered with the consultancy study that goes with it, as the anecdotal assessment probably tells us all that we need to know.

I cannot give you a commitment on a specific evaluation process. The purpose of a spending review is to challenge how the Government spends its money and to determine the relative importance of, and what can be achieved by, pursuing expenditure in one direction rather than another. The fact that the spending review has resulted in the provision of financial support clarifies the fact that the Government, having assessed the effectiveness of that expenditure, considers it to be justified in the long term.

If there is a specific proposal for a further evaluation beyond that, I will let the committee know. However, I sometimes think that we should just see what these events are like, enjoy them and keep running them. I appreciate your impression of the young carers festival, convener. I had a lot to do with that group when I was out of front-bench life, in my constituency activities, and it is a group for whom I have the greatest admiration.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. We can all tell when young people and, indeed, others are enjoying themselves, but I want to pinpoint something different, which is much harder to evaluate. How can we evaluate the reach of support for black and ethnic minority young carers, who are often marginalised? That is much harder to quantify.

John Swinney: That is harder to quantify, but it is part of a process. I will not be able to give you all the details off the top of my head, but there will be legislative provision that requires us to assess the needs of young carers, whatever their background. Essentially, public authorities have a duty to determine whether they are properly fulfilling their statutory obligation. That is the mechanism: young carers from the black and minority ethnic community will not necessarily be singled out, but they will be included in an assessment of the effectiveness of public authorities in fulfilling their duty. I think that that is the correct approach.

John Finnie: We have previously heard from the NHS about data collection. Are you content that there are sufficiently robust data on which to make decisions about health spending in particular?

John Swinney: The short answer is yes. A substantial volume of health data is collected and published that allows us to establish an informed perspective on all the areas of need in Scotland's geography and on the levels of need in particular communities. That data informs many of our judgments in our approach to distributing the substantial funds of money to the health boards and the smaller sums of money to address particular programmes.

John Finnie: How might issues to do with rurality, sparse populations and pockets of certain ethnic groups distort the figures? That matter must be very complicated.

John Swinney: I do not think that such a question can be answered adequately just by reference to the approach that we take to the distribution of resources through, for example, health boards. That distribution is driven as it is driven in relation to local authorities. Rurality and sparsity issues are factors that influence how budgets are allocated to local authorities, whether that is Highland Council—I was in its area yesterday, in Boat of Garten—or the City of Edinburgh Council, as it is clear that differential costs are involved. Those factors are taken into account in the distribution of resources.

If the committee wanted to go beyond that into the question whether all needs are met in specific ethnic minority groups, I would have to rest on the fact that a general allocation is made around the country and we take decisions to allocate resources to meet specific needs in particular communities if we can do so. For example, some of the more specific channels of funding are concentrated to support those from ethnic minorities in different communities throughout the country.

John Finnie: Translation services may be key. Are they sufficiently robust?

John Swinney: I referred to translation services when I was answering Margaret Mitchell's questions about the health service. There is a translation, interpreting and communication support programme in the health service. From my knowledge as a patient in the health service in the Tayside area, the availability of support to meet individuals' language expectations is pretty obvious. I have seen examples of that support being deployed very successfully.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. This might be the final question on health, and it relates to the health improvement, access, efficiency and treatment targets and users from different ethnic backgrounds. Would you consider seeking a two-pronged HEAT target so that, first, all boards reach the 75 per cent target for data collection on service-user ethnicity within two or three years and, secondly, that all boards demonstrate over two or three years that the data collected has been used to improve services and patient satisfaction? I stress that point because we have talked about anecdotal issues in relation to carers but information gathering on that issue might be significant.

14:45

John Swinney: The Government has taken forward a programme over the past couple of years to improve data collection within the ethnic minority communities. That has given us a better base of information about existing provision, the challenges that exist and what more needs to be done. In addition, the health team has done work on identifying further feedback from patient experience surveys to determine whether we meet expectations. That information is used actively by health boards to improve the design and delivery of their approaches.

Knowing the purpose of HEAT targets, I do not think that they lend themselves to the challenge that you highlighted, convener, which is more about ensuring that we equip services to meet the needs of people from ethnic minority communities. The HEAT targets are about driving a particular outcome in the performance of the health service on clinical interventions. I therefore do not think that a HEAT target would be the appropriate way to move forward, but I would not want that to be interpreted as our not recognising the importance of data collection and understanding the patient perspective, which we use to improve the way in which we make health services available to members of the black and ethnic minority communities.

The Convener: We move on to discussion of education and lifelong learning.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): At the Education and Culture Committee this morning we discussed the challenging settlement for Scottish colleges in the current spending review. Although discussions have not been completed and no final decisions have been made, some college principals have expressed their concern about the ability to provide the places that will be required to meet the 16-to-19 agenda. In addition, the Department for Work and Pensions is conducting a review of supported workplaces. I visited a Remploy factory in my home town a few weeks ago, so I know that there is concern about the future of supported workplaces. Are you concerned that the push towards accredited courses and promoting employability might disadvantage people with complex needs?

John Swinney: The answer to all of that is that we must focus on providing learning opportunities for each individual. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning has made it clear to Parliament that that will be the Government's focus. This might sound like a rather ridiculous thing to say, but I am going to say it all the same: we must put the learner at the centre of the learning choices and the learning experience. Often, we do not do that; we are concerned more about the institution than the learner. The message from the education secretary, which I support entirely, is that we must put the learner at the centre of the experience.

That brings me on to Clare Adamson's latter point. If we put the learner at the centre of the experience, we will have the opportunity to ensure that those with complex needs can have them better addressed by the education service. The passage through the education service for individuals who do not have complex needs might be more routine—if I can characterise it in that way—than it would be for somebody with complex needs. Why should the individual with complex needs have any less of an opportunity to progress through our education service than somebody with what I will call non-complex needs? The direction of travel that the education secretary has set out of focusing directly on the learner, rather than on the institution, gives us a way to meet the legitimate aspirations to which Clare Adamson referred.

The Convener: I have a supplementary question on that. The Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability has done some research that shows that funding has been cut by a third in real terms for courses that a lot of the groups that it represents have attended. Have cuts in courses for people with learning difficulties, particularly part-time courses, for example in my constituency

of South Scotland, been equality impact assessed?

John Swinney: I cannot give you an answer to that at this stage, but I am very happy to write to you about it once I look into it. If the clerks could give us the reference from the organisation, we would be delighted to explore the issue and provide a detailed response on whether an equality impact assessment has been undertaken. What I would say—this comes back to my answer to Clare Adamson a moment ago—is that I really do not think that, just because some people's educational needs are more complex and complicated than those of other people, those courses should be less worthy of receiving funding than any others.

The Convener: Thank you. Particularly in relation to those who need additional support, the danger is that some courses that are not so much employer led, which there seems to be momentum towards in further education at the moment—I do not know whether you agree with that—such as starter courses that allow people to prepare for courses that might lead to their becoming employed, might slip off the agenda. I am sorry, I did not express that very well.

John Swinney: I know what you are asking.

The Convener: I know that concern has been expressed about that in Strathclyde, for instance.

John Swinney: One of the things that the Government and I are acutely aware of, and to which we attach priority, is ensuring that it is possible for individuals who find it more difficult than others to access the labour market or to be economically active—whatever term we wish to apply—to do that. One point that Clare Adamson raised with me that I did not cover in my answer was about supported employment. I met individuals at the social enterprise that I visited this morning who have been very remote from the labour market for some considerable time. That project, given its nature and character, has made it possible for those individuals to get into the labour market in a way that they could never have conceived of before.

The same point is relevant within our further and higher education services. Additional effort will have to be put in to make sure that those who have more challenging needs can gain access to those opportunities. One of the points that I made in my opening remarks was that, when money gets tight—to put it bluntly—we have to be extra vigilant so that we do not lose some of the strong, perhaps more costly, interventions that provide the good outcome of getting people into employment. That is one of the points on which the Government has concentrated.

The Convener: That is reassuring. Are there any other questions about education and lifelong learning?

Dennis Robertson: I welcome your remarks, cabinet secretary, and am pleased at the commitment that you and Michael Russell have made to children. However, Enable has recently produced a report that suggests that children who have more complex needs are being failed by the system. Barriers seem to be put up because of the lack of awareness and training in our schools and perhaps even in the pre-school sector. As you have rightly said, when money is tight there is sometimes a tendency for some areas to be squeezed that little bit harder, so I welcome your suggestion that we should be more vigilant. Is there anything that we can do to ensure that those who have complex needs are not failed when money becomes tight?

Also, the colleges suggest that those courses that do not give certificates sometimes drop off the college's agenda. When we are looking at courses for children and young people who have complex needs for additional learning support, would it not be simplest to certificate those courses rather than just getting rid of them because they are not certificated?

John Swinney: The key point comes back to my answer to Clare Adamson. We have to put the learner at the centre. That is the way forward. Why on earth should any individual miss their opportunity to progress through our education system because they happen to have more complex needs than another individual has?

The Government's commitment for 16 to 19-year-olds, for example, is to make sure that every person in that age group can get access to a learning or training opportunity. We have to fulfil that commitment. That is what we are working to achieve.

In my opinion, there should be no reason why the needs of individuals are not properly and fully met by the education system. I just do not see why that should be a challenge in these circumstances. Although money is under pressure, I am presiding over a budget that totals £28.3 billion, which is still an enormous sum of money. Within that, we should be able to meet the needs and expectations of individuals in our society.

Dennis Robertson: I am not sure whether the cabinet secretary is aware of the Enable report that has just been published, but Michael Russell might want to share it with you at some point. As I said, it contains some very disturbing information that seems to show that there are barriers to your commitment.

John Swinney: I am sure that the education secretary will be familiar with the report and I will

mention it to him when I see him later this afternoon in the Cabinet. I rest on my argument that we are focused on ensuring that learners' needs and aspirations are satisfied by what is provided for them.

The Convener: Thank you. We move now to questions about the justice brief.

Stuart McMillan: Page 126 of the draft budget shows an allocation of £3 million to tackling sectarianism in 2012-13. Obviously, the wider debate on sectarianism has taken place inside and outside Parliament, but it could be suggested that the £3 million is too narrowly focused in how it is to be spent and that it should be extended to cover discrimination and hate crimes relating to other religions. I am keen to hear your comments on that.

15:00

John Swinney: The provisions in the budget document cover a range of elements. For example, in 2011-12, the Government has given direct financial support to a number of organisations that act to counter sectarianism in different ways, including Sense over Sectarianism and Nil by Mouth, and to organisations that are closer to faith communities, such as the Iona Community. Of course, the Government provides other support to interfaith communities and other such organisations, but I am not clear from the information in front of me whether it is supported in this particular budget line or in the wider equalities budget lines. The point is that the Government undertakes work in this area through a number of channels; one of those is the anti-sectarianism channel, but the Government will also take forward a number of other equalities measures.

Stuart McMillan: Written clarification of that would be very useful.

John Swinney: I would be surprised if the £3 million allocated for tackling sectarianism is not already a level 4 figure. The difficulty is that, if we go beyond that, we will be into specific grant allocations to specific bodies. I can give the committee information about some of the allocations that have been made in 2011-12, but some of the other allocations will be settled only when the budget is approved and when the budget holders are certain that the resources are in place.

Stuart McMillan: The point that has been raised in oral and written evidence is that, although the main focus is on sectarianism, particularly in football, we should not centre our attention solely on what happens in and around football grounds. There are other issues with regard to other religious groups.

John Swinney: As I said in my opening remarks, the budget does not summarise absolutely everything that we are doing on equalities. I entirely agree with Mr McMillan. Sectarianism issues are very high profile and attract a great deal of interest, but the Government routinely undertakes other work to foster good relationships between different communities in our society and Scotland's faith communities. We will do all we can to encourage that work and to try to give it greater prominence than it perhaps has.

Stuart McMillan: On a wider point about religion—not just sectarianism—should religious bodies receive more financial assistance to promote what they do and foster a wider cultural understanding of their activities?

John Swinney: The Government provides support to encourage understanding in communities. Indeed, much of our equalities work has been focused on ensuring that there is understanding, that there is no prejudice and that there is an appreciation of different communities' diverse perspectives. That is reflected in the equalities priorities of the Government's budget.

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Following up on Stuart McMillan's point, I appreciate that, in scrutinising the draft budget, we should bear in mind that religion is a protected characteristic. However, the only specific reference to religion in the entire document relates to sectarianism. You have said that other funding has been allocated directly to, for example, the Iona Community and interfaith organisations, but the budget document makes no specific reference to that and it is hard to see where that money is going. How will that slight anomaly be addressed in future?

John Swinney: I rest on my earlier comment that the budget document cannot set out everything that we are doing. Instead, it gives a perspective on where the Government believes it should focus its activities and how that should be demonstrated. We support particular projects that encourage community cohesion and understanding and those are reflected in the Government's funding priorities. We are quite happy to make more information available to the committee if it would assist, but we try to ensure that our resources are deployed to encourage cohesion and understanding among Scotland's different and diverse communities. Indeed, that is the appropriate way in which those resources should be deployed.

John Finnie: I do not know whether I am going to phrase this question correctly, but am I right in saying that this £3 million is but part of the equality agenda and that the bulk of the energy that goes into it will be through our education system? Would it be possible to indicate in the education

budget the moneys for dealing with discrimination and hate crimes?

John Swinney: My officials have helpfully pointed me to the page of the budget document that I could not find earlier on. With regard to the Government's priorities on equalities, the second bullet point on page 71 mentions

"work in relation to addressing violence against women, the integration of asylum seekers and refugees, promoting religious tolerance"—

which, I note, is a reference to religion in the document that is not linked to sectarianism—

"improving outcomes for minority ethnic communities including Gypsies/Travellers, and addressing issues of gender, age, LGBT and disability equality".

The equalities section of the budget document sets out a £20 million budget for promoting equality. Moreover, the citizenship elements of the curriculum for excellence, which is another aspect that we will be unable to disaggregate, will be conveyed throughout our school environment. Clearly, a range of different measures in the Government's programme supports that activity.

Dennis Robertson: At a recent interfaith meeting, I was fortunate to talk to a leader of the Bethany Christian Trust, which has suggested that some of its work, particularly on street pastors, might already be meeting the Government's preventative spending aims. However, one barrier that it has encountered has been in securing appropriate funding to continue its work. I was asked to bring forward one point. If the trust came across an empty shop and wanted to set up a charity shop or a small not-quite-social enterprise, so that people could do something useful during the day and perhaps learn some new skills, is there anything that we could do to help offset the costs of setting up that shop, given the work that it is doing?

John Swinney: The Government funds discrete projects to achieve particular objectives within what one might call the wider faith arena. We do not habitually fund faith-based organisations to be faith-based organisations, but we provide funding to organisations to try to help them in achieving outcomes. Many organisations in Scotland are funded through different streams of funding—some through the third sector, some through equalities funding and some through local authorities or health boards—that are working to achieve particular outcomes. The work that Mr Robertson has highlighted might well fit into some of those categories, so there are a number of vehicles through which individuals could obtain support for the objectives they want to take forward.

Siobhan McMahon: I will be quick. I thank the cabinet secretary for mentioning religious homes. I

do not think I was clear when I was talking about scrutiny involving religion as a protected characteristic. I should have mentioned the lack of data available to us, such as employment figures for all religious groups and so on. Those figures might not be as readily available to us as the figures for ethnic minorities. I just wanted to know how we can address that anomaly, and I should have said that at the outset.

John Swinney: The most reliable information on religious identity or religious association, if I can call it that, is the 10-year census. I cannot think of other opportunities in between censuses. Nuala Gormley might be able to help me here.

Nuala Gormley (Scottish Government): We have a programme of work to improve the quality of all our equalities data. We have developed harmonised questions for each of the equality characteristic strands—except, as yet, for transgender, I think. Those questions are then rolled out across all our social surveys, which run between the censuses and are designed for Scotland in particular. The better and more frequent use of those questions means that we can compare data across surveys and make a lot more of them. We also have a project that we are about to take forward to look again at our religion questions so that we can distinguish better between religious practice, religious affiliation and religious identity. We realise that they tell us about different aspects of a person's identity and how they refer to it, which attach to different policy issues.

The Convener: Thank you. We move on to infrastructure and capital investment.

Dennis Robertson: I am sure that we all welcomed the Government's announcement on the spending on affordable housing and the council housing programme. However, is there any way in which we can secure appropriate and apportioned funding for black and ethnic minority groups and disability groups, who might need specific types of housing? Black and ethnic minority groups might need additional bedrooms for larger families, and people with disabilities might need an extra room for their carers and people who are there to help them lead an independent life. Can we identify a portion of the spend for those groups?

John Swinney: There certainly is not a ring-fenced fund, if I could call it that, to meet the needs raised in Mr Robertson's point. Local authorities clearly have a duty to house individuals appropriately when they present as homeless. In that circumstance, they must find accommodation that is appropriate to the family's needs.

From my own experience, I know of examples of what local authorities do when presented with

homeless families. I can remember a case in which a large family presented itself as homeless and the local authority undertook extensive refurbishment and redesign of some of its existing stock to accommodate that family properly. I know also that local authorities and registered social landlords take great care to try to design approaches to housing that meet the needs of individuals with particular disabilities. It is an on-going priority for that to be reflected in the work of local authorities.

15:15

Dennis Robertson: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. However, some people and families still live in overcrowded conditions. With the positive spend on the new housing programme, is it possible to identify a proportion of houses in certain sectors—for example, in our cities—that can meet families' specific needs? I acknowledge that the cabinet secretary has said that there is no ring fencing, but we must try to ensure that we have the most appropriate housing to meet the community's needs.

John Swinney: What I was trying to say is that I know that local authorities and registered social landlords take great care to ensure that they have a diversity of housing provision in place that can meet the needs of individuals and that that is reflected in the available provision. That can be achieved without ring fencing for particular purposes. It is difficult for local authorities to plan effectively on a prescriptive basis. They can do their level best to assess the character of housing demand in the years to come with the assistance of population projections. However, it is difficult to be definitive in that respect.

Stuart McMillan: I stay in the Inverclyde area and over the past four years housing issues have come across my desk regularly. I have taken great pride in getting out and about as much as I can to meet different groups and representative bodies to learn a lot more about how they deal and liaise with RSLs in the Inverclyde area. The issue of housing allocations comes up time and time again. If money has been spent on a property to provide aids and adaptations and if the individual in the property can no longer live independently or if they pass away, the aids and adaptations in the property are invariably removed. The RSL therefore spends money twice on the property, instead of putting somebody else into the property who could use the aids and adaptations. It is frustrating that RSLs spend money twice in that way—in effect, they squander money rather than consider their allocation policy in order to save money. Do you have any comments on that?

John Swinney: This is about the challenge of meeting housing requirements. It is almost

impossible to require RSLs to predict, absolutely, what the housing requirement will be. They can have a decent look at population projections and the balance of groups and can ask themselves whether there will be more young single people than older people. Judgments can be made, but it is a big ask to expect RSLs to have the requisite number of specially adapted properties available at any given time.

Reluctance to adapt properties to meet individuals' particular needs is a different question altogether. By its nature, that is an issue of responsiveness. RSLs must be in a fit state to respond, and to do so timeously to meet individuals' needs.

Stuart McMillan: I recognise that it is extremely difficult for RSLs to predict the future, but we know that the population is ageing and that more people will need assistance to live independently. We also know that the numbers will increase in future. I hope that RSLs will consider that, so that when someone leaves an RSL property, instead of the RSL going straight in and removing the aids and adaptations, it thinks about the property as it is and considers whether it can be allocated to someone suitable who is waiting for a property.

John Swinney: There are two different issues there. One is the point about the ageing population. Older people are increasingly living more independently, and they require housing that is suitable for their needs. That is perfectly easy for RSLs and local authorities to predict, given the availability of data on the development of the population. We can all see the shifts in the balance of the population.

The second issue is whether RSLs and local authorities have adapted properties available at a given moment. My judgment would be that an RSL would think pretty carefully before removing aids and adaptations from a property. Before stripping out a property—only to have to redo it at a later stage—it would look at its housing waiting list to see what housing needs might crystallise. If there is a particular case that Mr McMillan is concerned about, I am sure that the housing ministers will do whatever they can to assist.

The Convener: We will now focus on local government, single outcome agreements and community planning partnerships, which are important.

Siobhan McMahon: The cabinet secretary will be aware that we have taken evidence from a number of people and organisations on the draft budget. On the capacity issues, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has said that

"in relation to giving early intervention and prevention a higher profile—as well as helping us to reduce the budget deficit—from an equalities perspective it will mean that we

will be more likely to be tackling the causes of inequalities rather than the symptoms”.

I am sure that you will agree that that is very worrying and that we should be tackling the symptoms of inequalities. What can we do to address that?

John Swinney: I am not sure that I have the same perspective on the quote as Ms McMahon has. I am interested in tackling the causes of inequality—it is the root of what we are all trying to achieve. None of us wants to see inequality in society, and we have to tackle its symptoms and causes. The point that COSLA may be making is that, if we want to be effective, just treating the symptoms will not make the causes of inequality go away. Unless we tackle the causes of inequality, another generation of folk will just present later on with its symptoms. I have not seen the quote in its full context but on the basis of what has just been read to me I am not sure that I take the same view of it as Ms McMahon.

Siobhan McMahon: It was just the last paragraph of the COSLA submission. Like the cabinet secretary, I would like both the causes and the symptoms to be addressed—we are both on the same page in that regard. The concern is that the quote suggests that COSLA will focus more on the causes than on the symptoms. I would prefer both to be addressed.

John Swinney: I do not know the context of the quote. If the context is local government's willingness to work with the Government on a preventative spending agenda, I understand why COSLA has expressed that view. It is saying that society has a choice between either continuing to treat the symptoms of inequality or taking a step back into the process, saying “Right, let's tackle the causes”, and making early interventions and taking early action to ensure that we do not give rise to a further generation of inequalities. If that is the context, I agree with COSLA.

The challenge that the Government and local authorities face just now is that, if we want to move to a system of preventative spend—which everybody thinks is a good idea—we must do that in the context of the challenging financial environment that we face. That means that we must formulate the interventions in such a way that they have the maximum impact in delivering the best outcome.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. Are there any other questions on this area?

John Finnie: I reassure the cabinet secretary that I, too, read that quote as a ringing endorsement of his position on preventative spend.

We talk about assessments all the time. How can we make them meaningful to the constituents whom we deal with, who may well see them as just academic documents?

John Swinney: We make them meaningful by making sure that the individual experiences not the full weight of the equalities impact assessment, but the delivery of services that meet their needs and address their circumstances, leading to the delivery of better outcomes for that individual. For me, the ultimate test of all this work is whether it delivers a better outcome for the individuals who require a better outcome. That is how we make it more meaningful.

Siobhan McMahon: I think that the cabinet secretary answered this question a few themes ago, but what guidance does the draft budget give local authorities in relation to the obligation to maintain and support ethnic and cultural minority organisations?

John Swinney: Local authorities are independent corporate bodies but they have obligations around the equality duties and are required to undertake equality impact assessments for their own purposes and for approaches within the organisations. That work encompasses their obligation to ensure that any implications for individuals from ethnic minorities are properly taken into account.

The Convener: In the committee's view, incorporating equality measurements within national indicators and targets within SOAs will help with accountability and reporting from local government to central Government, which, in a time of tightening finances, is very important.

John Swinney: One of the themes of the Government's public sector reform agenda that I set out to Parliament in September was further development of the performance monitoring culture in Scotland, to ensure that we not only collect a lot of data but use it to drive improvements in performance. That will be a feature of what we look at as we develop the reporting and monitoring structures that are implicit in single outcome agreements. We are working with local authorities and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers on that.

15:30

The Convener: Can you shed any light on the relationship between SOAs and community planning partnerships in relation to reporting mechanisms?

John Swinney: With regard to the relationship between SOAs and community planning partnerships, our objective is to ensure that

community planning partnerships are truly representative of all the different public sector players at local level. That is what they are there for—they are there to bring together the thinking, the perspective and the planning of different public sector players in local communities, in partnership with the third sector. That process gives rise to the single outcome agreement, which essentially gathers together all the aspirations within an area. It should be the forum in which we can judge the effectiveness of performance on a number of different issues.

The Convener: Stuart McMillan will open up on the important area of mainstreaming. As the cabinet secretary will know, as part of our rolling programme over the next five years, we have been looking at—not in any way exclusively—race, religion and belief. In that context, we have taken quite a lot of evidence on the importance of taking forward mainstreaming.

Stuart McMillan: The committee has heard evidence that there seems to be some confusion about what mainstreaming means. Can you provide further guidance on what the Scottish Government means by the term? Will you ensure that there will be some support for and monitoring of public sector mainstreaming equality processes to ensure that we have a measurement for progress and that high-quality equality impact assessments are carried out as part of decision-making processes?

John Swinney: Mainstreaming equality considerations are best dealt with by reference to the duties that are placed on public sector bodies. That is the best way of ensuring that we mainstream equality. It should be made part and parcel of the on-going priorities of public sector players that they fulfil their statutory obligations and duties in relation to equality considerations and that, as a consequence, they can properly discharge their equalities responsibilities.

Stuart McMillan: Will the Government be providing any further information on that?

John Swinney: In such areas, the Government tends to work closely with the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the advice of which we would take on the provision of guidance on mainstreaming. We are working with the EHRC and the Improvement Service on designing a strengthened local outcomes framework that would enable us to make judgments on many of these issues.

The Convener: Members have no further points to raise on EqlAs, so we will move on.

John Finnie: There has been a lot of speculation about the implications of the Welfare Reform Bill. If changes take place midstream, could anything be factored into your budgetary

considerations to offset some of the excesses that are likely to be the outcome of that process?

John Swinney: This takes us into quite difficult territory. I would be exaggerating if I were to say that our dialogue and discussions with the UK Government on the Welfare Reform Bill's precise implications and on the willingness to understand that specific implications might have a major impact on the provision of public services in Scotland were at an advanced or indeed the development stage. We are profoundly concerned about where we are. We might agree with some of the UK Government's welfare reform agenda, but we do not agree with an awful lot of it and it will have implications for devolved public services and the financial commitments that we will be able to make. As the UK Government does not seem willing to understand that important point, I certainly fear that the burden on devolved public services in Scotland will grow as a consequence of its proposals.

Dennis Robertson: I am sure that the Scottish Government and most people in the Scottish Parliament are gravely concerned about the coalition Government's moves on welfare reform. Is there anything that we can do to reassure those with specific needs—for example, people with disabilities or dementia or in need of additional support—who live in properties deemed to be larger than they require that no action will be taken against them, that they will not be penalised and that they will be able to stay in their homes?

John Swinney: Although nothing from the Scottish Government will affect those individuals, the UK Government is pursuing an agenda that might have negative consequences for them. It is difficult for me to answer that question and provide that reassurance when it is the UK Government that is causing such difficulties and potential distress.

Dennis Robertson: I fully appreciate that, cabinet secretary. Obviously our main aim of preventative spending will be absolutely significant to the mental health and wellbeing of the most vulnerable in our society. However, I am greatly concerned for those with identified needs and additional requirements—who might, for example, require people to stop over—and wonder whether we might be able to make representations for an exemption on their behalf.

John Swinney: The Scottish Government is certainly making very strong representations to the UK Government on the implications of the Welfare Reform Bill. Indeed, we have put those points very firmly to the UK Government. The Deputy First Minister met the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in September; I, too, have met him, and both of us have made these points firmly to the UK Government.

The Convener: I believe that Siobhan McMahon wishes to ask a question about our predecessor committee's comments on the 2011-12 budget.

Siobhan McMahon: The previous Equal Opportunities Committee stated that it would have been helpful to have specific examples of how the commitment to equalities integrated with the economic strategy. What progress has been made in that respect in this draft budget?

John Swinney: If the opportunities for all programme, which I mentioned earlier, is to live up to its title, it has to create opportunities for all and ensure that individuals are able to fulfil their potential within the training and learning opportunities that are available.

The Government's action to protect employment in the public sector as much as we possibly can is an example of how we are acting to fulfil our equalities obligations in the economic strategy. Creating economic opportunity for our citizens lies at the heart of the economic strategy. That strikes me as a clear illustration of how the Government's strategy reflects that priority.

The Convener: We are drawing to a close, but if the cabinet secretary made the time to bear with us for one or two more questions, we would appreciate it.

John Swinney: Certainly.

The Convener: Thank you.

Can EqlAs be improved to ensure that equalities are truly considered in all decision-making processes, particularly in relation to mainstreaming, in setting Government and other public sector budgets?

John Swinney: I stress that the process of constructing equality impact assessments is an active part of the budget process. I saw the formulation of the equality impact assessment several times as the budget was formulated. The final equality impact assessment can be done only on the final proposition but, as the document emerged, my colleagues in portfolios worked on the equalities dimension and I looked at it strategically, as is my duty, to determine whether we were satisfying our obligations. I assure the committee that that is an active part of the process. Ministers assessed the issues as decisions were taken, and the final document was signed off.

I return to a point that I made in my opening statement. If the budget document changed, I would of course revisit the equalities assessment to ensure that it represented what was relevant.

The Convener: I will ask about EBAG's scrutiny of the budget. The issue that I raise might be for

next year. The concern has been drawn to the committee's attention that the group does not appear to include representation from race, religion, disability, age or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups. Will you comment on that? Having such contributions early is invaluable, as they might be lost in the formulation stages.

John Swinney: EBAG is a valuable part of the budget process. I met EBAG in August. EBAG is not a representative group—it is not designed to have a representative nature. It is there to challenge me, to be frank, and it does that pretty well, to be honest. It challenges me from an equalities perspective, and I am not sure whether that requires to be done from a representative equalities perspective—if I can use that terminology—because I feel pretty acutely the challenge process in how I go about things.

I have established a much more active dialogue between EBAG and the office of the chief economic adviser, which provides my principal advisers on economic issues. I say with no disrespect to the economists who advise me that I have done that deliberately to ensure that the equalities perspective is woven into the quality and nature of the advice that I receive. That has been good. The economist team has benefited from being put closer to EBAG's work. I am certainly willing for that to be looked at afresh from other perspectives, but I assure the committee that I feel no lack of challenge to what I do from what EBAG puts in front of me and says to me.

15:45

The Convener: Thank you for that. If there are no other issues that members would like to raise with the cabinet secretary at this stage, we will move on to closing discussions about the equalities statement.

Cabinet secretary, I am reassured to know that the equalities statement is a living document that is moving forward in parallel with the budget. What action has been taken to address gaps in the data and evidence in relation to the budget decision? Are there any gaps that might remain outstanding in relation to equalities? What action is planned to tackle them? It might not be possible to answer that at this moment.

John Swinney: I pass that back to the committee. I hope that I have given the committee the sense that Government takes the decision-making process very seriously. There is a lot of challenge around the process and I am ultimately strategically challenged by organisations such as EBAG and by my testing of whether we have fulfilled the duty. I offer that to the committee and to the Parliament as our attempt to fulfil our duty. I suppose that I am saying that it is up to the

committee to say what it thinks. If the process can be strengthened, it will be.

I have been round the houses with these questions during the past four years and they are always about improvements to the data. Some of that is difficult. Getting better data about some of the ethnic and minority issues would mean changing many of our data collection practices that are based on the collection of sample data. It would not quite mean moving to the degree of census data, but we would be getting much more into such quantitative analysis than we are ordinarily able to do. I think that there will still be weaknesses in the data, but I invite the committee to reflect back to us whether the assessment meets the committee's expectations or what it thinks is appropriate at this time. If there are ways in which the Government can enhance the process, I would be more than happy to take it forward. That could be done in a number of ways. It could be done through a committee report or in a workshop session at which we discuss the issues with my officials outside the glare of formal scrutiny and kick around some of the questions. I am open to that possibility.

The Convener: Thank you cabinet secretary. The committee would welcome that. It would help to move the discussion forward this year and in the future.

As there are no further questions from members, cabinet secretary, do you have anything to add at the end of what has been, for us, a helpful session? I hope that it has been useful in focusing your brief in relation to equalities. You have shown a strong commitment to equalities today, and I thank you for that.

John Swinney: I view these questions as iterative. I would not for a moment say that what I have said must be the last word on our approach to equalities. If the committee can suggest ways in which the process can be strengthened, the Government is ready to take them forward.

The Convener: Thank you. I also thank Nuala Gormley and Yvonne Strachan for coming along.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

15:50

The Convener: The next item is to decide whether the draft report on the spending review 2011 and the draft budget 2012-13 should be considered in private at future meetings, in line with usual practice. Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you. The next meeting is on Tuesday 8 November.

Meeting closed at 15:50.

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