

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 7 September 1999
(Morning)

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 7 September 1999

	Col.
SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS	13
METHODS OF WORKING AND LEGISLATIVE PROGRAMME	16
WORK PROGRAMME	18
MINISTERS	25
EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND OTHER CORRESPONDENCE	27

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE **2nd Meeting**

CONVENER :

*Kate MacLean (Dundee West) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS :

*Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
*Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
*Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
*Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
*Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
*Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)
*Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP)
*Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

*attended

COMMITTEE CLERK:

Martin Verity

ASSISTANT CLERK:

Rodger Evans

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 7 September 1999

(Morning)

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

The Convener (Kate MacLean): Welcome to the second meeting of the Equal Opportunities Committee. The committee has been busy during the recess and has been briefed by many organisations. A paper on the briefings is on the agenda for today.

Schedule of Meetings

The Convener: Items 1 and 2 of the agenda are deferred to a later meeting and we will start with item 3, which deals with the committee's schedule of meetings. Are there any questions about the report that was circulated regarding the schedule?

Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Initially, there was an understanding that the committee would meet weekly. A number of members blocked off spaces in their diaries because of that. On what basis and on whose decision was the schedule changed to have us meet fortnightly?

The papers that were presented to us this morning show the amount of work that the committee has to carry out—a lot of work is detailed in the paper on the schedule of meetings, for example. The organisations that briefed us during the recess said that they believed that this committee would be one of the busiest. It is strange, then, that we should meet fortnightly. I would like to open up the issue to discussion.

The Convener: How often the committee meets is up to the committee. My understanding is that we did not come to a firm decision on the schedule of meetings because it was difficult to make that decision until we understood how we would operate. We decided that we would have fortnightly meetings but would allow ourselves the flexibility to meet weekly if necessary. The next item on the agenda is methods of working, which will allow us to discuss whether we want meetings every week or informal meetings in Edinburgh. I am interested to hear other people's views.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I propose that we take items 3 and 4 together. It does not make much sense to discuss the schedule of meetings without discussing the methods of working. There is a problem with our schedule of formal committee meetings: I see a

four-week gap between 16 November and 14 December. I understand the reason for that but, whatever we decide in the broader discussion in a moment, we have to slot in at least one meeting in that period.

The Convener: That is an anomaly that has come up in the programme.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I think that we need to be flexible. We have a huge amount of work and there is high expectation about what the committee can do. We are in uncharted waters and it would be a good idea to block off spaces in our diaries as time that we will devote to the Equal Opportunities Committee.

My concern about formalising our arrangements is that, inevitably, the work would expand into that time—we would meet weekly and might not be able to do the kinds of things that we have spoken about, such as meeting organisations and visiting places. If we discover that we are being overcome with work and cannot examine the work of the other committees as we discussed, we can at any stage review our schedule and methods. I would like to have time in which we can meet organisations.

Time is tight for committees generally. We are unable to meet on 30 November, as we had planned, and we should discuss what we will do about that. At a later point, we should examine how effective we have been with the time that we have been given and amend our schedule accordingly. I would not like to be told at the end of November that we can meet only fortnightly.

The Convener: That ties in with my thoughts about the committee. We have two roles: to consider the Parliament's legislation; and to be pro-active in examining issues that have been raised by the groups that briefed us during the recess. I hoped that we could have formal meetings every fortnight and, every other week, split the committee into smaller groups that would consider and report back on specific areas of our remit and include people from the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Commission for Racial Equality, Disability Scotland and other specialists. That would mean that we were not driven only by the legislative programme and could diversify into other areas. I was going to introduce that as a topic for discussion when we turned to methods of working.

Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): I agree—your comments pre-empted what I was going to say. The key word is flexibility. To meet formally every week might not be the best way of dealing with some of the issues in our wide remit. We have to look at different ways of working and they should not be set in stone. Meeting weekly would serve little purpose if

we were to become bogged down and unable to involve other people in our discussions. Equally, if working in small, informal committees becomes undesirable, we would have to review that method.

If we set out our working methods from the outset and are inflexible about them, we will create problems for ourselves. We have to overcome that and allow ourselves a chance to bed in. We must try different ways of working; they may be unsuccessful, but they have to be given a chance.

Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I understand your point about having informal meetings in between the formal ones, Kate. As Michael and Johann said, we should establish that as our working method at this stage but set a date on which formally to review it. It would be helpful to assess whether the arrangement is working in three or four month's time, rather than simply to leave it open-ended.

The Convener: We should do that. Is six months a reasonable period, or is that not long enough?

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): It would be sensible to review our arrangements before December, which is when the next dates will be set.

The Convener: That sounds sensible.

We will come to our work programme later, but it would be helpful if members would tell the clerk at some point today what specific issues they are interested in for the sub-committees.

Malcolm Chisholm: I do not know whether this will be addressed later, convener—you can tell me to shut up if it will be—but I would like to know whether you mean that we should tell the clerk about the general area that we would like to cover or an aspect of that area that we would like to focus on?

The Convener: It would be useful at first to set up a group to deal with each of the main areas that we are going to cover—we might have four groups dealing with four areas—and then to specialise within those areas.

Shona Robison: It might be more logical to consider sub-committees when we deal with the work programme. Once we see what the work programme will be, we will know what sub-committees we will have to set up in order to take the work of the committee forward. According to the informal briefing paper, if we set up ad hoc sub-committees around all the areas that we have examined so far, we will have five or six of them. That might not be the best use of our time.

The Convener: I will ask the clerk about Malcolm's point about there being a four-week period with no meetings. Martin, would it be

possible to sort that out?

10:15

Martin Verity (Committee Clerk): There is the October break and the St Andrew's day holiday, which falls on a day on which the committee would have otherwise met. There are some difficulties if the committee wants to arrange another meeting in that period, because members of this committee are also members of other committees and we have to avoid clashes. Possible dates would be on Wednesday afternoons or on Tuesday afternoons—possibly Tuesday 23 November or Tuesday 7 December.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): That is too late; the four-week gap is between the beginning of October and the beginning of November.

Martin Verity: There are two gaps—the October break and the one that covers St Andrew's day on 30 November.

The Convener: I take it that everybody is agreed that we should try to fit in another meeting. I suggest that the clerk and I try to find a date in the committee timetable.

Johann Lamont: It would be logical to meet on 23 November, which would bring the meeting forward a week. Committee members have blocked off that time anyway.

The Convener: Yes, it would.

Methods of Working and Legislative Programme

The Convener: Does anyone have any questions or comments on the paper on item 4, which is on methods of working?

Johann Lamont: Will all legislation be brought to the attention of the committee or do we have actively to seek it out?

Martin Verity: No legislation will come before the committee automatically. The committee might want to discuss how it will identify the legislation that it is interested in.

The Convener: Members have a copy of the legislative programme of the Parliament.

Martin Verity: As far as we know it.

The Convener: It is intended that the equality unit will, when it is set up, look at the equal opportunities implications of legislation. We should decide on areas that we want to look at as well and on the organisations that we want to engage in consultation about legislation.

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): As some of the contributors to the informal briefing

sessions suggested, there is a danger that, at first sight, some legislation does not seem to have equal opportunities implications; it is only during implementation that it is discovered to have considerable disadvantages for certain sectors of society. We should not assume that some legislation raises no equality issues. If we are keen to mainstream equality, we ought to be in a position to have sight of almost all legislation coming before the Parliament.

The Convener: The issue is how we manage that. I suspect that we will be quite dependent on other organisations to help us to scrutinise legislation, although of course we cannot abdicate responsibility.

Malcolm Chisholm: I agree. All legislation requires a policy memorandum setting out any effects on equal opportunities, and we should be involved in that. One way of doing that is to look at bills as early as possible. We should be involved at the pre-legislative stage, which has begun for the education bill—that should be the first bill that we look at between now and October. We should look at all the others, but not as urgently.

Shona Robison: I think that it is wrong that there is no requirement for legislation to come to this committee as a matter of course. I assume that there would never be an objection to legislation coming to this committee when we request it, but we should formalise a procedure. That has to be put in tablets of stone; we should not leave it to chance.

Michael Matheson: Malcolm mentioned the policy memorandum attached to a bill. The first bill is the emergency legislation and there is a mention of equal opportunities, although it is limited. We need to have a proper mechanism and some type of proofing system. A workable mechanism could be developed in consultation with organisations such as the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality. My concern is that we could start to look at legislation without having a template of what we want to address, which would mean that we do not have continuity in our consideration from one bill to the next. Until we have a proper mechanism, it will be difficult to consider each bill properly.

The Convener: The equality unit, when it is set up, is meant to equality proof all legislation. It is up to us to decide whether we consider all legislation. I do not think that we have to ask anybody else to decide what comes before the committee. When we talk about invitations I intend to suggest that we invite the equality unit to a future meeting to discuss its role and how it relates to this committee.

Michael Matheson: We should put on the agenda the early establishment of a clear template

for proofing bills. We must have some continuity, and a mechanism would achieve that.

The Convener: As long as it is not too restrictive—there must be flexibility.

Michael Matheson: That would be an issue when we decide on a mechanism.

Johann Lamont: I suggest that all legislation should be put on the agenda so that we could decide whether there are relevant issues. I do not know how the committees are publicised to the wider public, but presumably those who know how to use the web can find out what is on our agenda. That would at least flag up to interested organisations the fact that we intend to consider particular legislation so that they could make us aware of their concerns before we looked at it. We do not have a monopoly of wisdom. If we were in the habit of having legislation come here, people who had an interest in that legislation would ensure that we were appropriately briefed.

Some legislation self-evidently will not have issues for us but it can be surprising where issues arise. On that point, I suspect that it will not be possible for the committee to look at or have influence on the emergency legislation that is going through Parliament. However, it has been said that there will be an early review; we should say that, at that stage, we will consider whether the legislation has equal opportunities implications or whether it particularly affects women, for example.

Malcolm Chisholm: We must look at all legislation but, although this might complicate things and be difficult to manage, we must in the long run get involved at as early a stage as possible—at green and white paper stages. We have had a lot of submissions on the green paper on housing, because it does not address racial equality issues. If we can get involved at the green paper stage, the work should be done before we get the actual legislation.

The Convener: We should bring to our next meeting a method of getting involved from the start—perhaps we could have a small paper on that. Johann spoke about engaging different groups. We are still putting together a list of organisations to write to. In the letter that we send, we can say how those organisations can have access to information and contact the committee with comments on specific legislation, which would then be brought to the committee for us to look at.

Work Programme

The Convener: We have had briefings in the summer and the legislative programme obviously forms part of our work programme. Does anybody have any questions on the paper or anything to

add?

Mr McMahon: One item that has been missed in the report of the Scottish Trades Union Congress briefing is sectarianism and religious discrimination, although I do not think that the STUC was the only organisation to mention it. It would be remiss of this committee not to have identified that as something that we should be alert to.

Michael Matheson: It is included under the CRE's briefing. I agree that it is something that we have to look at.

Irene McGugan: Are we planning to prioritise our work programme or are we going to try to distribute the spread of work across the committee so that we encompass all the areas quickly?

The Convener: That is up to the committee to decide.

Malcolm Chisholm: The public assumes that we will at least do work in the four main areas mentioned here: gender, race, disability and sexual orientation. As I am sure the convener will say when we come to the item on invitations, we need to have a briefing from gay and lesbian groups. If—at least to begin with—we have four groups, those groups should have general discussions but should also focus on a particular issue. The group looking at racial equality would want to look at the Macpherson report, for example, and other issues would follow from that. I think that we are all slightly daunted by the size of our agenda, so we should have groups to deal with each of the areas and those groups could start by focusing on a particular issue within its area.

10:30

I wish to raise the matter of domestic violence, partly because of last week's debate on the subject, which a journalist called inspiring. This committee ought to take hold of the domestic violence agenda because, although the Justice and Home Affairs Committee is proposing that the law on interdicts be amended, it has a limited remit on that issue. The minister with responsibility for the strategy to tackle violence against women is the equality minister Jackie Baillie. Because the debate was inspiring—it was probably the best one that this Parliament has had since 6 May—we gained a great deal of momentum and we should build on that. The group examining gender issues should carry that agenda forward, because there is a concern that we do not have an holistic strategy to address all aspects in a broad way. I would like the gender group to address that agenda and ensure that we make quick progress, which is clearly what the Parliament wanted last Thursday.

The Convener: It was in my mind after last Thursday that one of the sub-groups of this committee could address domestic violence. Are there any other comments?

Shona Robison: The issues of data collection and monitoring span all groups and may be addressed by the whole committee. Those issues were raised in most of the briefings that we had. We may be able to make progress on those matters, which could quickly raise issues that we do not yet know about.

The point was well made that, because the data collection and monitoring procedures are in many respects flawed, we do not have a lot of the information that we require to make decisions about what we are going to do. Remedying that should be an early priority, especially because the problem spans all the groups that we are talking about. That would prevent the committee from being perceived as being more interested in one area than it is in another, which would be a good start.

Johann Lamont: I agree that we must address that issue because concerns about it were raised across the board. An issue relating to information gathering concerns the decision to exclude from the census in Scotland a question on religion, although a question will be asked on it elsewhere in the United Kingdom. I would be interested in exploring that issue and finding out where our locus would be. From representations that I have had, I know that a number of religious groups—especially from the black and ethnic minority groups—feel strongly that they want the question to be asked.

My understanding is that it was claimed that the business case for including the question was not strong enough. However, the point was made to me that the information was not being asked for because organisations were not aware of, or sensitive to, the fact that they should be identifying the specific needs of the ethnic minority community in relation to services. Because they are not asking the questions, we do not have the information that would give us a much sharper focus on where the need is.

I note that later in this meeting we are to consider whether we should bring—that sounds too threatening; I should say “invite”—ministers to this committee. I hope that we pursue this matter with them, because I am sure that it has been raised with other MSPs. A lot of organisations feel strongly about the issue; we could intervene, but we need to know at which stage we can have an influence.

The Convener: We could decide to invite an appropriate minister and ask questions on that matter.

Would a sub-group like to examine data collection, or should the whole committee do it? The committee can ask the Executive to produce proposals on how there could be more consistency in data collection. That may be preferable to a sub-group reporting to the committee on how bad the situation is because, as Shona said, we have already heard from every group that we met during the recess that the situation is bad.

Malcolm Chisholm: I support what Shona said. It would be good if the whole committee dealt with this matter. Many people could be questioned; it is not difficult for those involved to collect the data, but the reality is that they do not do it.

There are many relevant people, particularly within the Scottish Executive, whose remit is data collection. It applies to many areas of our work, and we need to get moving on it. It cannot be difficult to make progress—it is a matter of demanding answers and creating momentum. We do not need much research on this issue: we just need to put pressure on people.

The Convener: We should make a request.

Does anyone else have any comments on other areas that we should address?

Michael Matheson: The committee should address religious bigotry, which Michael McMahon mentioned; we should incorporate it into our programme. I am not sure whether we should establish a sub-committee on it, but there is an expectation that this committee will address it and I support that view. I am open to ideas on the way in which we can make progress.

The Convener: With regard to race, are there other areas that the committee should address? Malcolm suggested that we consider the Macpherson report. That would be the most sensible matter for a sub-group to examine. The report raised many issues that were not covered in the Executive's response and which this committee might want to flag up.

Shona Robison: May I remind members that the deadline for responses to the action plan is 30 September. I would have thought it appropriate for this committee to input into the process before the deadline. The time scale is tight, but we should make every effort to submit our view.

The Convener: We would need to set up a sub-group now to address the subject. I am happy to do that.

Irene McGugan: Another area that we could make quick progress on, because we already hold powers to do something about it, is ensuring that all public bodies fulfil their equal opportunities duties—it was distressing to hear at our briefings that they do not always do so. We can take a lead

on that and ensure that all bodies that are accountable to us adhere to good practice and good equal opportunities principles.

Linked to that issue is the establishment of support processes to ensure that minority groups participate appropriately in public bodies. The issue is wider than ethnic minority participation; it relates to minority participation in general. Women are often under-represented on public bodies, as are the disabled. Our concern is minority interests in general. We can move quickly on that and be seen to be effective.

The Convener: Some of the organisations referred to the lack of equality in appointments. The committee may want to raise that matter with the appropriate minister and ask what steps, if any, have been taken to ensure that fairer appointments are made to public bodies.

Michael Matheson: At the informal meeting we discussed the issue of co-opting on to committees. There was a broad view that co-opting to this committee, and possibly to others, will be required. Can we fit into our work programme a briefing on that? How do we make progress on co-opting members, and what action would be required? I know that you were informed that the Scotland Act 1998 may need to be amended before members can be co-opted. If that is the case, could we have the appropriate input from civil servants as to how we achieve that?

The Convener: That would be possible. A report is being prepared for the Procedures Committee, because the problem was raised at the conveners liaison committee. There should be no problem in bringing that report to this committee. I am concerned about that issue, but sub-groups are allowed to have advisers. The groups will be informal and will not involve the official report or the clerks; they will go out and gather information. Until we get things sorted out, I see no problem with inviting on to the sub-groups anyone that we feel would be useful as an adviser. It is important that we have outside input from the start. We cannot afford to wait for months while the problem is sorted out.

Mr McMahon: On the Macpherson report, the final date for submissions is 30 September and our next formal committee meeting is 21 September, which means that we have only next week in the interim. As you suggested, a small group could meet then. Could we identify four or five people who could spend the next week examining and researching the report? We could meet next Wednesday to discuss how to consider the report and use the meeting on 21 September to decide how the full committee should respond to it.

The Convener: I suggest that we ask the CRE

whether it can release someone to work with that sub-group.

Johann Lamont: Would it be possible to invite the Minister for Justice to the 21 September meeting? Even if the sub-group could not do a huge amount of work, it would be helpful to have the opportunity to question the minister about the decisions that have been made and about what kinds of forums it has been proposed be set up.

Macpherson deals with big issues. It might be useful if a sub-group began to address them and then have a discussion in this committee. We could produce our conclusions at the end of that meeting.

The Convener: I am happy to have the minister attend, subject to his diary commitments. With regard to our response to the Macpherson report, I suspect that a lot of work has already been done by the CRE—we could tap into that.

Michael Matheson: At the previous formal meeting, you suggested inviting along the two ministers who are chairing the two working groups on specific aspects of racial discrimination and equal opportunities. We could discuss how our committee can work with them, how we can ensure clear lines of communications and how we establish what their remit is and the role that our committee will play. If we have the Minister for Justice here to discuss the Macpherson report and the action plan, it may be worthwhile pursuing those other matters at the same time.

The Convener: It has been pointed out to me that the Cabinet meets on Tuesday mornings. We will try to get the appropriate ministers to come along anyway.

Michael Matheson: What do they view as more important?

The Convener: Could we have the names of those who wish to be on the sub-group? I know that everyone is interested, but four or five people would be enough.

I note that Michael McMahon, Shona Robison, Elaine Smith and Nora Radcliffe have volunteered.

10:45

The Convener: Are members happy with that arrangement? Does anyone feel left out?

Malcolm Chisholm: Are we talking about setting up four groups today? I would like to join this sub-group, but there are other things that I want to do as well.

The Convener: Because of the urgency of this issue and the deadline for submissions, I think that we will establish only this one today—I do not think that we need to establish the other sub-

groups now.

Malcolm Chisholm: So the others will come later?

The Convener: Members should indicate which areas they are interested in.

Malcolm Chisholm: I would like to volunteer for this sub-group.

The Convener: We will add Malcolm Chisholm's name to the list as well.

Could members nominate one of the five members of the sub-group as a reporter who would officially report back, or is there a volunteer? Michael McMahon is volunteering. Are members happy with that? Good.

Shona Robison: Will the clerks facilitate the sub-group's meeting? Will we get our diaries out at the end of this meeting?

Martin Verity: We will do as much as we can to help to organise the meeting, but it will depend on the clashes that the five members have with other groups.

The Convener: The clerks will not attend all the meetings, as there might be quite a few of them over the next couple of weeks.

Malcolm Chisholm: In terms of the timetable, are we assuming that the sub-groups will meet every other Tuesday morning, although they can meet at other times as well?

The Convener: Meeting every other Tuesday morning would be the minimum.

Malcolm Chisholm: So this sub-group will meet next Tuesday morning, although it might need to meet at other times?

The Convener: Yes.

Michael Matheson: Is it a one-off group established purely to respond to the Macpherson action plan?

The Convener: Yes.

Mr McMahon: That was the suggestion, as it would give us a week to go through the papers. We could then meet next week to discuss our proposals and to formalise a paper to bring to the full committee the following week.

The Convener: On the work programme, disability has not yet been mentioned. Do members want to raise specific points on which we should establish a sub-group? So far, we have highlighted domestic violence, the Macpherson report, data collection—which will be a matter for the full committee—and religious bigotry.

Malcolm Chisholm: When I mentioned domestic violence, my concern was that our

strategy should be broad and should deal with violence against women, although domestic violence is part of that. It is important that we devise a holistic strategy—that is what a lot of people are telling us.

Michael Matheson: On disability, I got the impression from Disability Scotland's presentation that a major concern was consultation and involvement in policy planning. The organisation was concerned about its input on local authority provision, which affects disabled people markedly. Perhaps we should examine the involvement of service users in the consultation process, in order to see whether the process is working effectively. I would add that to the agenda.

The Convener: Are you referring specifically to consultation with local government?

Michael Matheson: One of the issues that I raised at the briefing with Disability Scotland was community care planning, although the organisation felt that there was a wider issue of consultation in a number of areas. It may be that the issue that we want to examine—and that we could address with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities—is whether disabled people are appropriately consulted on the community care planning process or on the on-going delivery of services.

The Convener: Last week, I met representatives of COSLA who hope to brief the committee. They have done a lot on that subject and it would be useful if we could work with them on it.

We have not covered gay, lesbian and transgender issues. I am aware that we have not had a briefing from any of the relevant organisations, although we have spoken to the STUC and the Equal Opportunities Commission. I hope that we will be able to arrange a briefing for the earliest possible committee meeting. Are there any issues that members wish to raise, in terms of establishing a sub-group?

Malcolm Chisholm: We should get a briefing as soon as possible; I do not think that we should decide priorities until we have had one.

The Convener: Yes, but it is agreed that we will set up a group once we have had that briefing. Are members happy with the work programme?

Members: Yes.

Ministers

The Convener: I am aware that this committee could send an invitation to every minister, as every minister should—and probably will—come before us at some point to answer questions on equality issues. The suggestion is that we send our first

invitation to Jim Wallace and Jackie Baillie.

Johann Lamont: We have identified that we want to see Jim Wallace at an early point about the Macpherson report, but we also want to see him about the broader issue of how legislation is put together in relation to equal opportunities. It is important to find out from Jackie Baillie—or the appropriate person responsible for equalities—how it is proposed to intervene in other departments. We need to find out what structures have been set up to ensure that an awareness of equalities issues is written into departmental processes at the very earliest stage—as Malcolm said—before legislation comes before committees. We will want to address specifics on policy matters, but the broad process that people who are responsible for equalities are planning to use when looking at other departments is also important.

The Convener: It is agreed that we will invite those two ministers to the earliest meeting, and that we will discuss, as issues come up, which other ministers to invite. It is also agreed that we will arrange a briefing with COSLA, which was keen to come. Given that local government spends 40 or 50 per cent of the Scottish block, it would be useful to get a general briefing from COSLA. The clerk will also invite one or more of the organisations that deal with gay, lesbian and transgender issues to give us the earliest possible briefing, so that we can include those issues in our work programme.

Elaine Smith: Malcolm mentioned education as a priority—perhaps we should invite the Minister for Children and Education sooner rather than later.

Malcolm Chisholm: As you rightly said, Kate, we will be dependent on outside experts for a lot of our work on proofing legislation. Would it be possible to write to the bodies that we have heard from—particularly the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Commission for Racial Equality and Disability Scotland—for their views or responses to the education bill? We could use that as a starting point, as it would be daft to bypass them.

The Convener: Yes, we can do that, but I think that that would be part of Michael Matheson's suggestion that we establish a process whereby the process of writing to organisations and asking for comments is triggered automatically when legislation is introduced.

Michael Matheson: Although this is not an immediate issue, I imagine that, at some point, we will need to consider transport, given that a transport consultation process is on the go just now. Disability Scotland referred to a national concessionary fare scheme—as did the STUC, I

believe—and it may be appropriate to invite the Minister for Transport and the Environment.

Shona Robison: Would it be helpful for members to have an indicative timetable for legislation, so that we can take on board Malcolm's point about early intervention? That would highlight—provisionally—particular pieces of legislation at particular meetings of this committee. I am not clear in my own mind when each piece of legislation is likely to be introduced. While dates might not be finalised, they will probably be indicative, and it would be helpful for us to timetable that.

The Convener: The clerk will do that.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I wish to endorse Michael Matheson's comments on transport. The main worry for Disability Scotland seemed to be rail transport. I wonder whether we could get some information about the difficulties that people face at stations; that would enable us to tackle those difficulties.

The Convener: I suspect that that work has already been done. We can try to obtain the information and circulate it to members.

Johann Lamont: Transport affects various groups, and there is a women's dimension to it, particularly relating to women's safety and the fact that women are more likely than men to use public transport. We should consider the issue from that perspective, too.

External Organisations and Other Correspondence

The Convener: I intend to circulate to all meetings—as I have done today—a list of organisations that have been in touch to ask whether they can give us briefings or provide us with information. We have already had informal presentations from some of these organisations, and we will organise further, formal presentations. Do members have any comments or requests?

Johann Lamont: Is this a list of organisations that have provided information or ones that are offering to provide information? Would information provided be circulated to members, or would we need to opt into that?

Martin Verity: The clerks receive correspondence during the period between committee meetings, and we are not entirely sure of the best way of handling that correspondence. We could keep members notified of every item of correspondence that we receive; members would be welcome to contact us if they want to see a particular item. Alternatively, we could list correspondence under each agenda item for each committee meeting, although that might load the

committee down. It is for the committee to determine how it would like the clerks to handle correspondence.

The Convener: Most of the organisations that have sent information have already sent it to members of the committee as well. Some organisations offer briefings. I think that it would be sufficient for us to be notified of the correspondence that has been received and for members to get in touch with the clerks if they wish to see a particular item. That would be better than having everything sent out, which would become unwieldy. Are members happy with that?

Members: Yes.

The Convener: That concludes the business of the committee—

Malcolm Chisholm: Can I confirm that we will at some point have a briefing from COSLA and the Equality Network together? When will that take place?

The Convener: I do not know—as soon as we can organise it, which will depend on people's diary commitments. It may not be a joint briefing. The Equality Network briefing will take place as soon as we can set it up. We will probably have that briefing before the one from COSLA. The Scottish Executive is to appoint a head of the equality unit and I would like that person to brief us on how we could work together. We will leave it to Martin to organise those briefings as soon as possible.

Nora Radcliffe: We talked about devising a template for examining legislation. How will that happen? Do we have to make suggestions or will we get a paper that we can comment on? Will we be given a starting point, or do we provide that?

The Convener: From listening to today's discussion, I think that Martin will provide something.

Martin Verity: The clerks can advise the committee which consultation papers, green papers, white papers and bills are coming through the system only as we are made aware of them.

Nora Radcliffe: My point echoes Michael's point—we need a checklist to guide us on considering legislation. How do we derive that checklist? It is fine for us to say that we want one, but how do we get it?

The Convener: We will have a paper on that at the next meeting.

Michael Matheson: I am sure that systems are used elsewhere in Europe. It may be worthwhile to compare the systems that are used by other Parliaments, such as the Länder Parliaments.

11:00

The Convener: We will bring something back to the next committee meeting.

Nora Radcliffe: Will there be any papers for the group that is to consider the Macpherson report, or should we supply our own?

The Convener: All committee members should have a copy of the Macpherson report. They should also have a copy of the Executive's response. Comments or papers will have to be provided by other organisations, but Martin will try to help with that as much as possible.

Nora Radcliffe: With providing what exists?

The Convener: Yes.

Elaine Smith: Kate, will you leave it until the next meeting to ask members to indicate an interest in the four working groups that you mentioned?

The Convener: It would be useful if members indicate to Martin, in writing, a couple of areas in which they would be interested. We could then decide at the next meeting what will happen.

Martin Verity: I shall clarify what will happen for the next two or three meetings. Next week, and possibly more often, the Macpherson sub-group will meet. That sub-group should report to the committee at 10 o'clock so that we can call others halfway through the meeting on 21 September—otherwise, the sub-group will be unable to report to the committee. The meeting of 21 September will then be taken up by discussion of the action plan in response to the Macpherson report. Are we aiming to have the other sub-groups up and running by 28 September?

The Convener: Yes. Those sub-groups should be decided by next week.

Shona Robison: I am a bit confused. Could you confirm the sub-groups in which we are being asked to express an interest?

The Convener: Initially, sub-groups were envisaged only in the four main areas. Michael mentioned religious bigotry, but I do not know whether he wanted a sub-group to be set up for that as well.

Michael Matheson: I would, as I think that it is a large area that needs a lot of study. Many organisations need to be contacted for evidence and advice. It would be appropriate for a sub-group to be established on that issue.

The Convener: So what sub-groups have we agreed on?

Martin Verity: Those that I have noted are to deal with race, gender, disability and sexual orientation.

The Convener: And religious bigotry.

Johann Lamont: The four main issues are clear and we have focused on them so far. However, a range of other issues relate to equal opportunities, including religion, religious discrimination and hostility towards religion. That is an area that we could explore, but I am not sure that I want to prioritise it above others. It could be dealt with after the first four areas are established.

Other issues relate to age, the role of carers and people's ability to access services. If we are agreed on the four main areas, we might want to consider subsequent priorities at the next stage. I agree that there are significant issues to raise in relation to religious discrimination, but I would like us to consider those in a subsequent group of priorities.

The Convener: How does the committee feel about that?

Michael Matheson: It is all down to personal perceptions. I know what Johann is saying, but ultimately the decision is one for the committee to make. I see religious bigotry as a priority issue and believe that it should be addressed at an early opportunity. I also believe that the establishment of this Equal Opportunities Committee has led to the expectation that we would seek to address that issue.

When we have established the four key areas, the likelihood is that there will be a continual turnaround of work in those areas. The question then arises whether to include the issue of religious bigotry in one of those areas, so that it would be addressed by one of the sub-groups. I am conscious of the fact that the sub-committees will examine certain issues, and that those issues will continue to expand.

Mr McMahon: There is an element of crossover between religious discrimination and race discrimination. The CRE raised the issue of religious discrimination, as did the STUC when it was dealing with race discrimination. We would not need a separate sub-group on religious discrimination if the sub-group on racial equality considered the issue in conjunction with race.

Michael Matheson: I agree with that, but I would not want us to go ahead with the four sub-groups before we considered whether to have other sub-groups. I would prefer religious discrimination in itself to be the subject for a sub-group.

The Convener: Is that agreed? Committee members should inform Martin as soon as possible which areas they are interested in. That concludes the committee's business. Thank you for your attendance.

Meeting closed at 11:06.

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