

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 12 September 2000
(Morning)

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

18th Meeting 2000, Session 1

CONVENER

*Kate MacLean (Dundee West) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

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)
Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
*Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
*Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)
*Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP)
*Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

*attended

CLERK TEAM LEADER

Lee Bridges

ASSISTANT CLERK

Alison Campbell

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 12 September 2000

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:05*]

The Convener (Kate MacLean): I welcome members to the first Equal Opportunities Committee meeting after the recess.

I have a few apologies to report. Tricia Marwick is attending another committee meeting. Tommy Sheridan is unable to attend most of today's meeting, because of the timetabling of the Executive's cross-party parliamentary working group on diligence, which is at 10 o'clock. Johann Lamont has submitted apologies for family reasons and Marilyn Livingstone has been delayed by the traffic problems. All other committee members are present.

I move that item 2 of the agenda be taken in private. Are members agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

10:04

Meeting continued in private.

10:17

Meeting resumed in public.

Single-sex Schools

The Convener: The next agenda item is single-sex schools. Before Tommy Sheridan, who is now present, joined the meeting, I advised members that while we can discuss that issue, one of the recommendations is to refer it to the reporter on gender issues, Johann Lamont. However, Johann is not able to attend today for family reasons and she asked if our consideration of the matter could be deferred until our next meeting. Tommy Sheridan asked for the item to be included on the agenda, and while I do not mind having a bit of a discussion about it, we should defer consideration of the recommendations until the next meeting.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): I have no problem with that approach. I brought to the committee's attention a number of letters that I received from parents whose children live in the relevant education authority area. It appears that problems with the single-sex school in that area have become more prevalent because of school

closures. When male pupils from those families were able to access local schools, the single-sex status of Notre Dame High School did not appear to be a big problem. However, local schools have closed and the difficulty is that male children from those families have to travel outwith their local area to attend a secondary school. The parents are saying, "Wait a wee minute here. Why is single-sex status allowed at Notre Dame?" The matter has been brought to our attention as a consequence of reductions in education provision.

It is important that the gender reporters group looks into the wider issue, which will allow us to focus on Notre Dame High School. I note that we are being asked to agree that the matter is for the local authority to address. From a legal point of view, I accept that that position is correct. However, from an equal opportunities point of view, if we perceive that an equal opportunities issue is involved, I hope that we would be prepared to raise that issue, regardless of the fact that it is a local authority matter.

The Convener: There are two issues. School placements and closures are local authority matters, but single-sex schools seem to have become an issue because of changes to schools in that local authority area. The other issue concerns single-sex schools and women in education, which may not be a matter for the Equal Opportunities Committee. It is worth discussing those matters when Johann Lamont is present, as they involve the wider issue of gender-specific education. The committee might want to address that wider issue, or it might want to ask the Education, Culture and Sport Committee to address it.

We have been notified that legal action might be taken, in which case the matter would be sub judice, and the Equal Opportunities Committee would not be able to discuss the specific school.

Do members wish to decide about the matter now, or do they wish to hold over the whole item until Johann Lamont is present, as she is integral to the discussion?

Tommy Sheridan: Are you suggesting that the committee might not agree to refer this item to the gender reporters group for further consideration? I hoped that the committee would agree the recommendation to ask the gender reporter and her group to examine the matter in more detail and to report back to the full committee.

The Convener: No. I am suggesting that, if we are to make that decision, we should wait until Johann Lamont is present, so that she can give her views. There is a question whether the Equal Opportunities Committee or the Education, Culture and Sport Committee should consider the specific benefits or disbenefits of gender-specific

education. I do not want the committee to agree to refer the item to the gender reporter without the reporter being here to comment.

Tommy Sheridan: I am sorry, convener; I misunderstood your point. I assumed that you had spoken to Johann Lamont already. If you have not, we should just defer the item—that would be fine.

The Convener: No—I have spoken to Johann Lamont briefly about the issue, and there were matters that she wished to discuss with the committee before she decided one way or the other.

Tommy Sheridan: Let us defer the decision until Johann Lamont is present.

The Convener: Okay. We will put the item on the agenda for the next meeting.

Legislation

The Convener: Before the recess, members expressed concern that we were not always up to date with legislation and consultations that were being produced, and did not always have enough time to give those matters the consideration that we wanted to give them. We have now a list of bills in progress. Are there any comments?

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I mean no disrespect to the bills that are included on that list, but it will have to be updated tomorrow. Our timing is slightly unfortunate in that regard.

The Convener: We have the information that members asked for prior to the recess. Members wanted that information for the first meeting after the recess.

Malcolm Chisholm: I am not saying that some of those bills should not be considered—we should certainly consider the Transport (Scotland) Bill and, doubtless, some others. The next time we meet, the list will be at least as long as it is now, and we should put this item on the agenda again.

I want to put down a marker: I think that we have a problem, given that we did not undertake an inquiry last year, as we must also still do all the many pieces of work that we did last year. Perhaps we should bear that in mind when we timetable our inquiry. Our meetings should not deal only with the inquiry, as we also have all that other work to do.

The Convener: When we consider legislation at our next meeting, we will have to make some decisions about how many times we should meet and how we should divide up the work among committee members. We can explore a variety of options at our next meeting.

Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP): We must look at the Transport (Scotland) Bill, about which Capability Scotland has raised many concerns. We may need to clarify whether any of the subject committees will also be looking at, for example, the disability aspects of the Transport (Scotland) Bill, because we do not want to duplicate effort. Also, we do not want to call in organisations to give evidence if they are being called to other committees, because that is a waste of their time, unless we hold joint meetings. For the next meeting it would be useful to look into the intentions of the subject committees with regard to the bills that we want to look at, so that we have an overall picture.

The Convener: I wrote to the convener of the Transport and the Environment Committee a while ago, asking the committee to consider the equal

opportunities aspects of the Transport (Scotland) Bill. We could try to find out the information that has been asked for and once we know what legislation is coming up next year, I can write again to the subject committee conveners to find out their intentions.

Consultations

The Convener: The next item on the agenda is consultations.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): The consultation on building standards is an obvious area of interest.

The Convener: If we are to start examining some of the consultations, would it be worth appointing reporters or asking the reporters groups to examine different areas? Building standards would come under the disability reporter, but I do not want to commit her to anything today while she is not here. Do members want to consider the matter and get back to Lee Bridges about it? If we need to appoint reporters, we could discuss that at our next meeting.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I do not see any mention of the consultation on the housing bill, unless I am missing it. That finishes on 29 September and the committee may want to input into that.

Malcolm Chisholm: That is one of the things that we will have to watch out for—sometimes documents are not formal consultation documents. For example, the housing document says, “This is not formally a consultation, but we would be interested to hear your views.” We would have to track every document, rather than just those that are formal consultation documents.

The Convener: Do members want the housing consultation to be put on our next agenda?

Malcolm Chisholm: We will probably be out of time to respond formally to the housing consultation. I am sure that we will want to consider housing when the draft bill is published.

The Convener: If we wish to respond, I think that we would be within the time limit if we put the matter on the next agenda.

Malcolm Chisholm: Okay.

The Convener: If members have points that they wish to raise, they should e-mail them to the clerks and we can discuss them. There is just enough time. I am sure that we would still be allowed to respond to the consultation, even if we were a few days late.

Shona Robison: It is difficult to tell from the titles of the consultations whether the committee would have concerns about them, and I do not think that any of us would be prepared to plough our way through the documents to see whether we did. I am not necessarily advocating that Lee Bridges do that either, but perhaps there are ways of getting a steer on whether our attention ought to be drawn to equal opportunities issues. We do not

want to miss anything. For example, there is a consultation on nutrition policy, and there may be something in that that the committee would be concerned about, but we cannot tell from the title.

Lee Bridges (Clerk Team Leader): I have spoken to the Executive equalities unit, which has a similar problem, because it has to equal opportunities proof Executive work. We are trying to work up a joint system so that we can keep each other informed. It will become easier, but as a temporary measure I can do as you suggest.

The Convener: There are Executive summaries of consultation documents, and the Scottish Parliament information centre produces reports. If the consultation is on an area that is of interest to members, there is an onus on members to look at those documents. Clerking does not have the resources to go through documents and summarise everything that is going through Parliament. That means that we will miss things until such time as a better system is in place.

Members should get back to the committee if they feel that it should examine any of the consultations that are listed. I ask members to consider the consultation on the housing bill. If they have any equal opportunities comments, they can e-mail them to Lee Bridges. If there is anything that we feel we need to take on board, we still have time to do so.

Reporters

10:30

The Convener: Item 6 on the agenda is progress reports. Irene McGugan is meeting the Disabled Persons Housing Service to discuss building standards. She has produced a written report, which will be circulated. If anyone has any questions on the report they can ask Irene when she comes to the meeting. Johann Lamont has sent her apologies, so there is no report on gender issues. Does Michael McMahon have anything to report on race issues?

Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Belshill) (Lab): The last thing that we did was the report for the Scottish Homes consultation. We have made a contribution toward that consultation. I was waiting to see how things would fit into place with the inquiry on travelling people before setting up another meeting of the race group, but we should be meeting in the next couple of weeks.

The Convener: Does Nora Radcliffe have anything to report on sexual orientation issues?

Nora Radcliffe: There is nothing new to report. We have met more or less monthly. We considered various pieces of legislation, and made contributions to the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc (Scotland) Bill and the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Bill.

A consultative forum is in the process of being set up to represent the Scottish lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, and it hopes that it will be recognised by the equalities unit as a consultative body. It will be helpful to have an umbrella organisation such as that forum to pull together views from the community.

Legislation is coming up that will be of particular interest to that section of the community, such as the family law bill and the housing bill. The big topic of discussion is registration, or some sort of civil recognition, of same-gender couples.

The group's next meeting has been organised for 27 September in room F1 of Cannonball House at lunchtime, from 12:30 to 2:00. Previously, I have reported back to the committee by e-mailing the minutes of the group's meetings to members. That was seen as secretive, so written minutes will be brought to committee meetings from now on.

The Convener: I forgot to ask, do members have any questions for Michael McMahon? Are there any questions for Nora? No.

Lee Bridges will be contacting reporters to discuss their role in the committee and the kind of support that they will have.

Correspondence

Members indicated agreement.

Meeting closed at 10:35.

The Convener: The final item on the agenda is correspondence, of which members have a list.

Tommy Sheridan: Would it be possible for the letter that you received from Jackie Baillie on the clarification of the equalities unit's role to be circulated? As you are aware, several of us were concerned about, first, the length of time that it was taking to establish that unit, secondly how the unit would be resourced and, thirdly, how we would fit in as the Equal Opportunities Committee once the unit had been formed. I would like to see what Jackie Baillie suggests is the role of the equalities unit.

The Convener: Yes. That is no problem.

When members receive their agendas and the list of correspondence, they are free to phone the clerk prior to the meeting to request copies of any of the listed correspondence, in case they want to raise any point about the correspondence at the meeting.

Malcolm Chisholm: The final two pieces of correspondence on the list are from the Disabled Persons Housing Service and could be relevant to our future work. What were the concerns in those letters?

The Convener: I wrote to ministers about concerns that had arisen from the evidence that the DPHS had given to the committee. Members should contact the clerk if they want copies of the responses. One is still outstanding. I wrote to another minister; I could not remember which one, but I am advised that it was Jim Wallace.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The correspondence from Kirkcaldy Area Abuse Survivors Project has come in from my constituency, but it concerns a national funding issue. I want to make members aware that there will be a cross-party working group meeting on Thursday 14 September at lunch time. I will report back from that meeting, because the funding of such projects is a major issue.

The Convener: As Irene McGugan has not been able to get back to our meeting to report on behalf of the disability reporters group, I will point out that her report mentions the fact that Disability Scotland has gone into administrative insolvency. Everybody will have read about that in the press. On Friday, when I heard about that, I phoned Jackie Baillie about it. I have also spoken at length to Irene McGugan about the matter and she suggests that we write to the minister to ask what action she has taken or is willing to undertake.

I am happy to do that on behalf of the committee and to get a response in writing. Is that agreed?

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