



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Equalities and Human Rights Committee

Thursday 8 December 2016

Session 5



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EQUALITIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE

11th Meeting 2016, Session 5

CONVENER

*Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)

*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

*Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Dr Jane Balmforth (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland)

Carol Baverstock (University of Aberdeen)

Ann Duncan (University of Strathclyde)

Hannah Gray (Thornlie Primary School)

Kai Kerr (Westfield Primary School)

Kirsty Knox (University of the West of Scotland)

Ryan Murray (Westfield Primary School)

Toby Petersen (Westfield Primary School)

Amanda Solyga (Thornlie Primary School)

Sheila Williams (University of Edinburgh)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Claire Menzies

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Equalities and Human Rights Committee

Thursday 8 December 2016

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:17]

Draft Budget Scrutiny 2017-18

The Convener (Christina McKelvie): Good morning and welcome to the 11th meeting in 2016 of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee. I make the usual request that people switch their mobile phones to aeroplane mode or silent.

Item 1 is our draft budget scrutiny, and in today's evidence we will hear from university equalities services and admission services about the issues that are faced by disabled people and people who use British Sign Language who attend Scottish universities. We will have BSL interpretation, so I make the usual appeal to members—mostly to myself—not to speak too fast, so that they can sign properly.

I welcome our panel. Dr Jane Balmforth is a conservatoire counsellor and disability adviser at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland; Carol Baverstock is the head of admissions at the University of Aberdeen; Sheila Williams is the director of the student disability service at the University of Edinburgh; Ann Duncan is the disability services manager at the University of Strathclyde; and Kirsty Knox is the assistant head of recruitment, admissions and participation services at the University of the West of Scotland. We are grateful for your attendance and for any written submissions that you have given us thus far. We will go straight to questions, because we want to hear some of your ideas.

We have received a huge amount of written evidence from people who have either accessed your services as students or been members of staff, so we have a varied view of how people feel. Some of the submissions are very positive and some are not so positive. My first question is about where the challenges arise. Can you give me a bit of insight into where you think the challenges are and what actions your organisations are taking to address them?

We have with us the chairs of the admissions and disability services, and we may direct general questions about the whole of those services to them. However, we are also interested in what is happening in your individual institutions.

Sheila Williams (University of Edinburgh): As you will be aware, the University of Edinburgh is

one of the largest and oldest universities in Scotland, and there are specific challenges to do with our physical estate. We have almost 300 buildings, some of which are listed and some of which are very old. As an institution, we recognise that and we are putting a lot of resource into the estate in the next year and beyond, including bringing in a company to audit all our buildings and provide guides for access and egress. There can be issues if there is a fire evacuation or drill—*[Interruption.]* Sorry—I have got the cold. If you will bear with me, I will try not to splutter too much.

For the University of Edinburgh and throughout the sector, one issue is the mainstreaming and inclusion agenda. We have looked at it via our accessible and inclusive learning policy, which we introduced more than three years ago. The intention behind the policy was to mainstream support that was previously recommended only for disabled students and should now be in place for all students. I say “should be” because it is still a work in progress and we have a lot of work to do in our institution to convince colleagues to provide that support.

I would be lying if I said that it is not a constant challenge to get the adjustments for individual students that the University of Edinburgh's student disability service recommends we need to make in the schools. As I said, it is a large institution with 22 separate schools that have different practices and approaches, and we need to look at that. The university is currently undertaking a major disability review of all those issues; it will report in February.

However, at least the University of Edinburgh has recognised that the challenges exist, and spend on the student disability service has doubled in the past five to six years. It has been a real positive that the institution has recognised that, as the number of students has grown, the number of complex issues around student support has grown, and finance has been made available to back up that growth.

The Convener: Has that proven itself through more students coming to Edinburgh and fewer students dropping out because of challenges that they have faced on account of their disabilities?

Sheila Williams: We have certainly seen more students and, at the latest count, for the previous academic year, almost 3,500 students disclosed a disability. The number and the proportion of the student cohort have increased year on year. It is not just that there are more students coming to the university; the proportion of disabled students has grown year on year, and that growth shows no sign of slowing—which is good.

The Convener: That is excellent. Would some of the other institutions like to comment?

Dr Jane Balmforth (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland): In contrast to the University of Edinburgh, we are a very small institution with barely 1,000 students. However, as I say in my submission, about 28 per cent of our student population have disclosed a disability, medical condition or specific learning difficulty. A high percentage of our students have dyslexia and specific learning difficulties—about 15 per cent have dyslexia or dyspraxia—and the number has grown hugely since I started in my post in 1998. At that time, about 10 students had disclosed a disability whereas, last year, there were 293. The conservatoire has worked hard to become more accessible and to be seen to be accessible for applicants and students with disabilities.

We are dealing with some very traditional—if I can say that—art forms including music and opera. As Sheila Williams said, the challenge is sometimes to ensure that all staff, including the one-to-one teaching staff, are on board and are taking on the adjustments that need to be made. Whether a staff member is teaching their student the violin or rehearsing them in an opera, adjustments need to be made. Sometimes, however, perhaps because of the traditional nature of those art forms, the idea of adjustments does not come easily.

Ann Duncan (University of Strathclyde): Some of our issues at the University of Strathclyde reflect those that Sheila Williams communicated about Edinburgh. We have a large campus on what is professed to be one of the steepest hills in Glasgow, so we face huge challenges in our physical estate. That is being addressed through estate redevelopment and we are ensuring that all our new buildings are as accessible as is humanly possible.

We are also experiencing growing numbers. I have been at Strathclyde for the past six years and we have gone from 1,200 to more than 1,600 students who have disabilities. The categories of disability are also changing. In particular, there has been an increase in mental health disclosure, which reflects the position in the sector as a whole, and we have had a significant increase in the number of students presenting with autistic spectrum disorders. Obviously, those are both wholly and entirely positive things. Students are choosing to disclose, which suggests that less stigma is associated with mental health disclosure.

However, we are finding that some of those conditions are probably ones that staff across the university feel less equipped to support. For our academic colleagues, it is not often seen as easy to support some of those students because of the nature of their conditions, which can be fluctuating or intermittent. Staff might have a plan to support a student, but then they experience a bad mental

health episode and the plan goes completely out of the window and we need to start from scratch again. That can be a particular challenge.

For staff in central support services, this is their bread and butter and they are comfortable and confident in supporting students, but students spend the majority of their time in their academic departments. It is about working to equip a large academic community to feel sufficiently confident in its support of these students.

Our experience at Strathclyde shows that there is without a doubt a willingness. Staff definitely feel that they want to support students to succeed, but sometimes they feel that they are ill-equipped to support students who have some categories of disability that are not perceived as straightforward.

The Convener: Is training available for those staff? A key theme that has emerged through the evidence that we have received is that staff training can make students feel much more confident in the lecture room or in classes. For instance, we have evidence from a student who uses BSL, who feels that their university experience would have been much better if their lecturer had had some BSL or deaf awareness training. The same applies to mental health and other disability training. What is available for staff?

09:30

Ann Duncan: Our institution offers disability awareness training and mental health training but the uptake varies. Our approach, particularly for BSL users or students who are deaf, is to work with their academic department to ensure that the academic staff have a level of deaf awareness. I assume that my colleagues around the table would say that there is scope to do much more.

The Convener: You said that the take-up of training varies. Is there any move towards making some of the training mandatory for academic staff, as part of their year-on-year continuing professional development?

Sheila Williams: The University of Edinburgh is very conscious of the support that academic colleagues require with regard to mental health. In conjunction with one of the senior academics, who has driven the project, we have introduced a fortnightly Wednesday afternoon training session for each school in the university for personal tutors and student support officers, who are the key admin people.

I recognise the point that Ann Duncan highlighted on engagement and attendance. There has been a bit of discussion at the University of Edinburgh about making such training mandatory, and I think that I can speak for many of my student

services colleagues who would agree that we would like it to be mandatory.

The Convener: I will open the discussion for questions.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Thank you all for coming along. I have three or four questions, but I will keep them brief.

To pick up on Sheila Williams's final point, I have no doubt that in the University of Edinburgh and in other universities across Scotland, the people at the top—the principal, the chancellor and the university court—all agree with everything that has been said, but if you dig down to the level of a lecturer in a particular school, the message is just not getting there. There is something missing between your department and the average lecturer at any university. It is all very well having policies and bits of paper, but if it makes no difference to the experience of the average student we are wasting our time. How do we bridge that gap between what we want to do and how we do it?

Sheila Williams: That is a very good question. We constantly grapple with that issue and we are currently looking at it in the disability review. We recognise that the key to the process is further engagement between the student disability service and each of the academic schools. There are issues around governance. A higher profile for some of the issues that student disability services are concerned with and the support of disabled students would be helpful. Sometimes a situation arises where some academic colleagues—I do not want to generalise—see a disabled student primarily as the responsibility of the disability service, whereas our approach is that those students are University of Edinburgh students and we all have a responsibility here. We all need to do what we need to do, whether that is because of the legislative context, because it is just good practice, or because it is fundamentally the right thing to do.

In the disability review we will look at ways to further engage with the individual schools, starting from next year. I do not want to suggest that we do not engage with the schools at the moment, because we do engage with them, but we recognise that that engagement must be more meaningful.

Jeremy Balfour: This question is aimed at whoever wants to jump in and take it. We have a helpful breakdown of types of disability that universities deal with. I think that across every institution, the highest numbers are accounted for by students with dyslexia or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Universities are probably pretty well set up to deal with that type of condition, which is good.

How do you deal with more complex conditions? I asked last week's witnesses whether there is a hierarchy of disability. Do you think that you can cope with someone with dyslexia, but if they have multiple or physical disabilities they will be more difficult to deal with? In your experience of schools and universities, is there a hierarchy of disability?

Ann Duncan: You are absolutely right to say that the category of disability that most institutions are best equipped to deal with is dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties.

On how we respond to students with more complex disabilities, our approach is very much to get in as early as possible. A case that I worked on a few years ago illustrates our approach well. We were involved in Strathclyde's open day a couple of years ago and met an applicant who was quadriplegic and had significant and complex difficulties. He was going to need a complete package of support, including personal care. The open day was probably in September or October, for application for entry in the following year, so from that point on we engaged with the student, to ascertain as early as possible what support he would require. It was a supportive approach; it was in no way about deterring or discouraging the student or influencing the prospect of his being offered a place—in fact, the student was offered a place but chose to go elsewhere.

The early intervention was key, because we needed to think about adapting accommodation and whether the student's social work package would be transferred from Edinburgh, where he was based, to Glasgow. There was engagement with the academic department right from the start, because the student was applying for a chemistry course, which would involve quite a lot of practical work, and he had no use of his upper limbs. We worked well with the department, which was forthcoming with suggestions about how to mitigate the impact of the student's condition on his participation. The student was central to those discussions, and the department was very supportive in thinking about how to adapt its teaching to make it entirely accessible for the student. We were confident that the support arrangements would be workable, and the student felt reassured that if he chose to come to Strathclyde the necessary support would be in place.

My point is that it is about early intervention. We are lucky, in that we have good systems and we can start looking at our applicant data very early on—from March or April for the September intake. We prioritise, based on complexity. If an applicant has a mobility, hearing or visual impairment, we will contact them by April or May for entry in August or September.

Jeremy Balfour: May I play devil's advocate for a moment? If 10 people had turned up with that condition, could you have coped? Was it fine because it was just one person? I am not trying to accuse you of anything, but what level could you cope with?

Ann Duncan: We would not be presented with such a case every year, but I agree that if 10 applicants came to us with that level of complexity and needed that kind of support package, we would really struggle.

Jeremy Balfour: I have two more quick questions to ask, after which I promise that I will be quiet. The first is about coursework when people are at university. Different students have different disabilities, and how they cope with coursework and exams will vary. Are your colleagues open to changing how students are assessed? Is it a case of saying, "This is how we've always done it; there's an exam at the end of the year and that's it," or is there an openness to recognising that although someone with a disability might be very capable, they might not be able to cope with that type of assessment?

The Convener: I will let Jane Balmforth answer first. It will be interesting to hear from her, given that the conservatoire might do different types of assessment compared with other institutions.

Dr Balmforth: We offer a wide range of adjustments to assessments. At the start of their course, we meet every student who has disclosed their disability to set up what we call a learning agreement. The meeting involves me, the student and the head of department or programme leader. We go through the assessments and the coursework elements of the student's course and consider any adjustments that are required.

It is fair to say that we are very flexible. We do not insist on written assignments. Students can present an audio submission or a video submission if that is easier. They can also specify a particular time of day that suits them better for a performance, which is helpful for students with mental health or medical conditions. If a student is struggling, we can provide a bespoke assessment calendar so that we can push assessments out of the set assessment diets.

We are flexible and open to looking at other methods of assessment. For example, if a student finds it too nerve-wracking or mentally impossible to perform in the hall, we will accept a recording as a performance assessment. We are always open to flexible assessments.

Sheila Williams: A number of imaginative and flexible approaches have been implemented at the University of Edinburgh. We operate in a more traditional academic sphere. A variety of approaches are taken, and there might be some

inconsistency—the approach that is taken might depend on the subject area or on how things have been done for the past 30 years.

In some subject areas, our academic colleagues will, on occasion, set an essay instead of an exam. We look at different ways of doing things, albeit that we operate in a different context from the one that Jane Balmforth operates in, but it is true to say that we are still fairly wedded to exams. A number of students get extra time, for example, or can sit their exams in a smaller room or in a room on their own. We are as supportive as we can be. Certain types of support are easier to recommend and put in place than others.

Jeremy Balfour: That is all positive, but I presume that there are some students whom you simply cannot accommodate. When I was at Edinburgh university—I appreciate that it was back in the dark ages—it was not possible for someone in a wheelchair to get into the school in which I was studying.

When you assess someone and find that you cannot meet their needs, where do you signpost them on to? How would you deal with an individual whom, for whatever reason, you simply could not accommodate because of their disability? What support do you give to students in that position?

09:45

Sheila Williams: To be honest, that has never occurred in my time in the university's student disability services, at least not to my knowledge. I do not mean to deny that there are challenges, particularly for wheelchair users. To refer to your earlier point about a hierarchy of disability, I do not think that there is a hierarchy, but some issues that we deal with on a societal level are mirrored in higher education, and some of them are more complex because of the nature of the subjects that are taught.

If a building is not physically accessible, we will recommend that classes are held in a different building. On occasion, that can be quite a significant disruption for certain classes. We can also look at broadcasting remotely. We can look at doing a range of things. I would hate to think that we would turn somebody away because of a lack of physical access, but I recognise that Edinburgh university's physical estate is less than ideal.

The Convener: I ask Carol Baverstock to say, with her admissions director hat on and given her general overview of admissions, whether the access point that Jeremy Balfour raised is an issue from an admissions point of view.

Carol Baverstock (University of Aberdeen): I can speak with experience from the University of Aberdeen. Like Edinburgh, we have an estate that

has been around for 600-plus years, but we also have a lot of modern and accessible facilities. Certain areas of the university are assigned to particular disciplines, but those areas tend to house the academic and support staff; they are not necessarily where laboratory work, lectures and seminars take place.

Like Edinburgh, we would look to give the student an alternative experience if we could not ensure that their seminars and tutorials were in accessible buildings. In fact, most of our main spaces for teaching students and delivering lectures and tutorials are in accessible buildings.

We have encountered students with mobility issues who were looking to take courses that involved a field trip. Students come to study in degree programmes, in which courses make up the degree year by year. Some courses are compulsory and students self-select others. Whether a course is compulsory or self-selected, if it is something like a field course and there are physical restrictions, we look to offer an alternative experience. The university would expect our disability advisers to work out with the relevant school in the university and the student how that alternative experience could be achieved. At the end of the day, we are looking to ensure that the student can have the experience so that the necessary outcomes for the course are achieved, and there are numerous ways of achieving the outcome.

To touch on one of Jeremy Balfour's earlier questions, one challenge that probably all institutions face is meeting the keenness to ensure that, at the application stage, applicants feel comfortable with declaring, and able to declare, their disability. The general understanding is that students with complex or multiple disabilities normally present in the application process. We encourage early disclosure because we seek to work with the applicant at an early stage to ensure that we can make the required adjustments, give support and engage with them and their wider family as appropriate.

However, we find that some disabilities such as dyslexia, which—as was mentioned—universities are fairly adept at accommodating, are not disclosed at the application stage, and the university realises that only when the student arrives and registers. Universities work to make appropriate adjustments, but the applicant might not have had the best experience that they could have had in the lead-up to entering university if we have not been able to give them the support that we could have given.

The Convener: One clear element that arose in the evidence that we took last week was the need for the Universities and Colleges Admissions

Service to be much more responsive to such needs.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Good morning, everybody, and thank you for coming to see us. I have two questions, the first of which stems from Carol Baverstock's comments. It is great to have her here, because the University of Aberdeen is my alma mater. At the turn of the millennium—a long time ago—I was president of the students representative council and I sat on the university court. At that time, there was a big discussion not so much about access as about retention and attrition.

What mechanisms, if any, do you employ to keep students in post once you have them there, particularly if they are affected by disability? Every university has students who drop out—that is part of university life—but what efforts do you make to retain students, in particular those with more complex needs?

Carol Baverstock: Retention is a key topic among all universities. A lot of effort goes into ensuring that students arrive and register, and we want that experience to be positive for them. There is an initiative and quite a drive from our principal to look at retention across all the schools in the university. There is no one particular cause of not being able to keep students at university; we are bringing together a lot of aspects and thinking about what is given to students before they arrive and register. We give out a lot of information and we have websites and prospectuses, and students come along on visit days and applicant days, but university is a different landscape. We speak a different language—the terminology that we use, and which students have to navigate, is different.

I cannot give specifics, but I am aware that universities are looking into a lot of initiatives to ensure that students feel that they can stay with their studies and that, if they have queries, issues or problems, the relevant signposts are in place to enable them to access services. We want to give students multiple pieces of information at multiple points rather than giving them a single handbook and telling them that they can find all the answers in there.

We have developed a personal tutor scheme, which is a move away from the adviser of study scheme that Alex Cole-Hamilton might have experienced when he was at Aberdeen. The personal tutor is a designated academic member of staff who can support a student on any aspect of university life, and not just from an academic perspective.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: A named person, almost.

Carol Baverstock: Yes—

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am just kidding.

Dr Balmforth: I will follow on from what Carol Baverstock said. Early intervention is key for us. We track students' absences and, if a student has more than a certain number of absences, they are asked to come along for an investigatory meeting to see whether there are things that are not going well, whether more support needs to be put in place or whether the support that has been provided is not working.

We also have the learning agreements that I described earlier. In January, I contact all students with disabilities who have a learning agreement to ask whether their agreements are working well and whether the students would like to review them and the support. In February, in the progress committee, which I sit on, the progress of all students through their courses is looked at and, if any student is not doing well, their learning agreement, if they have one, is checked and noted. The student will then be contacted and invited to a review of the learning agreement and their support.

At the end of the year, our special circumstances board meets just before the exam board. Again, all students with disabilities are considered and, if any student is not doing well, the learning agreement and support are checked and any issues are noted.

I realise that that approach is perhaps a luxury that we have because the numbers are small, but we can track every student personally.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: My next question is about the student experience. Last week, we were reminded eloquently that sometimes only nine hours a week are devoted to lectures—I know that as an arts graduate. A university might be good at providing adaptations and interpreters if there is a BSL situation or any other kind of mitigating support to students with disabilities, but those nine hours are a small part of the student experience. People talk about wider university life, including societies, club nights and the myriad of opportunities and experiences for students, but many students are left out at that point. In fact, the reflection from the panel last week was quite stark. It was said that Scotland does not have an institution that really ticks all those boxes. There are institutions in the rest of the United Kingdom that manage to bridge that gap, but we are potentially failing in the wider student experience. Will the panellists give us their reflections on that view?

The Convener: Does Kirsty Knox want to come in on admissions and on having a university that is spread across a few campuses with different types of accommodation?

Kirsty Knox (University of the West of Scotland): We certainly have a number of

challenges, given that we now have five campus locations, four of which are in Scotland, but we endeavour to take as consistent an approach as possible.

In the past few years, we have invested a huge amount in the structures in the schools and in support for all students—not just students with disabilities. A few years ago, we did a pilot project. We had a student enhancement developer for students because we thought that the touching points for students were minimal and that an engagement point was needed throughout the academic cycle on attending classes, assessments and workshops, for example. That pilot project was successful, and we now have a student enhancement developer in every school. We also have an education guidance adviser in each school, and all those people work closely together.

A member of staff is available for any student who needs guidance or counselling. If a student has a disability, they will have a named disability adviser. We try to have a triangulation of everyone joining together with things. I am not saying that we are perfect at that, but we strive towards that approach.

On the ultimate student experience that all universities strive towards, we have introduced a students welcome festival, which we run at each campus. Senior members of staff are present at that and we try to have every aspect of student services available, such as funding advice, our disability team and the students association—everyone is there, including our societies and clubs. That promotes to every student the fact that there is much more than just the academic side of things.

10:00

We recently had an event at our brand-new Ayr campus, which is second to none for accessibility. With our new principal coming into post, the Paisley campus has gone through a massive amount of development. We have a student hub on the ground floor that is right next to funding advice and disability services. We are focusing on the student experience as the heart of the university. That is replicated at the Dumfries and Ayr campuses and we are looking forward to the Lanarkshire campus, which we are striving towards for 2018. That will have the same approach.

We have invested a huge amount in the past few years and focused on the university experience for all our students and on putting the student at the heart of everything that we do. We recently took on the international student barometer for all our students; this is our first year

of going into that. When we do student satisfaction surveys, we always analyse the information that we get from them.

As for applications for admission, I liaise with our disability team and I find that we contact our potential students when they have a confirmation decision. As with Carol Baverstock's situation, we have found that a lot of students do not believe that they have a disability if they have dyslexia. They do not declare or disclose that. They come to talk to the team at induction and enrolment, when the support is put in place and they are given a named contact, so we find out by making ourselves known at that point.

Sometimes students do not want to be identified; as with care leavers, they do not want the stigma of being identified. For anyone who goes forward to disability advisers, we have a six-month review with them to find out whether we need to put in place anything else.

Having that continual review means that UWS has reviewed everything from the start to the end. We could still bring so much more into place, but we are moving in the right direction. This is a positive issue for UWS.

The Convener: On Alex Cole-Hamilton's question about the whole university experience, we have had some evidence, including written evidence, from BSL users who cannot access freshers week or festivals, or other such events, because there is no interpretation service available for them at that point. Therefore, when they get to class, the rest have all bonded and they feel left out. That was clear from last week's oral evidence and from some of the written evidence. Is any work being done on that very first stage of making friends and building relationships? In one person's first class, the students were told to pair off; everybody else paired off and he was left on his own.

Kirsty Knox: We have a one-on, one-off process or policy for any deaf student who has an interpreter. We endeavour to work towards deaf students always having someone with them. The disability team has noticed and identified to me that there is a shortage of interpreters. The team leader is going through sign language training, but she is doing that independently of the university. There has been interesting discussion about training and development in that regard.

I have also asked how many members of staff in student services in the university have a disability. We have one member of staff who is blind, but we do not have any deaf members of staff.

We try to make sure that the student experience is replicated for students with disabilities; I am not saying that it is perfect, but we try to make sure

that things are put in place so that they engage with the rest of the student body.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: If I could come in as a bookend on that, last week I asked whether there is an example of an institution in the British Isles or further afield that has got this right, and I was struck by the answer that we got. We were told that the University of Central Lancashire in Preston reached a critical mass where, because students with hearing loss recognised that it was a good university to go to in terms of wider provision, more and more deaf students gravitated there, which added to a virtuous cycle of investment in resources for them. It almost built itself, as it were.

Kirsty Knox: In the past few months, my role has expanded to take on recruitment, admissions and participation—not all of that work, of course; we have a head of department. We are now asking questions about the extra support that we need to put in place at applicant information sessions and open days to highlight the support services that we have for students who are coming to the university, and not just at the Paisley campus but at every campus in the university. For me, this is an exciting time to take things forward at the university.

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning, everyone. A lot of my questions have already been covered, but I want to ask the panel about the application process itself. I was quite struck by the statement in the Edinburgh university submission that the university is

“not aware of any issues”

having been drawn to its attention; it then goes on to talk about “reasonable adjustments”. I was quite disturbed by the use of the word “permitted”. The submission states that a student “was permitted to submit” an application.

I have a general question for the panel. What work has been done to ensure that the application process is easy for and accessible to everyone? Is any equality proofing done? Is there any testing? Is any checking done to ensure that, regardless of their disability, people are able to complete the application without having to ask for help?

The Convener: I think that it would be fair to let Sheila Williams come in on that first.

Sheila Williams: I apologise for using the word “permitted”. That is a very good point, and I thank Mary Fee for raising it.

All institutions continue to grapple with the fact that, under the Equality Act 2010, we have an anticipatory duty. Again, that ties into the whole long-term aim of being much more inclusive and of mainstreaming as much as possible, although

mainstreaming will never take away the need for certain types of individual support.

I do not want to go into too much detail about the admissions process because I am not totally familiar with admissions other than at Edinburgh university, where disability information is not taken into account when a decision whether to make an offer is made.

Mary Fee: That is not really the point that I am trying to get at. What work has been done to ensure that people are able to complete an application or go through the admissions process, understand it and not have any problem with it?

Sheila Williams: I do not think that I am best placed to answer that from an Edinburgh university perspective. My admissions colleagues could answer that.

The Convener: Maybe Carol Baverstock, as an admissions person, can answer the question.

Carol Baverstock: I will try to. Obviously, students who are looking to do undergraduate study in the United Kingdom do not apply directly to each university that they are interested in; they apply through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, which facilitates the delivery of the applications to each of an applicant's choices.

UCAS does a lot of user testing, not just of the accessibility of the application but of the terminology that it uses. UCAS is based in Cheltenham, where it brings in testers and users to monitor every aspect of their experience as they go through the application. When there is hesitation—over terminology, perhaps—further probing is done into why they did not go further forward.

As I have mentioned, the application procedure uses a lot of terminology that is commonplace in universities, but which is not necessarily understood by those who are looking to have that experience. Not everybody appreciates what “undergraduate” or “postgraduate” mean.

UCAS has developed its services over many years. It has moved away from paper submissions; by and large everything is online. It is further enhancing its products by moving to digital processes. It is engaging as widely as possible with its different stakeholders. Applicants are key to its business, as are schools, advisers, universities and colleges. UCAS has finished developing services for postgraduate study and it is currently developing services for university and course information as well as its undergraduate application services, on which it is engaging with wider groups and getting feedback.

UCAS is building and listening, taking feedback, adjusting and modifying. It is not a case of saying,

“We have developed a product. We think it is great. Please use it.” It is very much about engaging with the people who are going to be using the product, both at the front end and at the back end, to try to ensure that it is doing its job.

Mary Fee: That is very reassuring. Does anyone else want to comment?

Kirsty Knox: In relation to UCAS's engagement with the universities, I am part of the UCAS undergraduate advisory group, which I sit on with the head of admissions for Edinburgh university. We then feed into the—I cannot remember what the group is called—

Carol Baverstock: It is the Scottish universities admissions practitioners group.

Kirsty Knox: Thank you. We feed back information to that group about UCAS developments. In addition, because UCAS is developing so many of its products, we have webinars on Wednesday mornings every fortnight. We can all participate and we can then view the sessions afterwards. As Carol Baverstock said, it is not just about UCAS devising a product and running with it; it engages with us and brings in student testers. We are very lucky that we have a voice in how the products move forward.

Mary Fee: I have one other very brief question. Either Sheila Williams or Ann Duncan—I cannot remember who it was—spoke about awareness training. I would like a bit more information about how in depth that awareness training is.

Ann Duncan: I spoke about that. We have a range of disability awareness training initiatives for the university. They vary from short, two-hour workshops to a more in-depth programme called “Developing an inclusive curriculum”, which is an accredited module undertaken by academics who are certificated at the end of it. It involves participation over four half-day sessions and participants have to complete supporting course work. It goes into quite a lot of detail on the development of inclusive teaching practice within the university. The training varies from the generic and basic to the much more in depth.

Mental health awareness training also varies from short, one-off workshops to more detailed sessions. We have had more training facility, and recently Scotland's mental health first aid training has been delivered in the university. Both light-touch and more detailed content is available—there is a range.

Mary Fee: Does the training give information on dealing with physical disabilities? Does it cover every type of disability?

Ann Duncan: Yes. The disability awareness sessions in particular are focused very much on looking at the student population and considering

the barriers to participation that the student group faces, and what we as an institution need to do.

As I mentioned earlier, when there is a particular category of disability in an academic department—for example, when it is going to have a British Sign Language user—we will work with that department. We will do that on a more informal basis, but they will have training and development that is very specific to and focused on the individual student's needs. We do something very similar in relation to students who are blind or visually impaired.

We have a rolling programme of training workshops that we deliver three or four times a year, but then we have the tailored courses, working with individual departments when a need has been identified in connection with a new student.

Mary Fee: Thank you. Do other institutions do the same type of awareness training?

Sheila Williams: Edinburgh's position is very similar. We do tailor-made training for individual schools on request, and provide an impairment-specific range of training. We are just about to update our deaf awareness training, as we now have a disability adviser who is a BSL practitioner, which will be a real advantage for us. Basically, we do whatever colleagues would like us to do if that is within our remit.

10:15

Dr Balmforth: Similarly, every year we have a learning and teaching conference that is open to all staff, and part of that conference is given over to disability awareness training. This year, the National Union of Students Scotland's mental health officer gave mental health training. Previously, Scottish Autism has provided training on autism spectrum disorder, and we have also had the Royal National Institute of Blind People. It is a rolling programme. If there are any specific requests for training from departments, we can organise that as well.

Mary Fee: Thank you.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Hello, everybody. I want to go back to the point about students with a disability making an application to your institutions. Is there a common standard that students with a disability can expect? I raise the issue because of the points that Alex Cole-Hamilton made about the situation down south where specialist institutions somehow attract students with disabilities, which might lead to such students rejecting other institutions. Is it like that in Scotland, or is there a common level of service across all the colleges and universities so

that students feel comfortable about applying to each institution?

The Convener: I think that that falls to Carol Baverstock.

Carol Baverstock: There probably is not a publicised common approach as such. However, admissions practitioners and those who are responsible for making decisions very much look to ensure that there is fair practice for all applicants. There is a code of practice to ensure that all applications that are received on time via UCAS are treated equally and given the same consideration.

Most universities are working within constraints but, by and large, we look to see how we can make an offer of admission to the applicant. Certainly, at Aberdeen, our academic admissions selectors work very hard to do that. The admissions set-ups within each university are not the same but, in Aberdeen, we have centralised admissions with dedicated members of academic staff who are experienced and qualified to look at applications across a broad area. We admit to the degrees of MA and BSc. Although the applicant applies for a particular subject within those areas, consistency is applied regardless of the subject—whether it is an anthropology MA or a sociology MA, for example.

We generally look to ensure that we can make an offer of admission. Many candidates presenting through the Scottish education system may well have achieved their university qualifications at the end of secondary 5. Obviously, under curriculum for excellence, we look across the S4 to S6 experience. We would not ask for any further qualifications from those who meet our minimum entry requirements. I think that most universities take the same approach to those who have not met or have not quite met the requirements. If someone is not quite there, the selectors look to see whether they will be able to get there. If they cannot get there, the selectors consider whether there is an explanation for that. Disability might be one aspect, but there are lots of other aspects to contextual data. Therefore, adjustments may well be made in the offer making.

For example, a disabled student's achievements to date might be significant, but not quite what we are looking for. If their application shows that their achievement is significant and demonstrates an ability to have further success, adjusted offer making may well take place to take account of the information that is presented. Generally, we use the information in the application to allow us to make that decision, so we rely on the personal statement and the information that is provided in the reference. You might find that universities have different approaches in how they use that information.

Willie Coffey: Thank you. Before anybody else answers, I will clarify what I mean. Suppose I am a student with a disability and I am applying or thinking about applying to your five institutions. How do I get an impression of the support that each of you will offer me before I begin that journey? The support services are great, but they come after the event. It is about my ability to choose to go to one of your institutions because it seems the best one for me and there is a great level of support. How do you offer information about that at the outset to a student with a disability?

Kirsty Knox: I was at a meeting yesterday with our transition advisers, who work with our college partners on higher national certificate and higher national diploma students moving to university, and we are going to arrange college awareness sessions from May next year. We have a student recruitment team that engages with secondary schools and does school talks, but that is more about the provision of our academic portfolio. With the transition days that we will have from May, we will look at the other side of things as well.

The college advisers want to know about our admissions processes and how we look at the applications; they also want to know about what is available on campus in terms of student services and funding for students with disabilities. After those sessions in May, we will have college sessions for students. We are looking to hold them in October; we had a set of them last month, but we felt that that was quite late in the calendar, so we will bring them forward to October. We are working with the colleges to let them know what services we have available. In doing that work next year, we will look at Paisley and Ayr and invite all our college partners. Once the new college in Lanarkshire is up and running, we will have things there as well.

That is a development in the right direction. However, in my opinion, there is not a lot of integration between schools, colleges and universities. If a student at a college has support in place, their automatic expectation is that support will be in place at the university when they turn up on day 1, but I do not think that there is a free flow of information. That needs to be looked at, and the same applies to disability and support allowance in relation to funding. Students sometimes get their funding late.

We can engage with people and provide information and guidance, including on our website, but it is also about getting out there, speaking to people and raising the profile of the provision that is available to students.

Willie Coffey: Is that also the position of the other witnesses?

Sheila Williams: At the University of Edinburgh, the student disability service is always open on the open days when students and their families come to see the university as part of deciding whether to apply. People can come to the service and have a chat with one of our advisers and we have information stands and so forth at various points throughout the university.

I echo some of the points that Kirsty Knox made. Our widening access people do a lot of work with schools. There is also the usual information on websites and leaflets and we receive email inquiries. Our students association is also involved and I think that, these days, there is a lot of discussion on social media about choice of university. Not being a user, I cannot say that with certainty but, anecdotally, that is where a lot of information for students is bandied about, if you like.

Carol Baverstock: We are very aware that students who are looking to have a university experience are not engaged in gathering information in their final years at school—the information search starts much earlier than that.

At Aberdeen university, we have recently invested in our website to make information more accessible and to enable those who visit the website to have multiple ways of communicating and engaging with us. We can have live chats with them and we are available to talk to potential students who are making enquiries. We try to manage and navigate their journey well before they are applicants, and we try to ensure that they have a mechanism to find out the detailed information that they might require.

Like other universities, we are keen to ensure that, when students visit us on campus—whether that is an individual personal visit or through open days, applicant days or articulation arrangements with progression from college—our full range of services is made available to them. They can access the services while they are visiting the campus or they can make appointments to access them when they visit—the choice is theirs.

Willie Coffey: My question is a general one and not specifically about disability. Some of your submissions refer to personal statements. Do each of your institutions use personal statements in the admissions process? If so, how can students and their families be sure that the statements are being treated objectively? Is the process accountable and scrutinised so that we know that the system that you apply is fair?

Carol Baverstock: At the University of Aberdeen, we read the personal statement and the reference. The personal statement might be the only opportunity for the applicant to tell us their story, because they might not give us that

information in other parts of the application or by answering other questions. If we did not pick up the information that was presented there, we would be failing in our responsibilities to give equal consideration to all the applications that we receive.

We know that the personal statement causes quite a lot of anxiety for all applicants, because they are aware that universities use them in different ways. Most universities have statements on their web pages or prospectuses as well as on UCAS to explain how the personal statements are used. We do a lot of outreach activity with schools—in fact, we work with particular schools on widening access—to explain what we are looking for in the personal statement. You will also find that universities in Scotland do not ask for identical personal statements; although we are looking for an indication of an interest in the subject that a student is applying for, people have five choices in their application and the personal statement might not fit all their university choices.

There has been wider consultation with UCAS to see how we can improve the experience for applicants. If, for whatever reason, students do not hold any offers throughout their journey, can a new personal statement be submitted that better fits the choices that they make later in the application cycle? We try to give as much direction as we can on what we are looking for in the personal statement. We have a centralised admissions service and dedicated members of staff who have worked in admissions for a considerable amount of time and who undergo regular training. We also have a small group that looks at each application and we hope that commonality is allocated to all the applications that are received.

10:30

Willie Coffey: At the end of the day, the way in which they are treated is pretty subjective. I am concerned about the situation in which a student is not accepted to one of your institutions, while someone else with exactly the same qualifications is. How do we know that fairness is being applied?

Carol Baverstock: If they have the same qualifications, it is unlikely that two different decisions will be made.

Willie Coffey: That is interesting. Surely there is a limited number of places.

Carol Baverstock: Yes, and other factors may be taken into account in assessing the application. There is commonality in the profile of qualifications among students who apply for programmes such as medicine, but other factors are taken into account in the admissions process. It is not just the personal statement and the reference, but

things like the interview process. That helps to present a full picture of applicants.

Willie Coffey: I just want to press you on that, because students who have been turned down for a course such as medicine simply get a letter saying, “Sorry—you didn’t get in.” There is no detailed explanation of how the institution looked at the personal statement, how the person scored and so on. There is simply a letter saying sorry.

Carol Baverstock: That is not the case with the University of Aberdeen because—

Willie Coffey: So there is a different approach.

Carol Baverstock: Yes, because the person will get an explanation. If people apply for medicine and are not given an interview, they are given feedback on why that is the case. There will be a specific explanation that is particular to that applicant. That will be detailed to them in the decision that is communicated to UCAS. Those who are invited for interview and who are not then made an offer also receive feedback as to why that is. It does not mean that they are not qualified but—

Willie Coffey: No, of course not, because they have met the requirements.

Carol Baverstock: As you will be aware, medicine is a controlled subject area and we have a limited number of places available.

Willie Coffey: I will pursue that at another opportunity, convener.

The Convener: Absolutely. We are just about over our time, but I think that Annie Wells has a quick question.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): It is just a very quick question on the back of Willie Coffey’s questions.

When Mr Coffey asked about personal statements, you talked about written submissions, but do you accept, say, BSL video submissions? We have heard that the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland looks at various options for exams, such as recordings and videos. Is that commonly done for personal statements, perhaps for someone who does not have English as their first language because they are a BSL user?

Kirsty Knox: UWS has certainly had applicants contacting us to ask whether they can use an alternative format. We would engage with the school on that and, in my experience, no school has said that that is not possible. We have interviews and auditions for our creative programmes, and film reel is available, so there is access to alternatives. That has not been mainstreamed as such, but I have experience of a few people coming forward in that way.

Annie Wells: We are trying to get people to declare disabilities at the application stage. If they do that, should we then tell them that there are other ways for them to make their personal statement instead of writing things down? That might make it more likely that people will apply for courses, especially if they have something such as dyslexia, and it might make people's applications more successful and make them feel a bit more confident.

Kirsty Knox: That is a really interesting point that we can take back to UCAS. Obviously, we all have our own online application systems, so we can look at that for our own institutions.

The Convener: At last week's meeting, a BSL user who was a witness for our inquiry raised a point about the opportunity to do applications in BSL. There is also an issue about what is available on your websites. Either there is not much on BSL, or it is not signposted very well so that it can be found easily by someone who uses the language. Perhaps you can consider that feedback that we have heard.

We are well over our time this morning and you have been very patient; you have stayed with us for a long time, and we are grateful for your evidence. You have given us some very clear points that we will follow up on as part of our inquiry. If you go away and then think of something that you should have said, please get back in touch with the specifics—we would be happy to hear from you. Thank you so much for your evidence.

We now move into private session.

10:35

Meeting continued in private.

11:08

Meeting continued in public.

International Human Rights Day 2016

The Convener: Good morning, and welcome back to the Equalities and Human Rights Committee. Our next panel is an exciting panel that the committee has been working with over the past few weeks to highlight international human rights day, which is this Saturday, 10 December. The committee wanted to mark the occasion by speaking to some of the people who matter in the process—the young people of Scotland.

We have two groups of pupils, accompanied by their teachers, from two primary schools: Thornlie primary school in Wishaw and Westfield primary school. Deborah Kirkland and Liz Wells are the teachers, but our focus today is the kids. We are really pleased that you have come along, and some committee members were pleased to come to your school to talk about what matters to you. As you can see, some of your ideas are displayed behind me on red, amber and green cards. The things that you think we are doing well are on the green cards; the things that you think that we could do better are on the amber cards; and the things that we really need to make a difference on are on the red cards. We are pleased to have those ideas and to have heard your views. I was inspired for the committee's future work by hearing what you said earlier.

We are pleased to have you at the committee meeting this morning and delighted that you feel able to give us your views. We are keen to hear from you about what you think the Scottish Parliament should be doing to maintain your rights and the things that really matter to you. We are keen to hear about not only the things that you like but the things that you think we should fix. If you want to speak, do the same as you do in class—stick your hand up and tell me your name, and you can then give me your thoughts and feelings. Who is first?

Kai Kerr (Westfield Primary School): My name is Kai.

The Convener: It is nice to meet you, Kai.

Kai Kerr: I think that the rights of children and everyone in the world are very important. If everyone did what they liked, it would not end very well. We need to work on the wars, because there are a lot of them. That is really important. In Syria, people's houses are getting blown up while they are inside them.

We also need to drive cars that do not use fuel, because it is polluting the world.

The Convener: Those are two very good points, Kai. The first is about peace for children around the world, and the other is about the importance of the environment that we live in.

Hannah Gray (Thornlie Primary School): My name is Hannah. I think that we can help with gender equality, especially across schools. As a girl, I like to take part in many sports including swimming and football, but in my school—or in other schools—I can get treated differently because I want to play a sport that is played mainly by boys or that is known to be played by boys. I can be treated differently because of my gender.

The Convener: I know that Motherwell has a good women's team.

Jeremy Balfour: It is better than the men's team, anyway. *[Laughter.]*

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for coming to see us. Thank you also for your amazing presentations, which were really inspiring. Some of you told me that this is your first time in this building. If there was something about our country that you wanted to change, would you guys know how to go about doing that? Who would you want to speak to? What have you learned about how our democracy works and how you can influence it and ask for change?

Kai Kerr: I like the fact that, around the world, not everybody is being treated well but everybody is trying to fix things, including MSPs. I like the fact that they are helping. If I could change one thing about the world, it would be to have no wars.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: It is really noble to want to change that. You guys are the future. We are sitting here just now but, in 15 or 20 years, it could be you—in fact, it may well be you in some cases. It is important that you know how this place works and that your voices are as important as everybody else's.

Amanda Solyga (Thornlie Primary School): I would like to talk about gender stereotyping, which is all over the media and newspapers. I do not like the fact that people gender stereotype. Stereotypically, blue and green are a boy's colours, but I love those colours. A lot of people stereotype by gender, because they think that girls are weak and do not care while boys are strong. I do not think that that is right.

The Convener: That is an excellent point.

11:15

Annie Wells: Hannah spoke about playing football—I played football as well when I was wee. I liked to play football and tennis, and I was told that I was better than the boys at both of them.

However, I was called a tomboy; that did not really bother me, because I enjoyed playing football and things like that. However, Hannah is right—we do not make it that boys and girls can play together. Girls play in one team and boys in the other.

Amanda talked about gender stereotyping. If I do not like wearing dresses and high heels, some people might say that I am not as much of a girl. However, I am a girl, because that is who I am. It does not matter whether I want to look glamorous or if I do not want to be a princess, or whether I want to be a football player. That should not make any difference to who I am and how people treat me.

Hannah Gray: A lot of people do not notice when they are doing those things. If we do not notice those things, we will not be able to change them. At schools, we should maybe have another lesson on this, to let people know that they are doing things like that. Before we learned about this in class, if I said "I do not want to play football, I like being a girlie", I would not have known what I meant by that. It did not mean anything. If we look at it now, once we have learned about it, those kinds of things could offend.

The Convener: That is an excellent point.

Jeremy Balfour: Do you think that it is easy to explain that point to your mum, dad, granny or older people? Sometimes older people take longer to understand those things, because we are a bit slow—or maybe that is just me. How would you explain that to your mum or your dad or granny?

Hannah Gray: I would probably just tell them. I would sit down and say, "I do not want to be a girlie girl as such, I do not want to dress in dresses all the time", or I might say that I do not want to play football, or something like that. I suppose that I would just tell them and explain it to them and they would probably understand.

Jeremy Balfour: Do you think that we listen?

Hannah Gray: Yes.

Jeremy Balfour: Good.

The Convener: Do the other two boys who have not contributed yet have something to say? Would you tell us your names?

Ryan Murray (Westfield Primary School): I am Ryan. Thinking about opinions: it is not just about your opinion, it is about others' opinions as well. Someone might say that your opinion does not matter, but it has already happened and your opinion can still exist; it is not just taken away.

The Convener: It is about freedom of speech; I hope that we have given you the opportunity this morning to come to Parliament and have your freedom of speech. We are listening.

What about you, young man?

Toby Petersen (Westfield Primary School): I am Toby. When we were doing the cards, I only did green. Green was for stuff that was good about the Parliament; yellow was for stuff that was in the middle; red was for stuff that we thought you need to change. I only did green because I think that the Parliament is really good as it is.

The Convener: What kind of things do you think that we do really well?

Toby Petersen: I like the rights.

The Convener: Excellent; that is super. Do members have any other questions?

Willie Coffey: Hello, everybody. It was lovely to meet you at the school when I came to see you. If there is one thing more that you think we should do better, what would it be?

Kai Kerr: Boy footballers earn more than girls; I think they should earn the same amount instead of one earning £1 million a week and girl footballers earning £500,000.

Annie Wells: I agree.

The Convener: Equal pay. *[Laughter.]*

Willie Coffey: What else should we do better?

Amanda Solyga: I think you should change about our votes. We should be able to vote for president or things to do with this country or other countries, because we have our own opinions. It would be better for us to have a say.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: That is a very good point. Recently this Parliament acted to make sure that more young people can vote than ever before. That is because you are affected by everything that happens in this country, so you deserve a stake in how we make the decisions. We have very different ages for when people are able to make decisions right now, so we need to do a bit of work to make sure that those ages are better aligned.

I think that the voices of the children are the most important voices that we, as politicians, should be listening to. As was said before, you are the future. We are making decisions now that will impact on the way that you live your lives long after we are gone.

The Convener: Is there any one thing that each of you would want us to change that would make a difference?

Hannah Gray: Probably speech, because speech is in everything you do. You can have your opinion on anything you want. It could be in your class and you give your teacher an idea. In some schools, you would not be allowed to talk or give your teacher ideas, while in other schools, you

would. I think that we should have the right to do that.

The Convener: That is a very good point. What about you, Amanda? If we could do something here that would help you, what would it be—apart from lowering the voting age?

Amanda Solyga: Gender stereotyping goes on a lot. It means a lot to some people, because if someone tells them that they are weak, it upsets them. The country would be a nicer place if there were no more gender stereotyping.

The Convener: What about you, Ryan?

Ryan Murray: I do not know.

The Convener: You talked about freedom of speech—what about just having the right to say what you want to say?

Ryan Murray: Yes.

The Convener: What about you, Kai?

Kai Kerr: I would like you to look at housing, because not everybody has a home. I would like everybody to have shelter.

The Convener: That is an excellent point. That issue was written on all of the cards in our event—it was mentioned as something that we do well, something that we need to work on and something that, in some cases, we do not do well. We heard loud and clear where we need to go on housing and making sure that it works.

The Scottish Human Rights Commission is working with some tenants associations to make sure that tenants use their right to get an adequate house and decent shelter. You are on the money with your idea, Kai, because work is being done on that already. You are also absolutely right that more work needs to be done.

Kai Kerr: I also think that you are trying to do it and it is getting better—you are improving on it. You are building more houses now—you are extending our village to more than 700 houses—but it will take a lot of time.

The Convener: Can you see the difference locally?

Kai Kerr: Yes.

The Convener: Excellent. Toby, if there was one more thing that this Parliament could do to help you, what would it be?

Toby Petersen: We might need some better hospitals, because my great-gran died. But there is not really anything that you can do about that.

The Convener: Yes, but we are sad with you. Because grannies are important, aren't they? Having people who care for you when you are

having a difficult time, either in school or at home, is really important.

Toby Petersen: Yes.

The Convener: I agree. If committee members have nothing more to say, I will say thank you so much for coming. This has been a brilliant experience for us. When we go into the chamber or are in other committees making decisions, we will always be mindful of the information and the ideas that you have given us this morning.

We make laws now, but they will still be laws a couple of years down the road. By then, you might be at high school, starting your first job, getting your own house or going off to university or college. We need to make sure that that world is ready for you with a very good, human rights-based attitude.

Well done to your teachers, because they have done a superb job with you all. You should be grateful for the work that they do. We certainly are.

Thank you for coming to the committee this morning, because you have really helped us. I think that we have a few surprises for you during the rest of the day, but we will come to that when it happens.

I close the meeting now, on the very high note of the important work that you think we should do. Seán Wixted has taken lots of notes so that we can take on some of that work. Thank you so much.

Meeting closed at 11:25.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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