

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 5 March 2002
(*Morning*)

Session 1

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

5th Meeting 2002, Session 1

CONVENER

*Kate Maclean (Dundee West) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Kay Ullrich (West of Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Mrs Lyndsay McIntosh (Central Scotland) (Con)

*Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)

*Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP)

*Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

*Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

*attended

WITNESSES

Ms Margaret Curran (Deputy Minister for Social Justice)

Helen Mansbridge (Scottish Executive Finance and Central Services Department)

Peter Peacock (Deputy Minister for Finance and Public Services)

Yvonne Strachan (Scottish Executive Development Department)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jim Johnston

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Walsh

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 5 March 2002

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:04*]

Items in Private

The Convener (Kate Maclean): I welcome everybody to this meeting of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I have apologies from Tommy Sheridan and Kay Ullrich.

Item 1 is to agree to take items 4, 5 and 6 in private. Item 4 is a draft report, which the committee has not yet signed off. Under item 5 we will discuss individuals, which we obviously want to do in private. Item 6 deals with our proposed approach to the budget, which the committee has not signed off. Do we agree to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Budget Process 2003-04

The Convener: Under item 2, we will take evidence on the budget process from Margaret Curran, the Deputy Minister for Social Justice; Peter Peacock, the Deputy Minister for Finance and Public Services; Yvonne Strachan; Rachel Edgar; and Helen Mansbridge.

I ask members to direct their questions first to Margaret Curran, as she has to leave at half-past 10. I invite Margaret Curran to make a brief opening statement.

The Deputy Minister for Social Justice (Ms Margaret Curran): I apologise for having to leave at 10.30 am, but the domestic abuse conference is today. I hope that the Equal Opportunities Committee will forgive me.

It is good to be back at the committee. I feel that I attend regularly and so know the committee well. We appreciate the committee's interest in mainstreaming and we welcome the dialogue that we have been having about mainstreaming equality. We want that to continue in the coming months and years.

As the committee knows, we published our equality strategy in November 2000 and are making progress in a range of key areas: improving research and statistics; developing consultation and communication; raising awareness and promoting best practice; and developing the tools and the environment that will support mainstreaming.

The committee knows and I know that we cannot afford to underestimate the challenge that mainstreaming represents. It is about the systematic integration of equality perspectives into the everyday work of government. Although I argue that we have made significant progress, we do not underestimate the work that remains to be done; it is a substantial challenge. Anyone who is involved in equality knows the work that it entails.

We have significant agendas to pursue. I am happy that the committee has taken up our invitation to have a seminar on mainstreaming. That gives us a bit of space and an opportunity to talk about some of the issues in depth. I look forward to that as a way of continuing the attempt to address the agendas, which are profound.

My understanding is that the committee wants to talk today about the mainstreaming pilots that the Executive has been undertaking, particularly in relation to housing and education. We are happy to talk with you about those pilots. They are progressing. The committee knows that many positive comments have been made about the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 because of the equality provisions that are in it. The committee made its contribution to those provisions.

We are still only part of the way through the process. The pilots are not scheduled for completion until the end of the year. We are beginning to see some results, but we wish to broaden and deepen the approach as much as we can. We are beginning to draw lessons from the pilots and to integrate those lessons into the other work that Executive officials are developing in the bill team and in the equality unit.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): The minister has answered my first question, which was on the mainstreaming pilots in housing, but I have a question about education. Will she share with us the progress that has been made on developing equality policy in education and on the pilots in education?

Ms Curran: I hope that that means that I will not have to talk about housing and education. There is a lot of good work in housing to which I want to draw attention, but we will talk about education and I will perhaps come back to housing.

A range of work is being done on education—the officials who are with me can pick up the technical details. First, I will put that work in context. The mainstreaming approach runs with the grain of policy. Consider the McCrone settlement, for example, which involves big issues about teacher training. The pilot has been trying to ensure that equality is embedded in the approach. For example, the review of initial teacher education and continuing professional development group has a sub-group that will examine equality. On improved data collection, there was an overarching section on equality in the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000. We are picking up a range of on-going work.

We want equality to be part of the national debate on education. I have been doing some work on domestic abuse. We are working on support for local authorities and the new requirements of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. There is work on the integration of refugee children that we consider to be part of mainstreaming in education. There are different strata.

Cathy Peattie: The minister will agree that it is important to ensure that the mainstreaming of equalities issues runs all the way through legislation, but how do we deal with hearts and minds? The committee heard strong evidence from Gypsy Traveller children, whose experiences in education were pretty awful. How do we ensure that the policies are carried forward? When we examine further development for teachers, how do we ensure that local authority policies are not just written up, signed off, placed in a filing cabinet and lost?

Ms Curran: That is a big question and there is a range of different answers. I know what the committee recommended about Gypsy Travellers and the discussions highlighted some of the children's experiences. Guidance has been drafted for education authorities and schools on interrupted learning patterns and we are considering what support can be delivered for affected children. Many changes can be made across the range of issues that have been mentioned.

Hearts and minds are perhaps the most difficult: we cannot legislate to get into the hearts and minds of every schoolteacher in Scotland, but there are many levers that we can pull to do our best. On the continued professional development of teachers, pre-service and on-going training can do a lot to change people's understanding of equality and how they can liberate children to fulfil their potential. In a previous existence, I worked with a teacher training college and helped to develop some of the modules in equality. We worked closely across professions to do that. A lot can be achieved by similar small amounts of work.

I have witnessed this more closely in housing, but I am sure that it is the same in education: when the Executive has legislated and put in place overarching provisions for equal opportunities, the debate has shifted dramatically. People start to realise that they are accountable for their actions and that equality is not just an aspiration or something that only those committed to it will pursue. Many of us have had experience of being the only ones committed to equality and have felt marginalised, but that culture is beginning to change. People realise that it is not an optional extra and that it must be embedded in everything we do.

The next step is to persuade professionals that they best serve the needs of children by understanding and implementing equality strategies. They should understand that it is not just the politically correct thing to do; it helps them to deliver their professional agenda. We will not serve Scotland's children well unless we understand their diversity. Unless we understand the needs of disabled kids, we cannot say that we are teaching all kids properly. I may be being optimistic, but I believe that there is a shift in the culture and that people are beginning to understand that. It is a mixture of compliance and persuasion, and there should be opportunities to assist people who are grappling with the complexities and delivering on the practices. It is about resources as well.

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Is additional funding available for the pilots that you spoke about? Which budget heading does it come under?

Ms Curran: I might defer some of the budget questions until later. I will speak about the mainstreaming agenda with regard to housing, with which I am a bit more familiar because that comes under my portfolio. We should not always put in extra money for equalities, because the extra money is all that will be spent. We must integrate the spending. For example, the work on housing and tenancy rights for succession should be integrated across the board. Any local authority or registered social landlord should have responsibility for that.

The questions relate more to the work of the equality unit than to the outcomes of the work itself. I invite Yvonne Strachan to talk about the equality unit.

Yvonne Strachan (Scottish Executive Development Department): As members know from the objectives that are set out, £1 million per annum is allocated towards equalities work. It is intended to be used principally for promoting and developing equal opportunities internally and externally and for providing internal support to departments and other groups in their mainstreaming. The resource provides internal flexibility, so it can be allocated to assist where we think development work is required.

For example, we might consider the developments in the second phase of the housing pilot. We hope that somebody will come in from outside to work with the implementation team to ensure that equalities perspectives are brought in. The equality unit would work on providing the support for that, so that the development could proceed.

Assistance is available internally, through us. We can provide a development function as well as ensure that thought is given to how the resources within the departments' budgets should be deployed to develop equality work as part of a mainstreaming programme and as part of departments' natural work.

10:15

Ms Curran: The key issue is that all spending ministries are equality-spending ministries. That is the key point that I want to convey—to my colleagues as much as to Gil Paterson.

Mr Paterson: Are there plans to roll out the outcomes of the pilots throughout the Executive?

Ms Curran: Yes. The housing pilot is a bit more advanced, because the legislative programme was more advanced and because the pilot came at an early stage in relation to the legislation. The pilots still have to be completed, because we are still doing work on the guidance that accompanies the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and its

implementation. The equality unit is developing guidance for other bill teams. We are also considering draft training and resource packs. We do intend to have such a roll-out.

I hope that we can learn quite a bit from the pilots and that our experience will accumulate. The hearts and minds have perhaps not followed quite as we would have wanted them to. I am sure that we will look again and find other things that need done. We know how challenging this is and we do not want to be too simplistic about it.

Mr Paterson: The memorandum that you and Peter Peacock have supplied states:

"Ministers and officials have also established contacts with the Government of Canada".

We all know how well the Canadians are doing in tackling domestic abuse and violence against women and children. There is a big role for equal opportunities in redressing imbalances in how laws are passed, which is male-dominated even in Canada. You have also been learning about domestic abuse courts there—which is apt, given the conference that you are to attend later today. Is there anything that we can take from the Canadian example in the context of equal opportunities for women and children?

Ms Curran: You will know that I visited Canada. I have told you that before; you must think that I love to share my stories with you. We saw the work of organisations across the voluntary sector and I focused on women's work. I visited a domestic abuse project—a refuge. The parallels between the issues that the Canadians are facing and those that we are facing were striking.

We are sharing a lot and are continuing the learning process. The big lesson that I took away from Canada was the need to mainstream at the very root of policy. Mainstreaming cannot just be bolted on at the end, nor can the Minister for Finance and Public Services simply be asked to disaggregate budgets. Rather than just being his responsibility, mainstreaming has to be embedded in everything that is done. Then, the rest follows. We are intervening at certain stages, which is better than nothing, but we want to start getting at the root causes of inequalities.

Canada is an interesting example because the Canadians have been working on mainstreaming for so long and have a sophisticated approach to it. We still have a lot to learn from them. I do not think that visits continue all the time, but electronic communication does.

Mr Paterson: Good. Thank you for that.

The Convener: I remind members that the minister has to leave at half-past 10. I have quite a list of questions, so I ask that we keep the questions—and the answers—reasonably brief, so

that we can get through as much as possible.

Ms Curran: Apologies.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I have a point about housing, which relates to what Gil Paterson was asking. I am impressed with what the Executive has done to take forward the domestic abuse agenda since 1999. However, I still have some concerns and wonder whether they have been addressed through the housing pilot. It is great that the fact that more refuge provision is required is being recognised, but there is a difficulty, in that not enough attention is being given to what happens after the period of refuge provision. If women and children do not have somewhere to move on to, that blocks refuge provision for others. Costs are involved in refuge provision, which is an issue for people who are not on housing benefit but are in employment.

How are you addressing the difficulty of moving people on from refuge provision to permanent housing? Under the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, women who do not have children, but who have been abused and are in refuge, are not necessarily classed as being in priority need, which would enable them to move on. Most providers of refuge would not want to throw such women out if they have nowhere to go.

Ms Curran: I will try to address those many points as quickly as I can.

I recognise the points that Elaine Smith has made. We decided that refuge provision was a big priority to address. That was broadly recognised by women's groups, including women's aid groups. The £12 million that was provided for refuge provision showed that it was a key priority.

We are also examining after-refuge provision, which is a big part of the agenda of local authorities and multi-agency domestic abuse partnerships, with which I shall be speaking today. Local authorities, registered social landlords and Communities Scotland are very much in favour of discussion with women's organisations to develop ways of meeting accommodation needs.

On homelessness provision, the tightening up of requirements under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 addresses the needs of women who are fleeing domestic violence. The existing refuge provision did not cater for such women, who often had to move on. Back-up is being provided. The next phase is to reconsider the definition of priority need and to examine why and in what way that is not working. We will look at the underlying causes of homelessness, because we know that violence is a factor.

Mrs Lyndsay McIntosh (Central Scotland) (Con): Are you able to insist on the adoption of pilot results by the agencies, non-governmental

organisations and non-departmental public bodies that you fund. What levers can you pull?

Ms Curran: We have several levers and a lot of power over housing. Funding is perhaps the biggest and most important lever.

Mrs McIntosh: We shall come to that.

Ms Curran: Peter Peacock might be able to deal with that.

Guidance and regulation are also important. For example, equal opportunities in the broadest sense is a requirement on Communities Scotland and the local housing strategies of local authorities. As Cathy Peattie remarked, we must focus on the detail and we will consider the detail of local housing strategies. We are all familiar with a world in which people say that they have honoured their equal opportunities commitment, but the commitment has not been as broad or as deep as it should have been.

An enormous amount can be achieved and delivered through regulations, guidance and persuasion. I am confident that we will be able to push many of the requirements.

Mrs McIntosh: Will you consider methods such as those used for European structural funds, whereby a condition of funding for health authorities or local authorities is that equal opportunities and other equality issues are mainstreamed?

Ms Curran: Technically, that would be possible, but we would have to ensure that it was effective. For example, equality is a requirement for local housing strategies, so if authorities refused to implement that, we could refuse to fund them for housing, which would bankrupt them. However, that would never happen because local authorities understand that they must comply with legislation; there is no issue of avoidance.

Mrs McIntosh: Will you consider target setting?

Ms Curran: Yes, but in partnership with local authorities. Local authorities strongly resist ring fencing, so a partnership arrangement is more constructive. We have much to learn from the work of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which has gone far in the field of equal opportunities, but there is more that we want it to do. That is a much more constructive relationship than our—

Mrs McIntosh: Throwing your weight around?

Ms Curran: I might not be adverse to that if I thought that it would achieve something.

The Convener: That is an interesting point. I presume that the Scottish Executive would step in if a health board or local authority that received Government money to fulfil any other statutory

function simply spent the money on, say, going on holiday. Why cannot the statutory function for equal opportunities be given the same weight?

Ms Curran: Please do not imply that we would not step in if the money was not being properly spent. I work on the assumption that, as the requirement in relation to equality of opportunity is a statutory requirement, local authorities will implement it. All the evidence is that local authorities will comply. We believe that the best way to ensure that such compliance delivers effectively is through partnership, discussion and detailed work with local authorities. There is no need for us to threaten local authorities, because all the evidence shows that they are working closely with us on equalities.

Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): Yvonne Strachan mentioned the role of the Executive's equality unit and the money that is available for it. From our questions on previous occasions, the minister will know that the committee is concerned about the data that are used to sustain the Executive's policies. Does the Executive plan to update the data, so that it can identify the stakeholders that require to be consulted and contacted? Are there plans to improve on the wider data, so that good policy can be developed?

Ms Curran: Michael McMahon was looking at Yvonne Strachan, so I am unsure whether he wants me to answer. I will start off and Yvonne Strachan can continue.

A considerable amount of work on data collection has been done across the Executive. The equality unit has done a lot of work and is currently undertaking a consultation on gender issues, which I mentioned on a previous occasion. We are working towards implementing the recommendations on the collection of data in education that the race equality advisory forum made in its report. A whole range of data collection is being undertaken. Yvonne Strachan will provide further detail.

Yvonne Strachan: We are keen to ensure that the databases of organisations that can be contacted for consultation processes are as up to date and as effective as possible. Engender and the Glasgow Women's Library are collaborating to develop our women's database, so that it can be much more accessible for women's organisations. Similarly, we have been working with the disability groups to develop an effective database of contacts with groups and individuals that want to be part of the process.

Making our databases up to date and effective is an integral part of our work with all other groups. Our aim is not simply to be able to contact the intermediaries but to help the different groups to

establish mechanisms that allow them to have as wide a contact as possible with their constituencies.

On the data that are available for policy support, the Executive's central statistical unit has a clear policy of collecting disaggregated data across the board so that it can meet equality objectives. We will pursue that policy as well as we can and we will identify what needs to be done to fill the gaps that exist. There is a definite commitment to address the data issue. We recognise that, without the data, it is difficult or impossible to develop the kind of mainstreaming of equalities that the Parliament and the Executive want to see. Improving the data is a priority for the Executive.

Mr McMahon: My question has almost become the committee's standard question, but we will continue to ask it, as it is good to get on record what progress is being made and the Executive's attitude to data collection.

Notwithstanding the fact that we want every Executive department to mainstream equal opportunities, the body that helps that to happen is the equality unit. Yvonne Strachan mentioned that the budget for the equality unit has increased to £1 million. However, that £1 million—which also covers the asylum seekers and refugees team and on-going staff costs—is only about 0.25 per cent of the Executive's administrative budget. Is that sufficient to allow you to monitor the development of policy across all departments? Does it allow you to send out a signal to stakeholders and to the wider community that the Executive is committed to providing the resources to address equal opportunities issues?

10:30

Ms Curran: That question takes us to the heart of the mainstreaming debate. To be honest, there is a part of me that would love to be in charge of a huge equality department with a huge budget, so that I could direct the Scottish Government to implement an equality agenda. However, that would not work; it has been tried before and it did not work. Interesting and well-recognised projects were carried out at the margins under that model, but we have deliberately gone down a different road—the mainstreaming road.

If we had a big department and a big budget, officials in other departments would tell us that we should spend that money and that equality responsibilities should be paid for out of the equality budget. We see the equality unit as a catalyst that can go into other departments and make things happen. I understand Michael McMahon's argument. It is a strong argument that must be thought through, but the signal that we must give to stakeholders—in housing, in

education and elsewhere—is that all accountability and implementation mechanisms must be integrated to ensure that equality is delivered across the board.

A big equality unit would train equality officers in local authorities and social organisations. We want every teacher and social worker in Scotland to work on and understand the equality agenda, in areas such as disability, for example. The only way of doing that is to get into the nuts and bolts of each department and organisation.

Mr McMahon: I thoroughly agree, minister. I was not arguing that the budget should be extended to that degree or that the remit for equalities should be taken from any department. However, a question still has to be asked. Rather than boasting that the budget has been increased to £1 million, would not it be better to signal the Executive's commitment by saying that it has been increased by £1 million? People who genuinely want a commitment to equalities do not want to believe that the Executive is scrimping on the money that is available for data collection or for monitoring what departments and local authorities are doing. Given the equality unit's resource commitments, is a budget of £1 million sufficient to do what is required to ensure that the Executive is on top of that work?

Ms Curran: I assure the committee that I am always prepared to argue for the budget that we need to do the job that we have committed ourselves to doing. If I thought that the £1 million in question—or any sum—was not sufficient to do that job, I would argue strongly for more resources. I do not know whether more money is required at the moment, but I am not saying that I would not ask at some point for more resources to help us to do the catalyst work that we are undertaking. I am not closing the door on that suggestion. I understand what Michael McMahon is saying, but at the moment we are not scrimping and scraping. As long as it did not cut against the main point that I have been making, we would be prepared to argue for more resources.

The Convener: There is time for a final question from Elaine Smith before we let the minister go away—only a few minutes late.

Elaine Smith: As Cathy Peattie said, some of the biggest barriers to equality arise not from direct discrimination but from systems, processes and attitudes—the hearts-and-minds stuff that has been mentioned. I understand what you say, minister, about trying to get every teacher and everyone working in local government and housing to change their hearts and minds on the equality agenda, but there will be a cost associated with promoting equality and with encouraging such a shift in attitudes. Has any of the budget been identified for doing that? You are

probably fed up with hearing me talk about practical examples, such as the Zero Tolerance respect pilot in schools. We should be concerned not only with the people who are involved in such initiatives now but with involving the next generation at an earlier age to encourage respect. That might lead to a shift in attitudes and a change in people's hearts and minds.

Ms Curran: I want to make two points. The first is about increases in budgets. You are bound to hear a Scottish Executive minister say—Peter Peacock will say it better than I can—that there is a record local government settlement and increased health spending. I expect some of that money to be spent on equality issues. There is no excuse for local authorities not to meet their equality requirements with their increased expenditure.

Secondly, I acknowledge your suggestion that not all equality work requires higher expenditure. I know from experience that a lot of work can be done in pre-service training. The matter is one of integrating equalities and changing people's thinking as much as of changing the materials that are used. Changing frames of mind can be done quite easily if equalities are integrated. We cannot back away from that; not everything has resource implications.

However, there are serious matters that clearly have resource implications. If you look at spending patterns across the Executive, you will see that there are other ways to lever in moneys. For example, considerable resources are attached to the national group on domestic abuse. A £4.5 million programme of moneys is attached to developing a whole range of work, some of which cuts across into health regulations, including regulations on maternity care for women who have experienced domestic violence.

We keep repeating the point that the marginal moneys attached to the equality unit will never match the equality agenda. The only way to lever in the substantial resources that are required to address equality issues is to ensure that mainstream agencies do that work. If that does not happen, we will never get to the heart of some of those difficult issues and the key issue of spending and equality work will remain a marginal activity.

The Convener: Thank you for giving evidence to the committee, minister.

We shall now hear evidence from the Deputy Minister for Finance and Public Services, Peter Peacock, who is accompanied by Helen Mansbridge from the Scottish Executive finance and central services department. I invite the minister to make a short statement before committee members ask questions.

The Deputy Minister for Finance and Public Services (Peter Peacock): We submitted a memorandum in advance of today's evidence session. Quite a lot of that document is taken up with budgetary matters and I want to draw out some of the key points that arise.

We are seeking a range of improvements in the way in which the Executive goes about budgeting generally. We are just about to start the 2002 spending review, which will set targets and budgets for spending for the next three-year period. It is opportune to be able to fit equality matters into the new framework that we are developing, but I emphasise that there are many other aspects of the budget process that we are trying to refine. Building in an equality element competes with other work that is happening across the Executive to achieve a more rigorous approach to budgeting throughout the organisation.

The key to making progress on the budget side of the equation is making progress on the things that Margaret Curran was talking about—mainstreaming equalities in everyday Executive policy. That is particularly important in relation to new initiatives, where it is relatively easy to address questions on devising policy and how policies will impact on equalities. Mainstreaming is the key. If mainstream policy thinking addresses equality issues, the budget process will simply provide the cash to implement those policies. If the policies include equality measures, the budget will also automatically include equality measures.

The budget process is a challenging scrutiny process that the centre of the organisation undertakes on behalf of the whole organisation. When any bids for resources come to the Executive's finance department, we challenge the need for those resources and try to exhaust the arguments about why those resources are required. We challenge bids on the ground of whether they represent best value for money. We also scrutinise budget bids to see whether they comply with other Executive priorities and with Executive policy across the board. As part of that general scrutiny process, the budget process provides an opportunity to scrutinise budget bids against equality criteria.

As I said, we have just started the three-year forward look on our budgets and departments are beginning to prepare submissions for the next three-year spending period. We plan to use that forward look explicitly to scrutinise bids against equality criteria. Each department's bid for every new item of expenditure for the coming spending period will be tested against whether it contributes to closing the equalities gap. That will help to roll forward thinking on equality through the budget process and will have an impact for at least the next three years.

There will also be developments in the shorter term. Later this month, the annual expenditure report for 2003-04 will be published. We have issued guidance to departments on the equalities questions that they need to address in their submissions for that report. That is set out in the memorandum that we submitted to the committee.

An equality proofing budgets advisory group has been established. It has commissioned quite a lot of research, which will be reported on in due course and will help us to develop equality proofing in our budgeting techniques. The group held an expert seminar in October, which clerks of the committee attended. Later this month, consultants will present the advisory group with the results of that seminar and the work that has been done and I am sure that the committee will see those results in due course.

As Margaret Curran said, we are developing links with other countries and other parts of the UK to establish how they equality proof budgets. We have given departments guidance on the submission of budget bids, as I said. One of our omissions was not to invite the committee to be represented on the advisory group. It would be helpful if the committee's thinking were fed directly into the work of that group. The committee could then be informed regularly, through the clerks, of what is happening in that group. I extend that invitation to the committee. As the advisory group is made up of officials, not politicians, the best way in which to involve the committee would be for one of its clerks to attend the group, representing the committee. That would be helpful both for us and for the committee.

In preparing for today's meeting, I took my first detailed look at the budget process in relation to equalities. I read some of the comments that the committee made on last year's annual expenditure report. I am not sure that there is yet a clear understanding between the committee and the finance function about precisely what is meant by an equality-proofed budget. What would it look like and what would its attributes be? At what level should such matters be addressed—a high level or a detailed, line-by-line level in the budget process? To what purpose would we put such documents? Would they be intended just for scrutiny purposes or to bring about change in future policy? What are our priorities? Do we want to equality proof every new bid, which we can do with relative ease, or do we want to go into the whole of the existing expenditure and equality proof that? How much time would that take?

It would help us—I hope that it would help the committee, too—if we could spend more time discussing such matters with you. We want to put aside half a day to hold a seminar involving finance officials, the committee's officials and

members of the committee, so that we can get into the detail of the issues and work out precisely what we want. We might then, I hope, be able to meet your expectations and arrive at a shared understanding of what is or is not achievable in the short term.

I am happy to answer any questions. I shall probably want to add to what Margaret Curran said about structure funds in local authorities and other public bodies, if members want to address that issue.

The Convener: Thank you. The committee would welcome the opportunity to have one of the clerks sitting on the advisory group. We will shortly be involved in a seminar on equal opportunities and mainstreaming and it will be useful for members to be able to discuss those aspects of the budget in more detail.

Cathy Peattie: Minister, you will agree that we need some indicators to help us to achieve equality proofing. As I said to Margaret Curran, that is a hearts-and-minds job. We need to ensure that procedures are in place and that we can scrutinise whether the money that is supposedly set aside for ensuring equality is being spent in that way. Your submission is helpful in identifying different areas for attention, but there is much work still to be done. Your invitation for the committee to work alongside officials is welcome. The problem over the past two or three years has been in identifying equalities issues in the budgets and in ensuring that we are doing what we need to do. A lot of work remains to be done and, although people are willing to do it, we have a wee bit to go yet.

10:45

Peter Peacock: I agree entirely that we have to win the hearts and minds of people so that, in thinking about the way in which they deliver services and develop policy, they always address the key questions of equality. It is not difficult to identify those questions; the difficulty is in ensuring that that discipline exists. From the centre, we are checking across the whole organisation to ensure that money is being spent on Executive priorities. We are trying to ensure compliance with those priorities. We will try to build that rigour into the spending review process, so that there is much greater awareness of such issues.

On identifying spending, the easy bit is identifying the projects that are about equalities. However, those projects will always involve only small amounts of money relative to the total budget. The important thing is to shift that total figure and to shift people's behaviour in the organisation to ensure that they constantly address equalities issues. For example, in the

wider public sector, through the annual or triennial agreements that ministers come to with all the quangos, it would be possible to build elements into the quangos' work to ensure that they address equalities questions. That would be a matter for agreement.

We are introducing a duty of best value on local authorities and the accountable officers throughout the Executive. The best-value criteria for local government will include an equalities reference, as far as that is possible in Scotland, in the devolved functions. We are building equality considerations into the processes whereby local authorities and quangos secure best value. A range of such initiatives is being taken throughout the public sector, which ought to help with the scrutiny of what is happening to ensure that equality considerations are being taken into account.

Elaine Smith: The committee has recommended that ring-fenced resources should be allocated to equalities issues. Can we expect to see that this year? Can you give us any detail on that? If ring-fenced resources are not going to be allocated to equalities issues, can you explain why not and why that decision has been made? Can you also say something about equalities training in the Executive departments? I still get the feeling that some departments do not understand the principle of mainstreaming equality and feel that equality does not have anything to do with their particular functions. It is important that we explore how the Executive might, through the budget process, make them understand that equalities issues touch every department.

Peter Peacock: One of the reasons for our wanting to hold a seminar is that we need to get down to the detail of what we mean by ring fencing in this context. If a minister said that they wanted a certain amount of money to be spent on equalities and equality-type projects or in pursuing a particular objective to narrow a gap somewhere in society, that money would not have to be ring-fenced, in a technical sense, to ensure that that happened. In some circumstances, the minister might choose to ring-fence funding, but we must get some clarity about what we mean by some of these terms, so that we can interpret them properly. The easy part is identifying the discrete areas of expenditure where we want to tackle a particular discrimination or inequality and address resources to it. The difficult part is doing something in the whole system.

That brings me to your second question, which was about Executive departments and mainstream thinking. Yvonne Strachan and the equality unit are constantly chivvying people along. Any policy documents that are produced will be scrutinised to ensure that departments have considered equalities issues. If they have not, the documents

will be sent back to them and they will be encouraged to think more about those issues. That is a constant process. Through the finance function and the budget scrutiny process, every bid for new expenditure will be assessed, in part, against an equality criterion. Departments know that, if they do not address that issue, they are likely to score lower than departments that address it. We are building in such incentives.

Ultimately, we are talking about a cultural thing. It is about winning hearts and minds. It is about telling people that it is Executive policy to think about equalities, but it is also about persuading them of the benefits of doing that in terms of the recipients of the benefits in the community. Much of the Executive's work is intended to address inequalities, such as those in health conditions, education attainment, wealth creation and income distribution. A range of initiatives that are about equalities at one level continues all the time. We need to encourage that constantly while building in scrutiny processes to ensure that no one gets away with not addressing those questions.

Elaine Smith: The proposed seminar is a good idea for the committee.

Mr McMahon: The committee made some specific recommendations. In recognition of the fact that the work that is involved in the budget process is long term, the committee asked for impact assessments to be undertaken on each area of equal opportunities in relation to schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998. Has that recommendation been accepted? Will such impact assessments be included in this year's budget document?

Peter Peacock: On the last page of our memorandum, we set out what we have asked departments to address in their submissions for the annual expenditure report, which will be published later this month. I have not yet seen all the final drafts, but departments have been asked to address

"- positive action taken to address an inequality;
- improvements in data collection"

and

"- research that will assist evidence-based policy-making."

We are beginning to tighten up on what ought to be included in the AER. All the evidence that we are receiving from other countries is that such things take time. I do not want to mislead members into thinking that this year's document will be a revolutionary transformation that will answer all their concerns. The process will shift matters forward gradually.

That is another reason why I would like a seminar to be held. We must have a clear feel for what an impact assessment is. I mentioned to

officials this morning that when I was involved in education, debates were taking place about the impact of the number of female teachers in primary schools in providing role models for young males and whether that affected their learning. The question whether the number of female teachers discriminated against the recruitment of males was also argued about. The argument is emerging in various quarters that modern teaching methods play to female characteristics more than male characteristics, which may be one reason why females now perform better in education than males. That is impact assessment work on a huge amount of expenditure, which I have no doubt would be debated for many years, until people had some feel for it.

The committee probably has to decide what it wants to do with impact assessments. We must have much greater clarity on that. What ought we to examine? What can we address easily? How can we make productive change where that is important, and prioritise? We would like to have a much better feel for what the committee wants, so that we can do such work more effectively. The Executive does not lack willingness to get into that, but the question is how we deploy our resources and prioritise.

Mr McMahon: I agree. The committee also recommended that comments about the AER should be analysed and included with the document, where possible. If they could not be included, the rationale for not including them should be given. Has that recommendation been taken on board?

Peter Peacock: From examining all the relevant documents in the past few days, I have picked up on the fact that our advice from the Finance Committee did not repeat this committee's advice to it on the budget. The Finance Committee asked us to do slightly different things. From further debate, we want to reconcile what we can take forward.

As I said, the Executive does not lack willingness to find a way forward on the recommendations, or, when we cannot do that, to say why. We want to tease out for more clarity the recommendations that this committee made. That picks up Elaine Smith's comments about ring-fenced funding and impact assessments. We want to make progress.

Mrs McIntosh: Will the next AER pilot the use of the opportunity-cost approach to policy costing? That sounds like something from an economics lecture.

Peter Peacock: The memorandum sets out what we seek to do. If by the opportunity cost one means that by deploying expenditure in one way, the opportunity to deploy it another way, for

example on an equalities issue, is automatically lost, I am unconvinced that we will go into the depth that would satisfy the committee. I would want to go into detail on that issue at the proposed seminar to get a clearer idea of what we should do and of whether we should apply that to every aspect of expenditure. The Finance Committee did not pick that up in its recommendations on the action that the Executive should take to improve the AER, and that is a discrepancy between this committee's report and the Finance Committee's report. We want to consider that issue much more.

I have lost sight of the second part of your question.

Mrs McIntosh: I merely said that the phrase "opportunity-cost approach" sounds like something from an economics lecture. I take the minister's point that money that is spent in one way cannot be spent in another way. Such decisions will always be the subject of huge debate.

Margaret Curran referred to the fact that mainstreaming equalities involves building equality considerations into the start of a process. What plans does the Scottish Executive have to provide details of the manner in which new policies have been developed in line with the European Foundation for Quality Management's model and an overarching equality strategy?

Peter Peacock: Yvonne Strachan could answer that better than I can, but generally, the equality unit provides guidance not only on how policy is developed, but on how legislation is constructed. It is looking for common Executive guidelines that will ensure that bill teams take account of certain equality considerations and do not only respond to amendments from other parts of the system. We want more consistency.

As I understand it, the EFQM's model is a quality improvement mechanism that is used in parts of the Executive, parts of quangos and parts of local authorities, but by no means consistently throughout the public sector. The Executive participates in many other quality development initiatives. My department is trying to reconcile some of that. We have the charter mark, Investors in People, EFQM and all sorts of other standards towards which people work. We are trying to achieve a coherent Executive approach. If people use EFQM, they will use all its disciplines, so they will use whatever equalities definitions it has. The Executive is trying to address that issue more widely.

Yvonne Strachan: Lyndsay McIntosh's question relates to the essence of mainstreaming. If policy development takes such matters into account from the beginning, policy will be better. Several initiatives are being taken throughout the Executive to consider quality control issues and

how we develop better policy. Policy making is one of the Executive's essential functions. Parts of the Executive are considering how that can be done better by drawing on the experience and guidance that are available.

The equality unit's concern is that whatever guidance is being developed includes an equality perspective, so that what we say on developing better policy is the same as what we say about mainstreaming equality. Lyndsay McIntosh asked what we are doing to address that. The bread and butter of the Executive's work is ensuring that it has the best way of developing and implementing policy. The equality unit's concern is that an equality perspective is included. That is the process that we intend to pursue.

Peter Peacock: I will take up Lyndsay McIntosh's earlier question to Margaret Curran about structural funds, because that is one of my responsibilities. The basis of the structural funds programme lies in ironing out inequalities at a European level. That relates to major economic inequalities in a geographic sense and ensuring that the most peripheral parts of Scotland have the basic infrastructure to compete with other parts of Europe, for example. That ensures that there is more cohesion between the prosperity of parts of central Scotland and areas that are lagging behind, including the Highlands and Islands, where economic activity is lower and income per head is lower. Much money is spent on trying to equalise parts of Europe. In addition, equalities issues are involved in much of the money that is received from European structural funds, as that money goes in a variety of ways to combat exclusion.

Yesterday, I visited a college in Cumbernauld, which is examining how women from a social inclusion partnership area can be given the skills that are necessary to reintroduce them to the workplace. European funds are being used by the college to provide crèche and nursery facilities so that young mothers from a SIP can be given training for work opportunities. That example shows how equalities criteria are applied in the decisions to grant European structural funding.

11:00

Mrs McIntosh: I thank the minister for picking up on that point.

Mr Paterson: Respondents to the Equal Opportunities Committee's consultation on the AER expressed concern about the financial language that was used in the document. When people stray into using financial jargon, most souls find it difficult to understand them. It would be a good idea if everybody used the language that is used by Joe and Jeanette Bloggs—that is something that all of us understand.

Concern was also expressed about provision of the report in minority languages, as people in some of the smaller ethnic communities in Scotland suffer a double blow when dealing with financial jargon. Does the Executive plan to take action to deal with that issue?

Peter Peacock: We are trying to improve our consultation on the AER. The document is open and accessible, but sadly not many people take an interest in it. In the past two years, we ran a series of roadshows and we will hold another series this year. The roadshows aim to involve people from all sorts of interest groups in different communities so that they can comment on all aspects of the budget process. We involve equalities groups and those with particular concerns about equalities in that process.

Gil Paterson rightly makes a point about jargon and the accessibility of the budget document. The AER began life as a technical document and we are trying to make it less technical. There is a lot of talk about the Executive's objectives as they relate to the experience of people in communities for which the Executive sets aside moneys to achieve those objectives.

We are trying to make the budget document more user-friendly, but we will have to be persistent with people about the language that they use. In that respect, in addition to equality-proofing the document, we probably need a jargon-proofer to jargon-proof it, as that would make it more accessible.

The budget document is not translated into minority languages. If the Executive were to receive requests to communicate with members of ethnic minority communities where language was an issue, I am sure that we would seek to facilitate that by bringing in the appropriate staff, including translators. We would have to examine whether we could translate the whole document into the minority languages that are currently used in Scotland. However, that should not be a barrier to people from ethnic minority communities getting access to the budget document. We would be happy to examine what we could do in that respect.

The Executive amends bills constantly as they progress through Parliament. The Freedom of Information (Scotland) Bill is a recent example of that, as was the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Bill, which I saw through the Parliament. Changes that were made to the latter bill ensured that provision was made in suitable formats for people who had difficulty in accessing documents for reasons of language or disability. We are making progress and the expenditure that is being incurred on that provision is reflected in the AER.

Mr Paterson: You extended an invitation to the clerks to the Equal Opportunities Committee to participate in the process. Is there a role for the Equal Opportunities Committee to take a watching brief on the jargon that is used in the process?

Peter Peacock: I fully expect the committee to keep chivvyng us on such issues. In a sense, that is more the committee's job than it is ours. We benefit from external scrutiny; people who are not so close to the process will take a different perspective and tell us that something does not make a lot of sense.

In comparison with where we were a few years ago, we are still in the very early stages of developing our budget process. The process is much more open and transparent than it has ever been, but there is a long way to go to refine the process. I fully expect the committee to keep commenting on the process.

The Convener: Is the minister saying that the budget document is available on request in accessible formats including minority languages, Braille and audio cassette?

Peter Peacock: I will need to check the detail on that.

The Convener: Will the minister write to the committee on that, as it is an important point?

Peter Peacock: I am not sure that those formats are available, but I will check. I said that, if we received a request for one of those formats, we would seek to accommodate the request. We will examine whether we could make the formats available universally.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The publication "Wiring it Up" makes reference to 11 cross-cutting issues, one of which is equality. Will the Executive list cross-cutting issues under expenditure headings in the AER? When the Executive examines next year's budget, will cross-cutting priorities be shown separately in the document? How focused will the Executive be on those issues?

Peter Peacock: In the spending review 2002, which we are in the process of kicking off, we are taking a particular approach to cross-cutting issues across the Executive. That includes the Executive's approach to drugs and its approach to other issues that have a dimension that is not unique to one department. I will ask Helen Mansbridge to set out the detail of the AER document.

Helen Mansbridge (Scottish Executive Finance and Central Services Department): The AER will contain sections on equalities provision in housing and education, which are the Executive's two mainstreaming pilots. We have asked other departments to include information on equalities,

for example on data improvements and research that they have undertaken on positive action. That information will be included throughout the document, as it may relate to different sections. For example, information on roads and transport will also be shown further on in the document in the roads budget.

The Convener: I thank the minister and the officials for attending the committee. The clerks will be in touch about the seminar.

Peter Peacock: We will await notification from the committee of which clerk will join the advisory group.

Civic Participation (Aberdeen)

The Convener: The next item is consideration of a draft briefing paper on the civic participation event that we will hold in Aberdeen when the Parliament meets there in May. Do members have any comments or suggestions?

Mrs McIntosh: I would rather that all the workshops were held on the one night rather than on two nights, as other events will be happening during the week.

The Convener: Does the committee agree that we should hold a civic participation event while we are in Aberdeen? Apart from our visits to Gypsy Traveller sites and other places, the Equal Opportunities Committee has not held meetings around the country. The civic participation event would be a good opportunity for people in Aberdeen, who are geographically further away from Edinburgh, to become involved in the work of the committee. I hope that the committee agrees that the event is a good idea.

Mr McMahon: I agree entirely.

Elaine Smith: Do we have to discuss the workshop topics now?

The Convener: We could return to that. We need to agree the overall approach to the event. The clerks can then contact organisations. There is no rush on the finer detail of the event including the workshops. Members should contact the clerks with details of individuals or organisations that they would like to be involved in the event. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

11:10

Meeting continued in private until 11:45.

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