EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 4 March 2003
(*Morning*)

Session 1

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 4 March 2003

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
4th Meeting 2003, 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)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD)
Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jim Johnston

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Walsh

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

The Chamber

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 4 March 2003

(*Morning*)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:01*]

Items in Private

The Convener (Kate Maclean): Okay. We will get started. We have apologies from Jamie Stone who will arrive late.

I ask members to consider taking items 5 and 6 in private. The items deal with draft reports that have not yet been signed off by the committee. Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Reporters

The Convener: Under item 2, we are to consider reports from our reporters. The first report is the gender reporter's report. I ask Elaine Smith whether she wants to speak to her paper, which was circulated to members with the agenda.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I will do so briefly. I visited the Glasgow Women's Library along with Richard Walsh, who accompanied me to clerk the visit. Members have a copy of the report on the visit.

First, I congratulate Glasgow Women's Library on the work that it undertakes; I was impressed by my visit. I also point out that Glasgow Women's Library is to visit the Parliament and hold an event at lunch time on Thursday. Pauline McNeill MSP is organising the event and I am sure that she and the GWL would be delighted if MSPs turned up.

I ask members to turn to the recommendations. I would be pleased if the committee would agree to pass the report to the Scottish Executive for information. I was struck by the lack of computer equipment at the library. One recommendation is for the committee to make inquiries of the Scottish Executive about the general situation regarding the provision of such equipment to community resources such as the Glasgow Women's Library, which could certainly use some help in getting additional new technology. I also recommend that the committee writes to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, asking for further information about whether the Glasgow Women's Library could have Parliament partner library status.

I will leave it at that. If members have questions, I am happy to try to answer them.

Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): I endorse the recommendation that Glasgow Women's Library should get Parliament partner library status, as that would send out a positive signal. I am glad that Elaine Smith made that recommendation and I support it whole-heartedly.

The Convener: As there are no further comments on the report, are the recommendations agreed?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: The second report is from the committee's disability reporter. The report, which was circulated to members with the agenda, is a version of the oral report that Gil Paterson made at the committee's meeting of 31 January. Do you want to say anything about the paper, Gil?

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Given that we have had the debate in the chamber

on the European year of disabled people 2003, it could be said that events have overtaken us. The mere fact that we had such a debate raised awareness about the year. I simply commend the verbal report that I made on 31 January to the Parliament.

The Convener: As members do not have questions or comments on the report, is it agreed that we commend the report?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Equal Opportunities Training

The Convener: The next item is our consideration of equal opportunities training. Members received a copy of a paper on the subject with the agenda. Do members have comments to make?

Elaine Smith: I welcome the paper. I am not sure whether it is possible to get an answer today, but I want to raise an issue about members' staff, particularly those in constituency offices, where much of the interface with the public takes place. Would it be possible for MSPs' staff to be included in the training opportunities that are to be made available to SPCB staff? Perhaps briefing packs could be organised, or the Parliament's personnel department could offer training for members' staff.

The issue is important, particularly given the need to implement the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. People in constituency offices have to comply with the act not only in respect of physical access, but also in respect of other related issues.

Mr Paterson: I back up that comment, as I was going to raise a similar issue. It is perhaps more important for MSPs' staff to be given such training, before even MSPs are trained. That is particularly the case for constituency office staff, who interface with the public much more than we do. It is our staff who see constituents when they first walk in the door or make contact by telephone. There is a weakness in the argument that only MSPs should receive equal opportunities training.

I would go further and say that a financial penalty should be imposed on MSPs. MSPs should not be allowed to take up some of the resources that are made available to them unless they and their staff have made progress on such training. Equal opportunities training has to be meaningful. It should not just be a recommendation; it should be part and parcel of what we do. Indeed, MSPs should be given training in how to treat their staff. The Parliament should have an on-going training programme that is available to MSPs and their staff and a financial penalty should be imposed on MSPs if they do not carry out their duties.

Kay Ullrich (West of Scotland) (SNP): I go along with everything that has been said. I do not know whether this is within the scope of the paper, but I am also very concerned about the safety of staff. In my office, it is certainly the case that one member of staff looks after the office all day and sometimes into the evening. I am not sure whether the issue can be included under this item, but I want to make a plea for consideration of personal safety training for MSPs' staff.

Mrs Lyndsay McIntosh (Central Scotland) (Con): As I understand it, one of the outside organisations that is connected with the SPCB, the Scottish Parliament and Business Exchange, made overtures in respect of personal safety training for MSPs' staff. One of the questions that was raised was whether the training should be conducted in Edinburgh or taken out to the regions. Given that MSPs receive an allowance to bring staff to Edinburgh up to 12 times each year, it is not unreasonable to expect people to come to Edinburgh. The business exchange is happy to provide such training. I am happy to forward details of the proposal to members.

The Convener: The debate is going beyond the terms of item 3. If members agree to the action that is set out in paragraph 6, we can add to the letter that we are to send to the SPCB wording to say that we would like MSPs and their staff to receive equal opportunities training.

I suggest that members take up the other important issues that have been raised with the member who represents them on the SPCB, which will allow the SPCB to discuss other general issues in relation to staff training.

If members agree the action that is recommended in the report, I undertake to add the proposal that equality training should be offered to MSPs' staff. Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Legacy Paper

The Convener: Item 4 is our consideration of the draft legacy paper, which was circulated with the agenda. Members will remember the discussion that was held a couple of meetings ago about the legacy papers that all committees are leaving for future committees. The legacy papers will act only as guidance—there is nothing that we can mandate a future Equal Opportunities Committee to do. Do members have comments on the paper?

Mrs McIntosh: I want to say something about paragraph 30 of the paper—the matter cropped up in the plenary debate on Thursday afternoon. The committee's third civic participation event was held in May 2002, when the Parliament sat in Aberdeen. Members commented on the accessibility of the meeting. In the plenary debate, I mentioned that the event was not our finest hour. If we had wanted to try to make the best access arrangements for people, we ought to have reflected on doing so at the time.

The Convener: I am sorry, but you have lost me.

Mrs McIntosh: When we held our civic participation event in Aberdeen, accommodation accessibility was a problem, which does not bode well, as we are the Equal Opportunities Committee. I appreciate that the property in question was not ours and that things would have been much easier if we had been on our own patch.

The Convener: When events are arranged outside the Parliament complex, it is sometimes difficult to get other organisations to realise the standards of accessibility that we expect. However, it is fair to say that we must ensure—

Mrs McIntosh: We made progress when we held our meeting to celebrate the European year of disabled people. We took the trouble to find better, more accessible accommodation.

Elaine Smith: We organised a big event, but did not particularly consider the needs of people with young children. As a legacy, we could pass on the fact that such issues must be thought about. I hope that if the new committee arranges anything in the new Parliament, there will be crèche facilities, so that parents can access events and bring their children with them. Such matters must be considered.

Kay Ullrich: The background to the issue is that although the committee is one of the eight mandatory committees, we have no power to legislate, which is a frustration for committee members. I would like that to be reflected in the

legacy paper. I think that the committee is the only committee of the eight mandatory committees that does not have the power to legislate.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I apologise for being late and arriving in the middle of a conversation. I had to deal with a constituency issue.

Why would the committee want to legislate? Surely our job is to scrutinise work in the Executive on equalities and mainstreaming and legislation with which other committees are dealing. If we got involved in legislation, we could not do that important work.

Kay Ullrich: I thought that the idea behind devolution was that there should be Scottish solutions to Scottish problems. I feel frustrated that we cannot proceed with legislation. The matter will be an on-going issue for the committee.

Cathy Peattie: Who would scrutinise mainstreaming and equalities issues in the Executive and the committees?

Kay Ullrich: Surely we would be doing that—

The Convener: Members are getting into an open debate without referring to the convener. We should be discussing the legacy paper, and I am not prepared to get into a constitutional debate about what is reserved and what is devolved—political parties can deal with such matters, in particular when they set out their stalls in the run-up to the election. The intention behind the legacy paper is that the committee should leave an idea of what it has been doing and give guidance to a future committee, based on the current devolution settlement in Scotland. Other points can be made in other forums, but I would prefer to concentrate on what we want to put in the legacy paper. It is not appropriate to have a constitutional argument at the moment.

Kay Ullrich: I had not intended to have a constitutional argument—I simply asked that the fact that the committee has no power to legislate should be reflected in background information. It is a matter of fact.

Mr Paterson: Every other committee scrutinises. It is legitimate to say that there might be a reason why we would want to legislate, within the limited powers that we have, and that it seems that we are not equipping ourselves with the tools to do so.

10:15

The Convener: I hope that future members of the committee will be aware that equal opportunities legislation is a matter that is reserved to Westminster. It is not necessary to put that fact in the legacy paper. I do not think that everybody will necessarily share Kay Ullrich's view that that has held the committee back. We visited the Northern Ireland Assembly, which has devolved powers for equal opportunities, and I think that we in Scotland have achieved far more in the field of equal opportunities than the Northern Ireland Assembly has.

We should return to the legacy paper, which is important. Michael McMahon and Elaine Smith, who are original members of the committee, will remember the daunting task that the committee had when it first considered the range of issues that it would have to cover and what issues would be focused on. The paper is important for the Equal Opportunities Committee after the election and I would like to concentrate on it.

Elaine Smith: I agree that we should do that. The committee has made a huge difference to the operation of the Parliament. While we are discussing the paper, we should record in the *Official Report* our thanks to the committee clerks for their hard work over the four years of the Parliament.

Perhaps there are two different aspects to the argument. I do not know whether the committee can proceed with a committee bill, as other committees can—there may be an option for it to do so. It is clear that revisiting the Scotland Act 1998 is an argument for another place and not for the committee. There are different levels of scrutiny around legislation and different ways of initiating legislation, but the committee has been extremely successful in influencing the legislation that has been passed in the Parliament. We should record that in the *Official Report*.

Mr McMahon: I want to make a general comment, which is based on what the convener said. When the committee's work started, it had a clean slate. We have made some progress in connecting with organisations and communities out there that looked to the committee to make a difference. We will pass on a legacy that other committees can build on, but we need to encourage an incoming Equal Opportunities Committee to engage even more with organisations. We have only scratched the surface in dealing with civic Scotland, minority ethnic communities and the wider range of organisations that want to see the Scottish Parliament making a real difference to people's lives.

Before we discuss other dimensions of what the committee can do, a whole range of things can be built on, and I want to put down a marker for an incoming committee on that. It should consider those matters before it starts to consider what other powers it can take upon itself. It should use its ability to engage with organisations that are dependent on its doing a job of work for them.

Cathy Peattie: I support what has been said. In considering what to hand over to a future committee, it is important to stress the need for the committee. Members will recall discussions in the past about whether an Equal Opportunities Committee was needed. There could be a paragraph in the paper to say that the committee is important. It would be easy to decide that other committees could scrutinise or that other bodies could do the committee's work, but perhaps we should say that an Equal Opportunities Committee is an integral part of the Parliament.

Kay Ullrich: I support what Cathy Peattie has said. There are still questions about the committee and there might be pressure to reduce the number of committees. The committee could be particularly vulnerable, so it is important that we make our case, probably in the draft paper.

The Convener: Okay, we can add something to the paper. Are members happy for the clerks to make the changes that have been mentioned, to be agreed by Kay Ullrich and me?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: Before we move into private session, I would like to thank some people, as this is likely to be the final meeting of the committee this session.

I thank all the Parliament staff who have been involved in the committee over the years, including the staff of the official report and the Scottish Parliament information centre, the broadcasting staff and the security staff. I particularly thank all the clerks we have had over the past four years, who have ensured that we have been able to operate effectively, produce high-quality reports and carry out the committee's wishes.

I thank all the members, particularly Elaine Smith and Michael McMahon, because they have been members from the start, along with me. All members have contributed a wide variety of skills over the years.

I particularly thank all the organisations that have given evidence to the committee over three and half years. Hundreds of people have given oral evidence and have submitted written evidence, which has certainly been very useful.

The legacy paper demonstrates that we have taken significant steps forward. Equal opportunities are at the heart of what the Parliament does, largely because of the hard work of the people whom I have just mentioned. There is still a lot to do. I take the opportunity to wish the future Equal Opportunities Committee all the best in the next session. I am sure that everybody will agree with me on that.

10:21

Meeting continued in private until 10:32.

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